



Robert E. Kittredge

Stone Soup Partnership is struggling to transform a neighborhood that is an overcrowded, impoverished, high crime apartment complex housing several thousand Southeast Asian refugees and other ethnicities. The neighborhood is located adjacent to a major metropolitan university. The author gives both an outsider's view of the formation of a strikingly effective collaborative alliance of public and private sector organizations, and an insider's view of the intricacies of involving the university as a major partner.

Stone Soup Partnership: A Grassroots Model of Community Service

What They Say about Stone Soup

I have learned that leadership begins with me and that one person can make a difference.

—Gary Sisombath, 16-year-old resident

The most unique aspect of Stone Soup is its diversity among not only the constituency we serve, but the diversity of the agencies who are involved—school, police, university, social service and business people.

—Susan Smits, elementary school principal

The philosophy of Stone Soup was our greatest tool in allowing a community to fight and take back its neighborhood.

—Steve Coleman, police officer

I find Stone Soup's concrete programs and activities a wonderful change from the theories and discussion of other groups that talk a lot and do little.

—Tim Ikeda, high school teacher

My students and I feel we gained more than we gave. It helped us see the world in our own backyard more globally. Cultural exchange was greater than skills taught or learned.

—Carolyn Jackson, professor, California State University, Fresno

The Stage Is Set

In a college student's pursuit of a well-rounded education, there may be no substitute for the vital role of meaningful community service experiences along the way. It seemed a natural move upon this author's retirement from the California State University, Fresno (CSUF), Counseling Center to volunteer for a fledgling, low-budget campus program, "Students for Community Service (SCS)," through which students could earn university credit for service in the community. Having served as faculty advisor to the Hmong Student Association (1984-1992) and among the Southeast Asian (SEA) community in Fresno, my volunteerism with SCS was targeted to the refugee community. .

Soon I was participating in the implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated community-based effort to address serious problems in a ghetto-like neighborhood called El Dorado Park that lies in the shadow of the university. The Stone Soup Partnership was formed to address the challenge of finding the right formula for a university/community collaboration that would make true inroads into the problems faced by the park and surrounding community.

Background: The Refugee Influx

Fresno, a city of 424,000 in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley of central California, is home to the largest population of Hmong in the world outside their homeland of Laos. In Laos, the Hmong lived in the hill country and subsisted for centuries as an agrarian society. Together with the Lao, Cambodians, and Mien, the total number of Southeast Asians in Fresno is now over 40,000.

Just one block west of CSUF is a three-square-block apartment complex. Built in the 1970s for student housing, the complex soon acquired the name of "Sin City." As the students moved into newer and more modern housing in the 1980s, the area became home to over 6,000 Southeast Asian refugees and was characterized as an overcrowded, low income, and "undesirable" neighborhood. These refugees were part of a larger contingent who served as allies to the U.S. in the secret war in Laos. They were offered asylum in the U.S. following withdrawal of U.S. troops from Laos and Vietnam and the takeover of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge.

Today, the population in the apartment complex is eighty percent Southeast Asian, predominantly Hmong; the remaining residents are mostly Mexican-American and Afro-American. Overcrowding, poverty, limited formal education, limited English, trauma from war and refugee camp life, and lack of job skills among the adult residents were formulaic for major problems. The result was high unemployment, youth crime and gangs, frequent gunshots and drive-by shootings, graffiti, litter-strewn streets and alleys, and general deterioration of the neighborhood.

Over a period of time, the area essentially became an isolated island, surrounded by a Methodist church, middle and upper-income single family residences, fraternity and sorority houses, vacant office buildings, and student housing complexes.

By the late 1980s, gang activity in the form of vandalism, graffiti, bicycle theft, auto break-in and theft, and burglary had spilled over into the neighboring residential community, businesses, and the university campus. The church attempted to address the needs of the refugees by leasing church space to a Head Start program, providing room for offices for a refugee resettlement agency, a recreation room, and a playground area. The problems generated within the neighborhood, however, proved to be beyond the abilities of both the church and residents to address effectively.

