

THE VISTA

Summer 2017

# REVIEW

*A Publication of* AmeriCorps VISTA

IN THIS EDITION:

FROM RURAL TOWNS TO ROBOTICS

Q&A WITH VISTA VETERAN & ALUM

MY AMAZING YEAR WITH GOOGLE

Introducing our **new tagline:**

# GO WHERE YOU'RE NEEDED.

and what it means to us.



Corporation for  
**NATIONAL &  
COMMUNITY  
SERVICE** 

Since 1965, AmeriCorps VISTA members (Volunteers in Service to America) have brought their passion and perseverance where the need is greatest: to organizations that help alleviate poverty. Today, over 8,000 AmeriCorps VISTA members are serving as catalysts for change, living and working alongside community members to advance local solutions.

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## QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS

✉ [vistaoutreach@cns.gov](mailto:vistaoutreach@cns.gov)

Visit our website at [AmeriCorps.gov/VISTA](http://AmeriCorps.gov/VISTA)



## Photos Wanted

They say pictures are worth a thousand words – but getting pictures of capacity-building VISTAs in action isn't always easy. Do you have a picture that captures the essence of VISTA? We would love to see it! Send photos to [vistaoutreach@cns.gov](mailto:vistaoutreach@cns.gov) or post on social media and tag @AmeriCorpsVISTA.

Message from the Acting Director:

# From Rural Towns to Robotics

Coming Full Circle with AmeriCorps VISTA

By Eileen Conoboy

When I packed up my car in 1992 and left my familiar bubble in Arlington, VA, to serve a year as a VISTA member in rural North Dakota, I was an adventurous 22-year-old, hitting the road with idealism and a duffel bag. With 3 days of training under my belt, I arrived in town, found a room to rent over the shopkeeper's house, and settled into my new role at a domestic violence and sexual assault program. I spent the next 12 months recruiting and training volunteers for a battered women's task force, establishing a safe house network, and setting up a court watch program to monitor how the system

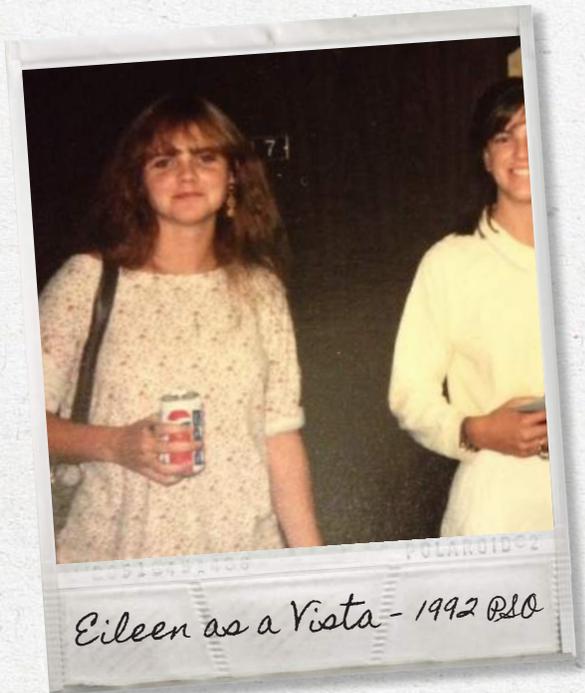
responded to victims of abuse. Being able to make a difference in people's lives was an awakening for me, and I bounded out of bed each morning with excitement and vigor as I headed off to the first job I ever loved. My cultural intelligence also grew as I learned to recruit in church basements, came to understand the difference between a combine and a tractor, and developed a deep appreciation for the richness of Midwestern hospitality.

