SOCIAL SERVICE IN THE NINETIES

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

ILLUSTRATION BY BURTON MORRIS

By most estimates, the Eighties were a dismal time to be at the bottom of the social totem pole. Government programs were slashed. Moneyed narcissism reigned. But according to those who still fight the good fight, the time for change is upon us. The next decade will bring a return to compassion in our public priorities.

BY DEBORAH J. WALDMAN

HALF THE PEOPLE IN THE Rev. Joe Ehrmann's neighborhood live below the poverty level. Ehrmann, a former defensive tackle with the Baltimore Colts, isn't one of them. He could have bought a house in the suburbs when he retired from professional football four years ago, but that didn't fit into his agenda. Now an ordained minister, Ehrmann directs The Door, an urban ministry serving the approximately 10,000 people in the Middle East section of Baltimore.

The neighborhood is similar to the one where Ehrmann grew up in Buffalo, New York. The main problem facing those who live there is the one that put Ehrmann at a disadvantage when he left for Syracuse on a football scholarship in 1968.

"The poor people need to learn how the system works," he says. "I went through a great deal of culture shock seeing your typical SU student: kids getting cars for high school graduation. I never really felt like I fit in at all. Even throughout my pro career, seeing the guys that came into pro football, the guys that came from good homes and knew how the system works—they had tremendous advantages over guys who didn't come from the advantaged lifestyle."

Ehrmann is determined to see that his new neighbors get those advantages, but he isn't doing it alone. For many of its resources, both financial and human, The Door looks to churches in the Baltimore area. Suburban congregants commuted to the inner city every Saturday this past winter to help renovate The Door's new headquarters, and they have helped with programs ranging from the monthly canned-food giveaway to the self-esteem-building class.

"They've been tremendously generous," Ehrmann says. "From the little corner of the world where I sit I couldn't be any more encouraged about people being willing to share and to help and to invest their time and their money in the kind of work we're doing."

Such a proclamation seems incongruous in this, a decade in American history that has been notorious for its neglect of social welfare and charity. But there is solid evidence that across America more people are donating their time and money to worthy causes, serving meals to the homeless at soup kitchens, teaching reading to illiterate adults, sending checks to charities. And this wave of altruism is not necessarily a result of George Bush's campaign mandate for a "kinder, gentler America." According to those who study trends in philanthropy and volunteerism, Americans have been getting kinder, gentler, and more generous all along.

"Bush, with his thousand points of light, has really captured a move and a movement in this country," says Elizabeth Kelly, who received her MPA from the Maxwell School in 1973, now vice president for the Volunteer Market of the United Way of America. "Some very good people must have done some very good market research. If you read the newsmagazines, you see this theme popping up over and over. They've just hit it at the right time."

WHEN RONALD REAGAN TOOK office at the beginning of this decade, he instituted policies intended to reduce inflation and taxes. Those goals were met.

Reagan also sought to readjust the balance of public and private support for the country's social needs—to effect a fundamental restructuring of who attends to domestic priorities and how. In the long term and at the macroeconomic level, that initiative may also prove its worth. But the immediate impact for many individuals has been financial duress.

Reagan's economic policies have left countless people homeless, jobless, and with little hope for any improvement in the future. While incomes of the wealthiest 10 percent of Americans grew by 27.4 percent during Reagan's two terms in office, incomes of the poorest 10 percent dropped by 10.5 percent. Between 1979 and 1987, the number of poor people in this country rose from 25.2 million to 32.5 million, 13 million of whom were under six years old.

Ironically, Americans of moderate means are the most charitable. "People with incomes under $20,000 give almost three times as much proportionately as people with incomes of $100,000," says Brian O'Connell, a 1954 Maxwell School graduate who is president of the Independent Sector, a Washington, D.C.-based coalition of voluntary organizations, foundations, and corporations. "If people see need around them, even if they have relatively little, they tend to be more generous."

