

Coulecap, Inc.

1966-2006



“Who knows where the outward moving
ripples of compassionate action end?”



Special thanks to Marci Verwiebe
Original Cover Artwork
2006

Couleecap 1992-2006
Grace Jones, Executive Director.

*“Who knows where the outward moving ripples
of compassionate action end?”**

The image created by this question is symbolic of the work of Couleecap. We believe in compassion, but we also believe that our compassion for others must serve as a catalyst for change. Feeling compassion is not enough, we must act on it. And, our compassionate actions help people who want to change and improve their lives.

Fundamentally inspired by our deeply felt compassion for others, we take action through our daily work and agency activities. Our agency mission is to help families access opportunities so that they can achieve self sufficiency and reach their full potential. We act to help people achieve these goals. We are part of a community *action* movement. The story of our work is a story about people and communities, and it is important because of the differences our work makes in the lives of people and families. Regardless of what happens locally or nationally, we continue the work we are doing and the fight against poverty.

Couleecap staff is on the front line and sees the pain and despair, the struggles and hopes of people. We help and affect people in positive ways, and in doing so, we improve the lives of families and plant seeds that will influence generations to come. We know that, over time, compassionate action has ripple effects beyond our ability to imagine.

**Quote from Jonathan Bader, WISCAP staff.*

Who knows where the outward moving ripples of compassionate action end? We believe that the outward moving ripples are endless, and that our work makes a difference in profound and lasting ways in the lives of people, communities, and our country.

"I think a hero is any person really intent on making this a better place for all people."

-Maya Angelou

In 1991, Couleecap wrote the story of its first 25 years. Now that we are having our fortieth anniversary, we are providing this update that covers fifteen years, from 1992 to 2006. I am pleased to share with you some of the highlights of our agency that have occurred since our 25th anniversary in 1991.

But lest we forget, here is a reminder of our heritage, where we came from, and how we were created.

In 1964, the "War on Poverty" was launched by the federal government under the leadership of President Lyndon Johnson. Lyndon Johnson had only been president for a short eight weeks, having been sworn in as President after the assassination of President John Kennedy. He stood before Congress in early January, 1964, and gave his first State of the Union address. In that speech he declared:



President Johnson signs the Economic Opportunity Act, 1964

“This administration today...here and now...declares an unconditional war on poverty in America”

A few weeks later he introduced legislation known as The Economic Opportunity Act. Its preamble vowed to eliminate poverty in the midst of plenty. Congress later passed the Economic Opportunity Act legislation, which President Johnson signed into law on August 20 of 1964.

“It is therefore, the policy of the United States to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this nation by opening to everyone the opportunity to live in decency and dignity...”

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964

Among other things, the legislation made funding available to local communities to create a “community action agency” (CAA). Those local agencies were to be the “soldiers” of the war on poverty, identifying local poverty problems and planning and carrying out solutions. Within the following few years, 900 CAAs were created by local people and communities across the nation. There currently are sixteen agencies in Wisconsin and 1,100 nationwide.

Forty years ago, upon hearing of the President’s new anti-poverty initiative, a small group of coulee region citizens determined that local poverty conditions were intolerable, that something had to be done to improve the lives of people who were living in poverty in the coulee region. Their determination and persistence served as a wake up call to others in our area. That wake up call led to the initially small, but very empowering, effort led by local citizens: the creation of our local community action agency, now Couleecap.

The basic structure and core concepts of Community Action Agencies are the same today as when they started. Most CAAs are locally controlled non-profit corporations governed by a local board of directors comprised of:

- 1/3 representatives of low income people,
- 1/3 local government representatives, and
- 1/3 representatives of other interested community groups

"I got appointed and I found it interesting. It kind of grew on me; I liked it."

John Young, Board Chairman, 1991

Each CAA is unique. We joke that, "If you have seen one CAA, you have seen one CAA." Each agency has a Board of Directors comprised of representatives from their communities. Each agency conducts a comprehensive community needs assessment every three years. Each local board prioritizes the identified local needs and plans how it wants its CAA to address the problems and concerns of their local communities.