*"I get to support the 8,000 Vista members who are walking the talk and fighting poverty every day in America."*

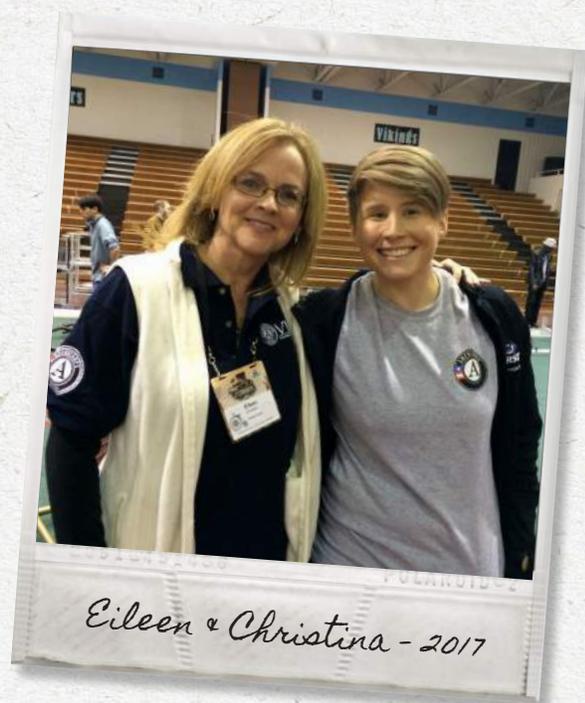
Fast forward 25 years and here I sit at my keyboard, pinching myself that my circuitous path has led me to be Acting Director of AmeriCorps VISTA. Having benefited from so many interventions in my own life, from Head Start to scholarships and Pell grants, this feels akin to winning the purpose lottery. I get to support the 8,000 VISTA members who are walking the talk and fighting poverty every day in America.

The secret of this 52-year-strong anti-poverty program is its multiplying force. Have a dollar? An AmeriCorps VISTA member can turn it into two. Running a program with five mentors to help keep kids in school? A VISTA member can recruit and train ten more. VISTA members leveraged \$178 million in cash and in-kind resources and mobilized 900,000 local volunteers in 2016 alone. From Anchorage to Orlando and 3,000 sites in between, these anti-poverty warriors are finding the good, multiplying it, and





*Eileen as a Vista - 1992 BSO*



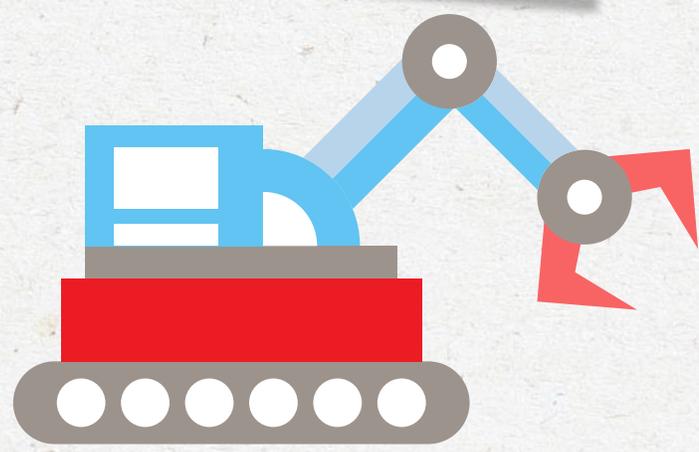
*Eileen & Christina - 2017*

mobilizing the non-federal resources needed to ensure positive ripples reverberate in communities long after the VISTA member leaves.

The mission of VISTA hasn't changed in its 52 years, but the scope of projects has adapted with the times. In addition to bolstering services for homeless veterans and helping low-income youth get into college, VISTA members today are combating opioid abuse and expanding STEM/robotics programs in low-income communities. An example of the latter is the FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) AmeriCorps VISTA project, which I was thrilled to visit as I served alongside VISTA member Christina Lee during AmeriCorps Week. Through the FIRST project, VISTA members help inspire young people to be science and technology leaders, and engage under-served communities and school districts to make science and technology accessible to all children. Since 2013, 114 AmeriCorps VISTA members have expanded FIRST programming into 51 cities and 32 states, engaging more than 7,600 children from under-resourced communities in STEM activities. While robotics and Lego™ competitions may not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of anti-poverty work, the FIRST AmeriCorps VISTA project provides children with access to education and technology resources in order to "engineer paths out of poverty."

