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**CIVIC VENTURES 2 INNOVATIONS**

Photographs by Alex Harris

Essay by Rob Gurwitt

# Lessons for Life: Experience Corps

INTRODUCTION BY MARC FREEDMAN

INNOVATIONS profiles the work of creative organizations that engage older Americans in new and compelling ways to revitalize their communities. The series — part of the documentary project REINVENTING AGE — is published by Civic Ventures, a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the aging of America into a source of individual and social renewal.

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*Lessons for Life: Experience Corps*

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We are grateful for the time and attention from Philadelphia Experience Corps volunteers and staff, and the teachers, principals, and students at Julia Ward Howe, Alexander K. McClure, Bayard Taylor, Andrew J. Morrison, Alain Locke, Richard Wright, Thurgood Marshall,

Martha Washington, and William Rowen elementary schools. Our thanks especially to Sharen Finzimer, Howe principal, for opening her school to us. We also thank Deanda Logan, Rob Tietze, and Nancy Henkin at the Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning for their help.

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MARC FREEDMAN, founder and president of Civic Ventures, is the author of *Prime Time* and *The Kindness of Strangers*.



**A**s Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare during the heart of the Great Society, John Gardner was responsible for implementing both Medicare and the Older Americans Act. Together with the expansion of Social Security benefits, these sweeping measures helped provide aging Americans with unprecedented economic security, independence, and health. Yet these advances also raised basic questions about the role a dynamic and growing older population might now play in our society.

For Gardner, the gift of longevity offered an opportunity for older individuals to put their talents to new use—not only in pursuit of personal meaning, but also to help meet some of society’s most significant needs. How might we channel the skills and idealism of older Americans to such purposes? For Gardner, one important answer was in the creation of a new national service program, a program he called “The Experience Corps.”

In 1995, a full three decades after Gardner first formed his vision, The Experience Corps was finally launched. From its inception, the program focused on bolstering urban elementary schools, setting up shop at “ground zero” of the intergenerational war some contend will be an inevitable byproduct of the aging society. Experience Corps offers a compelling alternative to this bleak prospect, showing the older generation investing in the well-being of children and the educational institutions charged with developing them. Indeed, the schools you will visit in Rob Gurwitt’s essay and Alex Harris’ photographs have become safe harbors where young and old can come together to find connection and a true sense of interdependence.

The story of Experience Corps is also a tale of local heroes, women and men from economically blighted inner-city areas foregoing conventional retirement to devote 15 hours or more each week to children in need. These children all too often have little steady adult support in their lives—at a time when parents are compelled to work long hours just to get by, teachers see 200 or more faces in a day, and guidance counselors confront

ratios of 500- or 600-to-1. Against this backdrop, the Experience Corps members become additional “aunts” and “uncles” to the children, and a second family to each other. They are, day in and day out, a walking illustration of E. M. Forster’s famous edict: “Only connect.”

*Lessons for Life*, capturing Experience Corps and its work in one city, is the second installment of Innovations. This ongoing series by some of America’s foremost photographers, writers, and radio producers is designed to bring to life, and to light, the work of creative organizations with the potential to reshape what it means to grow older in this country—to help transform the aging of America into a potent source of civic renewal.

# Lessons for Life

**O**N A CROWDED BUS IN PHILADELPHIA ONE DAY, A young girl sitting near the Rev. Cookie Bracey launched into a tantrum. It was early February, the weather was gray and cold, and no one on board was in the mood to put up with her behavior. “She needs a good spanking!” one passenger announced to the others. People around nodded their heads, adding their own surly comments. “Shut up!” someone called to the girl. “Hey!” the bus driver yelled at the mother. “Can’t you stop that child from screaming?” The mother herself was furious, the girl inconsolable.

As she listened to the sour hectoring around her, the Rev. Bracey noticed a well-dressed elderly woman seated across from her, taking it all in. Eventually the woman leaned toward the girl, smiled at her, and calmly said, “Hello. My name is Sarah.” Taken aback, the girl fell silent. “I can see you’re having a bad day,” the woman continued. “Why don’t you come over here and tell me about it?” Sniffing, the girl did. “She got up,” the Rev. Bracey remembers, “went and stood in front of the lady, and for the rest of the ride she stood there and told that lady all about what was troubling her. Her mother said, angrily, ‘Come here!’ but the lady said, ‘No, let her talk. Let her be.’”