Stone Soup Partnership

In 1992, a handful of concerned volunteers launched a summer project called "Stone Soup." True to a classic folktale by that name, and starting with practically nothing other than the church grounds in resources, the volunteers offered refugee children and youth a variety of evening activities as positive alternatives to the lure of gangs and the curse of boredom. The folktale is the story of a soldier, returning home from war, who passes through a small village in search of food. The villagers will not feed him until he boils a large pot of water, adds a large stone, and begins to stir the pot with a large stick. When asked, he informs the villagers that he is making stone soup. Soon each villager manages to find something—a carrot, an onion, a scrap of food—to add to the pot. The result is a hearty soup that everyone shares. The stone soup principle is, "making something out of nothing, if each contributes whatever he or she can."

The University "Throws the First Stone"

In 1992, in conjunction with the SCS program, a needs assessment was done to develop recommendations for the allocation of a \$15,000 California Campus Com-

pact planning grant for a Southeast Asian community service project. The vision and commitment of the Stone Soup volunteers led to a recommendation for support from the planning grant because it was a “real life” classroom and ready-made learning laboratory for students and faculty alike, in close proximity to the university campus. The university also allocated \$6,000 to Stone Soup to support a more substantial summer youth program for 1993.

An eight-week program of activities for youths and adults was successfully implemented, using the grounds and meeting room facilities of the neighborhood church. One key ingredient of success was the securing of federal Summer Youth Employment Training funds that paid staff salaries for twenty Southeast Asian university students who were a vital bridge between the residents and the community volunteers. The students were eager for the challenges, learning opportunities, and leadership demands of the summer program.

The Summer Youth Project also encouraged adult participation and provided a variety of activities for adults, such as literacy and parenting skills classes. Wishing to affirm the various Southeast Asian cultures represented in El Dorado Park, summer staff adapted activities in a way that would be culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive. For example, each Friday evening they planned a celebration of a different SEA culture or of other major ethnic groups residing in the city of Fresno.

Support at the church site from university faculty volunteers that first summer included staff training assistance from the coordinator of Southeast Asian Student Services; children’s drama activities by a professor and students of theatre arts and a children’s theatre class; instruction in native languages (Hmong, Lao, and Khmer) by upper division Southeast Asian linguistics students; basic craft and sewing techniques by faculty from the Child, Family, and Consumer Sciences Department; orientation tours of the university’s agricultural facilities; and hands-on demonstrations by Industrial Technology Department faculty.

Organizational Structure and Governance

Early Organizational Structure

Two conclusions became abundantly clear to the organizers of the 1993 eight-week summer program. First, that the activities and services barely scratched the surface in terms of need, and second, that the need for further commitment and continuity of effort dictated a more structured and systematic approach. At the end of the first summer project, a steering committee was formed that began to use the

designation “El Dorado Park” instead of “Sin City” in referring to the neighborhood, signaling the efforts at cultural revitalization.

The committee’s immediate tasks were to clarify the vision for El Dorado Park and define the mission of the partnership, which became “reconnecting to the larger community,” “encouraging self-sufficiency,” “ensuring safety,” “encouraging indigenous leadership,” and “raising the quality of life.” The mission statement calls for “a grassroots coalition of volunteers and partners to secure necessary resources, to provide the needed level of ongoing support and commitment, and to empower residents to act on their own behalf” in the quest to transform the neighborhood into a safe, desirable place in which to live and raise a family.

