Special Edition

A Rewarding Life through Community Action

50 Years of Memories

Dedicated with thanks to these outstanding Americans and the multitudes of others working for justice in communities across our country.

Dr. C. G. Gordon Moss
Desegregation Trailblazer & CPAC Board Member

Drewary J. Brown
Powerful Civil Rights & Community Action Leader

VirtualCAP RoundUP is a project of:
This issue of RoundUP feels appropriate with my retirement set for the end of this month.
I’m pleased to announce that Sue Kenney will be stepping in to carry on with Virtual CAP for CAFCA.
With heartfelt thanks to many people who have supported and used VirtualCAP as a resource.
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Dedication

There were earlier influences, but my unplanned (and only) visit to Franklin & Marshal College’s placement office in April 1971 is a good place to start. Upon walking in the door, I spotted a flyer announcing that a VISTA recruiter would be holding interviews at 2:00 p.m. that day. Call it serendipity, fate or an act of God. However you put it, this turned out to be the beginning of my journey into the Community Action movement.

I received a phone call a month later from the national VISTA office, learning that I had been accepted into the program and telling me to report to Philadelphia for two-weeks of training in mid-July. I arrived along with 34 others, and we were given our placements: 31 assigned to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh or Baltimore and four of us, myself included, were going to the Central Piedmont Action Council, which served as the community action agency for three counties in rural Virginia.

Looking back 50 years later, I am grateful and humbled by the work I’ve been associated with to push the envelope — by opening up opportunities and providing support to the far too many who are marginalized, vilified, exploited and discriminated against. Yes, as sounded through the Promise of Community Action: Community Action changes people’s lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.

One of the blessings I’ve received has been connecting with a countless number of incredible people as mentors, colleagues and friends. As such, this partial compilation of my experiences is dedicated to Dr. C. G. Gordon Moss and Drewary J. Brown, They both stood tall on behalf of those without a voice. They represent the best of those who fight for social change, which has been (and continues to be) long overdue. They were unwavering in advancing principles of fairness and justice. As underscored in the great civil rights song: Keep Your Eyes on the Prize.

Kenneth Ackerman, December 2021

My first bi-weekly VISTA earnings record
Office of Economic Opportunity
August 31, 1971
Gordon Moss & Drewary Brown: Setting the Bar through Total Commitment

The Foot Soldier Project for Civil Rights Studies at the University of Georgia chronicles the lives and stories of those “foot soldiers for equal justice” whose names may not be familiar, but whose dedication to the cause of equality and civil rights formed the backbone of a movement that brought about sweeping changes in the nation’s history. Similarly, those of us involved with Community Action are “foot soldiers” in the War on Poverty. Gordon Moss and Drewary Brown would be among the Generals as they walked the walk throughout their lives. They exemplified qualities of compassion, strength, wisdom, generosity, persuasion and much more including “doing the right thing because it’s right.”

Dr. C. G. Gordon Moss: Stepping into History

Born in 1899, Gordon Moss, PhD from Yale, chaired the Department of History and Social Sciences at Longwood College (now University) in Virginia from 1948-1960, served as Dean from 1960-1964 and continued teaching until retiring in 1969. Prince Edward County, where Longwood is located, was the only student-initiated case among the five cases in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education desegregation decision – see The Moton School Story: Children of Courage and Birthplace of the Student Civil Rights Movement, a vivid video of black student protests in Prince Edward County.

Prince Edward County’s response to the U.S. Supreme Court’s order to desegregate public schools with all deliberate speed was to withhold funding for public education. This resulted in schools being closed for five years. A private academy was set up for the children of white families, but in essence, there was limited or no education for black children from 1959 through 1963. Almost all white families continued to send their children to the academy after the public schools reopened but not Gordon Moss – see In My Father’s Footsteps, All Eyes on Prince Edward County (see pp. 16-19 for interview with Dickie Moss).

Drewary J. Brown: Building Bridges is the Formula for Success

Born in 1918, Drewary Brown, a U.S. military veteran, became a pivotal civil rights leader in Charlottesville, Virginia during and after working as a “house boy” for an all-white fraternity at the University of Virginia. He was president of the Charlottesville NAACP and a driving force when the Charlottesville-Albemarle Community Action Organization (now MACAA) was formed in 1965. The next year, Mr. Brown was hired as a neighborhood worker for the agency. He then served as the longstanding director of the agency's employment training programs, renamed in his honor as the Drewary J. Brown Multi-Purpose Service Center.

Mr. Brown was a people-person extraordinaire. Highly respected as people took notice of what he had to say — from presidential candidates to disengaged youth. He received the Chamber of Commerce’s Paul Goodloe McIntire Citizenship Award in 1989 and posthumously honored in 1998 with naming of a bridge passing over railroad tracks in Charlottesville as the Drewary J. Brown Memorial Bridge – photo of plaque. In the late 1990’s, MACAA joined forces with City Council member Virginia Daugherty and filmmaker Larry Garretson to produce: Drewary J. Brown: Working for a Better Day – view sample interviews.

Etched in my memory

Gordon Moss Speaks: An Atticus Fitch Moment

Drewary J. Brown: Working for a Better Day

View the documentary aired on PBS Picture sharpens after 4:00
Sensing Injustice at an Early Age
Words from My Father

My father, Sidney Ackerman, dropped out of high school and went to work as an errand boy in New York City to help his first-generation immigrant parents during the Great Depression. Years later, when I was a teenager, we were walking in New York City and he stopped to give some money to a panhandler. As we moved on, I asked why he did that. “There but for the grace of God, go I,” he replied. Those words had an immediate and everlasting impact on me. And I’m grateful having them as a centering influence growing up as a white child with comforts and privileges in the 1950s and 60s.

