

AmeriCorp State and National Symposium 2016
September 21-23, 2016, Alexandria, VA
Harkin AmeriCorps Awards Presentation
Thursday, 9/22 12:30pm – 2:00pm

Transcription

WENDY SPENCER: Good afternoon! Are we still having a great time learning? Yes. And I hope you're accepting my challenge that by tomorrow afternoon when you depart this beautiful hotel, you have met one new friend. Are we on the track for that? Yes? Close? I'm confident that you're going to have one new buddy that you can share your experiences with. It's so great to be back with all of you, and thank you so much for your commitment to running the best National Service program in the world, AmeriCorps. I'm so glad to be your colleague and your supporter and your cheerleader for AmeriCorps, and this is a very, very special part of our week, recognizing outstanding programs. When Senator Harkin retired, we decided it would be a wonderful opportunity to have an awards program each year in his honor, so let me begin.

It's one of our favorite events to celebrate Senator Tom Harkin, one of the greatest advocates we've ever had for National Service, and recognize AmeriCorps programs and members who embody his legacy of public service. Senator Harkin retired from public service recently after a long and distinguished career where he proudly represented his home state of Iowa in the U.S. Capitol for 40 years, first serving five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives followed by five terms in the United States Senate. Early in his Senate career, he wrote the Americans with Disabilities Act, which has been called the Emancipation Proclamation for people with disabilities. In the true spirit of a public servant, Senator Harkin's career is filled with work that gave voice to the voiceless, making sure the concerns of every American was heard in Washington, D.C., and across the nation. While working in the halls of Congress, Senator Harkin stood tall for education, for farmers, for healthcare, and for America's workers. Still, his duties did not keep him from demonstrating what it means to be a good citizen. For 13 years he spent an hour each day – each week, that is – as a volunteer reader at an elementary school program in Capitol Hill, and he still continues to volunteer today.

Today we'll honor some of our most outstanding AmeriCorps programs and members, and if you pay close attention to the service today's honorees are performing, you'll hear echoes of Senator Harkin's life in public service, with emphasis on engaging individuals with disabilities in service, best program innovation and enhancements, and compelling AmeriCorps member experience. The awards reflect the depth of the impact a National Service field has on communities served and the individuals who are performing the service. These are AmeriCorps programs and members that are making a difference, and inspire all of us to continue our work to make a difference in the communities we serve.

The two categories for the Harkin Award are Program Awards and AmeriCorps Member Awards, and I want to thank everyone who submitted an application, a submission for the award. It was a great response but it made it very hard on our committee to make a selection, I must tell

you that, very, very difficult. But I think you for submitting them, and it shows me that there are so many organizations, programs, and members that we want to lift up. So I encourage you, if you're not one of the winners that we announce here, I submit that all of you are winners, and especially those that submitted an application, find a way to recognize the members of the program activity that you submitted sometime in the next year. Find a way to share that because every single one were outstanding. So are you ready to hear the awards? All right, let's get started.

The first award is for the 2016 Best New Program Addressing a Critical Priority, and this year's winner goes to the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation in Texas. Congratulations! So great! The foundation is a new nonprofit formed in 2013 that host a cadre of AmeriCorps VISTA members in Houston. Their goal, their VISTA project goal was nominated for the Harkin by the OneStar Foundation, and I know we have a lot of colleagues from OneStar here today. We are joined today by the President of the Foundation, Dr. Julie Baker Finck,

The Foundation was formed to respond to the growing literacy crisis in Houston. The Texas Service Commission partners with the Foundation to host a team of AmeriCorps VISTAs. Among their accomplishments, these VISTAs have launched connect4literacy.org to engage all Houston residents in literacy projects, mobilized over 5,000 volunteers to serve in 30 literacy organizations, and participated in an international event called "Read Across the Globe" that engaged 3,500 volunteers to read in 200 schools with 65,000 children, and I believe it was done like in one day, it was crazy, part of an attempt for a national record.

Of their excellent AmeriCorps service, Dr. Baker, their Foundation leader, said, "Our AmeriCorps VISTA members have been instrumental in building the capacity of our internal operations, raising awareness about the literacy cause, supporting a growing coalition of 30 literacy providers our city, and mobilizing thousands of volunteers to serve those in need. We owe a great deal of progress in implementing our plan of action called "Houston's Literacy Crisis: A Blueprint for Community Action," we owe this to the AmeriCorps VISTAs, the men and women who served in the VISTA Corps, members for the past two years. It is really, really pretty amazing." And when we kicked this off a couple of years ago, I don't know if there was a picture up there of what was on the front page of the Houston paper but we took boot because we were in Texas, you know, and we had a boot and we held the boot up and said, "We're going to kick off the literacy goal, and we're going to stamp out illiteracy with our boots in Texas!" And that ended up being on the front page of the Houston newspaper the next day, and it really helped draw a lot of attention to the program.