Reagan was counting on that sort of response—from individual donors, foundations, corporate charity, et cetera—when he set out to restructure federally funded social programs in the early part of this decade. Operating on the principle that the government need not be involved in every aspect of private life, Reagan trimmed some budgets and slashed others, assuming that programs of true merit would survive. To a limited extent, the public sector *has* responded. United Way figures show charitable donations have increased steadily and stayed ahead of inflation since 1981, when the year-end total was $1.68 billion. Last year it was $2.78 billion.

But no amount of new support could save all of the programs affected by Reagan's cuts. Some managed to exist on shoestring budgets by eliminating staff and offering fewer services. Others folded.

WHEN REAGAN TOOK OFFICE IN January 1981, Mary Sutcliffe, a 1950 graduate of the College of Arts and Sciences, was the chief social worker in the federally funded Children and Youth Program in rural New Hampshire. The program provided preventive medical care to children up to age 14 from low-income families. Most of them, Sutcliffe says, would have gotten no medical care were it not for the program.

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Between 1981 and 1982, the program staff shrunk. The first person to be let go was the registered nurse, the only full-time employee. Next went the nutritionist, the community health aide, the pediatricians, and the driver who provided transportation for many of the clients who had no way to get to the clinic. By the end of the year, the staff had dwindled down to Sutcliffe and a dentist. For two weeks she served as social worker and dental receptionist, until her funding ran out. Her program became a casualty of the 1980s social welfare environment.

"It was a great program, and I think it was a great loss that somehow they weren't able to keep it going," says Sutcliffe, who now lives in Maryland, where she teaches psychology part-time at a community college. "They still had some funds—a couple of places: there's one in Concord [the state capital] that kept going under the [state] health department, but ours just died."

Sutcliffe recalls that the New Hampshire state legislature approved funds for Child and Family Services, another government-funded program for which she worked, but in the end there was no money to back up the legislation. Under Reaganomics such situations were not unusual.

"The state and local governments are taking more initiative in response to the reduced federal role," says John Palmer, dean of SU's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. "They're trying to be more active, efficient, and motivated, but they're doing it with less financial help from the federal government, and that makes it difficult for them."

Similar problems faced private nonprofit organizations, many of whom were at least partly dependent on federal funds. Those that kept going had to develop alternative sources of funding. One success was the Children's Art Carnival, now celebrating its 20th year providing arts programs to New York City youngsters ranging in age from four to 21. It is an example of a social program that, with difficulty, managed to make the Reaganomics adjustment.

The Carnival has a substantial list of foundation and private contributors, but when both the Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Office of Education stopped payment on four-year grants two and three years early, the Carnival was forced to make changes. Rather than eliminate programs, the Carnival's president, Betty Blayton-Taylor, cut her staff from six full-time in 1980 to three in 1988. She also devised a way for the Carnival to generate its own money without compromising its values: a textile business that designs and makes such items as tee shirts, pillows, and dolls.

Now in its fifth year, the Harlem Textile Works has a number of clients, including other not-for-profit agencies in Harlem, and the Marshall Fields department store chain. In addition to producing income, the textile works provides apprenticeships in hand-screen and textile design for program participants.

"I'm always an optimist, always think I'm going to be able to find a way to figure it out," says Blayton-Taylor, a 1959 graduate of the College of Visual and Performing Arts. "I think that the Carnival's survival and any not-for-profit's survival will come with each of these institutions coming up with some way to generate earned income. . . . It's not easy to be a philanthropic organization and at the same time be a business. It's very difficult. But I think the organizations that are going to survive are the ones who are going to figure that out."

BLAYTON-TAYLOR IS PROBABLY right. For all his kind and gentle rhetoric, President Bush won't be restoring social programs to their pre-Reagan levels. Hamstrung by a federal budget deficit that tripled during the Reagan administration, Bush doesn't have much leverage in terms of expansion. To carry out his commitments to improve public education, Head Start, and wage a war on drugs, Bush will have to cut into other domestic programs, says Dean Palmer. Which programs will be affected is not known.

"Congress, in its preparation of the budget, will have to figure out how to hit the aggregate target," Palmer says. "[Bush] did not pinpoint programs."

