CHAPTER FOUR

Keeping the Promise

In the aftermath of the broken heart experience in El Salvador, a flurry of related activities took place on campus in the fall of 1992—including writing and editing essays for “Notes on El Salvador” to appear in the Sacred Heart University Review, collating a traveling photo exhibit of the trip, and readying slide presentations with talks. At the same time, while the University community—the fraternities, sororities, and staff—continued to volunteer in the area, one service event stood out because it engaged the energies of a large contingent of people from the campus and support from several local towns and the city of Bridgeport.

The Make a Difference Day Challenge

In mid-August, USA Weekend ran an article entitled “You can make a difference” about the successes of the first Make a Difference Day challenge held the previous year. “Wouldn’t it be great,” the article asked, “if everyone spent one day helping others?” The article noted that “readers in nearly 1,400 cities cleaned up neighborhoods, fed the hungry, built and repaired homes for the needy, visited the sick and gave hope in thousands of other ways.” USA Weekend’s sponsorship of the second Make a Difference Day prompted this announcement from the University’s Public Relations department: “As an institution whose
mission is based on the belief that it has a responsibility to share its resources and its special gifts and talents for the betterment of the human community, Sacred Heart University is participating in ‘Make a Difference day,’ Saturday, November 14.” The memo then stated, “Everyone of us has the capability to help others in some way, no matter how small the effort. Our hope is that the students, faculty, and staff of Sacred Heart University will donate some time during this day in an activity that helps our community and the people in it.”

Efforts to coordinate a campus response to the Make a Difference Day challenge fell into the capable hands of Alice Chaves, a former editor of the school paper, the Spectrum, and a recent alumna working as an assistant in the office of Public Relations. Chaves “solicited ‘Make a Difference Day’ proclamations from six area towns (Bridgeport, Fairfield, Trumbull, Easton, Monroe, Stratford),” then coordinated nine University-supported volunteer events throughout the area with support from “over 100 students, faculty and staff,” announced a Public Relations news release. In the same release President Cernera said, “We have an ongoing commitment to encouraging our entire community to get involved in helping others—in truly making a difference.”

In response to the success of the day’s events, Ginny Apple, the director of Public Relations, issued a “note of congratulations and celebration” to the volunteers, saying that “many students were so touched that they expect to return to the sites of their volunteer efforts, to continue this important work.” After praising Chaves for her efforts, Apple thanked everyone who participated, saying “You have made Sacred Heart University very proud.”

The following spring, while a second delegation readied itself for the trip to El Salvador, another Apple memo highlighted several current University service efforts: treating eighty people from five homeless shelters to a musical, sponsoring a bowl-a-thon, donating time and labor for Habitat For Humanity in Bridgeport, continuing the active partnership with the Jonathan Winthrop Elementary School, and the formation of a campus organization called PEACE (People Effectively Achieving Community Efforts). But beyond these ongoing volunteer activities a large question loomed on the horizon, begging a response. September 1993
marked the start of the school’s thirtieth anniversary. What would be a fitting way to celebrate that milestone? Was there an initiative that would reflect Sacred Heart’s mission statement as well as its emerging vision of itself as a leading Catholic institution in New England?

Naming a Project

With the advantage of hindsight it is easy to see how the need to come up with a project, coupled with several past volunteer efforts (the school’s long history of service, the group experiences of El Salvador, and the success of the Make a Difference Day), came together to form “Keeping the Promise: 30,000 Hours.” In a sense, the project was almost inevitable. Once the issue of discovering appropriate ways to celebrate the anniversary was raised, it was only a matter of time before a proposal was on the table that pulled together the disparate elements on key people’s minds. First, the notion of “service.” With the University’s record of community involvement, service belonged at the core of any proposal. Then there was that thought haunting the El Salvador delegates: Why had it been so much easier to fly to a war-torn country to bear witness to the plight of the poor than it was to travel ten minutes down Park Avenue to be with the poor of Bridgeport? And what about the service commitment of students in El Salvador to fulfill graduation requirements?

