More than sixty years ago, three of us—newly minted Vassar College graduates—set out to save the world.

It was 1942. The country had been at war for six months, and most of our classmates wanted to contribute to the war effort as soon as we graduated. Many got married and prepared to set up housekeeping with husbands before overseas duty claimed them. Others went into uniform—the WAVES, the WACs, the American Red Cross. Still others went to Washington to seek government jobs. The three of us had a different idea.

In our senior year at Vassar, we had concocted a plan that we thought would help—in some small way—to win the war on the home front. Many Americans, remote from the bombs and fires of battle, wanted to feel useful but didn’t really know how to go about it. Perhaps, we thought, the three of us could help people organize for effective participation, not only to defeat Hitler and his Axis partners, but to understand and deal with postwar challenges. Though we were full of idealistic fervor, we were definitely uncertain of how to proceed. Having grown up in New York City, we wanted to live and work in a small rural community far different from the urban eastern world we knew.

As a first step, we went to Washington during spring vacation of senior year, and found a sympathetic audience in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Officials there urged us to contact colleagues in the Agricultural Extension Service at Iowa State College in Ames, Iowa. They knew the leaders there were outstanding, forward-looking people who would willingly work with us, guide our idealism, and put our energy to good use.

In mid-June, in our 1940 blue Plymouth convertible, top down most of the way, we drove from the East Coast to Ames. To our immense satisfaction and gratitude, we were greeted by warm, welcoming professionals. They not only helped us develop a real plan of action, they advised and guided us throughout its implementation.

During our week in Ames, the staff reaffirmed the hunch that American home front activities were in need of organization. A lot of activities had sprung up with little or no coordination. There was much waste and duplication, and frequent frustration, just about everywhere. The previous year, for example, four different organizations in one town had conducted scrap metal drives at the same time. The result? Not only did efforts overlap, but many people were not asked to contribute at all.

What was needed in that town and many others, the Extension Service team believed, was the formation of a town-wide coordinating council composed of representatives of all established organizations—churches, schools, civic groups, social clubs. A federation of this kind could be a clearinghouse of information for home front activities. It could set up a calendar of upcoming war drives so that organizations would not “trip over each other.” In addition, the council could take the lead in organizing neighborhoods, with leaders on each square block, so that everyone would have the chance to participate.

The Extension Service professionals at Iowa State had an even broader vision. “Developing the habit of working together instead of at cross-purposes in war-
time could carry over into peacetime,” they told us.

We were thrilled. Their words fit the dreams that had filled our late-night talks at college. “Why not adopt the community council idea as your plan?” they asked. “If you help to set up a War Activities Council in an Iowa town, perhaps it could be a model for all towns across the United States.”

Now we had to find a town. Our mentors spread out a map of Iowa. Clarion, a rural town in northwest Iowa, would be a promising setting for launching such a council, they told us. It had a population of 3,000 wide-awake and friendly people who got along well together. It was surrounded by farmland with some of the most fertile soil in the country. There were no extremes of wealth or poverty. The town had good leadership. It would welcome “three girls from the East” in its midst.

It sounded like the destination we had hoped for. Arming us with names of potential friends and words of advice—“don’t start organizing right away, just get to know people,” “get involved in town activities”—our new backers saw us off. And, they reminded us, “Holler if you get in trouble.”

On July 4, we headed toward Clarion, where we would live and work for the next three months. Our confidence boosted by the trust that Iowa State had shown in us, our spirits soared. We arrived in Clarion to find the town deserted. (Later we learned that just about everyone had gone to an Independence Day picnic in a recreation area not far from town.) Our morale plummeted, but we managed to find a place to stay for the night.

Our spirits rose the next morning when we called on the minister of the Congregational Church, Ralph Beebe, as the Extension team had suggested. We introduced ourselves as three college girls from the East who wanted to see what it was like to live in a small town in the Middle West.

“Glad you’re here,” he said. “I hope you’ll like us and I hope you’ll stay.” We consulted him about possible jobs to support ourselves. The town needed a summer program for children, he told us. The school playground was a fine site; it was empty for the summer. How would we like to start a day camp?

