

## VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA OF LOS ANGELES

### WHERE IMAGINATION AND COMPASSION MEET

#### VISION 2015 – NEW SOLUTIONS

Volunteers of America of Los Angeles (VOALA) is committed to bringing solutions to social problems, not just band-aids. In the next ten years we will pioneer new approaches that will move beyond assisting families and others in need to creating positive lasting changes in neighborhoods and communities. To accomplish this we will not pursue additional costly social services but will create interventions in the spirit of Malcolm Gladwell's popular **The Tipping Point**: "Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push – in just the right place – it can be tipped."

We believe that cost is a central issue. Since the launch of the Great Society in 1965 an estimated \$11 - \$12 trillion has been spent by federal, state and local government to alleviate poverty. The theory behind this massive investment is that change happens from the "outside in," that is, people change when they receive a menu of entitlements.

At the risk of being a bit philosophical, one of VOALA's core values is that real change happens from "the inside out." When people begin to think differently, seeing options available to them that they never imagined, they choose to embark on a life changing journey. And their journey is infectious, influencing those around them and rippling out.

And best of all, helping people begin to think differently is a very inexpensive proposition.

VOA has already undertaken a couple of experiments, epitomized in the imaginative activities of Juana and Gary.

Juana is the parent of a child enrolled in VOALA's Head Start program in North Hollywood. For the past three years VOALA has been operating a highly successful micro-credit program for its Head Start parents so that they can generate supplemental income that makes the difference between them staying in poverty or becoming self-sufficient. VOALA also recently began a social entrepreneur program, providing one year of salary and benefits for individuals with a unique vision and vibrant passion to utilize free market principles to benefit the community, in the end creating a self-sustaining business. Incidentally, VOALA was introduced both to micro-credit and social entrepreneurship by volunteers.

Juana noticed that some of VOALA's mostly female micro-credit entrepreneurs were experiencing tension at home because their husbands were threatened by their success. In response she designed the La Familia Retreat. With the help of a seasonal private campground at a nearby mountain location and assistance from a cadre of volunteers and donations of food from her church, she devised an inexpensive \$75 weekend retreat for couples. The couples spend two days in workshops designed to offer them a way to organize their lives together as if they were running a joint business effort. The sessions

take a great deal of the personal ego out of the equation as to who makes what while allowing free time for the couples to relax and enjoy their time in the mountains together.

The model worked well but Juana discovered that to run these sessions on a continuing basis would be considerably more expensive than the \$75 fee. She developed a detailed business plan and has applied to the social entrepreneur volunteer selection panel for a one year grant. She hopes to now get on with her real work, making La Familia Retreat a viable business that would make a very real difference in her community – and beyond.

Gary is a 24 year old veteran whose life as a child and teen was very chaotic. He was shuttled from one foster care family to another from the age of four because his father was in prison and his mother was a heroin addict and, not surprisingly, he suffered from attention deficit. He acted out in school and barely escaped the juvenile justice system. At 18 he enlisted in the Army and received an honorable discharge four years later. Unfortunately he became addicted to crack cocaine and ended up living on the street in Los Angeles' skid row, supporting his drug habit through petty crime.

In September, 2003 he saw a flyer posted on a skid row telephone post announcing a new VOALA initiative called ADRO (Accessing Dignity, Respect and Opportunity), which was conceived by a VOALA volunteer. The ADRO strategy is to create a cultural shift from a predominant atmosphere of hopelessness and despair to one where people realize that they have real choices and then exercise them, *especially* obtaining employment and securing permanent housing outside that neighborhood.

Gary instinctively embraced the power of this culture change message and, after attending the initial ADRO community meeting, took leadership in devising and implementing a number of activities, including a skid row renaming contest, banners and flyers in the neighborhood proclaiming the new values and outlook, and an ADRO information and suggestion booth at VOALA's Downtown Drop-in Center. Gary has been drug free since September, has secured a job and housing, and works passionately on ADRO, which impressively already boasts almost 150 volunteer "enculturators" from the skid row and wider community, during his off hours.