Then, finally, there was the historical link with Southwestern Connecticut: Sacred Heart University in its early years had flourished while drawing students from the immediate area. So the thinking was: Why not give back to the local community, especially at a time when Bridgeport was infested by gangs and drugs, traumatized economically by the loss of thousands of factory jobs, and when a sizable portion of the population lived stifled lives under a multi-generational welfare system that perpetuated poverty not unlike that found in third-world countries. Bridgeport was under siege, crying out for help. Call it blind luck, or happenstance, or divine providence, but it was only a matter of time before someone brought all these elements together into a cohesive proposal.
Planning for the Anniversary

To backtrack a bit, Dr. Trebon had started the planning for the "Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration" by sending a memo on May 6, 1992, to thirty-two key faculty, administrators, and staff, inviting them "to participate on a planning committee charged with developing plans for the Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration." The purpose of the meeting, according to the memo, was "to set forth initial ideas regarding the celebration. The academic year 1993-94 marks the time period for which we need to plan. Several events have already been suggested. I see this steering committee as developing a set of recommended activities, suggesting individuals who might lead a particular effort, and deciding which of the efforts a member of the committee might wish to lead or participate in." At that meeting, several ideas for the celebration surfaced, and select members of the group were asked to meet over the coming months to develop and refine proposals.

By the start of the spring 1993 semester, the group had generated a list of Thirtieth Anniversary activities. On February 11, at a meeting that included Dr. Trebon, Ginny Apple, and Joanne Tilghman, the director of Special Events, several initiatives proposed were based on "activities which we would normally do during the year." The memo following that meeting noted, "we will include perhaps four or five special events which are specific to the Thirtieth Anniversary year," and acknowledged that the coming year would "focus attention on our past history, our current transformation as an institution and our future activities with special mention of our contributions to the community." In other words, by February of 1993, plans for the anniversary year highlighted several events, including a special liturgy, the annual Discovery Dinner, academic lectures, special emphasis on annual activities during the academic year, and the development of a logo, a time capsule, school banners around campus, and related activities. But plans still lacked a focusing initiative to capture the imagination and serve as a rallying point for the year. As of yet, no mention had been made of the centerpiece of the celebration: the 30,000 Hours project.
Soon after the February meeting, Eilene Bertsch recalled that she was preoccupied by the memory of what the students at the University of El Salvador were required to accomplish for graduation. "It just blew my mind," she said. "Here was a university that had nothing, that was in decay—between bombs and earthquakes—and these students had to do 500 hours of community service in order to graduate. We saw them in the barrios, distributing medicines, taking blood pressures." If UES students could give 500 hours, she asked herself, "what could we do if this university decided to give back to its neighborhood?" That question, coupled with the need to devise a dramatic anniversary initiative, gave birth to Sacred Heart's 30,000 Hours project.

A thirtieth anniversary celebration with a cornerstone of community service excited Bertsch. But she wondered would everyone at the school buy into the project? Such a proposal, she knew from experience, demanded total institutional support at ground zero to possess even a chance at succeeding. The question was: "Could we pull this off?" So she called a meeting to "feel out" students, faculty, and staff. "It was a pitch, as far as I remember it," she said. "Here's a proposal: We could go to the President and say we could do this. So we asked the people at the meeting, do you think we can? People from Development were there, Student Government, students. . . . We got to the 30,000 purely because it was the thirtieth anniversary." At the meeting, Bertsch discovered overwhelming support for the project.

