

PILCOP 40th Anniversary – recollections of a VISTA volunteer – 10/1/09

Rob Sanders

As the one in the group who never went on to become a lawyer, I'm probably not the best qualified to be speaking on behalf of the six VISTAs. On the other hand, as the non-lawyer, I'm probably the most capable of keeping my comments to the allotted five minutes. We should be thankful for small blessings, right?

There are three from our original group who are here tonight:

- Reuben Clark, a real estate attorney in Raleigh, NC, and a director and officer of the Southern Africa Legal Services Foundation;
- Pete Casciato, a San Francisco attorney who practices communications law;
- and I manage the clean energy financing work that The Reinvestment Fund does here in Philadelphia and throughout the Mid-Atlantic.

And there are three who wanted to, but could not be here tonight:

- Bridget Arimond, a Chicago civil rights attorney and Director of the Center for International Human Rights at Northwestern University Law School;
- Bob Bone, a law professor at the Boston University Law School and the University of Texas Law School in Austin;
- and Margaret Bullitt, now a minister somewhere in New England.

35 years ago, we were finishing up our senior year at Stanford University, wondering what to do next. We knew we wanted to stick together. It was Pete and Reuben who got us organized to send our six resumes (such as they were), with a cover letter, to fifteen public interest law groups east of the Mississippi. Only one person responded affirmatively – that was Ned Wolf. He said he was interested, but we would have to figure out a way to pay for ourselves, and suggested we look into VISTA as a means of covering our expenses. Well, that's all we needed - we were on our way East!

Where we landed was a scrappy, highly caffeinated, chronically overworked law office. We were put to work assisting Shelley Stark and Alice Ballard with employment discrimination suits involving the local steel mills – John Wood Steel,

Alan Wood Steel, Bethlehem Steel and U.S. Steel. Ned managed to get the big law firms to represent our plaintiffs, but much of the work bounced back to Shelley and Alice because of the big firms' ambivalence and divided loyalties to large clients who didn't appreciate the job rights litigation that was being pursued.

Similarly, we helped Ned with lawsuits that PILCOP filed against the City of Philadelphia to end the pervasive police abuse during the Rizzo years and the use of excessive and deadly force in poor and black neighborhoods. As VISTA volunteers, we lived in those same neighborhoods. It was a time when people did not want to call the police if there were a problem – you called the fire department and hoped for the best.

I have to admit I'm having trouble remembering what it was I did that actually contributed to PILCOP's success. But what I do clearly recall is how hard and successfully Bridget Arimond worked with Alice Ballard on the U.S. Steel case. And I do remember the many nights Reuben Clark spent down at the Police Roundhouse observing the time and condition of people who had disappeared into the back of a police paddy wagon days before they were finally arraigned before a judge, still in a blood-soaked T-shirt, so beaten they were unable to answer questions. And I remember how important Reuben's deadly force study was to the outcome of those lawsuits.

And I do remember the real collegiality and good humor that characterized this early shop. Imagine it: six VISTA volunteers come barreling into an overworked law office one day, expecting to be fully recognized as equal partners in this public interest enterprise. After all, we did outnumber the rest of the staff! Not even Rose Lucas could keep us in line! Instead of just being tolerated, we were taken seriously and put to work. We were given the opportunity to work with some of Philadelphia's best young attorneys who were only a few years older than we were, doing law that mattered.

This was all that we had hoped for back at Stanford, and it changed and shaped our lives in the most profound way.

There is one more thing I remember very clearly. When we arrived in Philadelphia, we didn't have a place to live. "Don't worry!" said Ned. "Stay with

us until you find a place!” So, overnight, Flora’s household swelled from four to ten occupants, a situation that continued for the better part of a month. This was a time when Ned was quite sick with cancer, and Flora was trying to maintain some semblance of normalcy for her two little ones, Abigail and Susannah, who were probably 4 and 7 at the time. I remember Ned’s grit and resolute focus during this time, but it’s Flora’s grace, generosity and kindness to us, under the most difficult circumstances, that I will never forget. How do you explain such gifts of spirit from a young mom facing so much uncertainty?

It’s a great family we have come here to honor tonight.

Thank you.