The Rev. Bracey is a solidly built woman, with curly, reddish-gray hair and a deep, vibrant voice—a preacher’s voice—and as she tells this story it fills with warmth at the memory. “‘Hello. My name is Sarah,’” she repeats, shaking her head and smiling. “*That* is the voice of wisdom.”

... of late Cookie Bracey has been pondering why even unrelated children and old people seem to take to each other.

The comedian Sam Levenson once famously remarked, “The reason grandparents and grandchildren get along so well is that they have a common enemy,” but of late Cookie Bracey has been pondering why even unrelated children and old people seem to take to each other. As the pastor at the Mount Carmel United Methodist Church, a mostly African-American congregation in North Philadelphia, she has gotten involved with the public elementary school just down the street. There, in a trailer that squats along one edge of the school’s bare cement playground, she regularly sees the affinity she encountered on the bus that day. Even after a year and a half of visits, she feels no closer to an explanation for what ties people at the beginning of their lives together with those moving toward the other end. “I think it’s a God-given gift,” she says. “It’s a mystery.”

The trailer at Julia Ward Howe Elementary School is home to a group of volunteers active in an effort called Experience Corps. They are all retired—with the exception of the Rev. Bracey—and most of them are African-American women. A few days each week, they arrive at Howe first

# “People are still carrying around all these stereotypes that older people

thing in the morning and spend their time tutoring kids from kindergarten through third grade. They focus on reading and writing. There is nothing flashy about what they do: This is not one of those “curriculum enrichment” programs that provide schools with fancy materials and a ready-made theory of how children learn. It’s a bunch of older people who believe in the importance of learning to read and who manage over weeks and months to give each of their pupils sustained, one-on-one attention. In the life of an inner-city school, this is a signal achievement.

Experience Corps is up and running in 15 cities now. Philadelphia was one of the first, and 13 elementary schools there use Experience Corps volunteers. Nationally, Experience Corps gets some federal funding and is coordinated by San Francisco-based Civic Ventures, but it’s run by independent organizations in each city; the Philadelphia version is coordinated by the Center for Intergenerational Learning at Temple University, a scrappy, lots-of-balls-in-the-air outfit dedicated to linking generations in ways that improve community life.

“When the intergenerational field started to get organized 20 years ago,” says Rob Tietze, who is the Center’s Experience Corps director and helped launch the program in 1996, “we and others were responding to the segregation of ages in communities, so the programs were free-flowing and based around activities. Experience Corps is the next generation, where we’re looking at social needs and then creating an intergenerational approach to them. Anytime anyone’s out there addressing a social need, we try to get a seat at the table saying, ‘Have you thought about how older people are going to be involved in it?’ And they still go, ‘Gee no, we haven’t thought about older people. Can they do this? Would they want to?’ People are still carrying around all these stereotypes that older people aren’t interested, they just want to watch TV or move to Florida.”

**O**N AN OVERCAST, CHILLY MORNING IN MARCH, WHEN thoughts of Florida would be entirely reasonable, Gordon Mackey is the first to arrive at the Howe trailer. He hangs his tan jacket and brown, corduroy cap on a set of low hooks by the door, turns on the lights, and checks to make sure that all is in order. At the far end, he notices that the cookie bucket is empty — kids get two cookies after each tutoring session — and sweeps the crumbs into a trash can, then refills it with vanilla creams.

Gordon Mackey is 65, a gentle, slow-moving man with large, brown-tinted aviator glasses that magnify his eyes

# aren't interested, they just want to watch TV or move to Florida."

and make him seem guileless. Which, in fact, he is: He tutors kindergartners in part because no one at the school was sure he'd be up to the rigors of older children. Born in Philadelphia, he was a handyman and a caterer's assistant during his working life, but since the 1980s, when his catering firm moved to New Jersey and he was thrown onto unemployment, he's relied on public assistance. He is a church deacon as well, and it was his minister who told him about Experience Corps. "I had extra time on my hands and decided it would best be served if I volunteered and did some kind of work," he says. "It's a wonderful program, working with kids. I like that smile on their faces."