Assured of the backing of students, faculty, and staff, Bertsch then carried the "30,000 Hours" suggestion to the President saying, "Why don't we think of giving back to our neighborhood and thanking them for the support they have given us over these thirty years?" Cernera not only embraced the idea, at a subsequent meeting with students he delivered a challenge: he would log more volunteer hours than any student present, setting the stage for a most ambitious, if not risky (from a public relations point of view), community service effort. "When I look back at it," said Bertsch, "I think it was an enormous undertaking with no foundation, no structure." In place at the time was an idea, but it was a powerful idea that the President did not plan to keep under wraps for long.
Announcing a Bold Initiative

At commencement that May, before announcing the 30,000 Hours project, Cernera reiterated one of his favorite themes on education: he exhorted the graduates to take from their years at Sacred Heart University “a deep sense of responsibility for the world and the next generation,” reminding them that they lived in a “fragile world in great need of healing and of compassionate service,” and that they carried a “responsibility for the well-being of the human family.” Talking about the need for generosity, which set the stage for his surprise announcement, he said, “it is a deeply held conviction that the generous life is the one that is worth living. If you live by that conviction, the world will be a better place for your having passed through it.”

Then the President, in one of the defining moments in the school’s history of service and volunteerism, announced a bold initiative:

I am delighted to announce a University initiative of importance to us all. During the 1993-94 academic year, Sacred Heart University will celebrate its thirtieth anniversary. Inspired by the vision of Bishop Walter Curtis, we opened our doors for the first time with 143 students and 9 full-time faculty on September 11, 1963. For thirty years, we have sought to educate women and men so that they might be prepared to live in and make their contribution to the world.

In our planning for this year of celebration, the Thirtieth Anniversary Committee of faculty, staff, and students has recommended to me a bold initiative, one that will affirm one of the most deeply cherished values of this University, an initiative that I believe will be a beacon of hope to the people of our local and regional communities. We will commit ourselves as a university community—students, faculty, staff, alums—to thirty thousand hours of community service during the academic year that begins on July 1, 1993 and ends on June 30, 1994.
We envision members of the University community, both individually and collectively, engaged in many and varied forms of community service at the local, regional, national, and even international level. It will be one of our ways to celebrate our life as a university and to recommit ourselves to community service while we continue to grow as a dynamic and distinctive academic community. To our graduates, and to every member of the Sacred Heart family, I invite and encourage your participation.\textsuperscript{12}

The announcement caught the assembled audience by surprise. Many found the idea exciting and took pride in the school’s intention to give back to the community; others withheld judgment, suspecting the call for 30,000 hours of community service was an audacious, even foolhardy, public relations stunt that could backfire if the goal proved unreachable. But, in spite of what the naysayers thought, the service initiative made perfect sense. It fired the collective imagination of the University community, it reflected the school’s revised mission statement which encouraged the preferential treatment for the poor, and it answered the questions posed by the El Salvador experience about involving students in volunteer work in Bridgeport. “We’re going to do the whole United Way thing with thermometer and everything,” said spokeswoman Ginny Apple after the ceremony referring to a sign often employed during United Way fund drives.\textsuperscript{13}

With the challenge now a matter of public record, the question was how to make good on such a prodigious undertaking. Who would be in charge? Who were the key players? How would the University’s resources be mobilized? What were those resources? Who could be expected to support the project, and how would they be brought “on line”? Just keeping track of the volunteer hours would be a massive headache. Who would do it? Obviously, serious planning was called for. “By the fall,” said Bertsch, “the President wanted a plan for how we were going to do this.”\textsuperscript{14} So did Bertsch and the other members of the anniversary committee.
A Project Coordinator is Named

The first task was to locate someone to take charge of day-to-day operations. The "Coordinator of Volunteerism," according to the job description, would contact local agencies requiring the services of volunteers; secure opportunities for placement of SHU volunteers; publicize throughout the University opportunities for placement with volunteer agencies; arrange for initial contact of SHU volunteer and external agency; monitor participation of SHU administration, staff, faculty, students, and alumni; establish data base of agencies, needs, and SHU participants; cooperate with the offices of Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Alumni Affairs in promoting volunteerism at SHU; insure inclusion of current projects re: PEACE, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Habitat, Mercy Learning Center, Literacy Volunteers, McKinney House, etc., in broader institutional approach and volunteerism.\(^5\)

In other words, the school was searching for a miracle worker: someone who knew the Bridgeport area and its social service agencies, a person familiar with the institutional structure at the University, a point-person who could keep the larger picture firmly in mind while attending to the nitty-gritty details of logging day-to-day volunteer efforts, and lastly someone with heart who not only believed the goal was within reach but who would work tirelessly to achieve it. Fortunately a Sacred Heart Media Studies graduate, a person with a track record of volunteer efforts, and a media consultant with access to area organizations, was available. Her name was Gail Halapin.