In other words, despite the president's commitments, the prospects for government involvement in social services during the 1990s are still undecided. Alejandro Garcia, a professor in the School of Social Work, is decidedly pessimistic about the outlook under Bush. "I haven't seen any evidence of a kinder, gentler America," he says. "Perhaps he forgot to say for whom."

Robert Maslyn, who received his MSW in 1978 and went to work for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now known as the Department of Health and Human Services) is more hopeful. "The agenda's not clear at this point, but at least one of the differences, and a significant difference, is how the current president perceives the role of the government, and that's positive. . . . He sees a role for government beyond defense and making currency."

Maslyn, now federal grants policy analyst for the department, points to Bush's selection of Jack Kemp as secretary of housing and urban development as tangible evidence of how Bush's attitude differs from that of his former boss. "He's an activist," Maslyn says of Kemp, who, shortly after accepting his cabinet position made a well-publicized trip to homeless shelters in Philadelphia. Contrast that with his predecessor, Samuel Pierce, who maintained such a low profile that Reagan once called him "Mr. Mayor" because he failed to recognize him.

Howard Blackman, a member of the President's Committee on Mental Retardation since 1987, believes Bush's commitment to appoint appropriate people to key positions will extend to advisory committees. The people Reagan appointed to head the committee tended not to have backgrounds in mental retardation. On the whole, the committee had less influence during the Reagan administration than during any previous administration. This caused some problems within the disability advocacy movement, whose members, Blackman says, "were frustrated by the slow pace of the president's committee."

The committee was established more than 20 years ago to advise the president on national policies that would promote the well-being of citizens with mental retardation. The belief then, as now, is that such citizens need to be integrated into their communities, not hidden away in institutions. But de-institutionalization requires community services, many of which were cut during the Reagan administration.

Blackman, who received his Ed.D. from SU in 1980 and now directs a special education program in a suburban Chicago public school cooperative, is optimistic about the committee's potential for influence in the Bush administration. "I'm going to work my damnedest to make sure the burden isn't placed just on citizens to be kinder and gentler," Blackman says. "Government needs to be very active in the pursuit of

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equity for people who are vulnerable, who are physically and mentally disabled, who do not enjoy the rights other people do."

ONE OF THE MOST HARMFUL LEGacies of the Reagan cutbacks is in social-service hiring. In the name of austerity, agencies cut back on hiring trained social workers, whose additional education translated into higher salaries. Offices were largely staffed by people who had, at best, a less specialized undergraduate degree—people who weren't trained to handle their clients' complex problems. The social workers that were on hand were often in administrative positions, and by the nature of their jobs did not deal directly with clients. That trend, though, is being reversed, and the ramifications for social work education are profound.

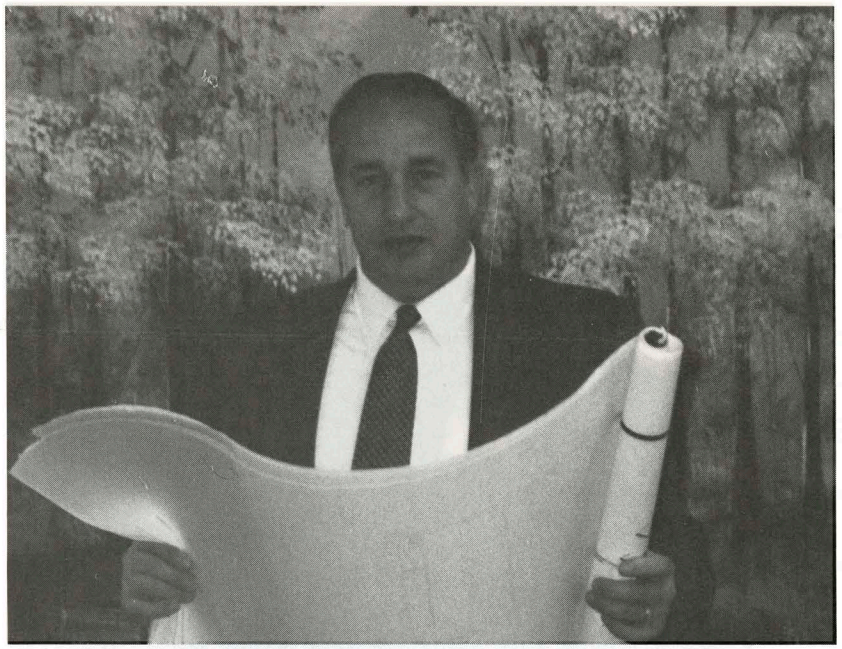
In 1987, Lisa Steinberg, a six-year-old girl from New York City, died after being physically abused by the man who had illegally adopted her. Neighbors had called a local child abuse hotline and the police to report beatings, but no action was ever taken. The case focused attention on the problem of ill-staffed social-service agencies, which many people said could and should have prevented the child's death.

