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The Thomas Jefferson Forum: Starting Small, Thinking Big

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THE THOMAS JEFFERSON FORUM

STARTING SMALL, THINKING BIG

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By T. Jefferson Coolidge

We wanted to be able to show the students, through their direct contacts with the people being served, that they were meeting vital needs.

WHEN Senior Minister Randall Niehoff of the Old North Church in Boston came to me and other lay members of Old North with a suggestion that we get together with his Youth Fellowship group to discuss ways of serving our country, we didn't foresee any consequences beyond an interesting evening's discussion. One thing led to another, however, and by the spring of 1986 our discussions had expanded beyond Old North Church to private individuals in the Greater Boston area and to agency heads and government leaders in New York, Washington, and other places.

The result of all these discussions was the Thomas Jefferson Forum, a group of citizens united by a mission to involve American youth in community and national service. Jefferson, although a rebel, epitomized community service and clearly recognized the value of youth participation and service. Thus, he became the symbol for our organization, and his leading biographer, the late Dumas Malone of the University of Virginia, became our honorary chairman.

The first major task we undertook was to start our own high school-based community service program. None of the organizers had been in a principal's office for about 40 years, and we were charting some pretty unknown waters, just figuring out where to start.

The first step was to recruit John Bengel to be our Schools Program Director. (I had met John and his wife Elsa in the jungles of Indonesia working on a community development project and knew that he was experienced in working with youth under all kinds of circumstances.) Then I asked Patricia Graham, Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, for more help. She referred me to the Harvard Principals' Center, which in turn introduced us to a half dozen or so high school principals who might be interested in our program.

We ended up recruiting three schools through Harvard—Andover, Marblehead, and Masconomet. John Bengel connected us with Boston Latin Academy, a Boston public school, and Cathedral High School, a parochial school, both inner-city institutions. Advisory board member

Jeff Coolidge graduated from Harvard College in 1954. After service in the U.S. Marines, he headed Back Bay-Orient Enterprises, Inc., a development finance company that involved him in rural community development projects in East Asia.



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Lee Auspitz introduced us to Somerville High School.

Just getting in the door seemed like a huge step, and having all the principals say okay was a major triumph. By late fall of 1986, all of the principals had appointed faculty coordinators to recruit and organize a program of community service that the Jefferson Forum would support. The model we suggested was that each school would place between 15 and 40 students (sophomore, juniors, and some seniors) in community agencies that serve genuine human needs—convalescent homes, hospitals, shelters, soup kitchens, day care centers, and special education classes.

Many of our placements put students into direct contact with those in need. We were seeking to meet a microcosm of national needs as outlined in Danzig and Szanton (1986). Our priority remains to enrich a student's character and education by connecting him or her with genuine human needs in the community. We wanted to be able to show the students, through their direct contacts with the people being served, that they were meeting vital needs.

In some cases, the Forum assisted in placing students in appropriate agencies. We were surprised—and delighted—at the favorable response of the agencies. The volunteer director at Somerville Hospital said our program had provided "more mature" volunteers than those they had previously had, and the students were able to handle more challenging jobs dealing directly with needy patients. Herb Richmond of Eldercare, which is responsible for 3,000 elderly in the Boston area, is enthusiastic about expanding his program with Boston Latin Academy and has expressed interest in making weekly

visits to the school to train and orient young volunteers.

Our first year demonstrated to us that youth are ready to serve, and that they are capable of serving the most needy.

IN May 1987 we held our first annual meeting with representatives of the participating schools. We heard a keynote speech by Brian Holloway, formerly an all-pro tackle with the New England Patriots; saw a film clip on Robert Kennedy; participated in team-building exercises on the lawn in front of the John F. Kennedy Library; and attended workshops in which students from all of the schools could discuss their community service, describing their problems and suggesting solutions. In analyzing the students' work, we were encouraged to see that what they saw as problems—and their suggested solutions—closely paralleled what the Forum was trying to achieve. The problems they identified—burnout, lack of understanding on the part of clients and adults, motivation, etc.—could be solved, they suggested, through development of a network of young people who could reinforce one another's efforts.

Diane Kell, an experienced consultant, is now researching the first year of our program to determine how much we achieved compared to our stated goals and to make recommendations for strengthening our efforts. Our goals for this school year are to deepen and enrich our program by involving student leadership and strengthening relationships between the schools and the agencies they are serving. We also hope to expand the number of schools in our program from six to sixteen.

To support our expansion efforts in the Boston area and to begin to take the program statewide, we are seeking substantial funding; our goal is \$500,000 for 1989-90. We have also begun discussions with the University of Virginia and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation to plan a national conference on youth service in Charlottesville, Virginia, in June of 1989. □

REFERENCE

Danzig, Richard, and Szanton, Peter. *National Service: What Would It Mean?* Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986.