Once the coordinator was in place, planning began in earnest. Immediately Bertsch requested key people on campus to attend a meeting to review the "progress to date on the 30,000 Hours project," and to meet Halapin.\(^6\) Also at this meeting, Bertsch introduced a student intern enrolled in an Independent Study writing course who would cover the 30,000 Hours project for the
Spectrum and outside press. A double major in English and Sociology, Sarah Gauthier agreed to author a series of articles on volunteers and service sites to maintain visibility for the project. Halapin reiterated this need to “keep a high-visibility profile in order to encourage and motivate participants,” adding that another publication, the alumni newsletter, also would be “a great avenue for this purpose,” saying it could “spotlight volunteers; become a vehicle to inform the alumni of this project; provide listings of where they can interact with this project”; and “provide a means of visual feedback to see the hours as they accumulate.”17

Next on the list was the call for a catchy project theme song. Bertsch turned to Mike Campo, the University choir director, and sent him two brief selections from the school’s mission statement as background materials for the lyrics. The first selection read: “Sacred Heart University aims to assist in the development of people . . . compassionate of heart, responsive to social and civic obligations, and able to respond to an ever-changing world.” The second quote announced the University’s “responsibility to share its resources and its special gifts and talents for the betterment of the human community,” and ended with the key language of the document: “All members of the University community are encouraged strongly to participate in the wider community through service to others, especially the poor.”18 Campo rose to the occasion, contributing a song that included several key ideas:

Thirty Thousand Hours

Thirty thousand hours, reaching out with a heart that cares
For our friends in many places, joining them we will do our share.
Lift up our world together with a pride in all we give.
We'll make our world a kinder place, then in peace and joy we'll live.
A very special feeling comes to those who lend a hand.
Doesn't matter what you offer, you just offer what you can,
For the gift of yourself is a gift that will last,
Compassion for others is all that we can ask. Thirty thousand hours, this promise we’ll keep together.\textsuperscript{19}

With a coordinator on board, a theme song in place, volunteer hours already trickling in, and the school year started, it was time for the September “kick-off” celebration.

\textit{The Service Fair Kick-Off}

Although the 30,000 Hours drive began July 1, the Service Fair on September 14 on the patio outside the Dining Hall—complete with the singing of the newly-composed theme song, booths for a veritable “who’s who” of local social service agencies,\textsuperscript{20} and an inspirational talk by Cernera—marked the first pitch for the program to uncommitted undergraduates. Reporting on the day’s festivities, the \textit{Connecticut Post} said, “the idea for the ‘30,000-hour program’ grew from a trip to Salvador to help in that troubled country’s rebuilding effort.” In the same article, reporter Cheryl Yost quoted Cernera as saying, “We’re holding up a value that has been important to the university for a long time. . . . We think it’s an integral part of the educational opportunity for our students.” Then Cernera added, “What more appropriate time to ‘Keep the Promise’ we have made throughout the decades to share our resources and special gifts and talents for the betterment of the human community.”\textsuperscript{21}

At the Service Fair, Cernera and Bertsch, in a memorable photo-op, turned over a two-and-a-half foot hourglass with its sand symbolizing the volunteer hours needed to make good on the promise as well as the limited time frame to accomplish the feat. The \textit{Spectrum} quoted Cernera as saying, “Thirty thousand hours of volunteer service is an ambitious task.” Then the President challenged those present by saying, “I ask you to think of each grain of sand as representing a promise that I hope each person in the University community will pledge to keep during the year.” Summing up, Halapin noted the fair “was to have students see first-hand organizations and agencies that need volunteers.”\textsuperscript{22} Then, in what amounted to a direct plea to students, she said “No matter
what your interests and schedule, there is a need for your special gifts and talents.”

