SHIRLEY SAGAWA

The AMERICAN WAY TO Change

HOW NATIONAL SERVICE & VOLUNTEERS ARE TRANSFORMING AMERICA

Foreword by MICHELLE NUNN ★ Prologue by JOHN PODESTA

"The stories of everyday people changing the nation through service come to life in this book. Shirley Sagawa has been at the center of service policy for two decades, and if we follow the blueprint she offers, together we can solve the pressing problems of our day."

—*Alan Khazei, founder, Be the Change, Inc., and co-founder, City Year*

"Leaders agree: with the many challenges facing America, we are at a critical moment when real change is needed. Service can play a central role in that transformation, and this book spells out how everyone can participate."

—*Lisa Paulsen, president and chief executive officer, Entertainment Industry Foundation*

"Shirley Sagawa has written an invaluable how-to book for accomplishing nothing less than the transformation of our nation. Shirley was present at the creation of the America's Promise Alliance in 1997 and, more significantly, guided its recent 're-invention.' If we are effective today, it is because we benefited from the lessons she brings to life in this book."

—*Marguerite Kondracke, president and CEO, America's Promise Alliance*

"Through this important book, Sagawa offers a compelling case for the idea that citizen service is a critical strategy for solving the pressing problems of our time."

—*AnnMaura Connolly, steering committee member, Voices for National Service*

"This book, written by one of the country's most influential advocates for service, shows how we can improve the quality of life in America's communities through policies that encourage a lifetime of service."

—*Stephen Goldsmith, chairman, Corporation for National and Community Service, and author of* The Power of Social Innovation

"Shirley Sagawa is the godmother of national service and volunteerism. In this book, she takes her ideas to the next level and outlines a new approach to national problem solving—one that asks each of us to help reshape America."

—*Jeanne Shaheen, U.S. Senator from New Hampshire*

"No one has a better sweep of the ways and means Americans can use their power to change the world than Shirley Sagawa. This book highlights some of the most innovative and successful programs of our time and should be read by any policymaker or active citizen who is looking for effective strategies to solve our most critical social problems."

—*Harris Wofford, former U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, author of* Of Kennedys and Kings, *and former CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service*

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Published by Jossey-Bass
A Wiley Imprint
989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741—www.josseybass.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Sagawa, Shirley.
The American way to change: how national service and volunteers are transforming America / Shirley Sagawa.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-470-56557-5 (hardback)
1. Voluntarism-United States. 2. Volunteers-United States. I. Title.
HN90.V64S24 2010
361.3'70973-dc22
2010003891
Printed in the United States of America
FIRST EDITION
HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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This book is dedicated to the memory of
Senator Edward M. Kennedy and Eli J. Segal,
who shaped our future through their service.

Foreword

America's vitality is rooted in the volunteer spirit. From the country's founding through every significant chapter of its history, the imagination and energy of our citizens have written our narrative of change. From Ben Franklin to Martin Luther King Jr., volunteer leaders have shaped our nation. Volunteers built institutions such as the Sierra Club, United Way, Red Cross, and the Salvation Army and shifted the nation's moral compass through the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, and every campaign for change that has transformed our nation and often the world.

Today we need this spirit more than ever. At this time of possibility and peril we must awaken the true power, potential, and will of the American people to imagine and then forge the change we need. This book, *The American Way to Change*, is a roadmap to guide policymakers and citizens on how to seize this moment.

Shirley Sagawa is singularly equipped to show us how to rebuild the nation through service. Shirley stands as the most thoughtful, well-versed student of the policy and legislative history of our national service agenda. As the author of the original national service legislation and a policy adviser to every administration over the past twenty years, she uniquely is both author and actor on the public stage. Most important, Shirley is an intellectual and a passionate change agent—combining research, data, storytelling, and analytical insight with a passion to equip our nation to solve its greatest problems.

