

Making Ripples

Resolving to Focus

by Amanda Bancroft

What will your New Year's resolution be for 2015? Whether it's losing weight, transitioning to solar power, adopting a new hobby, or something else entirely, there is one aspect of making a change in one's lifestyle that is often overlooked: focus. Many people resolve to make a difference as part of their New Year's resolution. But without focus, these positive ripples may never be created.

2014 marked the 20th anniversary of AmeriCorps and the 50th anniversary of AmeriCorps*VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America). Almost one million people in over 15,000 organizations in the United States have resolved to give a year of service to AmeriCorps since 1994 and grow gardens, teach children, build houses, work in national parks, and write grants, to name a few options. But sometimes, a good resolution for a year of service can turn into a confusing situation.

Around 2005, two VISTA members at a rural Missouri community center were fired because they insisted on writing grants to benefit people living in poverty (as they had been assigned by the government) rather than performing odd jobs around the center. In Arkansas, VISTA members assigned to work on issues of hunger or youth poverty, for example, have found themselves serving as janitor or secretary instead, and scolded for being "too arrogant to clean a toilet" if they resist.

Imagine that a postal employee walks up to a house where the yard is completely overgrown. A woman comes out, smiles, and says, "Thank you for delivering the mail! It's a great service to our house. But don't you think it's time you cut the grass?" If the carrier were a nice person, it would be a kind gesture to cut the grass. Yet, if they cut the grass for the whole neighborhood, the mail would be late, and people's paychecks may not be delivered on the correct day, which may affect their ability to feed their families. The consequences are even worse if we expect doctors in a service corps to stop serving patients in order to deliver the mail – people could die unnecessarily!

I served as an AmeriCorps*VISTA from 2009-2011, and witnessed many "postal employees" being told to "cut lawns" instead of focus on their assignments. If you're entering service in 2015, don't let others make you feel bad for focusing on your service assignment. The law is on your side, studies show that focused goals are more likely to succeed, and there are many people depending on you to eliminate poverty, help the environment, teach the next generation, and so on.

According to NationalService.gov, "Every citizen can make a difference for our nation. Whether you're an AmeriCorps alum, current member, relative, fan, or friend -- you can show the world the power of service." Maintaining your focus on a goal and saying no to other projects isn't

selfish. Ripples can reach farthest to those in greatest need with a little loving focus. Happy New Year!

Ripples is an emerging online educational center inspired by a holistic approach to making a difference. Follow our journey to live sustainably and make ripples with our lifestyle at: www.RipplesBlog.org.