My father’s words echoed with me remembering John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inauguration speech when he urged us to ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country. This was followed with his creation of the Peace Corps and its domestic counterpart — VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America). Later, my retort when my younger brother would announce he was going to be in the Marines Corps was that I was going to be in the Peace Corps.

My father’s words echoed again in 1963 when I watched news coverage of black protesters in Birmingham — including young children — being attacked by police with fire hoses and police dogs. I had nothing but disbelief and visceral anger over this relentless abuse of power. Such feelings continue today with our daily lives learning about police shootings of Blacks, violence against Muslims and Asians, sexual abuse of women, perils of refugees — the list goes on certainly including economic hardship in the United States.

Birmingham and the Children’s March
PBS video clip aired on the 50th anniversary of the march

Higher Education Inside and Out of the Classroom

I entered college in the fall of 1967 with the idea that I was going to become an accountant living in New York City. That plan quickly fell by the wayside shortly into my first semester. We were assigned The Affluent Society written by Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith as one of our books in Economics 101, which contained quotes such as these: The poverty stricken are further forgotten because it is assumed that with increasing output poverty must disappear — An affluent society, that is both compassionate and rational, would no doubt, secure to all who needed it the minimum income essential for decency. Economics quickly became my major with an emphasis on social welfare and public policy.

Plenty was going on outside of the classroom, parallel to my studies, in the late 1960’s — civil rights and anti-war protests — the assassinations of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy — and the student movements of that era. I was fortunate to spend my junior year abroad studying in England among students from all over the world, usually being the only American in my class. Becoming a VISTA after graduating in 1971 was a natural move to roll up my sleeves by joining the War on Poverty, which became a calling for me over the next 50 years.
Welcome to Community Action
Training---and More Training

Starting off with two weeks of pre-service training in Philadelphia surely had the intended effect on our group of 35 new national VISTA recruits. A full-day interactive poverty simulation was included serving as a forerunner to the Community Action Poverty Simulation. We were an idealistic group, full of energy and enthusiasm, and ready to get to our assigned locations and hit the ground running.

The four of us — placed with the Central Piedmont Action Council — drove down to Virginia passing through a torrential downpour. We received a warm welcome and enjoyed a group dinner with the VISTA “veterans” who were still in place from the past year or two. Collectively, the CPAC VISTAs were a close-knit group with a high level of creativity, aptitude to learn new things and, most importantly, a can-do attitude. Many of the connections made among us have continued over the years.

Arrangements were made for each of us to live with a local family for the first two weeks after we arrived. My family, a black couple with three young children, was out in the country in Prince Edward County. Their home was part of a larger grouping of trailers and houses occupied by members of their extended family — Grandma Eliza was the matriarch presiding over outside evening gatherings surrounded by her children and their children. Lots of family strengths were easy to recognize and some of the adults provided counsel and leadership dealing with community issues. Blue Morton, who was around our age and grew up in Prince Edward County, was a significant connection for us. Later, he became a VISTA himself and has been an educator in Richmond for many years.

Formal training was the focus our first two weeks. Presentations were given on various topics such as public assistance programs (i.e. Medicare and Medicaid...and now I’m on Medicare). We also learned about the history of Community Action. Much discussion occurred over President Nixon creating ACTION as the federal domestic volunteer agency with VISTA having a diminished focus on anti-poverty work and being moved out of the Office of Economic Opportunity – see article in The New York Times.

Learning about CPAC and meeting with key community leaders were also key aspects of our training. The meeting that stands out for me was with Rev. Francis Griffin at the First Baptist Church in Farmville where he was the minister. Rev. Griffin led the fight to end segregation in the Prince Edward Schools – see Program of Action: The Rev. L. Francis Griffin and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Farmville, 1963 (VCU Scholars Compass) and this Richmond Times-Dispatch article from 2000. This was flesh and blood real history from the front lines of the fight for justice. Rev. Griffin set the bar very high for the work ahead. It was an honor and privilege to meet and hear from him.

When training ended, three of us “newbies” became the occupants of what had become known as the VISTA house. This was a small 3-bedroom dwelling with 35 acres of land, which I shared with Ron Lewis and Steve Rosenfield. Our total rent was $50/month. We remain close friends and each of us lives outside of Charlottesville, VA. Ron is a retired public school teacher and Steve is a retired civil rights attorney. Here’s a glimpse of 1971 earnings and expenses compared to 2021 equivalents – we did okay!
Now Get to Work

Beyond driving down the country roads, it wasn’t difficult to comprehend the pervasive nature of poverty throughout the three counties, which CPAC was designated to serve at that time — Buckingham, Cumberland and Prince Edward with the town of Farmville in the center near the bottom. The total area combined covered just over 1,200 square miles with a population of around 31,000 people.

1970 Census state-level data for Virginia gives an overall poverty rate of 14.5% with whites at 9.0% and blacks at 29.9%. The weighted average poverty threshold for a family of four was $3,968 in 1971. Using statewide rates with local data, approximately 18 percent of families in CPAC’s area were living below poverty-level with about a 60/40 white/black split in the overall population. At the state level, nearly one of four families had incomes below $4,000 and one in three black families below $4,000.