Over the last forty years the original community action agency in the coulee region has evolved into Couleecap, Inc., an organization that provides services to 10,000 families a year, provides good jobs to sixty local residents, and raises an annual budget of six million dollars. Couleecap owes it all to the many caring and dedicated Board members, staff, funding sources, donors and volunteers who have helped advance our mission since 1966. They are people who cared enough to try to make the world a



Steve Smith weatherizes a home.

better place, especially for people living in poverty. To each and every person, we are grateful.

1992 to 2006

Early in its history, Couleecap started and operated services including Head Start, Family Planning, and RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program). These programs spun off into separate agencies. In the mid 1980s we sponsored one of the first small business loans to a “non-traditional” group of farmers, now known as Organic Valley, an employer of 300 people in La Farge.



Head Start children

Over the last fifteen years, since 1991, Couleecap has had some services come and go, while others have been consistent. Some of the consistent programs are rental housing, home weatherization, Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Abuse prevention, home buyer assistance, employment and training assistance, food pantries and clothing centers. The list that follows is not a comprehensive overview of the agencies activities, but rather provides a summary of some of the achievements, changes and challenges since 1992.

1992: The agency became a CHDO, a Community Housing Development Organization. As the operator of the JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) program, our performance was one of the highest in the state. The program helped people attend school and find better jobs. 980 adults and youth were

“The other America, the America of poverty, is hidden today in a way that it never was before. Its millions are socially invisible to the rest of us.”

*-Michael Harrington,
1962*

helped with training and employment programs. We operated 36 contracts.

1993: Couleecap began Total Quality Management (TQM) and began to survey staff and make improvements in the working conditions of the agency. We sponsored our first Housing Information Exchange. 85 people received home ownership counseling. Transitional housing helped 13 families with case management and apartments.

1994: The agency began operating the Elderly Benefit Specialist program. 254 people were helped in the JOBS program. 4,117 were helped with food. 340 homes were weatherized. 6,969 were helped with fuel assistance.

*Poverty Fact:
21,000 coulee region
citizens live in poverty,
6,000 of them children
under the age of 18.
U.S. Census, 2000*

1995: The highly successful JOBS program had its last year, serving 143. W-2 was created to replace it. W-2 emphasized employment instead of education as the path out of poverty. The agency began to increase its efforts to be highly collaborative. We operated 40 contracts.

1996: Our efforts with youth expanded, with initiatives like One by One, and the Community Youth Initiative. The ending of the JOBS program and a decrease in weatherization funding were financial set backs for the agency.

1997: W-2 was in place so there was no longer AFDC or JOBS assistance for low income people with children. We became a United Way member agency. The four Safehouse rental apartments were completed. We were part of a three state

collaborative to implement our Rural Health Outreach project. In Viroqua, we created the Families First Resource Center. Weatherization funding continued to decrease. 20 households received down payment and closing cost assistance in the City of La Crosse.



Safehouse ribbon cutting, 1997

1998: Couleecap developed the Lender's Consortium, a consortium of bankers involved in the Home Buyer program. In the COPS project in La Crosse, we implemented a collaborative grant with the La Crosse Police Department. 199 homes were weatherized. Eighth Street apartments (eight units) were purchased. Clothing was provided to 5,792 people. Job and Business Development helped 75 people. We built a completely accessible home for a family with severe disabilities. We operated 52 contracts.

1999: The La Crosse Skate Park, was finished, the largest project of the Community Youth Initiative, a youth initiative which we facilitated. The Public Benefits program was approved by the state legislature. This would more than double the weatherization budget by 2001, from its lowest in 1999 of \$519,624 to \$1,266,317 by 2001. We constructed two new homes on the south side of La Crosse, as part of an award winning New Housing Construction program.



Ribbon cutting for a family's new home.

2000: The Home buyer program expanded to our rural counties, as did the Lender's Consortium. We began to run Public Benefits. We constructed 10 units of affordable senior housing in West Salem called Whispering Pines, in partnership with the La Crosse County Housing Authority. We assisted with the development of the Teen Court in Vernon County. New Hope was started to provide housing for families with disabilities.