While volunteering may be seen as something nice to do, it is not always understood as central to our history and our future. And yet, the enduring words of our nation's greatest leaders were often centered on a call to what is best in all of us—from Lincoln's invocation of the "better angels of our nature" to Roosevelt's declaration that "this generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny" to President Kennedy's mandate to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Indeed, the

activation of our volunteers and citizen leaders is truly at the core of our nation's story and a defining hallmark of presidential leadership.

In 1989, President George H. W. Bush invoked a Thousand Points of Light, which became not only a lasting metaphor in the public's mind but a touchstone for a presidential commitment to lift up volunteer service. With the passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, the president and Congress created a platform to power the "twin engines" of national service and community volunteerism. Over the next twenty years, each president extended this legacy of service. President Clinton gave life to the long-held dream of a national service program that would bring together young people across differences of race and socioeconomics to tackle the toughest problems in our communities and, in the process, to transform themselves. President George W. Bush embraced the call to service and extended both AmeriCorps and a broad mantle of service that included Citizens Corps and Volunteers for Prosperity to engage our nation's human capital in the wake of 9/11, natural disasters, and the needs of the developing world.

It is notable that in two decades characterized by polarization and political defamation, the call to service has been a unifying rallying cry. U.S. presidents have joined together over the importance of citizen action—from the 1997 America's Promise Summit to the pairing of former Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton in the wakes of Hurricane Katrina and the tsunami in Indonesia. Over this time, we have seen remarkable progress. We have twenty-three million more volunteers serving annually today than we did when President Bush called for us to turn to the only resource "that always grows in times of need—the goodness and the courage of the American people." We have gone from an idea about the power of young people joining hands to solve our nation's problems to a corps of more than a half million, who have worked in thousands of programs across the country with measurable impact in lifting up test scores and graduation rates, conserving our resources, and restoring economic stability to families. Through this service, we are creating life-long habits of engagement, exposing a new generation of citizen leaders to the serious challenges of their day, and imbuing a sense of the patriotism that draws individuals into something larger than self.

We now stand at a pivotal moment. We have, in President and Mrs. Obama, leaders who are rooted deeply in service through their values and careers. Mrs. Obama ran an AmeriCorps program, Public

Allies (one of the pilot initiatives that President Bush's legislation supported). President Obama, a community organizer, has a profound understanding of the import of activism to create change. In the first hundred days of his administration, with long-time service champions Senators Kennedy and Hatch, the landmark Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act was passed to grow national service exponentially, spark social innovation, and greatly expand volunteer engagement. While President George H. W. Bush helped create a culture of service in which "definition of a successful life must include service," President and Mrs. Obama are embracing a vision of service as "central to our national priorities."

In the words of President Obama, our history is the "story of patriots who set forth the ideals that animate our democracy, and all those who fought and died for those ideals. It's the story of women who reached for the ballot, and people who stood up, and sat in, and marched for justice. It's the story of firefighters and police officers who rushed to those burning towers, and ordinary people who rushed to the aid of a flooded American city. That's always been the story of this nation—the story of those who stepped forward in our darkest hours to serve it."

Those who rose to answer the defining questions of their time—colony or country? free or half free? separate but equal or truly equal?—weren't in it for the money. They were volunteers. Their service wasn't "extra." It was the work that changed this country. The courage, the patriotism, and the compassion that drove them to act are the same qualities we need today as we seek to answer the questions of our own time. Will this continue to be a land of opportunity where all things are still possible for all people? Or will it be a place where those born without advantages of wealth, health, and good luck have the deck stacked against them? Will we engage with the world to confront our shared threats? Or will we hope against hope to defer them to the next administration, the next generation?

In *The American Way to Change*, Shirley Sagawa outlines a plan to engage our citizens in answering the call to continue to remake our nation and our world.

Michelle Nunn
CEO, Points of Light Institute
Co-founder, HandsOn Network

Prologue

The Center for American Progress (CAP) is in the business of generating and lifting up solutions to America's biggest challenges. We like to think of CAP as idealistic enough to believe change is possible and practical enough to make it happen.

