Following graduation from college in Massachusetts, I packed up my belongings and drove to Miami to serve in the poorest neighborhood, in the poorest city in the United States. Twenty-Five hours later I was in Overtown.

The fifty-four second graders here at Phillis Wheatley Elementary School are “Dreamers.” They have been promised a college scholarship by a former VISTA, now an attorney, as long as they stay in school and out of “trouble.” Statistically, most of the boys in this neighborhood will see a chalk outline before a high school chalkboard and most girls will glare at a pregnancy test before knowing the acronym SAT. My job is to give them a chance in hell.

In the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I serve in a program called “I Have a Dream.” Dr. King once wrote from a prison cell in Birmingham, Alabama, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny.” This conception of justice is what called me to the Dreamers. It is also why I make a difference.

(Continued on page 3)
In Dunnellon, our students don’t know that they are poor. They think they own the world because their campus sits near the confluence of two of Florida’s most beautiful rivers. Students come to school early, stay late and sometimes dedicate their weekends to protect their greatest resource.

They are students of PAWS, Promoting Awesome Watershed Stewardship. They monitor the quality of the rivers and report data to scientists, they create gardens at Rainbow Springs State Park, they produce displays about Florida’s flora and fauna, and they write articles about taking care of their watershed for our local newspaper. But they are also struggling with poverty and reading skills. Roughly half of our middle school students cannot read on grade level; 67 percent are on free or reduced price hot lunch.

One of our most successful projects this year was a tutoring program in which struggling readers from our middle school boarded buses with neighborhood children and traveled to one of three elementary schools. They worked with low-level readers for about 45 minutes and then rode a bus to their own campus for the start of the school day. The students met once a week for ten visits before FCAT. Dur-

(Continued on page 3)
the ManaTEENS who had traveled nine hours from Bradenton to set it up. Running the VRC involves interviewing and matching able volunteers with people and places that need their help.

This center had a very slow day. Word of its location had not gotten out, and phones were still down. Around 4pm, we shut down for the day and headed to the nearest hotel with vacancies, 70 miles away.

Up bright and early the next morning we traveled back to the VRC and a much busier day greeted us. The phones were up and ringing non-stop with aid requests, people were trapped in their houses by downed trees, and others were being rained on through holes in their roofs. Many were elderly with mobility restrictions. No one had power yet.

Word had gotten out over local TV and radio stations of the VRC’s location. Volunteers as well as those in need were steadily coming in to the center. One elderly man caught my eye as he sat and took an extended period of time to fill out the simple two-sided sheet to request aid. I noticed that his eyes were teary and he seemed severely shaken at the devastation he had gone through, as well as much humbled to ask for help.

I am amazed at people’s desire to help those in need, or rather, those in more need. Many volunteers were local residents who still had no power, but instead of sitting at home decided their time would be better spent on more dire situations. I also learned how to set up a VRC so the ManaTEENs won’t have to travel nine hours for the next Panhandle hurricane. Lastly: don’t always trust the national media. Just because they claim a hurricane “isn’t as bad as last year’s” doesn’t mean help isn’t needed.

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"If this is your first time hearing this
You are about to experience something cold man
We never had nothing handed, took nothing for granted
Took nothing from no man, man I’m my own man
But as a shorty I looked up to the dope man
Only adult man I knew that wasn’t a broke man...
...You know the kids gonna act a fool
When you stop the programs for after school...
...Look at what’s handed us, our fathers abandoned us
when we get the hammers gone and call the ambulance
Sometimes I feel no one in this world understands us
but we don’t care what people say...”

-Kayne West

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In addition to conceiving, directing, and maintaining an after-school program for the students, I work intimately with their families to cultivate a stable home environment and with their teachers to foster programs that educate the children beyond their tattered textbooks and meager walls. Each day I greet 64 children in a classroom without desks.

I fight for the dream. I fight with parents to bring their children to school and to see these scholarships and extracurricular programs as instruments of self-enrichment rather than as futile inconveniences. I fight with parents’ employers to dismiss them for thirty minutes to go to the food stamps office so that my students can eat dinner. I fight with a school administration that sees my coming in from outside the neighborhood as a sign of my mal-intention. I fight with burnt out teachers who cannot stand one more thing to do. I fight with a community scarred by broken promises that counted my fight over before I even arrived. I fight with students to dream for themselves because their education can lift them to heights they never thought possible.