VISTA workers were a valuable resource to CPAC working and often serving as the lead in areas such as welfare rights organizing, affordable housing construction & home repair projects, food assistance, creation of a quilting & growing coops & assistance to farmers, design & implementation of child care programs, health projects, rehab of community facilities — and often filling in wherever needed. My assignments during two years as a VISTA primarily involved three projects focusing on housing and environmental health:

Assist with the construction of an FmHA financed home

First, I served as a carpenter’s helper for Ben Marshall — a prominent black contractor and community leader. This helped keep the purchase price down for a widowed mom with four children who lived in a three-room house with no electricity and no indoor plumbing. I remember the shining look in her eyes as she walked in to inspect her new home just prior to completion. Marshall later became the first black member of the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors.

Organize and supervise a minor home repair program involving area college students

Next, student leaders at Hampden-Sydney and Longwood Colleges helped recruit volunteers to handle minor home repairs for families in Prince Edward County. Work included painting, repairing or building steps, yardwork, etc. Local businesses were generous in providing donated materials. There were great interactions between students and family members. Hopefully, a better understanding of poverty was a long-term takeaway for the students.

Assist with environmental home repairs --- social determinants of health in 1972

For my second year, I teamed up with Bob Van Hook, environmental health officer with the Central Virginia Community Health Center, to handle work such as roof repairs or replacement, building wheelchair ramps & steps, installing screens & plastic on windows (pre-weatherization program), putting up drywall, etc. Our work was funded though the Community Health Center’s OEO grant providing up to $200 per household. This worked with the cheap labor we offered plus donated and discounted supplies.

In response to 48 percent of area housing without indoor plumbing and 35 percent with no running water, we pre-fabbed and installed sanitary pit privies (outhouses). And we charted Buckingham County homes without indoor plumbing and sent the data to the Virginia Water Project, which was a site for the National Demonstration Water Project that later became the Rural Community Assistance Project. This led to the Recognition from VWP

April 1994
Founding of the Buckingham Housing Development Corporation, which created Gold Hill Village, as affordable housing for elderly and handicapped. BHDC also helped people get subsidized loans to build new houses. Footnote: I later served for a number of years on the VWP/SERCAP boards.

**Gordon Moss Speaks: An Atticus Fitch Moment**

Shortly after finishing my two years as a VISTA, I had one of those moments you forever remember where you were when it happened. The scene was a CPAC board meeting held at the Cumberland County Courthouse with board members seated around a table in front of the judge’s bench. A proposal for OEO funding to establish legal services was on the agenda. CAA tripartite boards have long consisted of three community sectors bringing together representatives of local elected officials, low-income residents and major interest groups such as business, faith-based, civic organizations and others. Approval by the board was uncertain as an area within a state that was known for its outright resistance to change.

The application was developed by one of the VISTA’s and we were all mobilized to pack the courtroom through our connections with mostly black supporters from throughout the region — who would benefit from the presence of legal aid. The meeting was called to order and the moment arrived when Dr. Moss, a board member, rose to speak. He looked the part of a typical southern gentleman with his white suit and flowing white hair. But in his heart, he was a passionate advocate for change.

There was total silence in the room. Moss — a distinguished professor of history — took this moment to give a mini-lecture on the origins of our country and how the principles of justice were at the core of a true democracy. He closed his remarks by asserting that you could not help but vote to approve the proposal unless you didn’t believe in these principles. You could hear a pin drop and no one else asked to speak. The vote was taken — and passed unanimously!

**Joining Forces to Advance Desegregation**

In the summer of 1974, the Prince Edward Council of Human Relations was awarded a U.S. Department of Education grant designed to promote desegregation of public schools — 95% of the students in Prince Edward’s public schools were black. Ben Marshall, who was on the PECHR board, encouraged me to apply for the director’s position. I was interviewed and selected for the job by the PECHR board, whose leaders, in addition to Ben, included Gordon Moss, Vanessa Venable (Prince Edward educator for decades), Sarah Young (Longwood College Professor of Social Work) and other notables.

We launched School-Home Activities of Prince Edward County based at the vacant Mary C. Branch Elementary School. SHAPE offered after-school activities bringing together black and white elementary school students from the P.E. schools and a Longwood College experimental school for children of faculty from there and Hampden-Sydney College. The idea was to help branch the racial divide inspiring white families to enroll their children in the P.E. schools after 7th grade when the Longwood school was no longer an option. Their other option was a private, tuition-based academy that had been established for white children when the schools closed.
SHAPE offered classes in art, music, drama and sports led by public school teachers, some CPAC employees and CPAC Neighborhood Youth Corps workers. There was strong participation and support from families of the students. Alas, the program was not refunded after the initial grant. We learned that our proposal received the highest rating on its approach, but scored low in the second rating category due to P.E.'s still mostly segregated schools. Go figure...

**Into the Future with MACAA**

**Hit the Ground Running...Really Fast**

"Here's an application for VISTA volunteers that must get done by the end of this month." That's what I was told — in February 1975 — by the executive director of the Monticello Area Community Action Agency as I barely had taken off my coat on my first day in a newly created Planner position. No one gave me a crystal ball to see that I would continue with MACAA more than 25 years later to launch a national Community Action initiative. For most of this time, starting in October 1976, I served as Executive Director.

The agency was an important force in the community dating back to its origin in 1965. Originally serving as the Charlottesville-Albemarle Community Action Organization, initial efforts involved summer Head Start classes, Neighborhood Youth Corps, outreach services and development of neighborhood centers. The agency's service area expanded into Fluvanna and Louisa counties and becoming MACAA in 1970 — Nelson County was added in 1980.

Many of MACAA's staff had been onboard for a good chunk of the agency's history and were vital advisors, partners and community connections early on and through the years for me. At the beginning, these included Pynke Gohaner-Lyles (who became our Deputy Director), Bertha Armstrong (who became our Community Programs/Outreach Services Director), Annabelle Hopkins and Rosa Hudson (Outreach Workers/Housing Counselors) and, of course, Drewary Brown (Job Training Programs Director). Many others were added as — in hiring new employees — we placed an emphasis on life experiences and ability to relate to those being served.

