



MarbleRoad



Howard Liebers, Founder & CEO

Remarks of Howard Liebers at the 2011 Serve DC "Life After AmeriCorps Conference" in Washington, DC at the AED Conference Center.

Each year, Serve DC - The Mayor's Office on Volunteerism brings together AmeriCorps members from a variety of programs across the District of Columbia for a conference focused on preparing members for their transition out of their year of service. This year, conference engaged over 250 AmeriCorps members and provided them with information on "next steps" related to employment, professional development, service, and resources for post-service opportunities. Attendees engaged in interactive workshop sessions, visited an exhibitor hall, and heard from dynamic speakers.

MarbleRoad

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I am humbled to be here today. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of Serve DC’s “Life After AmeriCorps” Conference. In particular I would like to thank Mayor Gray, Patricia Evans, and the staff here at the Mayor’s Office on Volunteerism – specifically Sarah Watkins for putting up with all of my peculiar questions and comments during the planning phase. Now, you all already have two strikes against you – one for making a policy person speak before 10am and one for holding your conference on a rare 70 degree February day.

I understand that this event is about your life after service, and so I am glad that I don’t need to speak at length about the importance of service in moving this country and its communities forward. You all already understand how important service is, and have chosen to serve here in DC. However, not everyone understands the role of a service program like AmeriCorps. Just last week the House Appropriations Committee, in keeping with the new House majority’s campaign promises to trim \$100 billion from the Federal budget, recommended eliminating the Corporation for National and Community Service and AmeriCorps State and National. This development reflects what might be the single most important thing you can do in your own “Life After AmeriCorps”: you need to be a loud voice, sharing your stories, carrying forth the service message, and promoting the positive impact the AmeriCorps program has had on your life and on the communities that you have served. When you complete your term of service this year, you join the ranks of more than 637,000 AmeriCorps Alums – change agents who have dedicated nearly 775 million hours of service, and who mobilized almost 2.5 million community volunteers in 2008 alone. To cut Federal support for AmeriCorps would be a devastating blow to America's poorest and

most at-risk communities. AmeriCorps is a critical thread in our national fabric, and its presence is even more critical in challenging economic times. As AmeriCorps Alums, we’re all compelled to ensure that others will have the same opportunities to serve, and to benefit from service, as we did. This responsibility is particularly timely now, but it’s forever important to share your story with others.

Like you, I served in AmeriCorps. I completed two terms of service with the Community HealthCorps program of the National Association of Community Health Centers; and later I went on to work as Senior Program Officer for Policy and Innovation at Community HealthCorps. In that time I have participated on leadership teams at AmeriCorps Alums, marched with AmeriCorps Alums in President Obama’s inauguration parade, and had an opportunity to meet the CEO for the Corporation for National and Community Service. All of us here today are connected by the spirit of service, of volunteerism, and the efforts we make towards achieving equity through social justice causes like education or health care. But what I want to do today is encourage you to never lose the spirit that first set you on this path... Your “Life After AmeriCorps” can and should continue to be a lifetime of service, whether you choose a career in public service or simply volunteer as time permits.

In that vein, I want to share with you four things I learned along the way; by no means revolutionary, but basic concepts that will help you to achieve success down the road – those are to “Find Inspiration”, “Do What You Love”, “Ask for Help” and “Be an Advocate”.

"FIND INSPIRATION"

Service demands the best of us, but we all know that sometimes our labor demands so much of us that it can be hard for us to find the best in ourselves. It doesn't matter if we are in healthcare, education, environmental restoration, etc; we all need to be conscious of finding and remembering what motivates us to achieve and to contribute to the common good. Let me share with you some of the sources for my own inspiration.

It has now been nearly a century since Theodore Roosevelt first called for health care reform. Ever since, nearly every President and Congress, whether Democrat or Republican, has attempted to meet this challenge in some way. Early in the 20th century, industrial America faced the *problem of sickness*: when working people missed work because they were sick, they also lost their wages. This loss of income, even more than the cost of medical care, made sickness a major cause of poverty. In 1915, progressive reformers proposed a system of compulsory health insurance to protect workers against both wage loss and medical costs during sickness. Later, the outpouring of civil rights activity in the early 1960s spurred politicians to support Medicare as a part of Johnson's War on Poverty, and major civil rights groups all endorsed the legislation. Even after Medicare became part of the Social Security Act in 1965, support for more comprehensive health reform continued. In the 1970s the National Council of Senior Citizens and other groups joined the labor-led Committee for National Health Insurance (CNHI) and worked hard for the passage of a plan co-sponsored by Senator Ted Kennedy. Finally, last year, President Obama signed into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act which expands access for affordable insurance options for

people who need it and puts patients back in the center of the health care system.

