

AmeriCorps Works in Mississippi

The national service member experience develops leadership skills and encourages a lifelong commitment to service. This series of *AmeriCorps Works!* success stories honors the past and current Mississippi AmeriCorps participants whose service changed Mississippi, and who found themselves changed along the way. Their stories are reflective of the many former AmeriCorps participants who continue to serve our communities and our country, long after their national service experience has ended.



Leadership Through Service: Abigail Stowell

Abigail Stowell credits her mother for her sense of civic engagement. Stowell was active in Girl Scouts and participated in service projects through her church, but never considered herself a volunteer. In college, she traveled to Ecuador with a group of students to repaint and bring supplies to a mountaintop school. She considered serving abroad through the Peace Corps, but while the appeal of an international experience was undeniable, she was struck by domestic need. "I began to feel a bit selfish, and thought if I wanted to make a difference, I should start at home."



Stowell served two years as the MCVS AmeriCorps VISTA Leader, where she worked extensively in supporting VISTA members and other volunteers. Abigail's position put her in the thick of disaster recovery, coordinating volunteers at Volunteer City in Yazoo City in 2010, and the Volunteer Reception Center in Smithville in 2011.

When Abigail's second VISTA Leader term ended, she took a short break to get married before diving back into serving Mississippi's communities. While job hunting, Stowell served her community by volunteering with the newly implemented [Mississippi FoodCorps AmeriCorps program](#) in the Jackson Public Schools system. Her VISTA experience has proven highly marketable, earning her a position with the [Mississippi Center for Nonprofits](#). As an Assistant Program Coordinator, today Abigail helps coordinate the Center's membership and training programs for nonprofits and nonprofit leaders.

Campus Leader Combats Homelessness: Bowman Hitchens

As a double major in history and religion at the University of Mississippi, Bowman Hitchens (above, right) is an extremely busy young man. Nevertheless, Hitchens has become a campus leader in rallying volunteers and resources to a cause often overlooked by college students: homelessness. He has combated homelessness in Oxford and beyond by engaging students and community members in service with groups like the Oxford Homeless Task Force and Interfaith Compassion Ministries (ICM). Hitchens received a Governor's Initiative for Volunteer Excellence Award in 2011 for his work, particularly with ICM's More Than a Meal program and the



Ole Miss Box City Night, where students slept in cardboard boxes in The Grove.

Over the summer, Hitchens and two friends raised over \$43,000 for faith-based organizations by completing a daunting 61-day journey by kayak down the entirety of the Mississippi River. The young men documented their journey online at www.awakeinthecurrent.com. In 2012, Hitchens served his community as an AmeriCorps member with the University of Mississippi's College Corps program.

Advocacy and Enrichment: Cynthia Singletary

Cynthia "Cindy" Singletary served with [LIFE \(Living Independence for Everyone\)](#) of Mississippi's Project LINC (Linking Individuals Into Neighborhoods and Communities) AmeriCorps Program from 2004-2006. Her work revolved around making sure that individuals with disabilities have a choice in where they live, work, recreate. Project LINC's mission is to ensure that individuals currently residing in institutional settings, or those who are at great threat of moving into institutional setting, be able to access the available services needed to live freely in the community.



Cindy transitioned institutionalized individuals with disabilities into their own homes. She also provided peer support, skills training, mentoring/peer counseling completed American with Disabilities (ADA) site surveys to ensure accessibility for everyone, disabled and non-disabled. Cindy spearheaded (LIFE)'s Gulf Coast Tennis Clinic for individuals with disabilities. As an AmeriCorps member, Cindy actively promoted the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. "AmeriCorps impacted my life greatly. It taught me the true definition of service. I also learned my strengths and abilities. It opened the pathway to my current job at the same site."

After she finished her years of service, Cindy went to work for LIFE as a Healthy Opportunity Independent Living Specialist in Biloxi, Mississippi. She works with children and youth between the ages of 5 and 21 with special health care needs, enabling them to make successful transitions from one stage of life to another. She also works with families of children with special health care needs to receive training and ongoing support services to help them and their children confidently transition from pediatric-health care to adult health care providers.



Cindy also sits on the Governing Board for the youth-led [National Youth Leadership Network](#), an organization that aims to build power among youth with disabilities between the ages of 16 – 28 years of age. She serves as Chair of the NYLN Outreach and Awareness Committee. Cindy knows her AmeriCorps experience shaped her life: "Service allows you to learn about yourself, and gives you the tools to become a better you."