We were elated. We had all had experience as camp counselors, and this was a positive way to meet people and get to know the community. Within a week, we were going door-to-door recruiting children for the camp, and news of the arrival of “three girls from the East” had spread through town. It wasn’t long before we were greeted by friendly calls of “Hey, Vassar,” or “Hey, Massachusetts” (from the license plate on our car).

“Camp-at-Home in Clarion” opened on July 13, with children signed up for full or half days, Monday through Friday ($2 a week for full-time attendance, $1 for half-time). The Oddfellows agreed to let us use their basement on rainy days, and the Commercial Club provided equipment and supplies. Later, a county social service agency paid for enrollment of a group of children whose families couldn’t afford the program. Camp provided us with a livelihood, augmented by selling subscriptions to the Wright County Monitor, the local newspaper.

The paper allowed us to write a long story about the camp for the August 6th edition, and we three shared the byline. We described in detail the activities—swimming, dramatics, singing, art, puppet shows, games, treasure hunts, and field trips to the Great Western roundhouse, the airport, Lake Cornelia, and Gordon’s Greenhouse. “Camp has been fun for us, too,” we wrote. “None of the children are ‘problems.’ Discipline is rarely necessary. Everyone knows each other by now, and we have no ‘mortal enemies’ in the group. And it’s always gratifying to know that you’ve been able to teach someone something, even if it’s just that hey [you] shouldn’t hog the teeter-totter. We want to thank all the mothers for trusting us with their children. We hope they’ve had as good a time as we have.”
We were amazed at how quickly we were accepted and welcomed. Clarion’s friendliness was in startling contrast to our urban experience. Although some people spoke harshly of the East and its “big city ways,” most were outgoing and hospitable. After we moved into our own apartment, neighbors brought us tomatoes, beans, corn, and other succulent vegetables from their gardens. People consistently inquired about our well-being and seemed to want us to have a good experience in their community.

Eager to be part of community life, we accepted invitations to church activities, 4-H club meetings, civic clubs. We agreed to be Victory Girls at the Commercial Club’s “Retailers for Victory” night, donning red, white, and blue jumpers and selling defense stamps. It was clear that there were already several local efforts to do war work.

After four weeks, we decided it was time to ask townspeople about their involvement in home front activities. How to start? There were more than 60 active, lively organizations in this town of 3,000: six separate religious denominations; civic groups like the Rotary, Kiwanis, the Commercial Club; lodges, including the Masons, the Royal Neighbors, the Eastern Star; railroad brotherhoods and sisterhoods; the American Legion and VFW and their women’s auxiliaries; dozens of study groups, like the Monday Club, the Progress Club, the Knotty Thread, the Merry Eight. Finally, there were county offices of government agencies and national campaigns such as bond drives, scrap iron drives, the Red Cross, and Civilian Defense.

We began by conferring with our friend, Rev. Beebe, the Congregational minister, asking him point blank if he thought the town would see the need for a coordinated war activities council. He liked the idea, especially its potential for dealing with human problems unrelated to the war. He suggested we get reactions from all organization heads, starting with the county chairman of the office of Civil Defense. He’d be in a position to give the idea a real push.

We were in for a splash of cold water. The chairman spoke emotionally of his hatred of “the East,” “the idle rich,” “the monied states with all the power.” This was “Roosevelt’s war,” he said. He complained bitterly about people cheating with rationing—sneaking extra sugar, bootlegging tires. We tried asking if giving out information about rationing would help, but he brushed off that idea. “I haven’t started any home front activities here in Clarion,” he told us. “People like to relax in the summer.”

Crushed, we beat a hasty retreat, caucused over ice cream cones at Evans Dairy, and decided to move ahead on our own. We drew up a list of every organization in town, and for the next three weeks spent our after-camp hours calling on leaders of these groups.

In approaching people, we knew that to succeed, a community war council had to be their idea, not ours. Our instincts, and the advice we received from the Extension Service, told us to listen to each person’s concerns and to “float the idea” of a town-wide council, rather than assert that such a federation of groups would improve home front participation in the war.

