

VISTA Trio Supports Growing Grassroots Literacy Effort

BY SUSAN USHER

As recent college graduates with a firm belief in the value of community service, Rick Kern, Alicia Peterson and Julie Wallace already had a lot in common.

As of last month, the trio have even more in common. That's when they began one-year stints with Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA), serving with the Brunswick County Literacy Council. The council recruits and trains volunteers to work with adults who want to improve their basic reading and writing skills and school-age children who need one-on-one help in reading. The council doesn't charge for its services.

The threesome's assignment for the next 11 months is to help expand the council's work. They help establish ways to recruit volunteers and students, strengthen the support system for tutors and their students and increase public awareness of the council. Their ultimate goal is to leave the organization stronger next year, closer to being able to operate without the support of VISTA, the domestic version of the Peace Corps.

"The good thing about this (VISTA) program is that it is a local grassroots effort, not the federal government throwing money at a program, but a local community trying to solve its own problems," said Peterson. "We set things up and hopefully they will continue after we leave. The county will be better off. It's not like we're just tutoring people for a year and then leaving."

During their 1992-93 stint, VISTAs Jennifer Fiellman, Monica Rathke and Linda Crothers supported all areas of the council's work, and it was the not-for-profit agency's busiest year since its founding more than 10 years ago. According to Coordinator Gladys Wagenseil's annual report that activity was fueled by the energy of more than 100 volunteers and a budget of \$21,000 raised from membership dues, fund-raising events, contributions, and support from the United Way and the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners.

Ninety-two potential volunteers were trained in the Laubach phonics-based approach in nine free tutor workshops led by three volunteer trainers.

Ninety-five adults and teen-agers received free, private tutoring. More than 50 elementary school children and 60 Head Start preschoolers were served weekly by BCLC volunteers to encourage a love of reading and to provide early remediation for reading problems. Presentations were made to 25 groups.

For the new VISTAs, 1993-94 promises to be even busier. "One of our main goals is to get the satellites going stronger so literacy can seep out into the county," said Kern.

He is working with leaders of the Little Prong section of Ash to establish a tutoring program for adults and students, with tutor training set for August.

The Longwood and Ash areas are the latest target sites for expansion. Because of the county's large land area and multiple telephone systems, setting up community "satellite" groups of volunteers boosts participation and communication within the BCLC. The council works from an office provided by its original sponsor, Brunswick Community College, at the old BCC campus in Supply.

So far, two satellite groups are functioning, in the Southport and Calabash areas, and others are organizing in Leland and in the middle of the county.

The council also wants to reach more school-age children, not only to help the students avoid a reading problem later in life, but to perhaps reach parents as well.

"I think it is real effective when a child goes home and wants help reading a book," said Peterson.

Existing school projects to expand on this year include a coloring contest, which gets elementary children thinking and talking about the value of reading, and a peer tutoring program for high school students. The



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

VISTA VOLUNTEERS Alicia Peterson, Julie Wallace and Rick Kern expect their enthusiasm and hard work this year to help the Brunswick County Literacy Council reach more children and adults who want to become better readers.

VISTAs also want to develop some activity for middle school students.

Fund-raising events are among the projects for which VISTAs help organize and recruit volunteers. The new VISTA volunteers were off and running their first week on the job, helping coordinate—and then work along with 74 other volunteers—one of the council's largest single fundraising-events of the year, a "bucket shake" at local grocery stores that drew \$2,991.59 in contributions. Other projects include a golf tournament each summer and an adult spelling bee during National Literacy Week in September.

Their stint started with an orientation and a two-week overlap with the outgoing VISTAs to learn about the BCLC. Their training will continue throughout the year.

Kern, 22, graduated from James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Va., with a degree in human communications, focusing on public relations.

"I wasn't sure if I wanted to do something in my major," said the West Chester, Pa., native. The stint offered a chance to visit the Southeast and to explore other career possibilities. His previous volunteer experience was

editing a newsletter for a free health clinic, and working with an independent living project.

He sees readily the value of the literacy council's work.

"Once people learn how to read they have a lot more confidence in themselves," said Kern. "It opens people to more opportunities and to a greater understanding of the world. It gives them more choices."

Peterson, 22, of Hattiesburg, Miss., and Wallace, 21, of Nashville, Tenn., lived next door to each other and were both political science majors at Millsaps College in Jackson, Miss.

Each knew she wanted to take a year off from school and gain some experience through community service before settling on a career or post graduate study. Peterson is seriously considering law or graduate school;

Wallace, community development.

"I've always volunteered, but nothing as prolonged and in-depth as this will be," said Peterson. "It will be nice to focus on one thing for a while."

Wallace has done volunteer work with a different organization each school term. This stint, she hopes, will give her a year "to see how a grassroots organization operates and how it meets its goals."

All three are excited about their work with the council.

"I think people who have the opportunity to receive an education should share that opportunity with others," said Wallace. "I think everyone should have an opportunity to learn to read."

To arrange a program on literacy, to volunteer or to refer a student, contact the BCLC office at 754-READ, P.O. Box 6, Supply, NC 28462.



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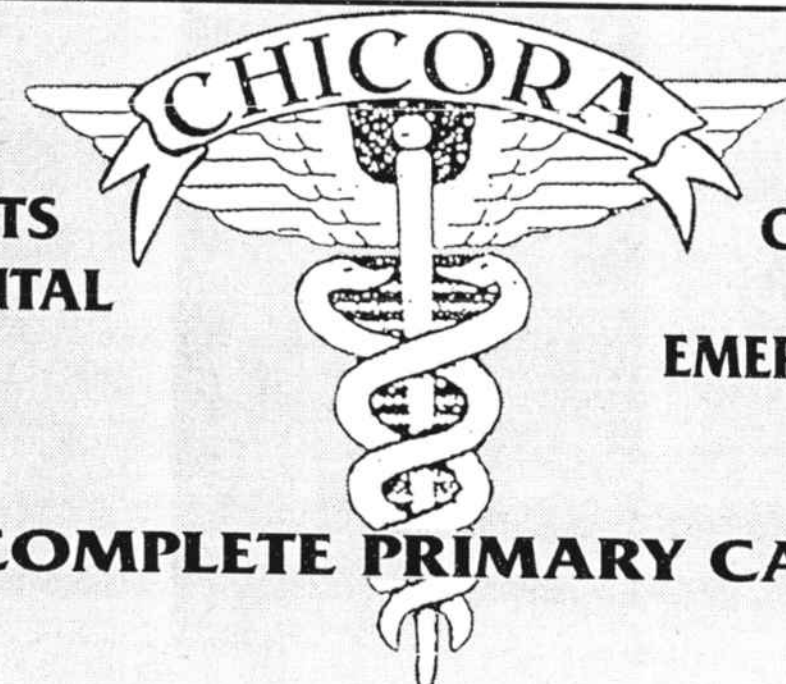


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