

POLITICAL BOOKNOTES

A City Year: On the Streets and in the Neighborhoods with Twelve Young Community Service Volunteers

Suzanne Goldsmith
The New Press, \$22.95

By Daniel H. Pink

National service, once a flaky idea peddled only by *The Washington Monthly* and a few cranky neoliberals, has hit the big time.

Bill Clinton says national service will be a defining idea of his presidency. He has promised to usher in a

“season of service,” and has created a White House Office of National Service to turn that promise into a reality.

Into this congenial climate comes Suzanne Goldsmith’s firsthand account of nine months with City Year, the highly regarded Boston-based project that’s a prototype for the national service programs Clinton envisions. The brainchild of Alan Khazei and Michael Brown, whose Harvard law degrees did not quash their entrepreneurial instincts, City Year is a privately funded service corps in which young people work in

small teams on projects like building playgrounds, restoring housing, tutoring children, or assisting the elderly. City Year participants earn \$100 per week, and if they stay an entire nine months, they receive \$5,000 for college or job training. To write her book, Goldsmith labored alongside a City Year team and talked at length with its members.

She began her City Year on a team that demonstrated one of the program’s greatest strengths: diversity. (At the risk of being labeled a bean counter, I note that her team had six women, six men, two Latinos, four African-Americans, two Asian-Americans, three middle-class whites, a few college students, and a man on probation.) The crew was officially known as the Reebok Team, after the Massachusetts footwear company which supplied part of the uniform all City Year corps members must wear.

The Reebok Team’s first projects were worthwhile. Team members excavated a weed-choked garden and playground complex in a beleaguered south Boston neighborhood, repainted a playground in Roxbury, and did chores for the elderly in a Charlestown public housing project. Then it was on to a state hospital to repair a greenhouse.

But difficulties quickly arise. Most tragically, one corps member is shot and killed one night as he walks home. And while some corps members hurl themselves into their work, others do little but complain loudly. Absenteeism and lateness are chronic. Several corps members often disappear for the afternoon or spend work days chatting on the phone.

What makes the shirking and skipping hard to understand is that the Reebok Team doesn’t work that much anyway.

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For example, one of the group's projects was to organize a Community Clean-Up Day in the Boston neighborhood of Chelsea. But during this seven-week venture, the Reebok Team found itself, alas, with loads of "downtime." Not to worry, though.

"There is a benefit to this downtime," Goldsmith writes. "It gives us a chance to relax together and get used to one another as friends rather than teammates. Thursday afternoons have been set aside for social activities—the team calls it 'Team Bonding day.' We go bowling. We go boating on Jamaica Pond. One Thursday we go together at lunchtime to Faneuil Hall, a popular open-air market, and the women on the team spend an hour browsing together at a lingerie store." Goldsmith adds, "Team members are rarely absent on team bonding days."

No wonder. It sounds like a hoot, but it doesn't sound much like national service. Also troubling is the amount of work time devoted to show. Each morning, City Year teams participate in group calisthenics at a major Boston subway stop, an exercise that seems geared less to physical fitness and more to public relations. One week goes to rehearsing a "recruitment blitz," complete with rap songs and skits, for the next year's program.

At times in this account, City Year seems more like an advertisement for national service than national service itself. At other times, the only real advertisement I could think of violated the jurisdictional boundaries of sneaker marketing. I often wanted to shout, "Reebok Team, just do it." Every Friday, for instance, is "Enrichment Day"; instead of digging or tutoring, corps members attend workshops and take field trips. In January, as at many private Eastern colleges, the Reebok Team has an "intercession," which is soon followed by a five-day "midyear retreat" at Camp Grotonwood.

These activities raise fundamental concerns about the book and about City Year itself. Goldsmith shines her attention almost entirely on the participants. She appears more concerned with what the corps member are getting out of the program than what

they're accomplishing in the communities that are supposedly being served.

Her epilogue, written two years after her City Year ends, is especially revealing. We learn that Reebok team-mates, Amy and Jackie, are in college, that Richie has been arrested, and that Brendan believes City Year improved his self-image. But the 30-page section doesn't say anything about the condition of the places where the team worked. Has the Chelsea Clean-Up Day been repeated? Have the kids at the Blackstone School become better readers because of City Year tutoring? Have drugs and gangs returned to the playground and garden the Reebok Team cleaned?

We don't know; Goldsmith doesn't tell us. The result is a cloudy view of service because true service is about doing a job, solving a problem, improving a life. Its primary focus is the served, not the servers.

Clinton has himself fallen into this trap. In a March speech on national service, he mentioned Stephen Spalos, a 23-year-old City Year team leader. "Last year, when I visited his project," Clinton said, "he literally took his sweatshirt off his back and gave it back to me so that I would never forget the kids at City Year. And I still wear it when I go jogging, always remembering what they're doing in Boston to help those kids."

Unlike John Kennedy, his political hero, Clinton begins with the wrong question. We must ask not what national service can do for its participants, but what its participants can do for their neighbors and neighborhoods.

True, many Reebok Team members come from troubled backgrounds. We learn that about half the team drops out. Charles returns to jail. Richie essentially drinks himself out of the program, and then is accused of burglarizing one of his teammates. Several team members sell drugs.

But if the overriding goal of enlisting volunteers in national service programs like City Year is to rescue troubled *volunteers*, then we are being foolhardy. Many of these kids come to the program with nearly two decades of pain and heartache that a single year—not even a City Year—can erase.

And that is precisely why we need national service. Our country has a screaming set of needs that neither the private sector nor the government is meeting—dangerous streets, abominable public schools, inadequate health care. Conditions like these produce kids with troubles. Yet the solution to their troubles is not a nine-month stint in City Year but a focused assault on the conditions themselves.

City Year is a good program, and its creators and participants ought to be commended for their innovation and pluck. And as long as the programs are open to criticism and evaluation, problems like the ones Goldsmith sometimes inadvertently points out can be solved.

If we go that route and focus on the volunteers *and* on the substance of their work, Clinton's "season of service" might achieve its most spectacular result. It might be followed by a season of solutions.

Daniel H. Pink is a Washington writer.

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