Data from 1977, shows that 19% of families lived below poverty level in the four jurisdictions served. 24% were below 125% of poverty with Fluvanna and Louisa at around 35% of poverty and 40% of near poverty. Blacks comprised 16% of total families and 32% of female-headed households. We framed our strategies from this base and developed targeted approaches to address critical community needs. Eventually, our programs were organized to foster a cohesive approach under two categories: Education and Training and Family and Community Development — [see page from MACAA's FY98 annual report](#).

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*My wife, Bunny, served on the Board for five years before me, so as a family we have a thorough commitment to the good work of this organization. We simply espouse the principle, shared by most Americans, that everyone who has been blessed with adequate assets and income has a moral and social obligation to help those who are less fortunate.*

*Indeed, President Bush categorized those who do help as “...a thousand points of light.” Bunny and I think that MACAA has produced a beacon!*

James B. Murray, MACAA Board President & former Virginia State legislator

1990 MACAA Annual Report
The MACAA history tree (shown below) illustrates many of the agency’s landmark achievements, which occurred from 1965-2000. We weren’t satisfied merely running a few conventional programs. I’d say we were a medium-sized CAA in terms of our funding, which was $3.9 million in FY2000 ($6.5 million in 2021 dollars). But MACAA was known in the community for its broad-ranging programs that offered hope and opportunity for thousands of low-income, children, youth and their families. The agency was a trailblazer in the development of innovative programs, engaging participants and serving as a strong voice on issues affecting the low income community.

MACAA: A Community Asset...
It isn’t feasible to fully share the story of MACAA as it unfolded during the last 25 years of the 20th century. For that reason, a few examples will be shared representing efforts under three important areas of the agency’s work: **MACAA as a Service Provider** — **MACAA as a Catalyst** — **MACAA as an Advocate**.

...as a Service Provider
There are 92 human service organizations in the greater Charlottesville metro area per Cause IQ. In spite of this apparent bounty of services — from the beginning — MACAA served as a reliable point-of-contact to either receive direct assistance or to be referred to an appropriate organization. Early on, grouping the agency’s programs under **Education & Training and Family & Community Support** (p. 2) tightened the focus of our work. Case management/family development was often featured in this work.

**Outreach services** became a core component when the agency was formed. Going out **into the community** is a departure from the customary process of going into an office for services — sitting in a waiting room — and waiting — to eventually fill out an application to be helped (or not). Isolation and the lack of or cost of transportation in rural areas speak to the critical value of outreach work. As do the trials and tribulations of navigating bureaucracies. Effective outreach requires deep knowledge of the community, a unique ability to connect with clients and, certainly, problem-solving skills. Our outreach workers including Bertha Armstrong, Mary Morton, Wendy Morris and Margaret Morton were shining examples of these traits.

**Housing counseling**, often connected with outreach services, was a go-to resource for both clients and service providers. This involved helping client secure affordable housing, avoid eviction, budget counseling and linking with other services. Establishing a trusted relationship with area landlords was a key to success. Annabelle Hopkins and Helen Miller in Charlottesville and Rosa Hudson in Albemarle could be relied upon to do their utmost (and then some) to get the job done. In response to the needs of homeless families, MACAA created the **Henry B. Mitchell Hope House** — named for one MACAA’s founding board members and a prominent community leader — as a transitional housing program. An eleven-unit apartment complex was also acquitted to serve as affordable rental housing.
Children and youth services were based on providing a continuum of programs with examples such as the Child Health Partnership (birth-age 7), Head Start (3-4 year olds), Parents in Education (Grades K-3). A series of teen pregnancy prevention programs (elementary through middle school), Project Discovery (first-gen college prep for grades 6-8 & 9-12) and various job training programs for in-school and out-of-school youth. These included job readiness, training and placement. Many great staff members went above and beyond to make these programs successful such as Judy Smith, Coordinator and Rocky Smith, Home Visitor (CHP) – Barbara Smith, Assistant Head Start Director – Pearl Early, Coordinator (PIE) – Debra Abbott, Teen pregnancy prevention programs & Project Discovery Director – Penny Martin, Job Training Deputy Director and, of course, Drewary Brown, Job Training Director.

...as a Catalyst
MACAA may have been a medium-sized CAA measured by funding, but the agency had a significant footprint beyond the range of direct services that were offered. Strategic decisions were made and we were grateful having others handle programs common to many CAAs. For example, MACAA was the initial sponsor of the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program. This is a vital program with the cost of housing alone taking up as much as 50 percent (or more) of income for a large share of people living in poverty. At the expense of other work, our staff was swamped by applications for fuel assistance from around December through March. After a few years, local social service departments began administering LIHEAP with many applicants referred through MACAA.

OEO Instruction 1105-1 from 1970, issued by then-Director Donald Rumsfeld, continues to resonate through the guidance provided on The Mission of the Community Action Agency. I strongly believe in the principles voiced — particularly this part, which still stands as a clarion call for CAAs:

> The basic purpose [of a CAA] is...to stimulate a better focusing of all available...resources.”
> The [Economic Opportunity] Act thus gives the CAA a primarily catalytic mission: to make the entire community more responsive to the needs and interests of the poor by mobilizing resources and bringing about greater institutional sensitivity. A CAA’s effectiveness, therefore, is measured not only by the services which it directly provides but, more importantly, by the improvements and changes it achieves in the community’s attitudes and practices toward the poor and in the allocation and focusing of public and private resources for antipoverty purposes.