A follow-up article in the same issue of the Spectrum announced that “service log cards will be available throughout the school for volunteers to write their names and log the number of hours.” The article noted that Halapin “will take that information and run it through the computer system by service agency and by student. At the end, she will compile all this information and find out how many volunteers and how many hours were served.” Referring to volunteer efforts promised and already logged, Halapin said, “the response from the faculty and staff has been great. Hopefully by the end of the year we’ll come out with 30,000 hours,” adding, “then we’re going to throw a big party.”

In fact, when the school year began, no one on campus knew if the 30,000-hour goal was attainable. Some believed it might be possible, and certainly they were willing to put forth their best efforts to make it happen, but with the President using the word “ambitious,” and the coordinator of the project saying “hopefully,” about the best spin the University community could place on “Keeping the Promise” was “cautious optimism.” “One of my biggest concerns,” recalled Halapin, “was that it was just going to peter out totally.” To cite an early example of what could happen, Cathy Swenson, the program assistant for activities on campus, had been asked to become a committee member of the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation Walk-A-Thon scheduled for Saturday, September 18. After accepting the position she sent a memo to department chairpersons asking for support. “As you know,” she said in the memo, “at Commencement Ceremonies Dr. Cernera announced a commitment by the University of 30,000 hours towards community service projects. I am currently working with the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation and PepsiCo in recruiting Sacred Heart University to participate in this year’s Walk-A-Thon... The celebrity Grand Marshall will be John Ratzenberger, 1992 Honorary Alumni... I believe this project is a wonderful way to incorporate the Pioneer vision of service while helping the future generations of tomorrow.” With ”Cliff the Mailman” Ratzenberger, the school’s famous celebrity committed to the
Walk-A-Thon, Swenson hoped that at least 500 participants would sign up, filling donated buses for the ride from the Fairfield campus to PepsiCo Headquarters in Purchase, New York. Instead, the University contingent logged a disappointing 13.5 hours that day. So "Keeping the Promise" was not going to be easy.

Getting the Ball Rolling

On the other hand, the project did experience a "jump start" earlier in the summer when the second delegation to El Salvador tallied up 2,575 hours of service in that country and presented the total to Halapin. "The El Salvador trip got the ball rolling," recalled Bertsch, in a Spectrum feature article on sophomore Gloria Irizarry, who, along with her classmate Angela Donohue, had accompanied faculty and administrators on the trip.28 "My arrival in El Salvador was the turning point in my life," Irizarry said in the article, adding that "Salvadorans possess a concept of wealth totally different from Americans. Their richness is in service and community."29 This sense of "richness in service and community" that Irizarry alluded to began to be felt on campus as the anniversary year moved forward and more segments of the University community joined in the task of achieving the 30,000-hour goal, even though the success of the project was still in doubt.