Service fits squarely into that vision. In this spirit, in 2007 we decided to add national service as a focus area for CAP and turned to Shirley Sagawa to join CAP as a fellow. As a legislative aide for Senator Edward Kennedy, Shirley negotiated landmark legislation—signed by President George H. W. Bush—to create the Commission on National and Community Service. She helped to draft the legislation that created the Corporation for National and Community Service during the Clinton administration and then went on to help lead the startup of AmeriCorps. She joined our team to develop a new agenda for the next stage of federal policy for national service.

I knew from experience early in my career at the ACTION agency that volunteers can play a crucial role in helping low-income people find ways out of poverty. Today a rich array of effective service programs are proving that volunteers, AmeriCorps members, and VISTA members should be part of comprehensive strategies to improve health, education, and the environment, as well as economic opportunity.

The National Service agenda that Shirley wrote for CAP had a significant influence on the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, one of the first pieces of legislation signed by President Barack Obama after his election. That legislation has the potential to inspire a new era of service in America. This book takes the next step by spelling out how.

It could not come at a more critical time, as America struggles to emerge from the Great Recession stronger than ever, with Americans who are healthier, better educated, and well-prepared for the jobs of the future. It's important to remember that during the Great

Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps to direct the efforts of destitute young men toward building the great national parks and conserving our natural resources. And that during the Cold War, President John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps to build goodwill with emerging nations, countering the image of the "Ugly American." President Lyndon Johnson followed through on President Kennedy's desire to create a domestic Peace Corps, launching VISTA as part of the War on Poverty, and President George W. Bush created the Freedom Corps to mobilize Americans in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy.

So when Bill Clinton called AmeriCorps "the American way to change America," he was right. He proposed the AmeriCorps program and took it from a pledge in a campaign speech to a national program with 60,000 members. President Obama followed that tradition, signing the Serve America Act, the first step toward making good on his pledge to expand AmeriCorps to 250,000 members.

This book makes the case that we should not pursue that expansion for its own sake but rather as an effective strategy to solve the problems that plague our nation. Volunteering and national service should be part of any plan to make America a land of boundless opportunity where people can better themselves, their children, their families, and their communities through education, hard work, and the freedom to climb the ladder of economic mobility. This book deserves consideration from every policymaker looking for new solutions—and every American who wants to be a part of the answer.

John Podesta
CEO, Center for American Progress

Preface

The last time I spoke to Ted Kennedy, he was grinning ear-to-ear in the ornate Senate lobby after the passage of the Serve America Act on March 27, 2009. Senator Orrin Hatch, a conservative senator from Utah, had graciously asked the Senate to name the legislation for its lead sponsor, the senior senator from Massachusetts. Despite his amazing forty-six-year legislative record, few programs had been named for Senator Kennedy, and it seemed he could not stop smiling. Leaning on a cane and with his wife Vicky by his side, he thanked a small group of us who had worked on the bill, then posed for photo after photo. It was a joyful moment that I will always treasure. He died just a few months later.

I was interning for Senator Kennedy in college in 1981 when I first encountered the question that is the central focus of this book: Can volunteers solve important problems facing our country? Senator Kennedy led the Democrats on the Labor Committee, which was controlled by Republicans. It was the beginning of the Reagan Revolution. Social program after social program was on the chopping block. To replace government efforts, the president called for increased volunteering. The Kennedy staff, crammed in a small office in a crumbling Senate annex building, spent much of its time fighting program cuts and working to reinvent government programs along lines that would be more appealing to conservatives—for example, public employment programs for poor people had been characterized as wasteful make-work; public-private partnerships took their place. Student financial aid grants shifted toward loans. Targeted, narrowly defined programs became flexible "block grants" that could be spent at the direction of state officials.

I spent much of my six months as an intern carrying typewritten papers back and forth in the muggy Washington heat, from the annex to the Senate Russell Building, where Senator Kennedy's main office was located. I copied documents, drafted letters, and even wrote a few

statements that were published in the Congressional Record under Senator Kennedy's name. My substantive contribution was limited. But I learned a great deal—both about how a bill becomes a law and how to think about public policy in an era of scarce resources. And I gained a career goal—to become a policymaker who would make things better, particularly for poor children whose life chances were dimmed by their economic circumstances.