"There is a recognition now," says Edward W. Ihle, director of graduate admissions for the School of Social Work. "It can't be hidden anymore that the problems are there, and we have to give them attention, and Bush is smart enough to know—at least he says we have to have a kinder, gentler America. At least he understands that we have to start restoring some services here, but whether he'll be able to do it in the face of this huge deficit, I don't know."

Says Professor Garcia: "We fail to see the long-term benefits of having people become productive citizens in our society. I don't think we could get anything for free, but the taxpayers should be aware that there are rewards for him or her. . . . For every person for whom you provide training and employment and rehabilitation, those are persons who are going to become part of the taxpayer rolls instead of the services role."

One thing Ihle is certain about is the future for social work and social workers. Those who want to help are finding work. "We literally haven't been able to put together a solid placement service, students are out of here and hired so fast. I tell people with a very clear conscience, the MSW, from what I can see for the next few decades, is career insurance." Enrollment in the School of Social Work has been increasing since 1982, partly due to a retargeting of the program toward working students, and partly because of changes in the nature of social work itself.

Among other things, the eighties will be remembered as the decade when everyone went public with his or her personal problems. Athletes had press conferences to announce they were going into drug rehabilitation programs. Celebrities went on talk shows



Camp Benefactor John Couri '63:
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and wrote books about their miserable childhoods, addictions, and bouts with incurable diseases. People began to realize their own problems weren't unique, or insurmountable.

Therapy became acceptable and accessible. Many private corporations and businesses started employee assistance programs, contracting with such agencies as Child and Family Services, Pastoral Counseling, and Family Service Associates to provide counseling for employees who sought such help. By and large, these agencies were staffed by graduates of MSW programs.

Government-funded social-services agencies that had to cut back on staff early in this decade are now reconsidering their priorities and funding options. During the past two years enrollment in the School of Social Work doubled because agencies in the Rochester area contracted with the school to provide MSW education for its employees. What is particularly noteworthy is the way the agencies are paying their employees' tuition—indeed, that they are paying at all. The price of an MSW at Syracuse is roughly $20,000 per person. Department of Social Services agencies from Monroe and Seneca counties are paying with grant money from the State of New York. The privately run Hillside Children's agency is splitting the cost three ways; the board of trustees pays one third, the employees another, and the rest is raised in the community.

In these rare cases, the Reaganomic strategy is actually working. State and local government and the private sector have joined to fill gaps opened during the Reagan administration. "I think the exciting part of that is there's that energy going on between those institutions," says Health and Human Services's Maslyn. "They're tapping into each other's resources. That hadn't been similarly explored in the past."

FOR JOE EHRMANN AND HIS URBAN ministry, the prospects for success depend equally on spiritual and financial commitment.

"I think within the churches, within the Christian community, God has given them enough resources," Ehrmann says. "It's just a matter of not getting caught up in overindulging yourself with a lot of the pleasure in this world and just being responsible."

During the past nine years we've made idols of those among the successful who indulge themselves—Donald Trump and Madonna, to name two. But the sense of responsibility of which Ehrmann speaks has not been completely lost, and indeed may be on the upswing. Americans between the ages of 25 and 49 have increased their involvement in public service 18 percent since 1978, an interesting statistic considering that included in that age group are Yuppies, standard-bearers for the cult of greed and materialism that has marked much of this decade. The spirit of community welfare that gave birth to the Peace Corps and VISTA almost 30 years ago may flourish again.

