Meet the Newest Segal Fellow: Rhonda Ulmer (AmeriCorps Alum ‘08)
Eli J. Segal Entrepreneurship Award Recipient

It is my dream to start a nonprofit organization that provides parents with the skills and educational resources to help their children. Where did this social entrepreneur idea come from? My path has not been straightforward. I made a bold career move by leaving a profession I loved with Southwest Airlines to join Volunteer Maryland, an AmeriCorps program of the Governor’s office. As a Volunteer Maryland Coordinator, I learned about nonprofit organizations and the many needs in the community and also gained the skills and training on how to build and create successful volunteer programs that helped many nonprofits meet challenges and measurable outcomes in the community. As a mother of three, part-time college student, and AmeriCorps member – I wanted to make a difference in my own community. I understood and knew the challenges families in my community were facing because I was on of them.

It all began in 2004 at the school my children attended, Van Bokkelen Elementary School in Severn, MD. It was considered one of the worst academic performing schools in the state due to its poor test scores. The school was at risk of being taken over by the Maryland State Department of Education for failure to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Law. I joined several other parents who were determined for this not to happen. As the PTA President, I formed a team that consisted of parents, teachers, and community leaders, and I was able to lead the implementation process by taking the skills and training she received from AmeriCorps and the Maryland Parent Leadership Institute (MD-PLI) to create the Van Bokkelen Family Network. The program provides local community resources to parents in the school to obtain their GED, housing, food, and health assistance. The school became the hub of the community. We took the approach of meeting the basic needs of the family, so parents then could meet the academic needs of their children. After three years of hard work, commitment and dedication of parents, teachers, and the community – the school is no longer at risk for being takeover by the state for their poor test scores. In fact, the school has made academic Adequate Yearly Progress for four consecutive years and the network has successfully sustaining itself for over three years.

I was determined to keep my vision, passion, and entrepreneur spirit alive while leaving “No Parent Behind”. So, I applied for the AmeriCorps Alum Eli Segal award and was recently selected as the 2008 recipient. The AmeriCorps Alum Eli Segal Award has afforded me the opportunity to not only share the Van Bokkelen success story across the state, also create University for Parents which mission is to provide skills, educational resources and no cost parent classes in low performing schools across the state. I have been traveling across the state recruiting parent leaders for the university. To date almost dozen parents have been recruited and trained in partnership with the MD-PLI to provide parent workshops in low performing schools. The goal is to have one parent leader for each county in Maryland. The organization plans to graduate the first class of parents in fall 2009. As part of the award, I received the honor to be a member of the Segal Fellows Network. I expect that being a fellow will help me to continue my lifetime of service, serve with other emerging leaders to gain knowledge, skills, and resources that will make it possible for me to turn my ideas into realities. What better way is there to honor the Eli J. Segal legacy.

For more information about University for Parents visit www.UniversityForParents.org.