The Partnership Expands

As a result of intensive networking, Stone Soup grew rapidly over the next several months. During 1994, the steering committee began monthly meetings and invited partners and other interested parties to provide a structure that promoted networking and collaboration. It became a place where members could share information, propose plans, identify problems, and develop solutions, review progress, and pool existing resources or obtain new ones. The list of participants and major supporters who attended regularly in 1994 reflects this growth:

- CSUF—several departments and schools, including the Research and Grants Office; Industrial Technology; Children, Family and Consumer Sciences; Arts and Humanities; Social Work; Marketing; and Nursing
- Fresno Unified School District and local K-12 schools
- Fresno Police Department—Problem Oriented Policing (POP) team
- Wesley United Methodist and University Presbyterian churches
- El Dorado Housing Association—apartment owners and managers
- El Dorado Residents’ Council
- Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries (FIRM)
- Central California Forum on Refugee Affairs
- Fresno Private Industry Council
- Portals (residents) Neighborhood Association

- Fresno County Library—local branch
- California Employment Development Department

In the fall of 1994, the Fresno City Council officially designated El Dorado Park a “revitalization neighborhood,” thereby making it eligible to receive city support and federal Community Development Block Grant funds. The designation was based on the low level of income, the number of families on Aid for Dependent Children, and the general deterioration of the neighborhood and its infrastructure. The Fresno Department of Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization (HNR) also became a partner in the project, as El Dorado Park was one of only four neighborhoods in Fresno to qualify, which brought the benefits of access to major city departments and consultation through an assigned HNR contact person. Additionally, Stone Soup gained membership on the Citizens Advisory Committee, a coordinating body of the revitalization neighborhoods.

Incorporation and Nonprofit Status

Hallmarks of Stone Soup Partnership’s mode of operation have been informality, simplicity, and accessibility. A conscious effort was made by the members of the steering committee to avoid the pitfalls of bureaucracy and red tape. The structure during the first two years consisted of regularly scheduled monthly meetings for all partners. The steering committee was a small group of the larger partnership that met with and assisted the director who had responsibility for day-to-day operation of the program.

By December 1995, Stone Soup was ready to pursue incorporation and nonprofit status in accordance with the provisions of article 501(c)(3) of the federal tax code. By March 1996, the partnership could enter into leases and other contractual arrangements, as well as receive tax deductible gifts and donations.

In order to maintain Stone Soup’s credo of simplicity, the steering committee formed a nine-person board of directors. The regular monthly partner meeting, now averaging 25-30 participants, remains intact, continuing to serve as the focal point for information exchange, resource sharing, networking, and collaboration, and has been officially designated as the Stone Soup Advisory Council. The board of directors is responsible for fiscal and managerial oversight of the corporation in accordance with its bylaws. By a March 1997 action, the Stone Soup Board raised its membership limit, thus permitting it to bring in, over time, a larger number of low-income El Dorado residents.

Funding

Stone Soup Partnership relies heavily—in fact almost exclusively—on volunteers from the community to conduct its programs and services. Because of extensive networking, an excellent track record of collaboration, and effective use of resources, Stone Soup has attracted funds and support from a variety of sources. The mix of funding was complicated, but allowed a wide range of programming and physical improvements for the neighborhood. For example, revitalization funds were targeted towards safety—street and alley lighting, a surveillance camera system, and speed bump installation. Salaries of student staff, ranging in number from 20 the first summer to 38 in summer 1996, were paid by the federal Summer Youth Employment Training Program (SYETP). For three of the past five summers, Stone Soup has negotiated SYETP grants of \$40,000 each through the Fresno Private Industry Council. In 1995, a \$25,000 grant from a local private foundation enabled Stone Soup to repave and improve the basketball court and add a volleyball court on the church grounds.

In 1994, CSUF, in coordination with Stone Soup Partnership, submitted a grant request for a Share America project funded by their parent organization, Children's International. The grant was prepared by the CSUF Grants and Research Office. The grant awarded \$63,000 in the fall of 1994; the grant supported an initial 250 children, ages three to nine, and their families, and a project director was hired.

By 1995, the Share America budget increased to cover additional participants and a full-time assistant. Stone Soup became a model program for Share America through its combination of small staff and heavy reliance on volunteers, and its funding for 1997 was increased to \$208,000. By virtue of its timing and long-term commitment, the Share America grant, as much as any other single event, gave Stone Soup an early critical boost in terms of support base and continuity of effort.