I had come to the Kennedy staff as a Republican, albeit a moderate, western New York–style one, not a hardcore conservative. I left as a Democrat, convinced that there was an important government role in solving critical social problems and that volunteers could not replace public programs. But a question stayed with me after that internship. Even if volunteers could not replace public programs, couldn't they make an important contribution?

I have to admit that I had never really thought much about volunteers. As a child growing up in a small canal town surrounded by farmland, I wasn't aware of formal volunteer programs. And yet, I realize that voluntary help was all around me. My father, who had come to the United States as a Japanese immigrant on a cargo ship with nothing but a trunk and a medical degree, sometimes treated farm workers and other people in our rural town without pay. My mother, a nurse, from a poor family herself, seemed always to be taking on hard cases, acting as a sort of informal mentor to drug addicts, depressed children, and lost souls. She ran the Sunday School, was active in Band Boosters, ran our 4-H Club, and nurtured sick animals that turned up in our yard.

My family benefited from volunteer help too. I spent time in a Girl Scout Brownie troop, and my brother was a Cub Scout and Little Leaguer—all volunteer-led activities. We went on field trips chaperoned by parents, and on longer school trips paid for through local fundraising efforts. When a sudden blizzard stranded my brother and sisters at school, a neighbor drove them home on a snow plow. People helped each other out.

These things that people do not because they are required to but because they choose to are essential to a strong community. These responsibilities start with the individual (we go to school, do our homework, get a job and pay our bills) and extend to the rest of one's family. We do our best to raise our kids, take care of aging relatives, tend to sick siblings, and reach out to family members in crisis. We do favors for friends, keep our lawns mowed, and take our turn at

carpooling. We don't expect the government to do these things for us, and at some level, appreciate the obligation that we all have to one another.

And yet, what about those people who don't have friends or family to help meet their needs? What about challenges facing whole communities that can't be addressed without extra resources? What happens when everyone has a role to play, but some people don't do their part?

In the face of circumstances such as these, there may be an important role for government and volunteers, not to mention nonprofit organizations and business institutions. It's not, however, an either-or situation. Government can't—and should not—replace the everyday efforts of people taking responsibility for themselves, their families, and their communities. And volunteers can't solve every problem.

In fact, every challenge facing our country exists in a complex ecosystem that requires multiple actors if we are to meet it. Roads out of poverty, for example, can't be built by government alone. Government may provide free public education; college aid; and funding for child care, job training, and safety nets. Businesses can offer good jobs with benefits, credit, transportation, or affordable housing. Nonprofits may run programs that offer a hand up. And volunteers can tutor, mentor, or teach skills to people, or help them find the help they need. All of these efforts are part of an informal cross-sector network that may work well or poorly, presenting opportunity to all or leaving vast parts of the population behind.

NATIONAL SERVICE POLICY

I returned to the Senate Labor Committee as a young lawyer, immediately after graduating from law school in 1987. At this time, the Democrats were in charge of the Congress, and Senator Kennedy was the chairman of the Committee. The following year, a Republican president, George H. W. Bush, was elected. He pushed volunteering as part of his "kinder, gentler" platform and created an office of national service in the White House, the first of its kind, led by his long-time friend Gregg Petersmeyer. However, a group of new-thinking Democrats, including then-Governor Bill Clinton and known as the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), had their own

proposal—to require young people to earn their student financial aid through several years of full-time national service.