The late Senator Ted Kennedy has left behind a legacy in both national service and health care that reminds me that I can always do more. AmeriCorps re-authorization in 2009, the Edward M Kennedy Serve America Act, was the largest expansion of national service programs in decades; and created the Healthy Futures Corps, supporting programs that identify and respond to unmet health needs within communities through a variety of activities. Senator Ted Kennedy also authored the CLASS Act in the new health law, which stands for the Community Living Assistance Services and Supports program. It creates for the first time, a long term care insurance plan to help people pay for necessary care at home or in their communities. Before that, Ted Kennedy was a leader in the community health center movement. In a Newsweek article, Kennedy shared the following, “In 1966, I visited the Columbia Point Neighborhood Health Center in Boston; it was a pilot project providing health services to low-income families in the two-floor office of an apartment building. I saw mothers in rocking chairs, tending their children in a warm and welcoming setting. They told me this was the first time they could get basic care without spending hours on public transportation and in hospital [emergency] rooms. I authored legislation, which passed a few months later, establishing the network of community health centers that are all around America today.”

Today, more than 1,200 Community Health Centers serve over 20 million people each year around the country.

I have been inspired by many of the leaders involved in civil rights movements, national service movements, and the health center and health reform movements. I can remember how I felt, exhilarated, as I sat in the House gallery on March 21, 2010 when health reform was passed – in fact, I ended up being quoted in a French newspaper which expressed that "Howard was unable to hide his joy." I knew I was in the right career. I was inspired. I only hope to leave behind a legacy that improves upon the successes of those who have come before me and carves a path for future leaders. That includes sharing stories about why service and community health programs are so important with anyone who will listen.

"DO WHAT YOU LOVE"

Have any of you had a job that you absolutely hated? Show of hands... How hard was it to get out of bed in the morning? In tough economic times it can be easy to settle into a job just because it's something that pays the bills.

When you wake up in morning, another day begins. Everyone goes through this same process. The alarm goes off, you get yourself out of the bed, and you get yourself out into the world. At times I have actually had to set 3 or 4 alarms, you know, the CD player on the nightstand, the cell phone, the coffeepot, etc. This is how our lives go by, and the only difference is that some people open their eyes with a smile and some people open their eyes dreading life. Unfortunately, not everyone gets to do the things that they love and it is no surprise that a lot of these people cannot wait for weekends to come. How many of you saw Facebook statuses this morning, or posted yourself, HELLO WEEKEND, I'VE MISSED YOU?!

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to become an AmeriCorps member in a program at a community health center. I used my two education awards to complete my Master of Public Health degree at New York Medical College, and have built a career around both health care and national service. Today, I am Director of Policy for the DC Primary Care Association (DCPCA), whose mission is *Action and Innovation for Health Equity*. For the last several years DCPCA has been operating a Community HealthCorps AmeriCorps program of its own, placing members throughout the District's historic, safety-net, community-based primary care providers. Today, DCPCA is a leader in the implementation of health system reform, from its role in helping the District achieve an insurance coverage rate of nearly 94% of its residents, to its role as the Regional Extension Center in bringing 1,000 priority primary care providers to meaningful use of Electronic Health Records, to its role as operator of the DC Regional Health Information Organization or Health Information Exchange.

No matter how hard we fight for change, there will always be a handful of people who slip through the cracks. There are people who health reform will reach eventually, but whose medical conditions and quality of life do not offer them the luxury of time to wait. And so I decided to do even more work than just my day job in policy and system reform.

In 2009 I started blogging about rare or "orphan" diseases, which affect more than 30 million Americans, or 1 in 10. Today, the MarbleRoad blog has welcomed nearly 15,000 views. I incorporated MarbleRoad as non-profit in the District of Columbia to offer financial assistance for people with rare diseases or for

community health center patients in need of specialty care services not offered by their primary care providers. Developing and growing MarbleRoad has been one of the most exciting things I have ever done.

