

## The Bennion Center's Early Years

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1987 Project Leader

In jotting down this story, I do not have the benefit of a daily journal, but I have the next best thing...my yearly appointment books dating from 1986. During February 1986, Jacque Morgan had been elected President of the Associated Students of the University of Utah (ASUU). I applied to work with Jacque as an Administrative Assistant. Sometime in March, we heard about the idea of establishing a center on campus that would encourage students to volunteer in the community. An anonymous donor from California wanted the University to create a center like one at Stanford University, which matched student volunteers with local community service agencies. The donor wanted the center named the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center. Being from Wyoming, I had not heard of Lowell Bennion, but that someone wanted to name a center after him piqued my curiosity. In addition, I had not done much volunteer work outside of the University, but I was immediately taken with the concept of a university center devoted to helping students find ways to help with the problems of Salt Lake City.

I represented ASUU and was active with the organizing committee. The first order of business was to recruit a director for the Center. The second was to craft a mission statement. The recruiting subcommittee selected Irene Fisher to direct the Center. She was the ideal candidate. She was very active in state and local poverty and social service issues as director of Utah Issues. Probably the most important skill she brought to the Center was amazing capacity to get things done. Nothing demonstrates this more than simply remembering that in November 1987 the Center was Irene, an empty office, a phone, and an Advisory Board willing to help out. But I am getting a little ahead of the story.

The second major committee project of writing a mission statement was also nearly complete. In my experience, mission statements are crafted and then tossed in a file never to be seen under the fluorescent lights of a big organization again. But the Bennion Center's mission speaks eloquently and simply of the need to live outside the limiting confines of your own world and tackle the problems of the larger space you inhabit – your own neighborhood, your city, state, nation, and ultimately the world. Jack Newell, the primary author of the mission, deserves high praise.

Irene, in her imitable way, wanted to do something when she started work in the fall of 1987. Her thought was, "the committee has been talking about service for quite a while, now let's do some." She and others arranged to help the Sugar House Living Center refurbish and cleanup their building. Many students, committee members, and others I did not know converged on the Center and began hauling, cleaning, and fixing up. As important as the physical work done were the interactions with the Center's residents and interactions among the volunteers. I met people that I never would have otherwise. We had fun while we worked and felt good about what we were able to do. After completing this community service initiation, I was ready for more.

Having the chance to consult with the expert, I asked Lowell Bennion at our next Board meeting what he would like the Bennion Center to do. He said he could use a group of about 50 to 100 students to do large projects each month. This idea planted the seed which grew into the Volunteer Corps of the Bennion Center. The Corps completes a significant project each month. The first project was on December 19. About 50 students delivered holiday food parcels to

elderly and home-bound people. Meeting and talking to these people put a face on the problems of the elderly poor.

At this time there was about \$85,000 in ASUU's Special Projects Fund. I thought the Bennion Center was exactly the kind of project worthy of student support so I set my sights on getting \$50,000. The original donor had agreed to match contributions up to \$200,000 which was a great help in persuading people to vote for the gift. I talked to everyone on the Special Funds Project Committee and the proposal passed. The ASUU legislature had to approve the gift. Lowell Bennion spoke to them about the importance of community service on the night of the vote; we got a unanimous "yes" vote.

During the 1998 winter quarter, the Salt Lake Rotary Foundation funded seven interns to start volunteer projects. Irene quickly set up an application and interview process. On February 28, 1998, we announced the selection of the new interns. They quickly established relationships with community agencies and created projects placing students as tutors in the Lowell Elementary School, as volunteers in a drug rehabilitant program, as companions for the elderly, as literacy action volunteers, and a handful of other projects. One of the interns organized the Center's first Community Service Action Week held during the third week of April, 1998.

