

What follows is a sample of my upcoming book ***Community Heroes: what a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA member taught me about community development***. The purpose of this is to give you a better idea of what the book will be about. This will likely be the final version of the introduction. Again, you can also go to [www.edwardp.me/blog?category=Book](http://www.edwardp.me/blog?category=Book) to find out more.

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This book is not a love story.

It is not an inspirational story about how you can overcome all things if you just “believe in yourself” and, as much as I do like them, it is definitely not a moving tale of a hero appearing out of nowhere to save the world from the forces of evil. But enough about what this book is not; you want to know what it is. You want to know who it’s for, what to expect from it, and what its purpose is.

This book is for people that are about to become, or already are, nonprofit professionals. This specifically includes AmeriCorps VISTA members (a term that will be explained later) but is certainly not limited to them. It is also for people that don’t necessarily want to change the world but do want to learn about how to improve their communities.

We hear so much about changing the world, but very little about changing our communities. Hence, and in apparent contradiction to what I just said, this book is also for you if you are not a nonprofit professional and don’t intend on becoming one, but care deeply about social impact and community development.

You might care about an issue in society—homelessness, inequality, climate change, animal abuse—but need additional tools and skills to better understand and more strategically tackle this problem. You are ready and willing to learn because you know that merely talking about how awful something is isn’t a very effective way of solving it.

Therefore, this book will give you an insight into the nonprofit world so that you can better engage with those that are improving their communities. You might have a sibling, uncle, or neighbor that works in this sector but perhaps you never had the chance to ask him or her about this work. I hope that this book will be the catalyst you needed to have a conversation about the work your loved one does.

In this book, you’ll learn why it’s important to:

- Focus on community, instead of global change;
- Suspend your dreams of changing the world and instead strive to be a hero in your own community;
- Make money with your nonprofit, even though this makes you uncomfortable;
- Focus on and build from what your community already has, instead of what it doesn’t have;
- Understand why your efforts to make a positive impact in society might actually be for selfish, instead of selfless reasons;
- Explore whether the private sector should or should not have a social responsibility and/or role in social impact and philanthropy;
- Understand the barriers to employment that disenfranchised people face and why they are such powerful impediments to progress;
- Break the unfounded stereotypes you might have of the poor—they’re lazy, they cheat the system—in order to serve them more effectively;
- Form partnerships with other nonprofits in the community, as this is the only way to achieve comprehensive social impact;

- Understand why working on Wall Street might be a more effective way of achieving social impact than working for a nonprofit;
- And much more!

## Purpose

In addition to the goals stated earlier, the purpose of *Community Heroes* is to provide advice about effective community development and social impact to people that are about to start working in the nonprofit sector, given that I was also once in this position.

The contents of this book are based on and inspired by the lessons I learned during my year of being an AmeriCorps VISTA member. I remember feeling terrified about starting my career in the nonprofit sector and not being able to find a resource that resonated with someone as new to the industry as I was at the time. I couldn't relate to most of the books I found for one of two reasons: they were either too "pie-in-the-sky" emotional for my taste or were written by experts that were too far ahead of me career-wise.

As a result, I wanted to write a book that was both grounded and more relatable to the average person. As mentioned earlier though, another important reason I wrote this was to provide people that are not deeply involved with or knowledgeable of the nonprofit sector an insight into this world.

As with everything in life, however, there is also an emotional reason for my actions. I have reached the age and point in my life where, after reading about all the injustices, poverty, and inequality in the world, I can no longer ignore the difficult questions of life. What is my responsibility to society? What is my positive contribution to the world? I realize that these are questions that make most people, including the vocal cynic within me, roll their eyes and say "Here we go again. Another one of those do-gooders that thinks he's special and destined to change the world."

It is probably for this reason that I ran away from my responsibility to confront these questions for many weeks, months, and years of my life. For lack of a better way of saying it, I foolishly believed that having these thoughts at such a young age wasn't "cool." I also didn't want to be that obnoxious person that turned every conversation or social media post into a lecture about how unjust society is and why humanity is so terrible.

Inevitably though, these thoughts and questions could not be suppressed forever. I finally decided to get rid of my limiting beliefs and realize that I too have a responsibility for making a positive contribution to the world, no matter how small it might be.

Like the heroes we cheer for in the movies that we love, I also have a moral obligation to live and fight for something greater than myself, despite how painfully melodramatic that sounds and despite the fact that my contribution, in the greater scheme of things, will probably be miniscule.

Nevertheless, whether you want to call it social justice, philanthropy, or even a divine calling, to me it is a matter of personal honor. Hence, I suppose that this book is my (un)official declaration of intent: for the sake of personal honor, I will dedicate my life to a social good greater than myself.

Alright, full disclosure. In addition to the melodramatic reasons I outlined above, I'm also writing this book for selfish reasons. Namely, having the credential of "Author" attached to my name is extremely valuable personal branding and a great way to further my career. So yes, I too am painfully vain. As the great Trevor Noah once said, "you laugh, but it's true."

## Details, Details

Two more things before I finish this overly sentimental introduction. First, you might be wondering what the term “VISTA” means. Since I’ll be using it quite a lot over the course of the book, allow me to define it.

VISTA stands for Volunteers In Service To America and is part of the AmeriCorps VISTA program, which is the domestic version of the popular Peace Corps initiative. It is a national service program that aims to eliminate poverty in the United States by sending out volunteers (who are given a monthly living allowance) to help nonprofits, colleges and universities, local government offices, and other community organizations build their capacity and strengthen their programs.

VISTAs spend one-year terms at their respective organizations, although they can, subject to approval, reenroll for additional years. They are limited to a maximum of five years of service. In my case, I spent my year of VISTA service in Mansfield, Ohio at the North End Community Improvement Collaborative Inc.

To learn more about the history and background of AmeriCorps VISTA, please visit the official website at <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corpsvista> to read all about it.

Lastly, this book is divided into two parts: the rational part and the emotional part. I did this because I believe that information is better processed when emotion is explicitly separated from reason. Based on my experience, discussions often become messy and incoherent when emotion and reason are mixed, to the point where those involved completely forget what they were talking about in the first place.

Hence, Part I is the rational part where the topics discussed are more practical, data-focused, and (obviously) rational. Part II is the emotional part. Here, I discuss the emotional aspects of social impact, community development, and nonprofit work in general.

With that preamble out of the way, let’s get started.