At the touch of love, everyone becomes a poet, and poetry has the power to truly move people. If you are doing the things that you love, work doesn't feel like work and others will be moved to join your cause. How many of you became AmeriCorps members because somebody else told you how amazing of an experience it is?! Do whatever it is that you do because you love it, not just because you have to do it.

"ASK FOR HELP"

Service oriented people are used to *getting things done*, getting their hands dirty, and directly making change. We don't always ask for help along the way... some of us work better independently, some don't want to inconvenience others, some are simply too proud, or don't know how to ask or who to ask. As I look around this room here this morning, I see hundreds of volunteers. However, according to a release from the Bureau of Labor Statistics last month, nearly 75% of the US population did not volunteer in 2010. A large number of people don't volunteer simply because they weren't asked to get involved. People want to get engaged; and if we work together and get more people involved we can have a bigger impact.

As I was developing the concept for MarbleRoad, and thought about incorporating as a business, I realized I couldn't go it alone. I had to ask people to step up as my Board of Directors, I had to ask artists to share their work inspired by health experiences to help raise money, and I had to ask the community to donate funds to support us a non-profit. And people came through for me. They helped, they donated, and they spread the word.

And financial assistance from MarbleRoad to patients in need will not just be a handout. We are including a volunteer requirement as a part of the eligibility for assistance. Naturally, if somebody is too sick to volunteer, a family member or loved one can volunteer on their behalf – and many already do, as caregivers. Being the caregiver of a loved one can be difficult for many reasons. Nevertheless, it is a responsibility that many Americans have. According to the Family Caregiver Alliance, "An estimated 44 million Americans age 18 and older provide unpaid assistance and support to older people and people with disabilities who live in the community." By having volunteerism as a requirement for financial assistance, the financial assistance supports patients in need, leverages additional community impact, and highlights the role of caregivers, of volunteers, of service.

The work that we do can feel like running a marathon and we need to learn to pace ourselves... something I've never really been very good at myself. There's so much work to be done, that we try to do anything and everything. But we should be looking for help long before things deteriorate so far that the options are limited and expensive. You need to ask for help, if you are truly invested in the work you are doing, and want to make a long-term commitment without killing

yourself. Most people don't turn to somebody for help until things are crashing down around them.

Never be afraid to ask others to help along the way – YOU can use the help, and WE are waiting to be called to action.

"BE AN ADVOCATE"

Believe me, I am the first to know that you are prohibited from certain activities as an AmeriCorps member... But in your own time, without organizational affiliation, or after service, as an AmeriCorps Alum, you can and should be an advocate. We in the health care and service fields have a dual responsibility to be passionate not only about our jobs and the people we serve, but also to ensure that the programs that improve our communities receive the highest funding levels possible. It requires some extra effort, but absent that effort, we are less likely to see increases for programs of critical importance, and more likely to sustain cuts.

I talked earlier about the proposed budget cuts to the AmeriCorps program. But the House did not propose cuts to AmeriCorps alone; their Continuing Resolution also cuts \$1.3 billion to community health centers and cuts over \$79 million in Federal support for the District of Columbia. **We cannot balance our budget on the backs of the poor and disenfranchised.** The AmeriCorps program is a tool for job creation, giving people experience and providing them with opportunities to further their education, all while driving positive change in our most vulnerable communities. Community health centers provide care to the uninsured and

underinsured, regardless of their patients ability to pay. Without Federal support, more than 11 million patients will lose their medical home. Furthermore, the District of Columbia has one of the highest concentrated rates of poverty in the Nation:

- One out of every three DC residents lives at or below the Federal poverty line.
- Three out of every ten children in the District were living in poverty last year
- Among African-American children in the District, childhood poverty was up to 43 percent

Again, as an AmeriCorps member, you all well know that you may not engage in political activity – but as AmeriCorps Alums you should rise and take action to protect opportunities for change. I encourage all of you to become advocates in your “Life After AmeriCorps”, not just on behalf of the AmeriCorps program itself, or on behalf of causes that are dear to you, such as education or health care, but on behalf of those who have no voice and who government has a responsibility to support.

In your “Life After AmeriCorps” find inspiration, choose a career that allows you to do the things that you love, ask for help along the way, and always be an advocate.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today, I welcome any questions you may have.