To all of the AmeriCorps VISTA members serving today - keep fighting the good fight.

*Thank you for your service.  
-Eileen*



# Q&A

## US Air Force Veteran & AmeriCorps VISTA Alum, **James Garcia**

James is a United States Air Force veteran, who served two terms with AmeriCorps VISTA, and now is the Director of Outreach at NYC Service, Office of the Mayor. And he had a very famous dog. But we'll get to that.

### What motivated you to join the Air Force?

My family has a long history of military service, and I thought it was a great opportunity to continue that tradition. At the time, I was living in New York City, and unsure what I wanted to do professionally, and thought the Air Force would allow me to gain the experiences required for success and pay for my college education.

### How did your experience as a veteran influence your decision to serve with AmeriCorps VISTA?

After leaving the Air Force, I received my bachelor's degree and worked full-time for a marketing company for several years until the crash of 2008. I was unsure what I wanted to do and knew nothing about AmeriCorps. I heard about AmeriCorps VISTA from a friend, so I did my research, and realized that



AmeriCorps VISTA was the perfect fit for me – I was already doing this type of meaningful work in my personal life.

### **Why did you choose to serve with the American Red Cross?**

On September 11th, my spouse and I were displaced for nearly 9 weeks, and the American Red Cross was one of the many organizations that supported us during that challenging time. So when an opportunity to serve as an AmeriCorps VISTA member became available at the American Red Cross, I applied and was accepted. I found it to be a great fit on a personal level since they helped me during my time of crisis, and now I can do the same for others.

### **It sounds like you had a good experience because you decided to serve a second term as well. Can you tell us more about what you did in both of your VISTA assignments?**

It was a fantastic experience! At the American Red Cross I was recruiting and screening volunteers who were deployed to locations nationally and internationally. I did not have much experience with food insecurity issues so I decided to become a VISTA Leader with a nonprofit in New York City that had satellite sites from New Orleans, LA to Portland, ME. That experience allowed me to travel across the country, and meet with the organizations working to improve access to healthy and affordable foods for those living at or below poverty level. The experience deepened my understanding about the issues and gave me perspective about why public service is so important.

### **In what way did service deepen your worldview?**

Public service is about supporting others and personal growth. Throughout my years of service, I've definitely become empathetic to other people's personal challenges. The VISTA experience has

allowed me to say, "I understand. I've been there."

### **Can you tell us more about your current position with NYC Service?**

As the Director of Outreach at NYC Service, I lead a City initiative, Love your Block, which gives 25 neighborhood groups a grant to improve their community gardens and neighborhood blocks.

I also work with our college and university partners to connect students to volunteer opportunities, our AmeriCorps programs; and promote the mission of NYC Service.

### **What advice do you have for people considering serving as a VISTA?**

Have a personal connection to public service and be open-minded to meeting others from outside communities. Do your research on the organization you are looking to serve with and understand the communities they serve. Be open to the idea that you will be experiencing new things. It's a life changing and rewarding experience.

### **And of course there's the service legacy of Elmo, your Norwich Terrier.**

I had Elmo for 16 years and he meant so much to me. When I found out he only had a few months to live due to several ailments, I decided to create a bucket list and we had an amazing final summer seeing sites throughout New York City, which the media picked up on. I also wanted to recognize him in a meaningful way, so we raised \$5,000 to enable a nonprofit, Development in Gardening, to open a community garden in Kenya. Today, the garden serves as a source of income for 30 families who grow herbs and vegetables sold at markets in nearby villages.