Being a CATALYST was probably on my mind 24/7 during my tenure with MACAA. We not only looked at community needs, but also carved out who else had a role or primary responsibility related to various issues. This informed our decisions related to program development, partnerships/collaborations and advocacy. You might be interested in these resources on Virtual CAP to help ramp up your strategies, evaluate results and modify as needed: [Partnership Tracking Tool & Partnership Assessment Tool]

MACAA did more than turn to others with proven track records to run programs that we might have otherwise offered. We were in at the beginning as the lead agency in launching programs that continue through other nonprofits as vital resources today such as housing rehab, Adult Education, Community centers with meals for seniors, Shelter for Help in Emergency for victims of domestic violence, Weatherization Assistance Program, Child Health Partnership and others. MACAA staff also provided leadership in creation of the Nelson County Community Development Foundation. NCCDF served as a model for a similar entity formed in two of MACAA’s other counties.
...as an Advocate

In 1999, as part of a deliberate focus on social change and dismantling racism, the MACAA Board of Directors adopted an updated Vision for the agency (see text box) and this new Mission Statement:

**Mission Statement**
MACAA works with individuals, families and the community in a collective effort to eliminate the causes of poverty, to lessen the effects of poverty and to promote progressive social change.

There were numerous storied advocacy efforts taken on by the agency over the years. Yet the continuing struggles and hardships suffered then — and now — by the poor and near-poor mandated a broadened and more deliberate emphasis at many levels. I'd like to share five examples of our advocacy work — starting with Dismantling Racism.

**Dismantling Racism**

Some might say we were trailblazers or ahead of the curve with our Dismantling Racism work that, to a degree, has finally gained some traction on a broader level. In some ways this is true, but sadly long, long overdue. It doesn’t take much research to look at how people of color experience poverty at about twice the rate than whites. This spills over into many basic areas that are needed to experience a decent quality of life — healthcare, affordable housing, education, jobs with adequate pay, child care, transportation, incarceration and more.

Dismantling Racism became an intentional process for us through a 1998 grant from the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation. This was preceded by participation in Dismantling Racism weekend retreats attended by several groups of MACAA staff members including myself along with various members of our senior management team and others. Later on, training workshops were conducted for all MACAA staff and board members. Issues covered were personal, cultural and institutional racism, internalized oppression and empowerment (for people of color), white privilege and the role of allies (for whites) and tools for organizational change. Various strategies were instituted afterward within the agency. Were we successful? Baby steps, but a start as part of the march for equity and justice.

**Living Wage Campaign**

In 1999, MACAA was among the leaders of a local Living Wage Campaign, which promoted $8.00 an hour as a base wage tied to the Federal poverty level of $16,700 for a family of four. This amount back then — and levels advanced now — are not enough to meet basic living costs for most low-wage workers across the country. But far better than Federal minimum wage was at $5.15 an hour. In local discussions about what we could do about poverty, I often gave a simple answer: **DO THE MATH** — and work for change in the equation = wages v. costs. Now, MIT's [Living Wage Calculator](http://www.mitre.org) offers a framework for this conversation by providing local data, which you can tweak.

To stand behind its words, MACAA established $8.00 an hour as the base pay level in July, 1999. Since then, through the efforts of the campaign, two of the major local employers, the University of Virginia and the City of Charlottesville have instituted newly established living wages.
Welfare Reform

Federal welfare reform legislation, which passed in 1996 under President Clinton’s administration was, at best, a mixed bag as voiced by many including Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund in this 1995 op-ed. Simply put, reducing the number on welfare doesn’t offset the economic woes of low-income families. You be the judge on the results considering this 2002 policy brief from Brookings: From Welfare to Work: What the Evidence Shows, which unsurprisingly has “Women Leaving Welfare Have Low-Incomes” as one of its findings. And a great video and other information on The Cliff Effect can be accessed in the June 2020 issue of VirtualCAP RoundUP (see page five).

MACAA mobilized efforts to help those on welfare learn about the provisions of welfare reform. An all-day welfare conference co-sponsored with Social Services was well attended and helped lay some of this groundwork. Nonetheless, as I concluded in this 1997 MACAA newsletter article:

These days, “ending welfare as we know it” has become a popular rallying cry. Ending poverty as we know it would be a far more noble quest.

Local Community Development Block Grant Ordinance

In 1977, Sam Brown, a former anti-war activist, was appointed Director of ACTION, the umbrella agency for national volunteer programs, by President Carter. As laid out in this 1978 Washington Post article, Brown retooled “VISTA volunteers to deemphasize their work with established institutions and governments and get back into "advocacy" and "community organizing." We jumped at this opportunity and successfully applied for 12 VISTA positions

Providing support to and — at least in one case — helping form neighborhood associations in Charlottesville was a project taken on by several of our new VISTAs. Thankfully so, since their work became a big part of fighting what we saw as misuse of federal Community Development Block Grant funds by the city. CDBG funds were largely provided to benefit low- and moderate-income persons. The city’s CDBG plan for that year proposed funding for bicycle paths to be created near the University of Virginia. Not included in the plan were sidewalks for the Ridge Street neighborhood, a CDBG target area, which had none at the time. Justification by the city was to claim that UVa students were themselves low-income. That was hard to accept with THE University known in many ways as an “elite” institution.