The DLC proposal presented Senator Kennedy with a quandary. His brother John's call to service had become a memorable defining moment of his presidency. Senator Kennedy's brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, sent a proposal from Notre Dame president Ted Hesbergh, a family friend, in support of a Peace Corps ROTC along with a note of support for the idea. Massachusetts, the state Senator Kennedy represented, was home to cutting-edge programs and outspoken advocates for service of all kinds—both City Year and YouthBuild, two national model programs with highly respected leaders, were based there, as were some of the country's best student service programs. On the other hand, it also was home to dozens of universities, and the higher education community was almost universally opposed to the DLC idea of requiring service in order to receive federal financial aid. The full-blown DLC plan had been estimated to cost the federal government at least $60 billion a year in 1980s dollars—an amount most people thought was too pricy for an untested public program.[1] In addition, the Democrats on the Education and Labor Committee in the House of Representatives were united in their opposition to the DLC plan.

Senator Sam Nunn's staff gamely pursued the DLC plan with the help of Senators Barbara Mikulski and John McCain, indicating their willingness to work with us to pilot the idea. Senator Kennedy asked me to see if I could put together legislation that would advance service but avoid the punitive aspects of the DLC plan. There were plenty of good ideas afloat. Over the past several decades, state and local youth corps had been created, modeled on the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps. I also heard from people who saw the power of service for college students. Others, such as Senator Kennedy's niece Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, were committed to the power of something called "service-learning" for students as young as kindergarteners.

Senator Kennedy hosted a dinner for a small group of national leaders to explore the parameters of possible legislation. From this dinner came a set of ideas to promote youth service that would become Kennedy's major focus.

I set up a series of meetings with key Senate staff to see if we couldn't compromise on a comprehensive bill. We settled on the creation of the bipartisan Commission on National and Community

Service that would make grants to test each of these program ideas and report back to Congress and the president with its findings. We then pursued the House Committee, hoping that it would agree to this greatly scaled back demonstration version of the DLC proposal. Gene Sofer, the lead drafter and negotiator for the House Committee, developed a plan that would provide support for youth service, but without any link to financial aid.

An ally came from a seemingly unlikely place. Senator Orrin Hatch, the ranking Republican on the Senate Labor Committee, was a conservative not prone to support new government programs. And yet, as a Mormon who had done several years of service through his church, Hatch appreciated the transformative role that service could play. He reached out to Senator Kennedy, indicating his willingness to work on a bill together, provided that it included limited new spending.

A THOUSAND POINTS OF LIGHT

All along, we had kept President Bush's national service director, Gregg Petersmeyer, informed about our progress. The president was advancing service in other ways, using the bully pulpit and power of the White House. President Bush had spoken of "a thousand points of light" in his 1988 acceptance speech at the Republican convention: "For we're a nation of community; of thousands and tens of thousands of ethnic, religious, social, business, labor union, neighborhood, regional and other organizations, all of them varied, voluntary and unique. This is America—a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like *a thousand points of light* in a broad and peaceful sky [emphasis added]."[2] This evocative line became the president's "brand" of service. Every day, he honored a volunteer with a Daily Point of Light Award. And a group of the president's friends and supporters worked to create the Points of Light Foundation.

Gregg Petersmeyer was sympathetic to the legislation we were developing, but he had few allies in the Bush White House. When he finally let us know, at the eleventh hour, that he could work on a bill with us we were elated. We worked out a compromise bill on the eve of floor action in the Senate that ensured we would have enough votes for final passage and to overcome a filibuster. But that didn't mean that dozens of senators wouldn't offer amendments—including provisions to condemn human repression in China and elections in Nicaragua.

After an exhausting floor fight that went on for two weeks, the legislation moved quickly through the House and was signed by the president in November 1990. Recently married and planning to start a family, I left the Senate staff shortly thereafter.

THE COMMISSION ON NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

The National and Community Service Act of 1990, while modest in scope and little noticed, turned out to be an important piece of legislation. It created the Commission on National and Community Service, as envisioned by the Democratic negotiators, and authorized funding for four new programs: student service-learning; youth service and conservation corps; a demonstration program to test tying education benefits to service; and the Points of Light Foundation. President Bush consulted with the bill's sponsors in making the Democratic appointments to the Commission, which would be uncompensated Senate-confirmed part-time positions. The president appointed me to the Commission at the suggestion of Senator Kennedy.

