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Making a Big Profit from Nonprofit Work

For local AmeriCorps volunteers, careers are on hold, but not their learning.

By **HELEN COLWELL ADAMS**,
Sunday News Staff Writer

LANCASTER, PA - Fresh out of college, **James Frederick IV** wanted to work in the home construction industry.

He did, for a couple of years. Then he had a change of heart.

"I didn't want to build neighborhoods that way," he said.

So now he's rebuilding neighborhoods.

For \$10,000 a year, plus an education credit of less than \$5,000.

Frederick, 24, is an **AmeriCorps Vista** volunteer with the East King Improvement District in Lancaster.

AmeriCorps, established in 1994, recruits young people nationwide to perform service to their communities. The Vista program, which dates to 1965, focuses on fighting poverty.

Five Vista volunteers are spending their service year in Lancaster County - two at **Tabor Community Services** and its affiliated agencies, and three at **Community First Fund**, a Lancaster-based lender that gives business loans and training to entrepreneurs.

For Tabor and Community First, Vista provides an opportunity to tap the energy and expertise of recent college graduates for very little money. And for the young people, Vista is "an excellent opportunity

for a recent graduate, whether high school or college, to fill a gap year between school or between getting a paying job," said **Sonja Crafts**, 24, who serves as Tabor's education and training coordinator.

May 11 to 18 is AmeriCorps Week nationally, and Tabor and Community First are partnering on a recognition luncheon Friday, May 16, to honor their Vista workers. The agencies also hope to raise awareness of the AmeriCorps program, to encourage young people to volunteer.



The "Vistas," as they're called, said program benefits run in both directions.

Kelsey Cunningham, 23, works in the development department for Community First, advising clients on business starts in urban areas.

For all that she's been able to offer aspiring entrepreneurs, she said, "If anything, I feel like I learned more from them."

Learning and doing

Cunningham, a graduate of Taylor University with a bachelor's degree in international business and international studies, picked Community First, and Lancaster, from the list of 1,200 nonprofit agencies qualified to hire Vista

participants. She moved here from the Chicago area.

"Lancaster is a very friendly area, very generous," she said.

Peter Johnston, 23, of Greensboro, N.C., with a bachelor's degree in business administration from Ohio University, said he chose Lancaster because of Community First and the opportunity to work in the agency's information technology/finance department.

"This actually has given me the opportunity to be behind the scenes of a nonprofit," he said.

Johnston and **Troy Dinkel**, 24, who's from Reading, both said they were inspired to join Vista partly because they saw the deterioration of the cities where they'd grown up and wanted to do something to help.

Vista, an antipoverty initiative, is one of three service programs under the AmeriCorps aegis. College graduates get \$10,000 a year to defray their expenses, plus \$4,725 in an education credit that can be applied to graduate school or to student loans.

Participants commit to a full year of being available to their agencies 24/7. They cannot take other jobs.

The federal government says 542,000 young people have served through AmeriCorps since 1994, giving a \$5 billion boost to government agencies and nonprofits that participate in the program.

Community First also gives its Vistas a housing allowance, reimbursement for meals and on-the-job travel expenses. Tabor pays mileage reimbursement, but wants to offer more benefits.

"It's almost impossible to make it on \$10,000 a year, especially if you're moving in from other areas," said **Phyllis Stacks**, Tabor's vice president for development.



Top row from left: Phyllis Stacks, Stephanie Kessler and James Frederick IV. Bottom row from left: Kelsey Cunningham, Peter Johnston, Troy Dinkel and Sonja Crafts
Blaine T. Shahan, Sunday News

Stacks said to her knowledge, Community First and Tabor are the only Lancaster County nonprofits with Vista workers, although some other agencies have volunteers from the other AmeriCorps divisions - AmeriCorps State and National and the National Civilian Community Corps.

While there's a huge amount of paperwork to get a nonprofit qualified for Vista - **Stephanie Kessler** of Community First said she spends about 20 percent of her work week managing the Vista program - Stacks and Kessler said it's a worthwhile investment.

"These were ideas we had of how we could help some of the needs at Tabor but we couldn't afford it," Stacks said. "... For an agency, you really feel like you're getting additional staff people who are helping you with the mission."

"We treat them like staff people, with responsibilities and expectations," Kessler said. "And they meet and exceed them."

Vista focuses on helping poverty-fighting nonprofits "build capacity," so workers aren't just doing menial tasks.

Crafts, who has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Pittsburgh, manages the financial literacy classes that Tabor offers for adults and young people.

She developed a computerized central

system for scheduling classes and designed the traveling courses taught around the community.

Dinkel, with an English literature bachelor's degree from Pitt, works at Community First's Reading branch.

He researches foundation support for the loan administration and development departments and helped the agency expand its donor base among religious organizations.

Johnston helped to create Community First Fund's new Web site and has been key in upgrading and improving its IT operations.

Frederick, a graduate of Eastern University who lives two blocks from Tabor's offices at 308 E. King St., helped to develop and administer the new Eastern Market and the Community Fresh Food Initiative. He said one of his most satisfying projects was working with a market vendor to open a pizza shop in the old Fairmount Hotel, a one-time nuisance bar.

"It's a way for me to get a hands-on kind of experience," Frederick said.

Giving back

All the Vistas but Frederick learned about the program through word-of-mouth. It doesn't have a high recognition factor among young people, Kessler said.

And Frederick found out because he had

been volunteering with Tabor.

Dinkel is finishing his Vista year this summer and may go back to school. Crafts plans to attend graduate school. Frederick has enrolled in a Marine officer training school. Johnston is still considering his options.

Cunningham volunteers with Water Street Rescue Mission and the United Way's Day of Caring. In fact, she said, she intends to stay when her Vista year is up.

"I've started to grow roots here," she said.

The Vistas agreed giving up a year of their lives is a sacrifice, but just as much worth the investment as the program is for the agencies.

"The amount of responsibility they give you as a recent college graduate is unbelievable," Cunningham said. "They definitely instill responsibility and expect results."

"I thought I was pretty good with people before I started," Frederick said. "... In terms of the business world, it's a completely different experience."

"When you aren't involved in nonprofits," Crafts said, "you have this picture of these communities that need your help ... but it's not like that at all.

"You understand everyone is a person. It's not like you're helping them. They're helping you too."

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INFORMATION

For information on Vista opportunities locally, contact Community First Fund's Stephanie Kessler, skessler@commfirstfund.org, or Phyllis Stacks, pstacks@tabornet.org. The AmeriCorps Web site is www.americorps.gov.