In addition, there were questions about compliance with the requirement for citizen participation based on how the city designed its CDBG plan. Typically, the city would first draft a plan and then bring together representative to form a neighborhood task force which, in effect, would rubber stamp what was being proposed. A new task force would be created each year to repeat this process. MACAA led an effort to develop and present a local CDBG ordinance that would create a standing CDBG Task Force. Members would become knowledgeable about the program and provide input from the beginning rather than after the fact. City officials opposed the ordinance, but City Council prevailed and it’s still on the books today.

A few years later, under President Reagan, MACAA was one of 35 organizations included on a “hit list” to no longer be a sponsor of VISTAs. As reported this 1987 Christian Science Monitor article, “the President objects to the ideological image VISTA has evolved over the years: one of social activism that bucks the establishment and promotes changes often perceived as liberal.” In some ways, it was a badge of honor to gain this level of notoriety. But certainly a shame no longer having the services of VISTA volunteers.
Fluvanna County Water Project
MACAA became involved with another CDBG advocacy effort in 1977; this one surrounded Fluvanna County’s apparent violation of their CDBG plan to extend its water system out into poor, isolated and mostly black communities in the county. MACAA staff surveyed the targeted areas and discovered that water lines were not being added. Rather CDBG funds were being used to make repairs to the system at the expense of the intended low-income beneficiaries.

Community leadership was provided by Jerome Booker, a retired veteran who returned to Fluvanna after his retirement from the Air Force. Our staff was led by Pynke Gohane-Lyles, Debra Abbott (two people involved in much of MACAA’s advocacy work) and Bertha Armstrong who were joined by Steve Rosenfield (my earlier VISTA colleague) as a pro-bono attorney. Rosey, as he’s know, carried a copy of the Freedom of Information Act into the County Administrator’s office to acquire the County’s CDBG plan.

Our team traveled to Richmond to present a protest to the Director of the HUD Field Office in Richmond. As a result, the county’s CDBG grant funds were frozen requiring compliance with their plan. Subsequently, MACAA aided the county in meeting the HUD requirements. Support was also provided in the development of a successful FmHA funding proposal, which together with the CDBG funds, enabled the county to both repair its water system and extend water lines into the targeted communities. A film of this advocacy effort was created for training purposes by the Virginia Water Project, which later expanded to become SERCAP.

Emerging as a community leader, Jerome Booker became the first black elected to the Fluvanna County Board of Supervisors and also served as a dedicated member of both MACAA’s and VWP’s boards. He was among 30 people featured in MACAA’s Success Stories commemorative book published in 1995 commemorating the agency’s 30th anniversary. And the Fluvanna Board of Supervisors passed a resolution celebrating his life upon his death in 2006.

MACAA Brief Takes
Hats off to the hard-working MACAA Board members who really rolled up their sleeves to help guide and support the agency including these fabulous Board presidents: Dr. Vivian Gordon (UVa Sociology professor), Jim Murray (former state legislator & successful business owner) Rev. Alvin Edwards (Mt. Zion Baptist Church pastor & former Charlottesville mayor), Mark Lorenzoni (successful business owner & civic leader) and Sarah Jane Stewart (rural community health center director).

In 1997, we consolidated five separate MACAA locations in the city onto one site, which was originally developed in 1959 as a segregated school for white children. The Charlottesville schools closed from 1958-1959 as part of Virginia’s massive resistance to the Brown v. Board of Education desegregation decision. The property is currently assessed at $3.1M and with more than 20,000 square feet for offices and classroom space situated on seven acres. Later, other large non-profits made similar moves seeing how we pulled this off. Lots of pro-bono professional services and low-interest IDB financing made it workable for us.
MACAA’s first requests for **local government funding** were made with some support received in 1976, which grew to $500,000 from MACAA’s five jurisdictions over the next two decades. **Gary Nickelsen** (Chief Planner) and **Lynn Huck** (Fiscal Director) worked diligently to complete the intricate funding requests that were required for some localities. And handled essential administrative work for many years.

MACAA joined with a number of other progressive non-profits to form **Community Shares** as an option for workplace giving and an alternative to **United Way’s** campaign, which would not accept applications beyond the traditional charities they funded. In response, United Way revised its eligibility criteria enabling us to join forces with them. At one point, MACAA became the second highest funded United Way agency at around $120K. It’s gratifying now to see United Way of Greater Charlottesville focusing on **Equity Work, Financial Stability** and **School Readiness** and the **Envision** five-year campaign to lift 1,800 families out of poverty.

We were involved in many **public education advocacy efforts** aligned with our commitment to school success for low-income children. These included the **Educational Issues Task Force** to address the achievement gap (co-chair, Charlottesville Public Schools) — the **Equity and Diversity Committee** & the **School Readiness Committee** (member, Albemarle County Public Schools) — and more! MACAA also presented regional **Teacher & Parent Awards** to highlight efforts supporting the needs of low-income students.

Building **awareness of MACAA and problems of poverty** was a continuous process using many strategies. We convened numerous **community forums** and were actively involved in a variety of **partnerships and collaborative initiatives**. Many, many **fundraising activities** were launched and our signature annual event — **Men Who Cook!** — was created in 1988. This became a do-not-miss evening for both our chefs and the lucky diverse crowd of attendees able to purchase a ticket before they sold out. **Newsletters**, **annual reports** and frequent **media coverage** were also important to the agency.

MACAA’s **30th Anniversary Banquet** in 1995 was a phenomenal celebration. It was held in the Omni Hotel ballroom packed by community supporters and our invited guests — the writers, photographers and individuals highlighted in our **Success Stories** publication. Three key community leaders worked behind the scenes on the Success Stories project. **Susan Payne** (successful marketing business) designed newspaper and print formats. She also led us in getting our local newspaper to publish a story for free over 30 days. **Mike Williams** (legendary local bookstore) recruited 30 renowned writers and **John Stubblefield** (high-level photo processing lab & former MACAA board member) recruited 30 top-notch photographers. **MACAA staff and board members** were superb in their involvement including a rousing rendition of **Lean on Me** with the assurance that you can — **Just call on MACAA when you need a hand...We all need somebody to lean on.** I wish we had videoed the event.