The response was astonishing. Almost everyone we spoke to agreed on the need for a town-wide council of organization representatives that could unify current war activities and start other valuable programs. “If we can have a war program in this town that’ll give every man and woman a specific job to do, I’m all for it,” one prominent church leader said. “The trouble has been that so far a few people have done all the work. Yet everyone is anxious to do something. They just don’t know what to do.”

People spoke about failed drives—piles of paper that got dumped because no one knew where to put them, rubber that never got picked up. And there were too many fund-raising appeals. “People get tired of being approached every other day for a different organization. We need to consolidate all the drives into one and then allocate the funds to the different organizations,” a member of the American Legion said. “It would save time and energy and probably raise more money in the end.”

Others wanted more information and discussion about major issues. One woman active in civic affairs called for forums on national concerns: the plight of Japanese internees, the importance of planning for enduring peace.

By mid-August, 37 representatives of organizations had expressed their readiness to come to a town meeting to help set up a community council. To ensure the success of such a meeting, we were advised to meet with a man described as a golden-tongued orator, one of the most respected people in town. We made an appointment, expecting his blessing. Instead, he asked coldly, “Who or what organization sent you girls here? You must admit it’s unusual for three girls to come into town and inside of 60 days start organizing a movement.” We protested our innocence, but he was unmoved.

We left his office shaken, with visions of being run out of town. But we tried not to dwell on this setback; there was too much to do. The immediate question was: Who in town was qualified and willing to take respon-
sibility for convening the crucial meeting of organization heads? A popular businessman on the Commercial Club board was a logical candidate, but he said no: though he was all for the plan he was too busy already. When a second candidate turned down the role, we began to wonder if our accuser had been spreading suspicion about our motives.

Our Extension Service friends came to our rescue, appearing in Clarion out of the blue “to see how you girls are getting along.” They assured us that no false accusations could undermine the work we and the people of Clarion had done. They suggested that we ask Arnela Kyseth, one of the town’s leading women and a member of the State Board of Education, to call together a representative group of citizens to plan and convene the big town meeting—a far better idea than placing the responsibility on one person’s shoulders.

Wheels began to turn rapidly. The group—eight outstanding men and women—met several times the following week to draw up a proposed organizational structure and an agenda for the town meeting, set for Wednesday night, September 2, at the county courthouse in Clarion. Every organization in town was asked to send a delegate.

Wednesday night we arrived at the courthouse early, helped to set up chairs, and waited nervously as 50 Clarion citizens came in, including the newspaper editor, the state senator, the superintendent of schools, heads of Navy Mothers, the Red Cross, railroad brotherhoods, the VFW auxiliary, and all the others we’d come to know in the past two months.

The first order of business was a surprise—a letter read aloud by the chairwoman, Ilah Banwell. Incensed by rumors about our “connections” to sinister forces, the Congregational minister had called Iowa State to ask for a letter telling the true story of how and why we came to Iowa. As we had feared, our accuser had been busy behind the scenes, but the words sent from Ames, warmly supportive of us, scotched any suspicion that might have ruined the meeting.

We had been asked to speak, to introduce the idea of a community council and describe briefly how it would work. We took turns, using the opportunity to express our feelings of appreciation for the way Clarion had welcomed us. Then, we sat back, watched, and listened.

Almost everyone spoke, pointing to problems that could be solved through a representative council, from fund-raising, to duplication and wasted resources, to the need for more education about important civic and social concerns. After three hours, they voted.

It was unanimous, a resounding “yes” to setting up a community war council. The group elected ten men and women to an executive committee that would report to a larger assembly of organization representatives. Every ward in town would have a captain, every block a lieutenant. Through them, all citizens would be an integral part of the programs carried out by the council. The delegates planned to go back to their organizations for final approval, but there was no doubt: The Clarion War Activities Council was born.

We could hardly believe it. The people of Clarion had adopted the concept of coordinated community action as their own. Our dream had become their plan. Natural leaders emerged and put the plan into action.

On September 23, three representatives from the board appeared as guests on *Freedom Front*, a WOI radio program hosted by Pearl Converse of the Extension Service. “Good neighbors in Clarion are working together in a community program to help the war,” Converse began. “In my opinion, this work in Clarion is a fine example of democracy in action on the home front.”