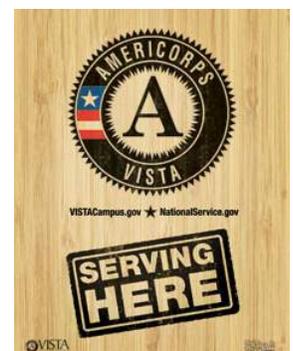
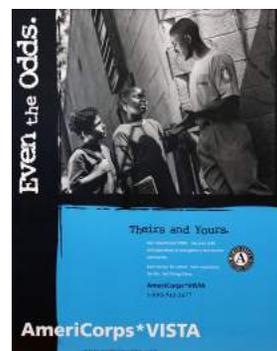
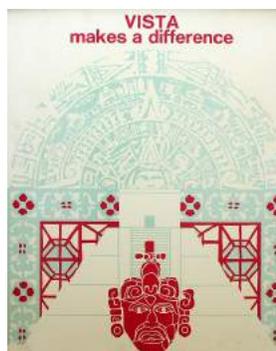
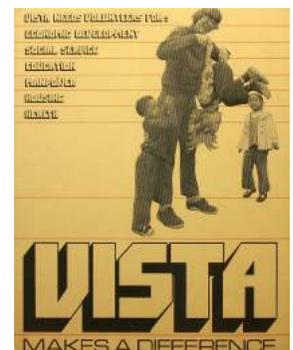
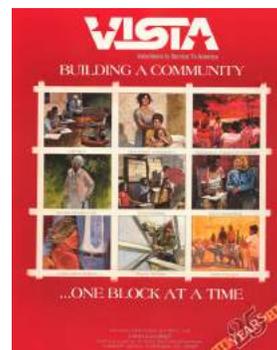
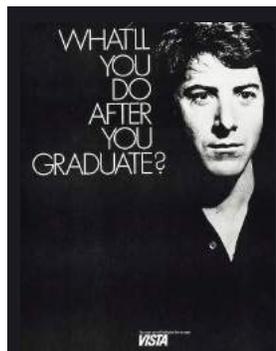
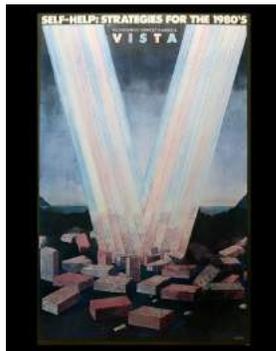
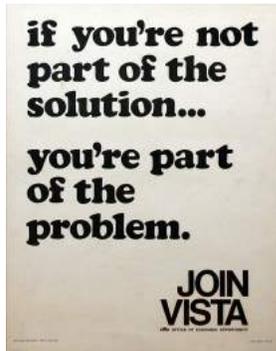


Follow James at [@james\\_garciaNYC](#) or [@NYCService](#)

# AMERICORPS VISTA THROUGH THE YEARS

VISTA has always sported a unique brand identity, tied to our vision of community empowerment and collaboration to address poverty. While some aspects of VISTA have changed over the years, our vision and spirit remain the same today. **Turn the page to see more.**

1960s



Today

Go across town or across the country,

wherever the need is greatest.

Go tackle our nation's most pressing concerns:

poverty, inequity, homelessness, unemployment.

Go with a desire to make a difference.

Go to rural towns, urban communities,

and everywhere in between.

Go down the block or to a completely new place.

Go share your talent and experience with others.

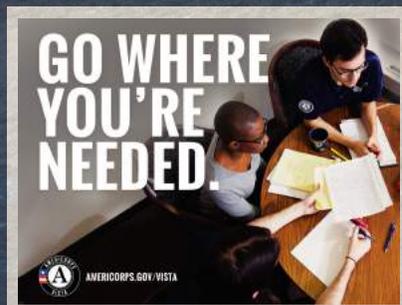
Go listen, learn, and collaborate.

Go witness the transformative power of community in action.

Go, because you can.

Go, because you have to.

# GO WHERE YOU'RE NEEDED.



## Top 5 Life After VISTA Resources

No matter where you are in your service experience—current member, about to exit, or already an alum—we want to make sure you know about these resources for life after AmeriCorps VISTA.

### 1. Employers of National Service:

This network includes almost 500 employers from all sectors who are interested in hiring AmeriCorps alumni. Check out the list of employers, look at available positions, and be sure to highlight your service experience in your cover letter and resume.

### 2. Segal AmeriCorps Education Award - Matching Institutions:

If you opted for the Education Award, your money could go even further. There are dozens of institutions that will match the Ed Award or make available financial aid benefits (scholarships, tuition waivers, in-state tuition, etc.).