Next, Halapin designed a 30,000-hour flyer to distribute on campus, and a Volunteer Services Log. "Learning occurs not only in the classroom," the flyer announced, "but also through a variety of volunteer experiences. These opportunities for service join students, faculty, staff, and alumni together in a commitment to justice. Depending on your interests, talents, and schedule, you can volunteer for one-day or for a semester-long project. You can choose from a variety of agencies or let us help you find something to meet your specific interest or concern... There are many agencies where you can make a difference." Inside, under the heading "Keeping the Promise," the flyer listed several service possibilities, including elderly outreach, AIDS/HIV support project, tutoring children, homeless and hunger, Amnesty International, recreational for special needs children, Habitat for Humanity, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters.30
Highlighting one of the above sites in her series of *Spectrum* articles, Gauthier called attention to a Habitat project located in one of the most neglected and drug-infested sections in Bridgeport. "The Pembroke Street home, a two-story four-bedroom wooden structure is now nearing completion," she wrote. "Under the direction of the construction manager Gary Koss, a Bridgeport resident and alumni of Sacred Heart University, the new home was built with special modifications for a mother in a wheel chair, her husband, and three young children." Shelley Donovan, a sophomore and a member of the campus organization PEACE, said, "I am very enthusiastic about working on this house and spending my free time working on community projects." Gauthier attributed Donovan’s enthusiasm to “the growing excitement toward service events generated on campus this year.” In the same article, Bertsch said, “Becoming involved in community service is part of what it means to be a member of the Sacred Heart community.”

Around the same time, the President underscored his commitment to the 30,000 Hours project when he wrote to Rutgers University Professor Catherine Stimpson, thanking her for her Women’s Studies lecture on October 4. Saying her talk “was every bit as inspiring as I anticipated,” Cernera pointed out “while there are many exciting things happening on our campus as we celebrate our thirtieth anniversary year, perhaps one of those closest to my heart is that of our 30,000 hours of community service. As we discussed that evening, the project is an innovative undertaking that encompasses all within our University family. As a teaching institution, Sacred Heart University strives to instill its students with a deeply rooted sense of civic and social responsibility. Thus, renewing our commitment to the community seemed particularly fitting.” Then the President noted that “since the beginning of the academic year, 5,000 hours of service have been logged and several new service efforts are in the offing.”

The President may not have had the University’s first black-tie gala in a decade in mind when he mentioned to Stimpson the several service efforts on the immediate horizon, but the event—the Thirtieth Anniversary Dinner on campus—underscored the University’s 30,000-hour commitment by honoring Helen
Wasserman, an indefatigable volunteer from Fairfield with a Discovery Award.33 “Wasserman’s volunteer efforts,” reported an article in the Fairfield Citizen-News, “have touched many segments of society—women’s causes, the homeless, business and industry, chambers of commerce, religious organizations and service and philanthropic groups.”34 Singling out the efforts of Wasserman sent a clear message: volunteerism and service to community ranked among the highest ideals espoused by the University.

Pledge Called “Amazing”

As the news of the school’s 30,000-hour commitment spread, the off-campus response was immediate and strong. Nancy Mandell, from the Department of Higher Education for the State of Connecticut, reported in a memo that “Sacred Heart University has pledged 30,000 hours of community service to celebrate the university’s thirtieth anniversary. Sr. Margaret Palliser and Gail Halapin from Sacred Heart talked about their program at the network meeting on October 13.” Mandell endorsed the program, writing that “the creativity involved in their 30,000-hour pledge is amazing. Features of the program include service logs which can be mailed in by students, faculty, staff, and alumni (copy enclosed) to keep track of the hours, buttons worn by everyone on campus proclaiming their pledge, and a newly written song about the 30,000 hours which is sung before each football game and at other school events. These are only a few of the innovations described at the meeting.”35

With clubs and organizations on campus vying with one another for the prestige of logging the most volunteer hours, and with members of the University community searching for innovative ways to get more involved in the project, it was not long before some novel approaches to service surfaced. For example, how could a thirty-five-mile fall foliage bicycle trip (voted “the best autumn foliage trip by the Fairfield County Weekly”) suddenly qualify as part of the 30,000-hour project? The tour organizers, Leland Roberts and myself had started the annual day trip fifteen years earlier for students, faculty, and staff, and after meeting with 30,000 hour coordinator Halapin it was decided that “this will be
the first time that hours will be logged and proceeds will go to the March of Dimes."36