After he crosses the school yard, passes through the steel doors by the lunchroom and up the steps to Elissa Stern's kindergarten class, though, what he finds is not a smile. He had come looking for two of his students who'd been absent the day before, Desiree and Shakira, but they are gone today as well. Instead, he discovers another of his pupils, Shawnae, sitting on the floor and weeping. "I want my mommy!" she wails.

Shawnae, a thin-faced five-year-old who wears her hair braided in tight rows held by blue and white plastic butterflies, is usually animated and charming. But just before school began that day all the classes had gathered outside, in the play yard, to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. As one small boy held a pole with an American flag on it, Sharen Finzimer, Howe's principal, led the school in the pledge. Ms. Finzimer is a believer in orderly behavior, and,

calling out through a tinny electric megaphone she uses, she insisted that each class stand in its own, disciplined line. Shawnae was separated from her older sister, whom she'd been standing with beforehand, and has been crying ever since.

Mr. Mackey carefully buttons up her jacket and pulls her green woolen hat gently over her head. She walks down the hall with him, down the stairs and out across the yard, holding his hand.

"Don't cry, Shawnae," he keeps saying. "Don't cry. Everything will be all right."

In the trailer, he asks if she wants to play with some of the toys. Slowly, she stops crying, and he leans down to wipe her tears. "Pretty girl, don't cry," he says. And then, "Say! Let me take your picture!" He pulls out a Polaroid camera and focuses on her face. On the wall by his desk, where he has Polaroids of the students he works with, there is already one of Shawnae, her head tilted to the side, with an exuberant grin. "Give me a smile!" he urges. She looks at him sadly.

Shawnae's gaze falls on the pile of books Mr. Mackey keeps by the small pupils' desk he uses. They're worn, mostly paperback or cardboard, the sort of nondescript kids' books you can buy for a quarter apiece at second-hand stores. He pulls one out and starts to read to her. "Sniff, sniff. Mo the Mouse. Mo smells his favorite food: cheese!" he says.

**There is another trait they bring, though,  
that is even more important: They show  
up day after day.**

She holds the book, looking somberly from the picture of a giant mound of cheese to her tutor. She pages through, finishes, and puts the book aside. Mr. Mackey pulls out a small cardboard book and slowly reads, “A is for Apple, B for banana, C for cookie . . .”



## Experience Corps®

Experience Corps places a critical mass of older adult volunteers in schools and youth-focused organizations in their communities. Started in 1995 as a pilot project in five cities, Experience Corps has grown to include more than 1,000 volunteers in 15 cities across the country. Among their many roles, the older adults work one-on-one with young children, create before- and after-school programs, get parents more fully involved in schools, and serve as advocates for children and their needs in the larger community.

## Getting Started

Experience Corps had its beginnings in a concept paper by John Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and founder of Common Cause. Gardner's idea was to create a new institution that would mobilize the time, talent, and experience of older Americans to revitalize their communities. He called it Experience Corps and later would become advisory board chair for the program's pilot project.

Gardner's notion became reality in 1995 with the launch of an Experience Corps pilot project. Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), a nonprofit organization that develops innovative strategies to help disadvantaged children, served as the managing partner for this effort, working in close collaboration with the National Senior Service Corps of the Corporation for National Service (CNS) and scholars from Johns Hopkins University.

Interested in avenues for expanding the impact of the National Senior Service Corps, CNS became the lead funder of this initiative. The agency secured \$1 million in federal funds earmarked for innovation through "demonstration projects," funds that seeded the Experience Corps pilot. The Retirement Research Foundation and the Pinkerton Foundation also provided funding to P/PV for technical assistance to and research on the new pilots.

After a planning and start-up phase that began in summer 1995, an 18-month pilot was conducted in 12 schools in Philadelphia; the South Bronx; Minneapolis; Portland, Oregon; and Port Arthur, Texas. The first Experience Corps volunteers—called members—began participating in early 1996. Each of the five pilot projects were

sponsored by a lead agency in those cities, either a Foster Grandparent or RSVP program in every case. The projects agreed to place teams of 15 half-time Experience Corps members in some of the neediest inner-city elementary schools in their communities. In return, each project received \$175,000 for the two-year period to plan, develop, and implement Experience Corps in their city.

