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Sargent Shriver's Legacy to the Nonprofit World



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R. Sargent Shriver, walking with children on a visit to a refugee camp.

By Pablo Eisenberg

For many of us who worked for him in the Peace Corps or the Office of Economic Opportunity during the 1960s, R. Sargent Shriver was an inspirational leader, a passionate promoter of social and economic justice, an ebullient enthusiast of public service, and a warm, compassionate human being.

Mr. Shriver, who died a week ago at age 95, bore all the marks of greatness: intelligence, vision, courage, diligence, and honesty. Yet he never quite received the public acclaim he so richly deserved until after his death. At another time, he might have become an outstanding governor, senator, or even president of the United States.

For much of his life, he worked in the shadows of the Kennedy family into which he married in 1953. He and his wife, Eunice, a sister of John F. Kennedy, had a long, happy marriage that produced five public-spirited children.

He was called to service in 1961 by his brother-in-law John F. Kennedy to establish the Peace Corps, a revolutionary effort to send American volunteers to help developing countries build their social and physical infrastructures, an idea inspired by Operation Crossroads, founded by the Rev. James Robinson of Harlem in 1958.

With the help of outstanding staff members, Mr. Shriver quickly created an effective nonbureaucratic organization, ardently independent of government. At its peak, the Peace Corps sent more than 15,000 volunteers a year all over the world.

The program's idealism reflected that of both its founder and American young people, yet it was tempered by Mr. Shriver's insistence that the work of its volunteers demonstrate concrete results. To ensure quality control, he instituted a novel evaluation system that sent investigative reporters, under the direction of Charles Peters, (who later founded *The Washington Monthly* magazine) to assess the progress of programs in each country.

His leadership and management skills attracted the attention of President Lyndon Johnson who, in 1964, persuaded him to lead the domestic War on Poverty. He became the director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, an agency reporting directly to the president (and the place where I had the opportunity to work with him in my role as deputy director of the research and demonstration division.)

In rapid order, he helped create a large number of organizations and programs that, to this day, play an important role in sustaining the nation's safety net for low-income people. Foster Grandparents, Head Start, the Job Corps, the Legal Services Corporation, and Vista are among the programs and agencies that got their start in the Office of Economic Opportunity. So, too, did efforts to spread community health centers and programs to help American Indians and migrants.

Another signature effort, the federal Community Action Program, which at its height financed more than 1,000 local community-action agencies, was responsible for stimulating and nurturing thousands of new nonprofit service, community-development, and advocacy organizations that from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s were instrumental in significantly reducing poverty in the United States.

By giving low-income and minority people the opportunity to find jobs, to get skills training, to become leaders in their local communities, and to succeed or fail, the community-action agencies became the largest leadership-development program in the country's history. To this day, many mayors and government officials, superintendents of schools, state legislators, American-Indian leaders, city and state social-service directors, and nonprofit executives are the graduates of the Johnson-era antipoverty programs. Providing opportunities to those previously left out of the system or disenfranchised was Mr. Shriver's most important legacy.

After a successful two-year stint as the American ambassador to France, Mr. Shriver came home in 1970 to work as a lawyer in private practice. He helped Eunice Shriver found and run the Special Olympics and provided support for many other nonprofits.

He was selected by George McGovern to be his vice-presidential running mate in the 1972 elections, but the Democratic ticket lost in a landslide. One has to wonder how successful a political career Mr. Shriver would have carved out for himself if the political deck of cards had not been stacked against him by a Kennedy family that did not want him to overshadow John F. Kennedy's brothers, Robert and Edward. He might have been the governor of Illinois (his home state) or the vice presidential running mate of Lyndon Johnson. That is a pity, for he would have made a superb elected official.

Like all great men, Sarge, as those of us who worked with him fondly called him, had a few foibles.

He never seemed to carry money while on trips, borrowing pocket change from aides or travel companions. He had a great instinct for selecting outstanding staff members, yet on occasion that nose for talent failed him. And he loved to play tennis but was irked when he was beaten by clearly superior players; losing was not part of his nature.

Sargent Shriver's life embodied a devotion to public service. He preached the notion of service everywhere he went. He worked tirelessly to support organizations and efforts that promoted social and economic equity. Not surprisingly, he was a deeply involved chairman of Friends of Vista, a group that was founded to protect the program he nurtured as a sort of domestic Peace Corps. Though not one of them, he was a champion of common people.

Few people like Sargent Shriver are left on our national stage, let alone our political world. He was not only a great man but also a very good man.

The celebrated American writer, Sherwood Anderson, might well have called him a "unique." Unique indeed.

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