### 3. AmeriCorps VISTA Campus Job Board:

Check our Job Board for listings from nonprofit organizations nationwide or federal agencies looking for candidates with active Non-Competitive Eligibility.

### 4. AmeriCorps VISTA LinkedIn:

Follow us and keep up with job announcements, webinar and career fair opportunities, and career advice.

### 5. AmeriCorps Alums:

Join this national network while you're still a member or as an alum. They help connect over one million alumni from all AmeriCorps programs.

## BY THE NUMBERS

Annual Impact of AmeriCorps VISTA

2016

8,000+ *Members Serving*

3,000+ *Locations Across the U.S.*

900,000 *Volunteers Leveraged*

\$178M *Raised from Other Sources*

220,000 *Members Since 1965*



**VISTA**  
Volunteers In Service To America



# My Amazing Year with Google Code Corps.

*by Preston Chan, AmeriCorps VISTA Alum  
(Reprinted with Permission)*

I recently completed my service as an AmeriCorps VISTA member with Google Code Corps, a collaborative effort between AmeriCorps VISTA, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and Google to fight poverty through youth empowerment. Our mission was simple: to ensure that under-served youth had access to a computer science education regardless of their ability to pay.

A year ago, my decision to turn down a full-time position at Apple for this opportunity was, conservatively speaking, a controversial call. A few of my friends, family, and even coworkers were in disbelief: why I would turn down an amazing paid opportunity at one of the leading tech firms to be a volunteer? Looking back on my decision, I am extremely confident that I made the right choice.

When I completed my undergraduate degree, I told myself that I would make a difference. Unlike many of the kids that we served, I was raised never having to worry about my safety or where my next meal would come from. Despite my privilege of growing up in a financially stable household in the Bay Area, I was never exposed to computer science as a possible career, up until my second year in college. By then it was too little, too late. I completed my undergraduate career without ever taking a computer science course. After all, I'd never really heard of it, and that just meant computer science probably wasn't for me. I was wrong. This past year was the first time I took a computer science class, and the first time that I discovered that computer science really is for anyone.

Google Code Corps represented many "firsts" for me: the first time I've managed a team. The first time I was interviewed on live television. The first time I've worked consecutive 65-hour weeks. The first time I've had the humbling experience of going from door to door begging local businesses to donate to my program (I've never been so ecstatic about a \$25 gift card). The first time I've seen an ankle monitor, indicating the wearer is on parole. The first time I've witnessed a drug bust. The first time I've had to lockdown a classroom due to a bomb threat. The first time I've seen computer science positively change not only a child's creativity and means of expressing themselves, but also their way of thinking and their perception of the world. Most importantly, it was the first time I've truly understood the power of "we."

As a team, we shattered stigmas and stereotypes about computer science only being for a certain gender, a certain clique, or even a certain personality. As a team, we made computer science accessible to the next generation regardless of their circumstances. And while there is still much work to be done in terms of leveling the playing field for those with barriers to education, we as a team were ultimately

successful in making a difference. Google Code Corps has never been about one individual's contributions, but rather a team effort stretching across the country to create a social change.

Let's take a look at the numbers that my team in North San Mateo County contributed to in the past year:

*7 Boys & Girls Clubs served across 2 states*

*29 volunteers recruited*

*607 youth exposed to computer science*

*(541 of whom are under-served)*

*6,654 total hours of coding (~8,500 total*

*hours of STEAM activities)*

Finally, I would like to conclude with a truth about myself. I have always loved my country. Despite its flaws and shortcomings, America is my home. It is through serving with the Google Code Corps that I emerged with an even greater sense of patriotism and camaraderie. I am honored to have the privilege to serve among the one million Americans who have taken the oath of service as AmeriCorps members since its inception more than twenty years ago, and I have never felt more American than when I took that same oath of service one year ago. Remember that having a voice and impact in your community is a privilege, one that none of us should take lightly.



*Photo Credit: Preston Chan & The Scratch Foundation*

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Search for trainings, forums, and many other resources:

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