2001: The agency began to help youth aging out of foster care in our Independent Living Program. We used Strategic Mapping to help plan for the future. We operated an Individual Development Account (IDA) savings program.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

-Martin Luther King, Jr. 1963

The Job and Business Development program served 130 people. 7,721 people received clothing. 16,732 were helped with food. 450 youth attended our Martin Luther King Teach In. 98 youth attended our Diversity Day. The Families First Resource Center served 450 families. We received the YWCA Tribute to Women Corporate award. We operated 61 contracts.

2002: We developed our new name, Couleecap, and our new logo and slogan: *Creating opportunities, changing lives*. We began our community education campaign on the issue of poverty, including position papers, emails, and sharing of poverty information. We began private donor solicitations. Two special projects were the Mentoring Program and the Youth Violence Prevention Project. We started the Coulee Housing Development Corporation and the La Crosse Community Housing Development Corporation.

2003: Our collaboration with the Wisconsin Council of Churches led to a community forum that resulted in the creation of the La Crosse Housing Commission. 50 youth were linked to mentors. The Home Buyer program helped 68 families purchase their first home. Transitional housing helped 55 homeless families get back on their feet. 37,002 people were helped with food. 1,490 Vernon County youth were trained in substance abuse prevention. 17 new volunteers were trained for our Restorative Justice program in Crawford County. 338 people were provided with child care assistance.

2004: 61 youth were linked to mentors. 75 families were helped to purchase their first home. 6,166 hours of volunteer time were provided at our food pantries. 4,275 hours of volunteer time were provided at our clothing centers. 76 adults and 53 children were served in transitional housing. We operated 62 contracts.



Sleeping with the Sharks mentoring trip

2005: We helped create the first statewide report on poverty entitled 'Poverty Matters'. 90 youth were helped with planning for their futures by our Youth Employment and Training program. We developed and began to implement the Tenant Based Rental Assistance Program and the Skills Enhancement program. Both programs were the result of collaboration and advocacy on many levels. 458 homes were weatherized. 5640 people received clothing. 3019 were helped with fuel and electric bills.

"In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."

Anne Frank, 1944

2006: We are celebrating our 40th anniversary. We are creating our next five year plan by doing our third Strategic Mapping process, and are involving the community in setting our future priorities and directions. Of course we develop our future plans based on the information we collect from our clients, community contacts, funders, and colleagues. It is in the very nature of a community action agency to do this given our long heritage of local leadership, local planning and local operation.

“And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” -John F. Kennedy, 1961

In the fall of 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the southern states, devastating large areas of the south. The breaking of the levees in New Orleans, and the subsequent inability of poor people to flee the city as it filled with water and flooded, served as a wake up call for our country. It reminded many people that poverty still exists, that poverty is a dire and sometimes life threatening situation. The images of vulnerable mothers and babies, the elderly and ill people, stuck at the Superdome, pleading for assistance in the heat with no help in sight, provided a compelling reminder of the serious plight of people who lack financial resources.



A family enjoys their new home

This was a good reminder for the country. Too often, poverty is invisible, forgotten, or purposefully ignored. If there is one good outcome of the horror that was Hurricane Katrina, it is that the nation's complacency about poverty was broken.

Poverty, as a social condition, should not to be tolerated. This concept regained a foothold in the nation's conscience.

At the local, state and national levels we continue to educate and advocate about poverty issues. These activities address some of the original direction, given back in 1970, regarding the Economic Opportunity Act. The Office of Economic Opportunity Instruction 6320-1 addresses the Mission of CAAs. It states: "The Act thus gives the CAA a primarily catalytic mission: to make the entire community more responsive to the needs and interests of the poor by mobilizing resources and bringing about greater institutional sensitivity. A CAA's effectiveness, therefore, is measured not only by the services it directly provides, but more importantly, by the improvement and changes it achieves in the community's attitudes and practices towards the poor and in the allocation and focusing of public and private resources for anti-poverty purposes."

So many things change over time, over forty years. We have had the pleasure of knowing many wonderful Board members and staff. But some fundamental things remain the same.