Other funded programs include The Stone Soup Literacy Project (SSLP), an eight-week summer program initiated in 1994 by the CSUF School of Arts and Humanities that is jointly sponsored and funded by the university and Fresno Unified School District at a cost of \$15,000-\$20,000 per summer. SSLP provides first and second language literacy and related educational activities to between 200 and 500 children per day. Instruction has been provided in English as a Second Language (ESL), Hmong, Khmer, Lao, and Spanish, and French and Chinese have also been successfully offered.

Additionally, the city of Fresno's Neighborhood Revitalization program has provided Stone Soup, on behalf of the El Dorado Neighborhood residents, considerable financial support. Stone Soup was allocated \$75,000 for fiscal year 1995 and \$100,000 for fiscal year 1996. Because none of these funds could be used for services or salaries, an additional \$170,000 was earmarked for rental or purchase of a community center. Stone Soup was allocated \$100,000 for fiscal year 1997, plus a \$250,000 "set aside" by the city council toward a proposed police substation in or near El Dorado Park.

Grant development activities are far-reaching. As of spring 1997, Stone Soup's submitted and pending grants totaled \$781,000, broken down as follows: California Wellness Foundation (Youth Leadership Initiative)—\$400,000; Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)—\$95,000; Small Farmer Support (USDA)—\$150,000; Private Industry Council (Stone Soup Summer Program)—\$40,000; Consolidated Plan-City of Fresno—\$95,000; and Fresno Junior League—\$1,000. Stone Soup has also received invaluable support from the university's grants and research office in the form of grant writing assistance and consultation. Prior to Stone Soup's incorporation, the university served as the fiscal agent for grant funds.

As an example of its grass roots funding efforts, in the fall of 1997 Stone Soup conducted a Citizenship Scholarship fundraising drive in late fall, mostly by mail, that netted over \$17,000. The scholarship fund was established to assist more than 200 Southeast Asian students at CSUF who were in danger of losing financial assistance because of their citizenship status and welfare reform legislation. These funds are used to assist those students who cannot afford the \$119 citizenship application fees. In return, each student receiving grant assistance has agreed to assist at least one other adult through the citizenship application process.

Staffing

Stone Soup has two full-time salaried positions, a director, and an assistant. There is also current funding for a half-time volunteer coordinator and a half-time medical office position. Other than these positions, the bulk of Stone Soup's services and activities are provided by volunteer help from the surrounding neighborhood, consisting in large part of students and retirees. One of the partners, a coalition of 12 churches in the vicinity, known as the "Holy Stone" also provides a substantial number of volunteers.

Community Volunteers

During the summer and increasingly on a year-round basis, professionals, educators, community leaders, and individuals with special skills fill the ranks of Stone Soup volunteers. For example, a professional photographer recently spent several sessions taking photos for a cultural preservation project, and a media specialist from a local TV station conducted several workshops for student summer staff on effective communication, interviewing skills, and telephone etiquette.

Margaret Hudson, a well-known artist with a specialty in sculpting clay, was asked by Stone Soup in spring 1996 to do a series of summer workshops. Although she initially turned down the request due to heavy prior commitments, she later called back and said, "I've changed my mind. I read in the paper today how a developer is stonewalling Stone Soup's efforts to get four vacant buildings. It made me so mad, I've decided to do those workshops after all."

University Student Volunteers

Over 60 students signed up as Stone Soup volunteers in September 1996 at the annual Volunteer Fair held on campus at CSUF. Some students volunteered community service and received college credit through enrollment in Community Service 101. In several instances, Stone Soup has been the site for field placements and internships such as the ongoing "Healthy Community" project through which Department of Nursing students deliver health care kits and health education instruction to the homes of residents. The Department of Social Work Education has assigned student interns to Stone Soup, and the Nursing Department will start formal internship placements as of fall semester 1997.

