

City of Newburgh

Press Release

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City of Newburgh Honors Outgoing VISTA Volunteers



Ramona Torres, Barbara Simon & Kimberly Bersin

At their January 25 meeting the City Council honored outgoing AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers Kimberly Bersin, Barbara Simon and Ramona Torres. Kimberly, a Quality of Life Specialist, and Barbara, a Community Organizer, just concluded their service. Ramona served from 2008-2009 as a Community Organizer.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy envisioned a national service corps “to help provide urgently needed services in urban and rural poverty areas.” Less than two years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson realized Kennedy's dream by launching the “War on Poverty.” Johnson welcomed the first group of 20 VISTA volunteers saying, “Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor often will be difficult. But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man.”

VISTA volunteers, who receive only a stipend, commit to serve full-time for at least a year to help communities overcome poverty and grow stronger.

Although some AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers travel to locations around the country, these VISTAS didn't have far to go. Barbara and Ramona are residents of the City of Newburgh; Kimberly lives in the Town of Newburgh but attended local schools. When asked why they would give up a year or more of their lives to be VISTA volunteers, all three expressed their desire to help the City of Newburgh realize its potential, and to build a sense of community. They began work in 2008.

As “Neighborhood Ambassadors,” Ramona, Kim, and Barbara have been instrumental in forming neighborhood associations for Dubois/South Miller Street, Grand/ Liberty/ Montgomery Sts., Lander/Chambers/South Sts., the Varick Homes Tenant Association and the Mill Street Business Association. They held several neighborhood cleanups, planted trees with the Shade Tree Commission, coordinated a celebration of the completion of infrastructure improvements on Renwick Street, and worked with the Safety for Community Youth parents' group to protest cutbacks in school district busing. In addition to all of their other activities, the VISTAS conducted workshops on the formation of sustainable non-profits and community associations, and a forum on saving money on energy costs.

Arlette Murrain, City of Newburgh Coordinator of Faith-based and Neighborhood Initiatives and VISTA Supervisor said, “Ramona, Kimberly and Barbara have made significant contributions to the community since their service began. It has been very exciting to see them bring neighborhoods together. Their enthusiasm and commitment have been extraordinary, and we hope they continue to stay involved.”

Mayor Nicholas Valentine commented, “We could not have asked for more dedicated or hard-working VISTA volunteers. I personally got to see the results of just some of their efforts at their Neighborhood Association Holiday Party, which brought together residents from all over the City of Newburgh. They truly have made a difference in the community.”

The program was so successful, the City has three new AmeriCorps VISTAS, Sean Bennett, Crystal Salas and Lauren Barth.