The Experience Corps model—built on both research and accumulated knowledge from other service programs—focused on 10 key elements, which the pilot projects were asked to follow:

- *A focus on elementary schools*, particularly in the inner-city because of the academic and social needs of low-income children;
- *Intensive service*, with an expectation that older adults make a commitment to work at least 15 hours a week throughout the school year;
- *Incentives* in the form of a stipend (which ranged from \$100 to \$200 a month, depending on the city) for volunteers who served at least 15 hours a week;

- *Diversity of participants*, including volunteers at all income levels and a special focus on drawing more men to the program;
- *A variety of meaningful service roles* that ranged from tutoring and mentoring to getting more parents involved in the school;
- *Leadership and initiative* for those volunteers willing to take on more responsibility for running the program;
- *Training* to help volunteers both understand the strengths and needs of children and schools, and develop the skills needed to effectively fill their roles;
- *Learning and growth*, striving to strike a balance between what volunteers gave and what they got from their experience;
- *Critical mass* of older adult volunteers to highlight the impact a group could have within a specific school and, ultimately, in a particular neighborhood;
- *The team concept*, which brought together six to 10 volunteers meeting regularly at one site.

Shortly after the pilots were launched, Experience Corps began receiving help from two prominent national organizations: AARP, which assisted by sending recruitment letters to its members living close to Experience Corps schools, and Elderhostel, which provided free scholarships to older adults who volunteered with Experience Corps for at least a year.

Once recruited, Experience Corps members spent the bulk of their day working one-on-one with children, with some of this time spent on academics and the rest of it developing close relationships with the students and supporting them emotionally. Volunteers also took leadership in developing before- and after-school programs for students focused on music, sports, dance, and academic enrichment, along with initiating other programs designed to strengthen the schools, such as parent breakfasts aimed at getting families more involved in their children's education.

Beginning in 1997–98, after the two-year pilot, the Corporation for National Service provided additional funding for an expansion of Experience Corps (called the Seniors for Schools initiative). This new round of activity brought with it two key changes from the pilot phase. First, non-stipended opportunities were added for volunteers to serve on a less intensive basis than the 15-hour-a-week positions that were at the core of the program. As a result, an older person interested in becoming part of Experience Corps was provided greater choice in selecting a role within the program. Second, the program moved more significantly toward a focus on improving reading for low-income students in kindergarten through third grade. The Seniors for Schools program included the original five Experience Corps pilot projects and expanded to include projects in Boston; Cleveland; Kansas City, Missouri; and Leesburg, Florida.

Meanwhile, in January 1998 Public/Private Ventures helped spin off Civic Ventures as a new nonprofit organization to focus specifically on developing Experience Corps, and more broadly on creating new civic roles for older Americans in our society. Civic Ventures quickly raised funds to further expand Experience Corps, including two ongoing demonstration projects: One initiative adapted the in-school Experience Corps model to the non-school hours, working in YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other community youth organizations. The second tested the use of seed grants to expand the elementary school model to new cities, including San Francisco; Washington, D.C.; Indianapolis; Phoenix; and Durham, North Carolina. Since 1999, two additional Experience Corps projects, focused on the in-school model, began operating in Baltimore (through Johns Hopkins Center for Aging and Health) and New York (through United Neighborhood Houses).

While the original elements of the Experience Corps model continue to guide the programs, several operational issues are worth further mention: volunteer training, site development, and stipends.

Each Experience Corps project provides training for both initial and ongoing support of its volunteers. Training sessions include information on a range of issues, such as child development, literacy, conflict resolution, tutoring, parent outreach, and the policies and procedures that go along with working in schools.

There also is an emphasis on team-building with other Experience Corps members and consistency for the students they serve.

For the projects that focus on in-school efforts, Experience Corps staff must be deliberate in their site selection, usually beginning with a few schools that have the greatest possibility for impact on both the children and the school. Staff members develop clear criteria and a selection process for potential school sites, and then explore the interest and commitment on the part of the school, including resources available at the site to help with running the program day-to-day. Projects running after-school Experience Corps sites also have developed a thorough site selection process. After selection, Experience Corps brings an already-developed structure to each site, working in partnership with the school or organization but maintaining responsibility for recruiting, training, and supervising the volunteers.