A Community Center Allows Expanded Programming

Lack of adequate space at the neighborhood church was a critical problem in the early years as summer staff and programs grew. In August 1996, a three-year lease was negotiated for a vacant office building with 7,600 square feet of space. Within a month of its mid-September opening, the community center was fully furnished by generous donations from local hospitals, businesses, the university, and other organizations. By mid-October the center was close to capacity during peak after-school hours when an enrichment program for neighborhood children is held. An ESL citizenship training class with an enrollment of forty Southeast Asian adults was started in October 1996, with an instructor furnished by and paid through the Fresno Adult School. A medical office was opened in October, staffed by a part-time

nurse practitioner and volunteer physicians, and professional and student nurses. Through the efforts and direction of a recently retired local dentist, a fully-equipped dental office was set up, and the first patient was seen in April 1997.

After-School Enrichment Program

An after-school enrichment schedule in 1996 featured a puppetry class, art projects for younger children, and a "Book Friends" reading club, a reading enrichment program for pre-school and elementary age children that focuses on the enjoyment of reading in the presence of a caring adult or older student. Through collaboration with the Fresno Unified School District and the services of an independent science curriculum and media specialist, Stone Soup was designated as one of only two Science Exploration Centers in the city of Fresno. By February 1997, basic science concepts were taught to a group of elementary school students by emphasizing stimulating, hands-on, fun-filled learning experiences. An experienced instructor was assisted by science majors recruited from the university's Minority Opportunities in Science Teaching (MOST) program, plus a dozen high school student volunteer "explorer guides" and mentors from the ranks of El Dorado high school youth.

Another noteworthy program has been conducted on a regular basis by a professor of theatre arts, in which CSUF students practice children's puppetry and drama activities with elementary age youth from El Dorado Park. One of the students described the class as the most meaningful and productive of her entire college career, and further stated that she wished every one of her classes could have an experiential component similar to her Stone Soup experience.

Economic Development and Job Training

Using donated sewing machines, a sewing training program was initiated in February 1997 at the community center by a quarter-time release granted to a CSUF professor of child, family, and consumer sciences. Basic sewing skills were taught in separate six-week increments to Hmong, Lao, and Cambodian women as the first step in a progression to gainful employment. An apartment maintenance and a landscape management/groundskeeper training course, with training assistance from Fresno City College, will begin soon. A Stone Soup subcommittee on economic development is also developing a strategic plan for expanding the opportunities and marketing possibilities for Southeast Asian small farmers, especially strawberry and specialty crop vegetable growers. Consultants and players in this effort include representatives from

the Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA); Fresno Regional Foundation; Central California Southeast Asian Agricultural Cooperative; and both the CSUF Marketing Department and the Southeast Asian Crops Experimental Plot located on campus.

Youth Leadership Development

Stone Soup believes that the current generation of Southeast Asian youth will play a key—and perhaps even decisive—role in the successful acculturation of Southeast Asians in the United States. Consequently, along with the strong push for advocacy as well as adult literacy, citizenship, and self-sufficiency programs, the partnership encourages and supports youth participation and involvement in the community center and its activities. Most notable in this respect is the formation of a youth council, “Bridges,” that has its own young adult coordinator who also coordinates our medical and dental services. Bridges elected its own set of officers and conducted two fundraisers to support its activities. Council members volunteer their services to the after-school enrichment program on a daily basis. They also assist instructors and serve as mentors to the children participating in the science exploration class, Book Friends reading program, cooking classes, and other activities. Several of them participated in producing antismoking radio and TV commercials, which were underwritten by a \$4,738 Asian-Pacific Islander grant designed for youth to educate the Southeast Asian community on the dangers of secondhand smoke. Stone Soup is hoping to substantially augment youth leadership efforts through a pending \$400,000 Youth Leadership Initiative grant through the California Wellness Foundation.

Mentoring is incorporated into the youth leadership effort whenever feasible. An example is the 1997 Industrial Technology (IT) mentoring project in which El Dorado high school students have been matched with university IT majors. Among the planned activities are campus and class visits, hands-on demonstrations, an open house, a picnic, and the invitation to the annual regional business/industrial technology banquet held on campus.

