

Action Corps seeks to understand with involvement

This article was written by Karen Menard, a former volunteer co-ordinator of Action Corps and revised by Dan Horsman, General Co-ordinator of Action Corps.

Four years ago a request came to the attention of several students from the parents of some Malecite Indian children who live on the Kingsclear Reserve, 12 miles up the river from Fredericton. The Indians asked for assistance with their children's schoolwork. About 30 students responded to the need and began traveling to Kingsclear three nights a week to help the children. Tutoring was provided in all subjects from grades four through nine. The students determined not to get bogged down with a studious and possibly enervating examination of why Indians did not do well in school. They called themselves the Action Corps. Their goal was to give immediate assistance, and they hoped to gain some understanding of the large problems through direct involvement.

This single-mindedness on the part of the students resulted in a loosely-structured organization. Each group leader provided transportation and assisted the members of the group as informally as possible. At that time, the Corps received no financial assistance, and transportation costs were covered by volunteered with cars.

The informal structure of Action Corps was reflected in the nature of its program. No rules were established for the tutorial sessions. It was emphasized from the start that the service would be strictly for those children and parents who wanted it and would not object to students in their homes three nights a week. At first, four families and a number of neighborhood children participated in the tutoring program. Of the 25 children tutored that first year, all passed, and most did better than before. The success of the project pleased the children, the parents, and the Action Corps.

The next two years of operation saw two new families added to the program. The result was that we reached about a third of the total number attending school. The number of tutors also expanded to about 50 students.

Although we have discussed moving our tutoring activities into a common room on the Reserve, the suggestion does not seem to be popular with the tutors. As one volunteer said, "I like going into the homes. It gives me a chance to get to know the kids and their homelife." In fact, by working in this home setting, a much warmer and more personal atmosphere is established between tutor and tutee. It permits a unique relationship. The tutor himself experiences his student's home life and can thus establish a rapport with the entire family. When the volunteer is separated from his own home by some distance, this contact can become especially meaningful.

One volunteer has commented on how much she looks forward to going out to the Reserve: "It's really a break from studying. You go there and you can forget all about your own problems and just relax and enjoy the kids." Many tutors feel that by the nature of the interpersonal contact, they gain just as much, if not more, understanding and knowledge as the children themselves.

A year after the first program was set up at Kingsclear, a similar

activity was established at the New Brunswick Central Reformatory. The reformatory's director of education, Gilles Pichette, said he needed tutors to help several of the inmates who were taking correspondence courses.

As volunteers and inmates came to know each other better, the inmates expressed their dissatisfactions and frustrations with institutionalized life more freely. But this freedom was not what the reformatory administration originally envisioned. They intended to encourage inmates to develop interest in activities and events quite separate from their immediate environment so as to better prepare them for returning to society. In the course of ordinary interaction between volunteers and inmates, this did not occur as readily as expected. In response to the inmates' attitudes and comments, many volunteers became increasingly dissatisfied with the existing program and began questioning the institution's rules and regulations.

Inmates and volunteers both began pressing for activities that would provide relief from the monotonous and restrictive nature of the institution. The most ambitious of these plans was the production of a winter carnival at the reformatory in late February, 1972. When permission was obtained, all former discussion groups were abandoned to allow full concentration on this one event. Everyone realized the importance of its success. Such an event had never taken place in NBCR or in any other penal institution in the region.

Inmate participation reached its maximum during the carnival. Nearly all joined in the activities. Because of this overwhelming response from the inmates, many of whom were directly responsible for the initial planning and organization, and because of staff encouragement, Action Corps considered the carnival a great success. The inmates obviously agreed. One said on the night of the social that it was the "best time I've had for a long while, even before I came in here".

The administration, however, had mixed feelings. They seemed to object to the total co-operation between inmates and Action Corps. The grievance committee which the inmates formed immediately following the carnival appeared to be a direct result of the inmate leadership that developed during the planning of the carnival events. While this innovation was enthusiastically received by the volunteers as indicating developing inmate awareness of and responsibility for their own community, the staff was of the opposite opinion. When the inmates specifically requested Action Corps representation on their committee, the alienation between the Corps and the staff became more pronounced.

A number of activities which had taken place during the carnival convinced the administrators that Action Corps was actively interfering with their institution. We were informed by the administration that our services at the reformatory were temporarily suspended. Last year, we re-established contact with the reformatory administration and resumed our tutoring program.

Furthermore, we received unexpected encouragement. Two former inmates, one of whom was extremely active in organizing the carnival, were hired by the

reformatory to serve as liaison personnel between inmates and administration. This seems to indicate that the administration has recognized that our activity produced positive results. Perhaps we have all learned from the experience.

Action Corps expanded two years ago into volunteer work at the county Jail. Since this was a pilot project — a first for the area — the initial organization was difficult. Eight volunteers, most of them sociology students, met once a week for two or three hours with 12 to 16 inmates. Originally there were two programs. The first was job and educational counselling that involved determining inmates' job interests, showing them how to get these jobs, supplying them with information on job hunting, providing application forms, and assisting them in writing personal resumes of their qualifications, interests and experience. If inmates were interested in furthering their education, the volunteers supplied information regarding upgrading, correspondence courses, technical and trade schools, and available university programs. The second part of the program involved tutoring inmates who were attending school during the day.

In January, however, the jail's classification system was changed completely. Now an inmate is placed on one of three programs. He may go to school, work during the day on a temporary absence program, or be transferred to NBCR. If he does not fit any of these programs, he is transferred to the Federal Penitentiary at Dorchester to serve out his sentence.

With these changes in the classification system, Action Corps had to redefine its jail program. The volunteers began working

mainly with those in the temporary absence program, doing job and educational counselling, but placing more emphasis on social skills than before. This created problems because most of the inmates involved were middle aged and had held several jobs before coming to jail. As one inmate said, "I've had over 40 jobs in my life, and you think you're going to tell me how to go out and get a job!" As we expected, communication was more easily achieved with the younger inmates, where student-prisoner age differences were not so pronounced.

Similarly, the volunteers at the reformatory have become much more interested in the nature of correctional institutions as a whole. "What purpose do they serve? Why do they say an inmate can't do a particular thing?" are common questions. This questioning particularly in relation to the Action Corps' approach, raises problems for the organization as a

whole. How do we co-ordinate those volunteers who are interested in service alone and those who are interested in the social and political issues behind the service? Action Corps realizes this problem is not uniquely its own. It involves volunteer motives, which are something that all such organizations must deal with.

In the forthcoming year it is hoped that the project co-ordinators will assist in co-ordinating the "service" and "involvement" approaches by making decisions about what kind of commitment is appropriate and how to successfully bring about change where needed.

The attempt to become involved in new areas, such as working with retarded children and senior citizens, show that Action Corps is ready for a more serious commitment to the community around it.



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