Is it presumptuous to think that VOA is the one to pioneer breakthroughs in how the Los Angeles community deals with its social problems? Not when you look at our history and current accomplishments. For the past 40 plus years the organization has targeted three client groups that represent growing taxpayer costs and severely threaten the wellbeing of the community. One is children and youth in poverty who are poised for recycling as the next generation of teen mothers, absentee fathers and welfare recipients. Another is youth and adults, including homeless and veterans, who are a significant risk for drug abuse, crime and violence. Finally, VOALA reaches out to frail homebound elderly who seek to remain in their own homes, thereby reducing the mounting costs for convalescent care. Examples of the success of our services abound.

- In 1965 VOALA opened its Early Head Start and Head Start programs, since then providing early childhood education and family strengthening for thousands of infants,

toddlers and preschoolers living in poverty. One of these was two year old Marian. In 1972 her parents were living out of a station wagon at Hansen Dam in the San Fernando Valley. They were referred to VOALA's 500 unit affordable housing and child care center in North Hollywood. The family was housed in an apartment while Marian enrolled in Early Head Start. The parents were both accepted into a nearby job training program and obtained employment as cooks. Five years later the family was able to buy its own home. Today Marian, a college graduate, has her own family and is an executive with an insurance company.

- Since 1978 VOALA has operated its Positive Alternatives program for elementary age youngsters from single parent families living in deteriorating neighborhoods in South Los Angeles. Its focus has been matching up the at risk families with stable families from local churches in long-term family-to-family mentoring relationships. Marcus and his mother were on welfare, victims of an abusive husband and father, living in the midst of drugs and gang violence in Nickerson Gardens, one of Los Angeles' most notorious housing projects. They were "adopted" by a family from Tabernacle of Faith Baptist who had moved to West Los Angeles but remained part of the congregation. Marcus and his mother began spending time with the family weekly, including attending church with them on Sunday. In the ensuing 18 months the mentor family assisted Marcus' mother to find a job and move out of public housing. Marcus is now an eighth grader doing well in school with an ambition to become a policeman.
- In 1971 VOALA was funded by Upward Bound for low income middle and high school students who will be the first in their families to attend college. The program now operates in North Hollywood, Central Los Angeles and Huntington Beach and supports youth at risk of school drop-out to not only complete high school but go on to postsecondary education, ranging from trade school to university. Over the past 33 years Upward Bound has a remarkable track record of postsecondary education enrollment of 94% of its students. One of the program's graduates is Shawna. For as long as she can remember her only house was motel rooms she shared with her mother who suffers from chronic mental illness. Shawna entered the Upward Bound program when she was a seventh grader attending an inner city school. Despite having every reason to fail, she faithfully attended Upward Bound classes every Saturday and participated each summer in the 6 week Upward Bound residential education program at a local college. In her senior high school year she was accepted at all four universities to which she applied, Harvard, Yale, Cal Berkeley and Stanford. She enrolled at Stanford and, supported by scholarships and loans, graduated with honors in 2003. She is now enrolled at the Stanford Law School, studying constitutional law.
- VOALA opened its first re-entry program for ex-offenders returning to the community from prison in 1948. One of its current programs is a 65 bed Women's Restitution Center located near downtown Los Angeles. Women convicted of non-violent offenses are remanded here for up to 3 years in lieu of prison so they can continue their employment and pay back their victims. Margaret, a single mother with two teenagers worked in the accounting office of a local college. After becoming addicted to methamphetamines she began embezzling funds at the workplace. Convicted of a felony,

Margaret entered the VOALA center in May, 2003. She was able to keep her job and is paying back the college. By her own account, the most important aspect of her being allowed to remain in the community is maintaining contact with her children at a critical time in their lives. While she is not allowed to be away from the center except during work hours, they are able to visit her there every weekend.