I am humbled. While I would love to boast about my accomplishments, the truth is that most evenings I go home battered. I lose more battles here in Overtown than I win. Thirty-Six years after Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, I am awed at how far there is to go. I had not understood the gravity

(Continued on page 5)
A large number of VISTAs are leaving us this month and the next, myself included. I struggled with what words I could use to tell the VISTAs goodbye and thank them for all of their hard work. I finally realized that I was having so much trouble because any words from me are inadequate. So, I’ve decided to use their own.

These quotes are taken from the VISTAs’ “reflection conversations” (a recorded conversation they have with their VISTA Leader about their year of service). The final question of the conversation is meant to draw out a promise the VISTA makes to him or herself, based on the lessons learned during their year as a VISTA.

I’m going to keep the quotes anonymous. The point lies in the positive effect a short year of VISTA service has on our communities and on the VISTAs themselves. Also, though it’s true that these VISTAs are extraordinary, they could be any one of us.

“I promise to be more proactive; more out in the community, doing community service; I promise to stay positive.”

“Enjoy every day. Enjoy my family. Don’t sell out too badly with the student loan debt.”

“I will ALWAYS take care of myself.”

“I will continue volunteering, because of the impact I’ve seen it have on our community and society. If I can do this, then I know I’ll be satisfied.”

“I would like to remain as idealistic as I can for as long as possible.”

“I will always find the good things in life, and treasure the small things. Be supportive, be true to myself, be spiritual, and to take risks.”

“To keep my personal standards high.”

“To connect.”

Goodbye everybody. There is a complete list of the exiting VISTAs on page 6.
Citizens are not born, but made! During the week of June 20, 2005, sixty-five high school students attended the Service-Leadership Ambassador Camp (SLAC) in Tallahassee, Florida.

Volunteer Leon received a grant from the Points of Light Foundation to implement the “Service Learning” curriculum into a program for high school aged students. It was decided that the curriculum would be integrated into a week-long service camp.

During this camp, the students participated in youth leadership and civic engagement activities. One unique aspect of the camp was that it was peer-to-peer teaching. The camp, led by the ManaTEENS, included very fun and hands-on leadership & teambuilding activities. The ManaTEENS are the largest service club in the country that engages youth in service. They drove up from Bradenton, Fl. to lead the campers.

Camp participants focused on community issues that were important to them, such as teen pregnancy, literacy, hunger, environment, disaster preparedness and homeland security. The students identified real community needs, designed projects that addressed the community needs through service, visited local service agencies, and participated in local service projects. The agencies visited included the Capital Area Chapter of the American Red Cross, the Tallahassee Museum of History and Natural Science, and Big Bend Cares.

“The camp will teach them how to be leaders,” commented Jeri Bush, Director of VolunteerLEON. “They don’t need adults to tell them what to do since they will be able to get out there and do it themselves”. That is just what the students who attended the SLAC camp did!

Through this special week, youth emerged as more active citizens in their community, and become empowered to address issues they really care about now and in the future. Through learning about various community issues, civic engagement advocacy, leadership and teambuilding, they realized they too are a voice in their community and their opinions matter!

The SLAC camp was hosted by VolunteerLEON, the ManaTEENS, the Service Learning Network of the Big Bend, the Florida Alliance for Student Services (FASS), Learn & Serve, the Points of Light Foundation and Tallahassee Community College.

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The Florida Alliance for Student Service VISTA Initiative would like to thank the following VISTAs for their outstanding service this year. They will be missed.

Ross Loomis, CNRP
Amanda Kennedy, NCCJ
Lynn Taff, FASS VISTA Initiative
Kim Tabah, Volunteer Leon
Brent Jones, FCC
Laura Lockwood, ManaTEENS

AJ Kleinheksel, Warner Southern College
Anne Cavazuti, Eckerd College
Elizabeth Howard, I Have a Dream
Jonathan Small, HSC
Krista Walker, MDC
Dawne Waithe-Talbot, Lake County Schools

Save the Date!

**August**

18  AmeriCorps Alums, Tallahassee (7:30pm Pescado’s Grill)
23-26  Pre-Service Orientation, Atlanta

**September**

30  Applications due for November PSO

**October**

15  Project Progress Reports Due
22  Make-a-Difference Day

**November**

15-18  Pre-Service Orientation, Atlanta
16-18  Florida Service Learning Institute, Tampa