So Julie, thank you for your leadership, you and the VISTA members. I've been hearing about you over the past couple of years. It is really, really pretty incredible. Before I bring Julie up here, I have a special little message from their board chairmen, who is Neil and Maria Bush, and Neil has a little special acceptance speech, so if you'll play the video, please. He saying, "It's so great to be here among all of you wonderful leaders, and I'm honored to accept this on behalf of Houston Literacy." We'll get it, let's be patient. I've seen this, I want you all to see it so I'll wait a while till the technology experts get it.

How did you like my story about the showers? You know, I didn't want to call out my good friends in Baptist Coalition with the shower trailer pulling but they really do a great job with that in disaster. I had the opportunity to speak with Congressman Graves last night from Baton Rouge, and his area, although the floods affected every district, I believe it was six districts in Louisiana, Congressman Garrett Graves' district is right in the middle of it, and he just expressed again to me how grateful he is that we have sent 984 AmeriCorps members into Baton Rouge and the entire area, and we've also got a cadre of FEMA Corps members not only serving in Baton Rouge but also serving in a call center, accepting calls for help for FEMA for individual assistance, I believe it's in Maryland. So he was really grateful, and so he wanted to make sure I really – I told him I was with all of you this week. He said, "Please tell all the AmeriCorps program thank you for reaching out." How are we doing on our video? Have we got it? All right, let's go with it.

NEIL BUSH: Hello, I'm Neil Bush. I'm the third son of Barbara Bush, former First Lady of the United States and the First Lady of Literacy. My mom has always known that if you can't read at an age-appropriate level, then you can't possibly realize your fullest God-given potential in life. It is that wisdom that inspired my wife and I to form the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation three years ago. The first thing we did was hire an outstanding leader, Dr. Julie Baker Finck, who hit the ground running. She brought together more than 80 key stakeholders in Houston, and together this community put together a blueprint for community action. Central to our blueprint for community action is to raise an army, to increase capacity for vital literacy services that are already being provided throughout the community. I'll never forget at the reveal of our blueprint, we had all of the local bigshots at this big press available. Wendy Spencer flew in from Washington, D.C., and she committed "to kickstart our effort by putting AmeriCorps boots on the ground." She even had some cowboy boots.

We are now two years into a three-year grant, and the AmeriCorps VISTA members who have been part of our team have been instrumental in building capacity. So far there have been over 5,000 volunteers who have committed over 40,000 hours of service, helping these organizations that provide services increase their capacity. It's been amazing work, and this work has helped qualify our foundation for a fabulous recognition. We are selected as the Best New Program Design. What an honor for our foundation and a great tribute for the amazing work that the AmeriCorps VISTA members have done. Their work has been invaluable and their impact has been immeasurable.

I also serve as Chairman of Points of Light, the largest organization in the world focused on volunteerism. My father, President George Herbert Walker Bush, started the organization 25 years ago. He called on and challenged all Americans to find a way to serve others. You know, we live in a very divided time. We've divided by politics, we're divided by race and economics and religion, but the one thing that brings us together as a nation and as a people is this concept of serving others, and it is such an honor for me to address the AmeriCorps Symposium, the hallway filled with bright points of light. Your commitment to service is a patriotic commitment, and there's no doubt that the way you serve your community and the individuals will leave that community and those individuals better off. So on behalf of the entire Bush family, I would like to extend our gratitude for your service. Thank you for serving America.

WENDY SPENCER: That's great. I like to ask Max Finberg, our National Director of VISTA, to join me, and join me on stage to accept your award, the Barbara Bush Houston Foundation. Congratulations. That's great, amazing. Everything's better in Texas today. Our next award is for the most significant enhancement to an existing program, and the 2016 winner is all the way from San Jose, California, it's called Our City Forest AmeriCorps Program, congratulations! This is a great one. An urban forestry program in San Jose, California's third largest city, Our City Forest was created in 1994 and has been an AmeriCorps program for 10 years. Representing Our City Forest today is Rhonda Berry, Founder and CEO.

Funded by California Volunteers – give a shout-out for California Volunteers – Our City Forest has planted over 67,000 trees, managed a community nursery, and provided environmental education in city schools to strengthen the help of San Jose's environment and citizens. In 2015, AmeriCorps members launched a program enhancement called Lawn Busters, I love that name, Lawn Busters, to respond to the severe drought conditions in California and support low-income households. Through Lawn Busters and partners, including the City of San Jose and Santa Clara Valley Water District, members worked with community volunteers to replace water-craving lawns with drought-tolerant landscapes to save water and money and our environment. The Lawn Busters have been really impressive. The lawn conservation saves 31 gallons of water per year per square foot. AmeriCorps members have conserved over 2.4 million gallons of water in 77 households in just the last year. Rhonda, it's truly amazing. Let me ask Bill Basl to join me. Thank you for your leadership and dedication, and congratulations to you and your entire team. Congratulations, Our City Forest. AmeriCorps member! All right, it just keeps going. Congratulations, San Jose!

I really think that's a program we can replicate around the country, whether you're experiencing a drought now or maybe later, so thank you for being great leaders, and I'm sure you'll share information with all communities on how we can also conserve water in our communities as well. So now for the Special Member Awards, I'm going to turn it over to our National Director of AmeriCorps, Bill Basl.