But the most satisfying project, recalled Halapin, was making quilts for AIDS patients. "I think it was the best project people worked on," said Halapin."37 Started years earlier by Dr. Marian Calabrese, and then later dedicated to honoring the memory of Michael Arnold, a former adjunct faculty member and later the director of the Stamford Campus, the quilting took place after school, used donated materials, and involved the volunteer efforts of a half-a-dozen to a dozen students. "AIDS was something that people pretended didn't exist," recalled Calabrese. "The students and faculty needed to know that there was a need out there. It was a way that the students could touch and be touched by patients. And, of course, when you put a face on something, you're locked in forever." Over the years, said Calabrese recently, the students have made over 125 quilts of all sizes, from "baby quilts, to twin sizes, to doubles for couples."38

As the academic year progressed, while the "Keeping the Promise" project started to gain more media visibility, the local press, to their credit, drew attention to the University's long-term commitment to social causes. "The concept of community service is not a new one to Sacred Heart University," reported the Westport News. "Throughout the years the university has been involved in various social service organizations, community partnerships, and other volunteer activities. Student organizations regularly devote a considerable amount of time to collect clothes for the homeless, provide food for the needy, and companionship for the elderly, to name a few of their outreach projects."39 In the same article Cernera reiterated the notion that the current volunteer drive underscored a long tradition of service at the school.

One program on campus with an outstanding history of service that supported the 30,000-hour project was Campus Ministry. In a Spectrum article, Palliser, then the director of Campus Ministry, reminded readers that "one of the values of volunteerism is that you discover who you are and move into a greater level of responsibility and commitment to service." Campus Ministry specifically targeted the Merton House in Bridgeport (founded by Fr. Giuliani back in the 1970s), setting up
“volunteers to commit a designated time weekly to the program.” Campus Ministry student President Diana Cutaia said, “It’s like a job. If you say that you are going to be present on a shift, the Merton House schedules you and needs you to be there.”

Then, as the volunteer hours piled up, the efforts of several people on campus were singled out for special mention. “High school teacher Wayne Sakal ’84 does it because he wants to feel useful in an emergency,” reported Focus, the University’s publication for alumni and friends. “Associate Professor of Computer Science Frances Grodzinsky, Ph.D. does it to keep her hand in other interests. Angela Miccinnello ’79 does it to participate more fully in her children’s education. Staff member Julia Pavia did it because somebody asked her . . . and it was something she likes to do anyway. Senior psychology majors Peter Rosaspin of Greenwich and Susan Ratanavong of Bridgeport not only do it as a head start on a career, but also because they want to give something back to the community.” Another article in the same issue of Focus announced that “Coordinator of Volunteer Services Gail Halapin is pleased to report that she has recorded an amazing 23,650 hours through December, according to log cards received by Jan. 10.” Many of those hours, it should be noted, were logged by people off campus. “Alumni and Stamford branch students have helped a great deal,” explained Halapin.

By March 1, The Catholic Transcript announced the hours accrued by volunteers topped 27,000, predicting that the University “will easily exceed its 30,000-hour goal by the end of the school year.” In the same article, several volunteers talked about their service efforts. “I’ve been volunteering for years,” said Rachel Harrison, who led youth retreats in her parish and worked in an area soup kitchen. Rosaspin volunteered at the Stamford Children’s Guidance Center and the Greenwich Youth Shelter. “At first I volunteered because I wanted the learning experience, but now it is much more than that,” Rosaspin said. “It’s a reciprocal, give and take thing.” Also cited was Dr. Laurence Weinstein, a professor of management at Sacred Heart, for working with the Branford chapter of Big Brothers/Big Sisters. “I guess I volunteer because, like many others, I feel I’ve been lucky in life, and I want to give something back,” said Weinstein, who
attributed the urge to volunteer to his Jewish background and the concept of doing good works. The article pointed out that Weinstein “also visits terminally ill patients and helps organize workshops for a once-a-year, week-long Jewish/Christian interfaith retreat. In total, he volunteers about ten hours a week.”