**Success Stories** (excerpts)
Introduction (Susan Payne)
Two of the 30 success stories
Writer & Photographer bios
Closing Essay (Julian Bond)

**MACAA’s 30th Anniversary Banquet**
Program booklet
Taking on a New Challenge with Virtual CAP

The Seeds of an Idea
Total immersion is a fitting way to describe how I approached my role as a leader with MACAA over the course of 25 years. Not quite 24/7, but sometimes it felt like that with an expansive range of efforts customarily on my plate. Endless meetings, continuous multi-tasking and a crisis or two along the way brought me to the point in of being ready to add a new phase to my career.

An Epiphany in Kansas
In 1988, I was able to recharge myself by taking a two-month sabbatical driving solo on a cross-country trip largely camping and hiking along the way. I called in to the office several times a week and was alerted of a funding crisis mid-way through the trip — the deadline was missed with our applications for continuation of our job training programs. I quickly arranged to fly back home and worked with our staff to recover from this glitch. Fortunately, rebidding occurred and we were successful in keeping the grants.

I didn’t hesitate to disrupt my sabbatical, which was no different than responding to a family crisis — in this case, it was the MACAA family. This, in fact, was a blessing in disguise. As I returned to California to complete my trip, it struck me how committed I was to my beliefs and how devoted I was to all phases of MACAA’s work. Those feelings were still in my heart as I embarked on another cross-country trip with one of my VISTA buddies shortly after leaving MACAA in the late-summer of 2000.

I was behind the wheel leaving Salina, Kansas, sipping on some really bad coffee from a convenience store, when the idea struck me. I wanted to create a Virtual CAP, which would be an online clearinghouse featuring innovative programs and organizational practices used by CAAs. Descriptions would be written and include source material to support replication — job descriptions, policies & procedures, flyers, brochures, relevant resource, etc. Like ideas gained from going to a conference, but without the cost or time involved. Plus with tools to put ideas into action. A virtual road trip to learn from the work of agencies across the country in a matter of seconds!

Building the Model
Immediately upon returning home, I began to develop some prototypes to demonstrate the type of information and material that would be the centerpiece of Virtual CAP. I also floated the concept around with several CAA colleagues who encouraged me to move forward. That led to meetings with the Community Action Partnership (then known as NACAA) and NASCAP for discussion and for each to entertain the possibility of serving as a national platform for the project.

A turning point came through a meeting with David Bradley, CEO and Co-Founder of the National Community Action Foundation. Helping in the conversation was Ted Edlich, CEO and President of TAP (CAA in Roanoke, VA) — a long-time friend, mentor and colleague. David voiced support and encouraged us to meet with the federal Office of Community Services to explore possible avenues for funding. So, it was over to OCS where Margaret Washnitzer — Division of State Assistance Director — became an early supporter.

Two years later an OCS Training and Technical Assistance grant was awarded to the Virginia Community Action Partnership to pilot the Virtual CAP project. Results of a July 2006 survey conducted after three more years of funding: 77.5% YES and 21.6% MAYBE when asked if Virtual CAP should be continued as part of OCS T/TA capacity building for CAAs (153 total respondents).
VirtualCAP.org: A Unique Community Action Online Clearinghouse

The willingness of CAAs to share their material with others has been of tremendous importance to Virtual CAP from the beginning. This would have been a great help to MACAA in our efforts to develop a transitional housing program back in the late 1980s. Our staff met 1-2 times weekly for four months to plan what became known as Hope House. If only we could have adapted material from other CAAs for job descriptions, policies and procedures, brochures, participant agreements and case management forms. This became possible with the advent of Virtual CAP.

My site visits began in December 2002 to four New York CAAs — RECAP, DCCAP, EOC of Suffolk and WESTCOP. Over the next 21 months, I traveled to 18 states and visited with 65 CAAs leading to 108 descriptions posted on VirtualCAP.org after it was launched in 2004. Items were placed under three main categories and sub-categories: Program Models – Advocacy & Community Building – Organizational Practices.

Over the next five years, site visits and attending conferences helped me learn about many noteworthy efforts developed by CAAs. All told these covered 40 states with more than 100 local CAA visits and contacts made at nearly 90 state, regional and national conferences. This helped me (a) create additional project descriptions for the website, (b) increase awareness of Virtual CAP and (c) present workshops on topics such as CAA Board Development – Collective Impact: A Community Change Strategy – Self-Sufficiency and Economic Security – How Far is Your Organization toward Becoming REALLY Great? – Local Solutions to Poverty in Changing Times.

A number of Peer-to-Peer Forums were co-sponsored for CAAs in Pennsylvania and Virginia. Additionally, an action-learning RuFES conference was co-convened for Region 3 CAAs to learn about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Rural Family Economic Success initiative. Duane Yoder, president of Garrett County CAC, was instrumental in getting the AECF’s involvement and support. In addition to VACAP’s leadership, John Wilson, CAAP executive director, helped design and promote these peer learning opportunities.

Our direct funding from OCS ended in 2010 with changes made to the federal agency's approach to technical assistance. We were able, however, to be involved with work under OCS grants to NASCSP and Meliora Partners to respectively (1) identify and prepare information on evidence-based & evidence-informed programs and practices and (2) gather resources and prepare two guides for CAAs: Mastering Community Action Financial Management and Administrative Governance and Striving for Excellence: An Annotated Resource Guide for CAA Boards.