Compassion and Strength: Sara Lamberson

“The most extraordinary part of the four days that my team spent in the tight-knit community (of Leakesville) was the sense of unity and compassion. People had tree limbs poking through the walls into their living rooms and giant-sized holes in their roofs and would tell us that the tornado swept through their town for a reason, in order for people to appreciate what they have and for everyone to work together. They are simple enough messages, but when you were in my position, seeing the community for the first time, I was in awe. Getting to see that kind of community support and people from all over coming out of the woodwork to selflessly give their time, energy and muscle was inspiring... The southern states have been hit with disaster after disaster and I am so proud to be serving in AmeriCorps during this time when we can help those people who are in great need. It makes me feel like this was really a worthwhile venture.”



Sara Lamberson is a 2010-2011 “River 3” AmeriCorps NCCC Team alumna. Despite a broken foot, she completed her term of service with NCCC, notably serving tornado-stricken Leakesville and Smithville. After a summer of serving as a Summer VISTA Associate with Volunteer Macon, she is currently working as the Corporate Communications Specialist at the South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

"Finding Yourself" through Service: Kasey Keith

Kasey Keith lives by the words “Volunteers don’t always have the time; they simply have the heart.”

Kasey served in the America Reads – Mississippi AmeriCorps program from 2008-2010 where she tutored grades K-4 in reading, working one-on-one and in small groups. Kasey also planned and implemented several service projects in the Mendenhall/Magee area, including very successful donation drives for the Salvation Army and the local women’s shelter.

After her two terms of service, Kasey put her education awards toward her Masters degree in School Counseling at William Carey University. Her AmeriCorps experience helped her decide to professionally work with children in a school setting. “My two years with ARM helped me realize what an impact I could have on children being in the school system. It also helped me realize how the needs of children in my community are going unmet.



“AmeriCorps really encouraged me to continue serving in my community and to continue to spread the word about how much we as individuals need to give back.”

Still Standing: Dwight Owens

Seven years ago, Dwight Owens was a 23 year old teacher and football coach. He was content in his life and career. Dwight's way of life screeched to a halt when he was hit by a drunk driver in August, 2005. Owens' spine was severed, and his internal injuries were so severe, doctors did not expect him to survive. Dwight stayed in the hospital for nearly a year, first on life support; then Intensive Care; and then finally beginning his road to recovery. Permanently paralyzed from the waist down, Dwight spent two years in a constant cycle of rehabilitation, surgery and medical set-backs, but an indomitable will and deep faith kept him focused.

Dwight took the life he almost lost and dedicated it toward serving others.



He currently serves with LIFE/Project LINC (Linking Individuals Into Neighborhoods and Communities) AmeriCorps. "Being paralyzed & living life in a wheelchair, I take great joy in advocating for people with disabilities. I realize that anyone can become disabled: it's only an accident away! Therefore, I like to help people realize that when they help advocate for people with disabilities, they may be advocating for themselves one day as well." As an AmeriCorps member, Dwight provided peer support to over 1,200 individuals with disabilities. He has completed 48 ADA site surveys to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities, and provided over 300 life skills training sessions to increase independence for Mississippians with disabilities. He also helped many individuals transition from public institutions to their own homes, and started a "Men with Disabilities" support group encouraging independence and leadership. Dwight makes "Before You Drink, Think of Dwight!" presentations whenever he can to caution people of all ages to not drink and drive. "Service keeps me grounded, humble, and reminds me to be thankful for the small things in life."

As a result of Dwight's AmeriCorps service, many Mississippians with disabilities are active, productive members of their communities. His efforts have not gone unnoticed: Dwight received the AmeriCorps Spirit of Service Award in 2010. "I truly believe, despite the wheelchair, that I can do anything anyone else can do, I'm just sitting down while I'm doing it. Despite my circumstances, I wake up every morning with unbelievable joy because I'm here to see another day. I want people to feed off my joy and realize life's value." In 2011, Dwight published a book, [*Still Standing with Dwight*](#), with Jon Praet about his experiences. On December 12, 2012, Dwight and his wife Tamika Chandler-Owens welcomed a beautiful daughter, Brailey Samara.