In a related issue, while the school was gearing up to celebrate reaching its volunteer goal, a group of faculty from the University of El Salvador visited our campus during the first week in March. The faculty, made up of members from Medicine and Allied Health, were on campus to “receive training in team building and strategic planning.” The visit, in the words of one SHU administrator, allowed us to publicly acknowledge our debt to the people of El Salvador and, in particular, to their university’s social outreach program. “I remember a very public meeting with the faculty who came from the University of El Salvador,” said Bertsch. “We told them the story of the 30,000 hours, and we thanked them for the gift they had given us to see our neighbor in a new way.”

Reaching the Goal

At the Founder’s Day celebration held on March 24 in Schine Auditorium, President Cernera made a much-anticipated announcement. “One of my happy tasks this morning is to tell you that we have reached 32,010 hours of community service,” he said. “This is wonderful testimony to the kind of University we are trying to become.” Halapin, according to an article in the local press, “was ecstatic when she learned the goal had been surpassed with more than three months remaining in the campaign. I’ve double-checked the accuracy of the figures in my computer just to be certain. This is marvelous,” Halapin said. ‘I hope we can go to the next milestone—40,000 hours—before the year ends.’ The Connecticut Post couched the achievement in these terms: “Put them together, and members of the Sacred Heart University community have logged 33,381 hours of community service since last May. That’s 1,390 days. More than 3½ years.”

Reaching the goal was especially satisfying because the entire University community had participated in the project. ‘I didn’t
realize so many people would want to volunteer," said Halapin. “It wasn’t just the students. It was the faculty, the staff. It was everybody.” To cite one example, the athletic teams had banded together, joined in the volunteer campaign, and, much to their credit, logged thousands of hours for the cause. “What really pleases me,” said Don Cook, director of athletics, “is that so many of our student-athletes, at first hesitant to become involved, have gotten so much into the spirit that they’re donating hours now purely because they want to, not because there’s any goal to reach.” Cook went on to say that “athletes are usually so focused on playing their sport that they don’t see anything else going on in the world. But our kids got the opportunity to see beyond the world of athletics and sports and they learned they could make a difference in other very important ways.”

Once the 30,000-hour goal had been exceeded, the commendations poured in. The woman’s softball team, nominated for a Connecticut Higher Education Community Service Award in recognition of its volunteer work with the Jewish Home for the Elderly, was presented a citation honoring its efforts at the annual awards ceremony in Hartford. “The Higher Education Community Service Awards were created,” said Andrew G. De Rocco, commissioner of Higher Education, “to honor . . . outstanding leadership and to acknowledge the selfless contributions you make to your communities.” At those same ceremonies at the State Capitol, the “Sacred Heart University 30,000 Hours Program” also was singled out for a Higher Education Community Service Award for achieving its goal.

In fact, the number of hours logged in the campaign by the time the year ended June 30, 1994, surpassed 37,000. But along with the joy and celebration that marked the close of a successful campaign, came a vexing question: What next? How could the school follow up the Thirtieth Anniversary campaign? Since opening its doors to students in 1963, volunteering and community service had been at the core of the University’s mission, but with its Thirtieth Anniversary celebration now a part of its history, what was the next step? “We’re very, very proud of all our students,” said Bertsch. “They really responded to a need and showed they could make a big difference in so many diverse areas
of the community.” Then Bertsch alluded to the issue at hand: “What we want to do now is build on this wonderful effort and help carry it into the future in a number of meaningful ways. We would like to see this kind of school-wide spirit and dedication continue beyond our thirtieth anniversary.”

The Challenge Ahead

Perhaps more so at this time than any other, the challenge posed by combining community service with the ongoing education of students weighed on the minds of administrators and faculty. There had to be a way to keep the proverbial ball rolling, to build support for a continuing institutional-wide commitment to community service, especially since the 30,000-hour project had proven once again that service created real learning experiences for the volunteers outside the classroom. In fact, efforts to continue the school’s commitment to institutionalize service, particularly through a new program gaining national attention called service-learning, already had started earlier in the spring semester.