VACAP remained the home for Virtual CAP from 2002-2014 — thanks to the support of executive directors Jim Schuyler and, previously, Jane Conroy. During that time, a VirtualCAP Blog was added (featuring a Community Action Book Club for about a year). While a new avenue of involvement and support opened up in FY2012 when OCS created Regional Performance and Innovation Consortia comprised of State CAP Associations. As a result, an RPIC Blog was created for sharing of State and Regional CAA Conferences & Training Events – RPIC & State CAP Association Material – State CAP Association Newsletters.

VirtualCAP RoundUP: CAA Showcase & Key Resources

The Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies served as the home for Virtual CAP in 2015-2017 thanks to the support of executive director Phil Cole. Valuable tech support in revamping the website was quickly provided by Kathryn Clausen, OACAA Communications Director. This two-page flyer serves as an index for the wealth of information and resources found on the website.
Additionally, the **OACAA Board of Directors** came up with the brilliant idea of starting a low-cost monthly subscription-based publication to provide continuous information helping CAAs further learn from each other. The first issue of **VirtualCAP RoundUP** was published in March 2015 and 83 issues have been published to-date. More than 750 agencies are now receiving RoundUP through 35 statewide subscriptions and individual CAAs in DC and 10 other states plus NASCSP for State CSBG offices.

This [two-page flyer](https://example.com) provides an overview of RoundUP — we encourage sharing internally and with community partners. There are six sections in each issue: **Focus Topic** – Successful CAA Funding Initiatives – Innovative CAA Programs – Community Action News – Did You See? – Brighten Your Day! Archives to past issues remain available to subscribers.

In 2018, the **Connecticut Association for Community Action** became the home for Virtual CAP thanks to the support of executive directors **Deb Polun** (current) and **Edith Karsky** (retired) along with deputy director **Rhonda Evans**. For the past seven years — under the auspices of OACAA and CAFCA — providing webinars largely replaced traveling to present workshops. Examples of topics include: Creating and USING Your Community Needs Assessment – Strategically Increasing Your Presence – CSBG Organizational Standards: Helpful Resources – Customer Satisfaction Data – Recruitment and Engagement of Low-Income Sector Board Members.

**Foundation for a Community Action Library of Congress**

An unfulfilled dream of mine was to create a **Community Action Library of Congress** using the wealth of material that has now been gathered for Virtual CAP over the past 19 years. RoundUP alone contains nearly 2,500 articles, which demonstrate landmark work carried out by hundreds of CAAs across the U.S. Additionally, a large body of high-level resources is now part of the Virtual CAP database. Similar to Virtual CAP, filtering would be possible for Organizational Practices and Program Models by category and sub-category. Alas, this never took hold but maybe someday it will.

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Early prototypes for a Community Action Library of Congress

Access links to sample compilations under four categories

NOTE: Some links may be out-of-date within the category samples
Parting Thoughts
You never know what might await you when you walk through a door. Indeed, I can attest to that sentiment reflecting back to the day in 1971 when I visited my college’s placement office, which launched me into the world of Community Action! Over the years my commitment to contribute to a social change movement has never wavered. I’ve learned and witnessed much along the way beyond my early life experiences or any knowledge gained from textbooks. This started right from the beginning as black students in Prince Edward County were pulled from school in late-summer to help harvest tobacco. Some would never return to school as described in this 2015 article in The Atlantic. Likewise, sometimes shaking my head when we delivered outhouses as an upgrade for a few of the 167,045 households in Virginia who lacked complete plumbing in 1970 as cited in this 1989 Washington Post article, which includes comments by Wilma Warren, executive director of the Virginia Water Project.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 called for the elimination of the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in the United States — a charge that’s just as relevant moving into 2022 (scroll down for pre-pandemic income gap charts in this January 2020 posting from the Pew Research Center). In 1998, I was chosen as one of the area’s Distinguished Dozen named each year by our local newspaper. As I stated in a profile on me that was published in the newspaper (wish there was a different headline):

In America, with all the wealth that we have, we rank first among industrialized countries in the rate of poverty. To me, that’s really an indictment on our entire system that we failed, and until we can turn it around...that is the measure of whether we succeed or fail.

Kenneth Ackerman in The Daily Progress, January 9, 1999
Note: The U.S. is still in this position as listed in this table found in a posting by Confronting Poverty Table 1. Extent of Poverty across 26 OECD Countries (2019 data)

Two Final Stories
From 1996-2000, I was active with the Non-Profit Group affiliated with the Charlottesville-Albemarle Chamber of Commerce. We learned at one point, that a question was being raised by a member of the CoC board: Why are non-profits part of the Chamber? I thought this could be answered in multiple ways, but decided to suggest a simple slogan — Nonprofits Profit Everyone. I realize this is a broad sweeping statement, but I strongly stand behind this variation: Community Action Profits Everyone.

In 1998 and 1999, I coordinated VACAP’s Walk-a-Mile project developed by the University of Washington. Elected officials and public policymakers were paired with welfare recipients (year one) and working poor residents (year two) for sharing of activities to promote a better understanding of each other’s lives. This harkens back to the words spoken by my father when I was a teenager — There but for the grace of God, go I. Those words are equally pertinent today, as I say thanks to all who have nurtured and supported me both personally and professionally.

In the spirit of Community Action
Give Me Love (Give Me Peace on Earth)
Give me hope, help me cope
Song by George Harrison
Slides & vocals by Tony Favachio