

Community Action Commemorates 50 Years of Creating Opportunities in America

By Jerralynn Ness, Executive Director

A team of 10 Community Action staff joined 1100 colleagues from around the country at our nation's capitol to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964 and to recommit ourselves to furthering the Mission, the Promise and the Spirit of Community Action. This Act created the Office of Economic Opportunity and President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Sargent Shriver, founder of the Peace Corp, as its first Director. In this role, Mr. Shriver became the architect of the most unique federal-local partnership ever established in America. This partnership created a community based approach to addressing poverty and called it Community Action.

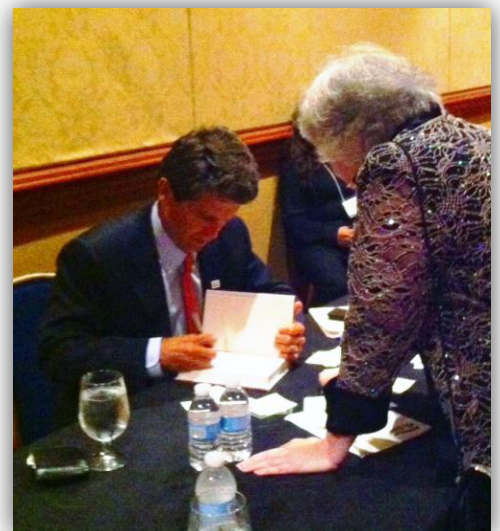


The convention opened with a keynote address by Juan Williams, author of "Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965", a companion piece to the PBS series of the same, and Emmy Award winner for television documentary writing. Williams, a long time supporter of Community Action's mission, asked us to pause and think about those who made this moment in time possible and the incredible impact we have had on poverty in America. He referenced President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Reverend Martin Luther King. "This is about using 50 years of triumph to turn away from the naysayers and keep your eyes on the prize".

That prize is ensuring that every American has the opportunity to achieve economic security. That happens through a combination of policies, programs and services that focus on strengthening the economy while providing the range of services needed for families and their children to successfully participate in our economy. In 1967 the poverty rate in America was 26% and by 2012 it had fallen to 16%. Throughout the week, we heard over and over again about the positive results of our fifty year effort to build a nation-wide network and movement to eradicate poverty in America. "Community Action is dazzling", Williams exclaimed. "You bring light to so many people".

The event, "Community Action: 50 Years of Moving Forward," focused on our past, present and future. We viewed a sepia tinted video called "Beyond These Hills" that features a conversation between Sargent Shriver, OEO Director, and the Reverend Billy Graham. It was fascinating to watch this old timey film as it took us back to the beginning and our roots. It can be viewed at: <http://youtu.be/Qolw12mYZuM>

An historical display of photos from Community Action across the country and reflections on our past, reminded us of our rich history. A wide range of workshops were offered to further the professional development of our staff and ensure the excellence of our programs and agencies today and tomorrow.



The convention ended with an awards banquet and the installation of the largest class of newly certified Community Action Professionals (CCAP) ever. We were all brought to our knees when 105 year old Virginia McLaurin walked onto the stage to receive the 2014 Community Action Pioneer Award for contributing over 40,000 volunteer hours to the Washington DC Community Action agency. She began her volunteer work at age 85. Just imagine what this power house would have done if she had started in 1964 at age 54!

Sargent Shriver's son, Mark Shriver, provided closing remarks as he shared stories from his book, "A Good Man: Rediscovering My Father, Sargent Shriver." I had the opportunity to meet Sargent Shriver over the years and he never lost his passion for the importance of addressing poverty because he understood that it was essential to maintaining a strong and vibrant USA. He was a true inspiration to those of us in Community Action who continue to do that work day in and day out and his spirit lives on in our mission. I left the convention feeling great pride in what we have been able to accomplish for America since 1964 and blessed to be a part of it.



Community Action attendees from left, Pat Rogers, Katherine Galian, Leticia Vitela, Larry Hauth, Karen Henkemeyer, Jerralynn Ness & Gina Brooks. Staff attending, not pictured, Catherine Crooker, Natalie Horne and Randy Olsen.

With deep appreciation for our staff, board, volunteers and supporters for ensuring that Community Action in Washington County remains relevant and impactful as we achieve our mission to eliminate conditions of poverty and create opportunities for our residents and communities to thrive. Congratulations to our nation for 50 Years of Community Action service to America!