BILL BASL: Thank you, Wendy.

As Wendy indicated today, we also recognize not only programs but also members, and today I have the distinct honor to recognize two members. The first is Chris Brown from the Washington Vet Corps. As an AmeriCorps alumnus of the Washington Vet Corps, Chris was nominated by Serve Washing to honor his AmeriCorps experience and service in his continued dedication in working with veterans through a nonprofit he founded called Growing Veterans. But Chris's service did not begin with AmeriCorps. He is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, he served with the Second Battalion Seventh Marine Regiment. Chris did three combat tours of duty in Iraq, where he was wounded in 2007, and also served in Afghanistan.

When Chris returned to his civilian life, he started working with plants and growing garden vegetables, and found that working with the soil helped him cope with the effects of his wounds, both physical and psychological. From this personal experience and with the work of the Vet Corps, he created Growing Veterans in 2012. Growing Veterans is an evidence-based program design, and its mission is simple – engage veterans of all branches in agriculture to help them

reintegrate into society and build their civilian community. Chris, thank you for your service to our country, and your vision and hard work in leading Growing Veterans. I present Chris Brown. Thank you, Chris.

Our next awardee is James Marvin Taylor IV, who serves with Public Allies in Chicago. James was nominated for the Harkin AmeriCorps Award in recognition of his extraordinary leadership development and dedication to engaging students of all abilities in high-quality education. James served with Public Allies Chicago and the Office of Diverse Learners in the Chicago public schools. In this role, James helped design, implement, and refine a system to track students with special needs, and ensure that they had proper access to education. James said that when he was a student with special needs, he was allowed to fall through the cracks, and he wanted to ensure that no child would be allowed to do the same on his watch. James meticulously combed through previous school-year records, tracked down students who disappeared from year-to-year, and according to his supervisor he revolutionized how CPS tracks their diverse learners. Kim Mercer, James' supervisor at CPS, says his service revolutionized how schools track and support their diverse learners, and that she uses the systems he created to this day to support students.

In addition to building programs and community organizations, Public Allies is also a hard-core leadership incubator for youth and young adults and diverse people, and James embodies the spirit of leadership that resonates throughout Public Allies and throughout AmeriCorps. And as our AmeriCorps pledge says, "When faced with adversity, I will persevere," this is James' story. From losing his mother too young to a long battle with MS, struggling with his own health issues and learning disability, and spending time in living in shelters to get by, James has had to persevere through more than his share of adversity. Again, Kim Mercer shared that "While at Chicago public schools, James was always, always persevering, he overcame incredible personal struggles just to come to work every day, which wasn't obvious to his coworkers. He is a remarkable person." And James says his service transformed his view of himself. It sounds like James' service also transformed the lives of students, the Allies, and the staff he worked with. James, your story is really emblematic of the power of service and dedicated service leaders to change our communities and ourselves. James, thank you for all that you did and for all that you will continue to do to serve and to lead. I present James Marvin Taylor IV.

Thank you again for being here and recognizing these wonderful programs and these wonderful members. So could we have another round of applause for all of our awardees!

WENDY SPENCER: Fantastic! Thank you, Bill. Wow, what a great group of winners, and quite frankly all of you are winners, but it does feel good to recognize a few of us, right? It's just really a great feeling inside to do so. So I have a little treat for you. Now, I wasn't supposed to do this but I saw a preview of a video for AmeriCorps NCCC that is not public yet, so if we can keep a secret among us girls and guys, we're going to preview this. I had to really strong-arm our External Affairs Director to let me do this, but I wanted to show you this – it's almost finished or it may be right at the, I think it's in its final edit – but I wanted to show you this because I think it's an amazing public service announcement, and if you like it maybe we work towards finding one for AmeriCorps as well. So take a look and I'll see if you like it.

[video]

MALE: You're a home for a family who's been out in the cold. You're a bottle of clean water in the hands of a thirsty child. You're a sandbag pushing back the flood. You're a traveler, a team member, a builder, a giver. You're a forklift-driving, chainsaw-wielding hand that reaches out. You're a line in the woods that fires can't cross. You're a body that feeds a community. You're not helpers on the way, your help is here. Join AmeriCorps NCCC. Be the greater good.

[end of video]

WENDY SPENCER: Okay! So I think Ted, our External Affairs Director, is in the house, so Ted, I think they liked it. So maybe we ought to do one for AmeriCorps as well. All right, there is our challenge. We'll see what we can do. But is good, isn't it? I think it's really great, so I'm glad we can get this up and get it before you, and get your opinions. So I think it's unanimous. We'll get this on the air very soon. So thanks, everyone, I hope you enjoyed the Harkin Awards Luncheon. It's a real treat. I'll send a special note of thanks to Senator Harkin. He's so sorry he wasn't able to be here today but he sends his best wishes. He's honored that these honorees are done on his behalf, and he really wants to encourage us to lead on and serve on and keep serving this year and beyond. So have a great break and go forth to your next sessions as soon as they start. Thank you, everyone.