The members of President Bush's commission represented the full breadth of the service field, from Alan Khazei, the founder of City Year, to George Romney, the former Republican governor of Michigan and auto company chairman who had championed volunteer centers.[3] President Bush took a hands-off approach to the Commission, keeping it free from political pressure. Supported by a small but talented staff, led by Catherine Milton, commissioners worked hard, meeting for days at a time, debating selection criteria, reading grant proposals, and designing the evaluation of the programs. I vividly remember co-chairing a day-long hearing conducted by the Commission and televised on C-Span in December of 1992. Nine months' pregnant, I must have looked like an elephant on camera and could not sit comfortably. My first son, Jackson, was born just two days later.

AMERICORPS

The Commission shared its recommendations in its January 1993 report to Congress and the president, titled "What You Can Do for Your Country."[4] It could not have come at a more critical time for

service. Arkansas governor Bill Clinton had been elected president in November 1992. His pledge to create a "domestic GI Bill" that would enable young people to pay their way through college with a year or two of national service had been wildly popular on the campaign trail.

In anticipation of the election, Melanne Verveer, Hillary Clinton's campaign chief of staff, convened a group to work on a plan to implement Clinton's pledge. Meeting in a borrowed law firm conference room, with the campaign issues director, Bruce Reed, calling in from the campaign bus, we sketched out an ambitious plan informed by the Commission's work.

After the election, Melanne asked me to join the Office of the First Lady as Hillary Clinton's representative on the Domestic Policy Council staff. President Clinton appointed his good friend businessman Eli Segal to head the White House Office of National Service with the responsibility to shape the legislation. We all agreed that national service ought to be a "first hundred days" priority. Dubbing themselves "The Little Engine That Could," Eli's team soon found that the rest of the White House was badly distracted by other priorities, from gays in the military to health care reform. The national service team asked for my help, which the first lady enthusiastically supported.

I worked with Jack Lew, a long-time staffer for Tip O'Neill, and the rest of Eli's staff to design the new legislation. It would keep the student programs authorized by the 1990 bill, as well as funding for the Points of Light Foundation. (When President Bush met with President-elect Clinton, it was reported that the only thing he asked was that the Points of Light initiative continue.) But it would dramatically grow the program that tied service to educational opportunity.

The final product was unveiled on the 101st day of the Clinton Administration. Like the Commission's demonstration program, AmeriCorps, as the new program would later be known, would build on state and local efforts, not be operated by the federal government. Anyone seventeen or older could serve and receive a living allowance, health care and child care benefits, and an education award if they served full time for a year.

While the new proposal was unveiled with great fanfare, it could not become law until both houses of Congress passed and agreed upon the details of the legislation. We had worked with both the House and Senate Labor Committees to develop the proposal, and sat

at the drafting table in the Senate legislative counsel's office making sure every line made sense. Eli Segal's tireless efforts resulted in a handful of Republicans joining the bill. But many vocal opponents made it clear that they would not agree to any legislation that "paid volunteers." The resulting floor fight in the Senate took two weeks, with amendments designed to whittle back the programs and their benefits. The House faced a similar battle. Finally, a bill reached the president's desk in September 1993.

The signing ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House was a celebration with a popular grunge band, celebrities, the senators and representatives who had championed the bill, and more than a thousand giddy supporters under a giant tent. When President Clinton crossed the lawn with fifty corpsmembers from programs across the country, the band launched into Clinton's campaign theme song, "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow." The crowd jumped to its feet and erupted in applause. Clinton acknowledged three young people who were volunteers, and recognized two veterans of the Roosevelt-era Civilian Conservation Corps. Noting that "if we challenge people to serve and we give them a chance to fulfill their abilities, more and more and more we will all understand that we must go forward together," Clinton signed the bill with pens that President Kennedy had used to enact the Peace Corps legislation and Franklin Roosevelt had used to create the CCC.

"The Little Engine That Could" had finally made it over the hill.[5]

THE CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Soon after the bill signing, Eli asked me to help him lead the creation of the Corporation for National and Community Service. I was sorry to leave the White House but pleased by the opportunity to help implement the new programs. The Senate confirmed my appointment to be the managing director of the Corporation in October of 1993.