- VOALA operates five programs serving homeless veterans. One of them, funded by the Department of Labor, provides job training and placement. Norm was born in Washington, DC and served in the Navy from 1995 through 1999. Shocked upon discharge to find that his wife with their two children had moved in with another man, he went into an emotional tailspin, ending up homeless and drug addicted on the streets of downtown Los Angeles for almost three years. In December, 2002, after four unsuccessful tries, he entered the VOALA detoxification program and completed nine months of recovery. Because he had experience in telecommunications and electrical installation in the Navy a VOALA job developer was able to place him in a well paying position with an aerospace subcontractor in Burbank. He regularly comes back to the program to share his success with other homeless veterans and consistently receives stellar reports from his employer.
- Since 1949 VOALA has been delivering thousands of meals each day to frail homebound elderly. We also provide a wide range of other services, including shopping assistance and friendly phone visiting, geared to helping them remain independent in their own homes. Grace is a case where the program was a life saver. She is an 84 year old widow living on a fixed income who has been receiving home delivered meals from VOALA for sixteen years. She says the visit from our volunteer is the high point of her day. One day last fall she did not answer our volunteer's knock at the door. Immediately concerned, the volunteer called 911. When the paramedics arrived and forced their way into the apartment they found Grace in a diabetic coma on the floor and immediately transported her to the hospital. The doctor said that if she had not been found that day she likely would not have survived.
- The volunteers delivering meals to the elderly began to notice that some of their seniors had companion animals but could not afford pet food. They then found that these seniors were feeding part of their home delivered meal to their pets. In response VOALA initiated the Senior Companion Animal Program to deliver donated pet food and supplies to these seniors for whom a dog or cat is the most important thing in their life. Additionally the program raises funds to provide veterinary care and grooming. Evelyn is a 98 year old who is almost blind and lives alone. Her life revolves around her twelve year old cat, Patti. With a big smile Evelyn describes how Patti "loves to be rocked on my lap, just like a little baby, and if I stop she looks up and paws my chin until I start rocking again." Without VOALA support Evelyn would have not been able to keep her beloved cat. Patti now needs medication for a thyroid condition. A Companion Animal volunteer takes the cat to the vet for periodic check-ups and makes sure that the prescription is refilled.

Today VOALA operates with an annual \$35 million budget, supporting more than 30 programs, including about 1500 units of housing for low income families and seniors, that touch the lives of 30,000 people each year. We are fiscally very conservative, a 'lean' administration with almost 90% of expenses going to direct services. We are considered one of Los Angeles' best managed non-profits both in terms of program excellence and fiscal control. Fundraising costs are low because we extensively utilize Hollywood celebrities for our special events, for example, Dustin Hoffman, Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

We are also entrepreneurial, committed to becoming more self-sufficient.

- We have developed a food business, La Voa, that utilizes our large commercial kitchens off hours and has produced a line of healthy gourmet soups and is now developing a full line of foods for supermarket shelves. La Voa provides job training in culinary arts for at risk youth while the proceeds are used to add seniors on the waiting list to our meals-on-wheels program.
- We are building on the legacy of Angels Attic, the preeminent miniatures and doll museum in Santa Monica, both to generate income for our services and extend our mission to additional disadvantaged children and low income seniors at a unique and beautiful venue.
- We are in the process of acquiring another non-profit that operates services for the homeless and that owns income producing commercial properties which we believe can generate increased revenue.
- We have just received a long-term \$1 per year lease for three acres of DWP property in North Hollywood where we plan to establish a nursery and landscaping business which will at the same time provide job training for unemployed veterans.
- We are about to receive at no cost between 150 and 200 three and four bedroom homes in an attractive San Pedro neighborhood, part of a Navy base closure, to provide up to five years transitional housing for formerly homeless families, including veterans. As these families' incomes increase they will be able to pay higher rents that will create a surplus that can be reinvested in other critical community services.

How can all this good work not be good enough? Just look at our Los Angeles community. Serious social problems that threaten the wellbeing of the entire community continue to fester and worsen despite the expensive and well-intentioned efforts of non-profits and government. Whatever the opinions about why this distressing scenario persists, the one thing that is clear to us is that new remedies must be discovered that promise permanent solutions to this community's social ills. It is also clear that these remedies must access leverage points, producing multiplier effects of positive change.

How can that happen? Not without you. Remember at the beginning of this talk that three of our more creative initiatives, micro-credit, social entrepreneurship and neighborhood culture

change were brought to this organization by three volunteers new to VOALA and continue to be driven by them and other volunteers they have recruited.

VOALA's vision to transform the social landscape of Los Angeles by 2015 will be realized through new thinking and new ideas that will be brought to us from *outside* – by you and others like you. Together we can make a difference, not merely by dreaming a new future, but by acting to make it real, now. This future demands risk taking and bold experiments. With each new volunteer stepping forward, a new realm of opportunity opens up, taking us closer to that dream for a healthy vibrant Los Angeles.

We desperately need your support, financial, yes, but even more your passion, creativity and energy. I guarantee you one thing, if you do get involved, you will take away with you more than you give. This is your opportunity to create a legacy.