The incentives provided to Experience Corps members have, from the start, included primarily a stipend of \$100 to \$200 a month for those who work at least 15 hours a week. The stipend can amount to a quarter or more of a project's budget, but the incentive makes a difference for most Experience Corps members. Many of the volunteers are under 65 and not yet receiving Medicare or full Social Security. Their stipend pays for program-related expenses such as transportation to and from a site, and also covers some of

their own monthly expenses. Civic Ventures continues to explore other incentives that might also support a significant commitment to Experience Corps.

## Staffing and Operations

In recent years, there has been growing interest in bringing together all the existing projects that use the Experience Corps model. At the impetus of Civic Ventures, project directors met in March 2000 in Kansas City to discuss the need for a national network using the Experience Corps model; a follow-up meeting, which also included volunteers, was convened in Washington, D.C., later that spring. At the same time, Civic Ventures raised national funding to establish an Experience Corps central office function, ensured the Experience Corps name was trademarked, and launched a web site for the program.

Local Experience Corps projects continue to be coordinated by a lead agency in each community. Current lead agencies include universities, community-based organizations, government entities, and local projects of the National Senior Service Corps. Experience Corps staff at the lead agency—always including a project director—focus on managing the program, recruiting and training volunteers, developing new sites, and raising local funds. In addition, larger projects also hire coordinators (typically one for every four sites) to recruit, train, schedule, and supervise volunteers, and also serve as the liaison with school principals and teachers.

The Experience Corps members remain the key to success at each site. In addition to performing consistent and intensive direct service, some assume volunteer leadership roles through organizing team meetings, serving as a liaison between the program and the schools, and mentoring new volunteers. Experience Corps volunteers, age 55 or older, are recruited principally through targeted mailings or word-of-mouth, and usually live in the neighborhoods surrounding the schools or community organizations where they work with children. Most are African-American or Latino working-class women and men who have lived in the neighborhood for many years and remain deeply committed to its improvement.

## Costs and Funding

Each Experience Corps project operates with its own annual budget; the amount varies based on the size and scope of the project. On average, however, the annual budget for a project that places Experience Corps teams at seven sites is approximately \$300,000. Of this, 55 percent covers personnel costs to run the project. Another 25 percent funds the stipends for Experience Corps members who work at least 15 hours a week, and the remaining 20 percent is used for general operating expenses such as rent, program and office supplies, training materials, and computer equipment.

In both the two-year pilot phase and the succeeding four years of the program, Experience Corps has been funded through a variety of public and private sources. For example, demonstration funding through the Corporation for National Service largely seeded the development of the pilot projects. Federal funding—again through the Corporation for National Service, but this time in the form of an Americorps grant—is helping to support the work of many Experience Corps projects during the 2001–02 school year. Significant funding for Experience Corps expansion has also come from national and community foundations; school districts supporting a local Experience Corps project; and state governments, including Maryland and Ohio.

## Expansion

As the fall 2001 school year began, Experience Corps projects were located in 15 cities: Baltimore; Boston; Cleveland; Durham, North Carolina; Indianapolis; Kansas City, Missouri; Leesburg, Florida; Minneapolis; New York; Philadelphia; Phoenix; Port Arthur, Texas; Portland, Oregon; San Francisco; and Washington, D.C.

The Experience Corps national network is dedicated to continued enhancement of the program and the development of a learning community among existing and

new projects. Regular phone conference calls, annual project director trainings, and a newsletter and electronic bulletin board are among the tools that help the projects share vital information and support each other. The network also will help to establish or refine standards for the projects, inform expansion and identify potential new sites, offer additional training and professional development opportunities, and provide a national voice for Experience Corps.

On the strength of Experience Corps' growth and success since its pilot phase, Civic Ventures is planning a significant expansion that will take the program to most major metropolitan areas over the next five years.

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Experience Corps has sites in 15 cities nationwide. The web site has additional contact information for each Experience Corps project.

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