In a very short period of just a few years, national service had gone from idea to reality. Its supporters typically had one of two reasons for their enthusiasm for the concept. Some, such as the DLC and People for the American Way, felt strongly that civic engagement was waning in America. Others believed in the power of serving

to change the lives of the server—whether they are young students, high school dropouts, college students looking for a purpose, or older adults needing to remain active. That was the focus of some House Democrats, who even supported giving low-income people priority for AmeriCorps education awards.

However, few advocates thought its most important benefit was to solve problems facing the nation. Of course, everyone, from the president to a local program head, would give a nod to this goal. And in fact, volunteers would quickly know if their activities were "make work" or "making a difference." But service was largely absent when policymakers put forward strategies to improve education, health, or the environment. To change this we made the motto of the new program, "Getting Things Done."

These early classes of AmeriCorps members would teach us a lot about the opportunities and challenges presented by federal involvement in service. We learned that certain issues were a good fit for AmeriCorps, while others were a stretch. One particular strength of AmeriCorps members turned out to be managing volunteers. Senator Harris Wofford, who succeeded Eli Segal as CEO of the Corporation, made volunteer recruitment a priority for AmeriCorps. He underscored the importance of volunteering by organizing a convening that George Romney had called for years earlier, to bring all the living former presidents together to call the nation to service. In July of 1997, every living president (except Ronald Reagan, who was represented by his wife, Nancy) joined President Clinton in Philadelphia at The Presidents' Summit for America's Future. I had helped with early planning for the summit but attended as a spectator, having left the Corporation earlier that year to take care of my growing family—my second son, Matthew, had been born in 1995.

While AmeriCorps and the other Corporation programs did enjoy bipartisan support, their opponents in Congress made it impossible to extend, improve, and expand them. In 1999, I was again working for First Lady Hillary Clinton. To build support for the program, we decided to celebrate the fifth anniversary of AmeriCorps. At the huge White House event on October 20th, attended by over a thousand supporters including Coretta Scott King and General Colin Powell, I was again enormously pregnant. My third son, Thomas, was born just eight days later.

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

When President Clinton left office, I was told he followed the tradition of his predecessor, asking George W. Bush to protect AmeriCorps as Bush's father had asked President Clinton to take care of the Points of Light Foundation. The new president did, always requesting funding for AmeriCorps in his budget and using political pressure when necessary to move Republicans in Congress. However, Bush's support was tested when, in 2003, a series of miscalculations and external factors created a crisis for the program—after a push to increase the number of AmeriCorps members, not enough money was left in the Trust Fund to pay AmeriCorps education awards. When the Corporation shifted money from program grants to cover the shortfall, the resulting reduced pool of funds required substantial cuts in AmeriCorps, in some cases the closing of entire sites.

The field rallied to save the program, organizing one hundred hours of testimony on Capitol Hill, obtaining support letters from 44 governors, 150 mayors, 250 business and philanthropic leaders, 190 college and university presidents, 701 citizens from as far away as Alaska, and 1,100 community-based organizations that work with AmeriCorps. Almost one hundred editorial boards wrote in favor of the program, and eventually the president weighed in and Congress appropriated a record amount of funds.[6]

This victory strengthened the resolve of AmeriCorps advocates to take the program to scale. Following President George W. Bush's reelection, it was clear that 2008 would offer the first open presidential election, in which no incumbent president or vice president was running, in forty years. I had spent the years since the Clinton Administration running a consulting business to help nonprofits, and had joined the Center for American Progress as a part-time visiting fellow working on national service issues. With a new president, it seemed possible that the national service laws might finally be successfully revisited, but bold plans were needed.

Across the field of national service programs, there were specific things that stood out. First, it seemed that service programs were making a substantial contribution in certain fields. At the top of the list was education. Why not focus new national service funds on expanding those organizations that were getting results in priority areas?