Community Action Agencies are a uniquely American creation. We were created by the people and for the people, just like our country. We were created to make a difference in the lives of the people of our nation. As we help people, family by family, community by community, we strengthen and reinforce the very fabric of our society.

"Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world? "
-Abraham Lincoln, 1861

The passion we have for this work comes from within, from our hearts and minds. We are so fortunate to work for and with caring and compassionate people who, along with us, want to

make the world a better place. I have joked over the years that, "Action is our middle name." As a Community Action Agency, it really is. We work for a better quality of life on multiple fronts for the people and communities we serve.

Our greatest reward is when someone says to us, "Thank you. You saved my life and the life of my family," or "Thank you, your support made all of the difference while I was getting back on my feet." This is what inspires us year after year. We are people helping people, helping to make our communities a better place to live. We see the ripples of compassionate action moving ever outward, and feel fortunate to be a part of this inspiring, mission driven work.

Sincerely,

Grace Jones
Executive Director
April, 2006



*"Strong women and strong men
protect the children, tend the ail-
ing, care for the aged, and in fact,
reassure the entire world. "*

-Maya Angelou

Board of Directors

2006

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Linda Greendeer
Karen Joos
Celesta Leis, Secretary
Mary Masters
Christina Westerman
Boyd Zietlow, Vice Chairman
Virginia Zietlow

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Ann Fisher
Paula Hammes
June Kjome
Janet Kusch
Bill Rudy
Gerald Sebranek
Denis Tucker

Crawford County

Virgil Butteris
Albert Wee
Carol Wolcott
John Young, Chairman

Vernon County

Yvonne Bolstad
Bob Brague
Karen Dahl
Terry Hicks
Bill Hoffland
Bill Riordan



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Jean Shore '76	Marina Abt '99
Grace Jones '78	Lori Strasser '99
Kathy Ames-Sherry '79	Pam Wood '99
Janelle Olson '81	Dana Hefti '99
Steve Smith '82	Jason Alexander '00
Sharon Mahan '82	Erik Schoenemann '00
Ralph Barlow '83	Keri Sharp '00
Dan Kotek '85	Bonnie Hanson '01
Sue Rahr '85	Dave Jacobson '01
Carolyn Babcock '86	Bob Tomten '01
Steve Skrede '87	Marv Elsen '01
Sharon Pederson '91	Matt Gaworski '01
Peggy Gallagher '93	Todd Alexander '02
Shelly Teadt '94	Teresa Gander '02
Carrie Ellefson '97	Andrea Jothan '03
Kelly Teachout '98	Mark Johnson '03
Kay Mueller '98	Amy Gabrielson '03

Current Employees

Betsy Gleiss '03	Lisa Trumm '05
Kari Nelson '03	Kadie Brueggen '05
David Thoreson '04	Marci Verwiebe '05
Luanne Neumann '04	Larry Larson '05
Heather Fisher Wallin '04	Kahya Fox '05
Colleen Hart '05	Jo Anne Killeen '06
Kim Cable '05	Lisa Bergman '06
Lyle Mickelson '05	Sharon Steele '06
David Williams '05	Georgia Hackbarth '06
Todd Mandel '05	Kimberly Edwards '06
Anastasia Mercer '05	Leila Holen '06
Jerry Crotsenberg '05	
Sonya Lenzendorf '05	

Executive Directors

Grant Ringlien.....	1966-67
Gordon Robson.....	1967-74
Roy Opfer.....	1974-79
Jim Wenner.....	1979-82
Mary (Schendel) Avery.....	1982-86
Grace Jones.....	1986-present

“The capacity to create and communicate a compelling vision of a desired state of affairs is an ability that is necessary not only for organizations, but for individuals who wish to achieve a higher level of success in their personal lives. Community Action Agencies can serve as models of this kind of vision and empowerment. To the extent that we are clear with ourselves, our Boards, and our employees about the visions we hold for the future, we serve as models of vision and empowerment for our clients and communities. We need visions to be motivated. Visions with action can change the world.”

- Grace Jones, 1992