Spin-Offs—Connections with Other Universities and the Community

Stone Soup’s experience is that a new project opens new vistas and enriching opportunities. For example, in March 1997, twelve undergraduate students from Vanderbilt University arrived at the community center to participate in the Vanderbilt Alternative Spring Break program. El Dorado residents were impressed and felt hon-

ored that these students traveled all the way from Tennessee to visit them. The students' objectives were to learn first-hand about urban social issues and to have a meaningful cross-cultural experience. They slept in the community center and participated in daily activities there, while El Dorado youth served as guides and neighborhood escorts, and residents hosted home visits. During their week's stay, the Vanderbilt visitors also toured Fresno and visited other community service programs and cultural groups.

Another example is a donation from a local service organization after three representatives visited the sewing training project. They were greatly impressed with the progress of the trainees, but not with the outdated sewing machines. The group gave the project \$7,000 to buy new equipment for a vocational sewing center at the Stone Soup facility.

The University's Role

The university's role in the development and nurturing of the Stone Soup Partnership has been pivotal, extensive, and varied, including:

- administrative support;
- leadership by retired professional staff;
- financial support;
- fiscal agent services;
- faculty involvement as instructors and as experts involved in planning;
- students as volunteers, as interns, and in field-placement activities; and
- furniture donations.

Yet, at the same time, the university is in no way a sole powerbroker within this community collaborative. It has worked to support the empowerment of neighborhood residents, the larger community, human services agencies, youth, religious groups, and government so all can consider unique ways of pulling together for a common cause.

Giving has not been a one-way street for the university. The faculty and staff have participated in turning around a very negative living situation for thousands of residents, and have seen the potential of service, the application of theory and knowledge to real life situations, and community spirit. The university has benefited by visibly expanding its "good citizen" role, and has been able to provide a creative teaching environment for its faculty and a relevant learning experience for its students.

It has also enhanced its own environment and the surrounding neighborhood, and has contributed to the economic development of the city.

Sustaining Commitment—There is No Blueprint

There is no blueprint for success with this type of initiative. The Stone Soup Partnership was built on strengths that individuals and organizations brought to the table, and it took advantage of opportunities as they arose. It made it a point to address the needs of those residents being served by involving them in decision-making and respecting their culture. And in 1996, the Partnership was one of only 20 community service organizations nationally to receive the Points of Light Foundation/President's Service Award from President Clinton.

There are many variables to consider in assessing CSUF's overall commitment to community service and more specifically to Stone Soup and its needs. CSUF is a campus of nearly 20,000 students. One might think that with unqualified support from university officials, including the president, vice president for academic affairs, and the provost, substantial faculty and student interest and involvement would tend to follow. While top level support has had the distinct advantage of opening many doors, it has not been a wellspring of widespread faculty participation. There is no substitute for the personal one-on-one approach to soliciting faculty participation in community-based learning activities. Sometimes the result is a strictly individual involvement or a single course; at other times there is commitment at the departmental level. In one school that is a model for effective collaborative relationship with Stone Soup, the associate dean not only attends the monthly Stone Soup Advisory Council meetings, but personally marshals support for and monitors Stone Soup programs from three specific departments. One of these is the highly successful summer literacy project carried out at Stone Soup and jointly sponsored with Fresno Unified School District. Discovering new and creative ways to collaborate with faculty, as well as with community agencies and individuals, requires persistent, ongoing effort and considerable commitment of time and energy.

Where To Go From Here for Stone Soup Partnership?

One way to answer this question is to first look at the good—and then the bad—news. The good news is that the Stone Soup model incorporates the ingredients of common purpose, shared goals and objectives, a willingness to share resources, a

built-in system of networking, and the sharing of information. Collaboration is constantly and consistently modeled and has worked well for the betterment of El Dorado Park and its residents. The bad news is that the advent of national welfare reform, together with the current mood in the country about affirmative action and immigration issues, will surely exacerbate health care, employment, and crime and violence problems. These are the very concerns that already afflict neighborhoods such as El Dorado Park all around the nation. But, using a model such as Stone Soup, it is to be hoped that the university/community approach can assist a deteriorating neighborhood to generate self-sufficient, productive, well-informed, and resilient citizens for the next century.