An addition to this group is senior citizens. People more than 60 years old, once the most reluctant members of society to donate their time, are now the fastest-growing age group in giving and volunteering.

"That has been a major change in just the last 15 years," says the Independent Sector's O'Connell. "People begin to realize that just playing bridge or golf is not very satisfying, that they have a great deal to give, and are being asked to help in all kinds of community activities. More and more they're viewed as an enormous source of wisdom, and experience."

Elynor Thompson Erickson, last year's literacy volunteer of the year in Shreveport, Louisiana, fits that profile. A former college administrator, Erickson spent the first three months of her retirement doing "what I wanted to do more than anything else in the world: I read and read and read, and played the piano, and read and read, sang in choirs, sang in a local chorus, and all of a sudden I thought, 'This is not enough.'"

Erickson learned about Literacy Volunteers of America—an organization founded by SU alumna Ruth Colvin '59—from a friend. During the past three years she has worked with six functionally illiterate adults ranging in age from 20 to 50 years old. Most have learning disabilities. Another, a 26-year-old man, believes he didn't learn to read because his teachers failed to teach him.

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MARY ELLEN MENGUCCI

trouble, so they just loved him and passed him along the line, but they did not always bother to pay attention to what his homework said," says Erickson.

Last year the young man was the local Literacy Volunteers' student of the year. Now that his three years in the program have ended, Erickson tutors him privately. A school maintenance worker, he just bought a house and is considering a new career, possibly in nursing.

Literacy Volunteers are required to tutor one student at least two hours a week for one year. Erickson works with four, in addition to her private pupil, and she often enhances the established curriculum with lessons she designs specifically for each of her pupils. Until this year she was the local program chairman. Currently she serves on her chapter's board of directors and as tutor coordinator, responsible for the program's 204 tutors.

"I get a tremendous amount of joy out of the fact that hopefully I can broaden their horizons. And I get a great deal of excitement out of teaching the sound of one measley little vowel. That's the biggest problem, they don't know their phonics. And down here, with the Southern accent, the *e* and the *i* sound alike to them and they have a terrible time getting that straightened out, and when they get that straightened out, I'm in seventh heaven," she says. "I'll stay with the program as long as I can see, hear, teach. I would stay with it as long as I could because it's so worthwhile."

A STUDY RECENTLY CONDUCTED by the Independent Sector revealed that the largest single reason people get involved is because they're asked to, and they stay because they find it satisfying. Thirty-three percent of the people surveyed for the recent Chivas Regal Report, which examines the attitudes of working Americans between the ages of 25 and 49, said they were motivated by a desire to contribute to the public good.

John Couri '63, and his wife, Elaine, have always been philanthropic, giving to their Methodist church and college alumni funds. Late last year they made a more substantial investment: a hunting lodge in northern Maine to use as a summer camp for "deserving children," those who cannot afford to go to camp on their own.

"We were looking for something unique to do," says Couri, who is president and chief executive officer of Duty Free International, a chain of duty-free shops in airports and along the U.S.-Canadian border. "Society has been good to us, and we have a belief that when life treats you well, you have to give back, and this is our way of doing it."

The Couri Foundation, set up to run the camp, will cover the costs of the camp. The children will be selected from Methodist church conferences in New England and New York. Because neither he nor his wife have ever run a camp before, Couri consulted camp administrators from Princeton University and the Salvation Army. Running the business end, he says, is no different from running Duty Free International, though the company has more than 550 employees and the camp will have fewer than a dozen. "The question is getting the right people and setting up the right program."

Teamwork, if you will. Which brings things back to Ehrmann, who, after four years away from professional football misses only one thing: "Sunday mornings before the game—45 men come together, black men and white men, every social and economic class, yet they've all come together for one good and one purpose," he says. "That's exhilarating, when you have that many men come in for one good cause, and that's the challenge for us here.

"It takes a tremendous amount of discipline," he says, and it isn't clear whether he is talking about football or The Door. "You focus on what your immediate and long-term goals are, learning to share the load, that you aren't a one-man team, that you are a team, and have to share responsibilities."