On Campus

Hands and Hearts

Community Impact celebrates 30 years of service

By
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|
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Maybe you've heard of Community Impact, the nonprofit Columbia-based service organization, which turns 30 this year. Maybe you were a volunteer in your college days, or maybe you're the parent of one of the 900 current student volunteers. Maybe you're one of the 8000 people now participating in Community Impact's programs in adult education, mentoring, and homeless advocacy. Or perhaps you're a supporter. Or a board member. Or you've been to Earl Hall on some other business and seen the sign pointing downstairs.

But you might not know how the agency got started, and even if you do — even if, like Joe DeGenova '82CC, you were there — anniversaries are a time to reflect on the elements of action and chance, the peculiar chain that produces the celebrated thing.

It was 1981. America was in a severe recession, and the Reagan administration had begun to purge the Social Security disability rolls. Thousands of mentally ill people lost their benefits, and many ended up on the streets, adding to an already burgeoning homeless population. The *New York Times* described the situation that September: "Settling on stoops and in vestibules, on park benches and in subway entrances, New York City's tens of thousands of homeless men and women are too numerous and widespread to ignore."

DeGenova wasn't the likeliest guy to take up the cause. He was born in Camden, New Jersey, grew up in Woodbury Heights, and was the first in his family to attend college. He hoped to major in economics, go to business school, and, as he says, "make as much money as I could." But in his freshman year, he and his friend David

Joyce ’81CC saw a sign in Hamilton Hall for the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Both of them signed up. The experience opened their eyes to the “jarring juxtaposition” of Columbia’s resources and the needs of the people living nearby. By 1981, DeGenova was majoring in economics and philosophy, and no longer thinking about an early retirement.

DeGenova’s Little Brother at that time, William, went to P.S. 145 on 105th Street. One day, a teacher from the school, while conferring about William’s reading progress, told DeGenova that there was someone in the neighborhood he should meet — a man named Timmy, who went around with a shopping cart full of food and fed people. Timmy worked out of a church basement on 100th Street. DeGenova went to see him.

“Here was a guy with a long gray ponytail tied up in a bun, and he’s making 10 pounds of spaghetti,” DeGenova said recently in his office in East Harlem at the Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS), where he is deputy director. “Someone had given him the tomato sauce, and he had day-old dough from a pizzeria run by Hindu people, which he made into bread, and we went out on the street and started giving it out. When people saw him coming, they ran to the shopping cart. Kids, homeless people.”

DeGenova assisted with the shopping-cart rounds for six months. Then he went to the Catholic chaplain at Columbia, Paul Dinter. “We really should be doing something for the community,” DeGenova told the priest.

Dinter agreed. He gave DeGenova $500 and some office space in the basement of Earl Hall.

“Paul Dinter was critical to getting us started,” DeGenova said. “He helped us raise money and gave us some legitimacy in the eyes of the University.” In the fall of 1981, DeGenova and David Joyce went around to different religious functions on campus to announce their plan to start four initiatives: a soup kitchen, a shelter, a Big Brothers Big Sisters program, and a tutoring program. More than 200 volunteers signed up. DeGenova and Joyce formed a committee of nine students, with DeGenova in charge. Joyce visited soup kitchens around the city. “He went to places where you stood in line, and places where you sat and were served,” said DeGenova, “and he came back and said, ‘I think we should have people served, because it’s much more dignified.’”

The two friends then went to Broadway Presbyterian Church on West 114th Street and met with the pastor. “We told him we’d like to do a soup kitchen there,” DeGenova recalled. “He said, ‘Well, I’ve gotta run it through these different boards of the church, and it may take six or nine months before they’ll give us a decision.’ So we said, ‘Man, we want to do something sooner than that. Look at all these people.’” DeGenova and Joyce spoke with the head of one of the boards at the church and pressed their case. Six weeks later, the soup kitchen was up and running. Then the pair worked with a priest at St. John the Divine to open a 19-bed shelter, and established their own Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

They created a student executive committee, and student coordinators were elected to lead each project under the auspices of the committee and the paid staff. A law student, Charles O’Byrne ’81CC, ’84LAW, who later became a figure in state and national politics, connected them with the nonprofit law clinic at the law school, which provided legal assistance. Then, with Dinter’s help, DeGenova and Joyce approached an alumnus named Connie Maniatty ’43CC.

“You find people who are good and decent, you ask them to make an investment, and it builds from there,” DeGenova said. “Connie Maniatty was this great guy, went to school on the G.I. Bill, ended up at Salomon Brothers, and was a trustee of the University and a supporter of the Catholic campus ministry. He gave us $4000 to hire a consulting group to help us put together a board for a nonprofit. Then Rabbi Michael Paley became the director of Earl Hall, and he helped us assemble a really good board with people both inside and outside Columbia. Eventually, we started working with the student activities center — through the structures of the University.”

In early 1983, David Joyce was experiencing joint pain, which had been diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis. The condition got worse, and by March he couldn’t get out of bed. He was taken to the hospital, where it was discovered that he in fact had a heart valve infection that had spread. Two weeks later, early on April 2, as Good Friday became Holy Saturday, Joyce died. DeGenova was at his bedside, along with Paul Dinter, volunteer leader Mark Napack ’82CC, and Joyce’s fiancée.

DeGenova continued to lead the agency through a decade marked by homelessness, crack addiction, AIDS, and cutbacks in social services. By 1986 he was putting in 80 hours a week. He was also engaged. “One night at 11 o’clock I got a call from a kid in the South Bronx, and I turned to my fiancée and said, ‘I gotta go to the Bronx,

Carmen’s out in the street, I gotta help her find a shelter.’ When I got back at 1:30 in the morning, my future wife said to me, ‘I don’t think this is going to work.’”

DeGenova tried to rein himself in and began looking for another job. In 1989 he left Community Impact to join Columbia University Community Services (an affiliate of the School of Social Work), where he became assistant director at a shelter for mentally ill homeless women. The organization spun off from the University in 1994 and became CUCS, where DeGenova is today.

DeGenova was succeeded at Community Impact by Sonia Reese ’79TC, now in her 22nd year as executive director. Under Reese, who grew up in the Grant Houses just north of Teachers College, the number of volunteers has more than doubled, the budget has more than tripled, to $1.4 million, and programs have been developed in computer training, technology access, standardized-test tutoring, and conflict resolution. Reese is planning an outreach event for this fall, and in April she reconnected with DeGenova at the 30th-anniversary gala benefit auction for Community Impact.

In his office at CUCS, DeGenova, in the anniversary spirit, went through some photos of Community Impact’s early days. Most showed volunteers working with program participants. In one of them, an older man is speaking with a student in a denim jacket and wire-frame glasses.

“That’s Doug Brennan,” said DeGenova, and he lit up with a memory of Brennan ’87CC, ’89SW. “Check this out: Doug’s at our Ice Cream Day to recruit new volunteers and he meets this woman, a first-year law student. He comes back and says, ‘Joe, I met the woman you’re gonna marry. I said, ‘How long did you spend with her?’ He said, ‘Fifteen minutes.’ I said, ‘Come on, man.’ He said, ‘She’s coming in to interview tomorrow, she wants to volunteer for the soup kitchen.’ I said, ‘We don’t interview soup kitchen volunteers.’

“I’d never dated a volunteer. So she comes in, and I interview her for an hour. We go out for the first time two weeks later and we click. I said, ‘This is it.’”

DeGenova and Michele Cortese ’87LAW will be married 25 years next January.

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