During winter quarter Grethe Peterson, a member of the Bennion Center Advisory Board, reported her reaction to KUED's documentary on the plight of the homeless in Salt Lake City. She suggested that the Bennion Center consider organizing a response to the problem. The Board agreed that the Bennion Center should create the "Campaign for the Homeless" and I agreed to direct it. As I read the name now, I think I would select a less noblesse oblige sounding name. Rather than doing something "for" someone else, we primarily provided help for people to help themselves. The name also implies that the homeless are powerless and need things done for them. As I learned more, my perception of the homeless changed considerably.

During the 1988 Winter Quarter, the idea of the Associated Students of the Bennion Center coalesced. A variety of positions were created to divide up the expanding work of the Center. The Salt Lake Rotary Foundation renewed their support for the interns and all those positions were filled at the end of the school year. During this time it became obvious that we needed more space than the two rooms we occupied in the Student Activities Center in the Union. Eventually we obtained space in 101 Union where the Bennion Center currently has its offices. We also obtained permanent secretarial assistance. We were fortunate that our work appealed to Terri Busch. Her amazing capacity to relate to all manner of people in the most upbeat way created a wonderfully supportive and friendly office environment which encouraged all the more active student participation. Behind all of this was Irene and her special ability to support and encourage while not requiring that it be done in just one way, and to allow people to make decisions as well as mistakes.

I hit the ground running the following autumn because I was able to attend a Salt Lake City conference on homelessness. I met many more people devoting their time to the problem. I also learned about an attempt in New York City to craft a legal right to shelter from broad phrases in the New York state Constitution. I was stunned by this "radical" idea. However, it seemed like an elegant solution to the problem. Just make being homeless illegal and require society to provide some minimum level of subsistence for anyone who needs it. As with all seemingly simple solution to complex problems, the difficulty was in the execution. How minimum a level of subsistence? How can this legal right be enforced? Ultimately, I turned my interest in these questions into my Senior Honors Thesis. This linkage of my community service work with my academic work foreshadowed the development of the Service- Learning Scholars

Program created in 1992 and the establishment of the Bennion Professorships to create courses linking hands-on service in the community with a course of study. My work on this paper also confirmed my interest in studying law.

The Center was fortunate enough to have John Pingree as President of ASBC in 1988-89. His charm and laid back approach nicely balanced the hectic pace of needing to do a thousand things NOW. We finally got around to thinking about a structure for the Bennion Center. I believe waiting to develop a structure until after we had accomplished a good deal saved us from a lot of worry about just the right way to do things when we still have not done much. Just as good university planners pour the sidewalks to new buildings after seeing where students make their own paths, the Bennion Center did not impose an organizational structure until we could visualize a useful form.

During the year, we grew phenomenally. I do not remember the specific number but I believe we multiplied by a factor of 10x the number of service hours completed compared to the first year. During this year there was a continuous palpable sense of excitement and accomplishment. I also remember it as one of the happiest years of my life. We created a wonderful atmosphere of camaraderie and friendship. We were having so much fun, it often felt like the final scenes of It's a Wonderful Life. Perhaps I make it seem as if we were insufferably happy, but we also accomplished a great deal. I cannot imagine a better environment for attracting and retaining student volunteers and for confirming their own desire to contribute their efforts to solving community problems.

The final phase in my Bennion Center career was helping create the summer school for children living at the homeless shelter. This was probably the most successful volunteer program I was involved in. The volunteers were excited about the school and responsible in fulfilling their commitments. The summer school teachers were fantastic. They gave the children a lot of needed structure and support and were creative in tapping the talents of the volunteer tutors. I met many of the children's parents and learned much more about the reality of being homeless.

I moved to New York to start law school in the fall of 1989. I have tried to maintain my connection to the Bennion Center and have been involved in community problems as my time permits. I believe the ultimate Bennion Center mission is one of educating students by providing the tools necessary for the effective participating in their own communities once they leave the University. The Center's capacity to affect the world goes beyond the immediate satisfaction of needs in the present to the impact Bennion Center volunteers will have as they find in their own communities. This thought gives me great hope for our collective future and should make us all cheer more jubilantly as we look back on the Bennion Center's first five years.