“People have accused us of not realizing we are at war, especially here in the middle west,” board representative C. J. Christiansen commented. “No one could help but know with boys gone and going every day. We wanted to do something—to live up to the responsibilities we owe to our fighting men. That’s the biggest reason, I think, that this organization was formed.”

State Senator G. R. Hill noted, “Naturally there was a lot of war work already under way in our community. But there was a good deal of confusion about it. For instance, the USO drive didn’t start until very late last spring due to imperfect organization. The Red Cross drive was launched at almost the same time and so neither drive succeeded as well as it might have. We need a council to time these activities.”

When we left in late September, the council was up and running, with committees, ward captains, block lieutenants, and clear lines of communication.

The story has an epilogue. We were determined to tell Clarion’s story to people in Washington, hoping it would inspire others. Who would be more interested than Eleanor Roosevelt? We wrote to her, then called her office at the White House. An invitation came. Could we meet with her in the Red Room? A week later, a warm, attentive First Lady listened to our account and agreed that grass roots action was vitally important. “This is something the president has to hear,” she said, inviting us to dinner.

And so, in mid-October, the three of us had dinner at the White House with eight other guests. At dessert, Mrs. Roosevelt gave us our cue, saying, “Franklin, these
girls did something remarkable this summer.” We re­cited the tale of Clarion to a genial, beaming president. In spite of the incredible pressures he faced leading a nation at war, he listened patiently, made a few jokes to put us at our ease, and nodded his approval.

The next day Eleanor Roosevelt mentioned the three of us in her daily column in U.S. newspapers. “It seems to me that they have been enterprising and far-seeing, because in planning to use this organization for the present, they are laying the foundation for post-war activities on an intelligent basis.” But she misstated the local situation when she said we had come to Clarion “to arouse it to its own responsibility in this war.”

We immediately fired off a letter to the good folks in Clarion, which was then printed in the paper. “Our summer in Clarion proved to us that you people out there are far more genuinely patriotic than the people we know in this area of blackouts and alerts.” We added that “the National Head of Civilian Defense thought so highly of Clarion’s experiment, that he hopes to see it tried on a regional basis here in the East.

“We did not go to Clarion because we felt it was ‘unaware of its responsibilities.’ We were told that it was a wide awake community, willing to accept three Eastern girls. We were told its people were intelligent and likely to cooperate with a new plan designed to unify existing civilian war activities. It was not our plan. It grew as we spoke to your leaders. You formulated it, and can make it work or fail. As one of you once said: ‘We were just the mild burr under the saddle.’

We’ll never forget our evening at the White House or the lessons Clarion taught us in 1942—about people, communities, and ourselves—lessons that have guided us throughout our lives. It was thrilling to learn firsthand, from Clarion, how eager people are to work together for the good of their community and their country. ❖

Mary Draper Jantey lives in Washington, D.C., and is an educator and community leader. Barbara Gair Scheiber lives in Bethesda, Maryland, and is a writer and advocate for children with disabilities. The co-authors write: “Juliet Fleischl Budney was the leader of our threesome in Iowa, spurring us on with her boundless energy, her wit, and her intense, unflagging commitment. She later became a columnist for the Boston Globe. Juliet died on January 23, 2003. This account is dedicated to her.”

Clarion citizens speak out for War Activities Council

A full page in the Wright County Monitor on October 1, 1942, explained the new Clarion War Activities Council’s function as a coordinating clearinghouse and how it would solve problems that had plagued earlier home front efforts.

What Mrs. Ed Jacobson liked best about the new plan was that “no one organization will be running the whole show. It isn’t good to have the same group out in front constantly. They over work and the community lacks that fine spirit it gets when everybody is working together.”

Regina M. Sheffield also approved of the system. “So far about all I’ve done is listen to news reports and read the papers. I know that isn’t enough and I know there’s a lot I could be doing. But I’m more of a follower than a leader. I need some help in discovering what contribution I can make.” She added, “Sooner or later people will have to be organized for war work. It’s much better to do it ourselves in our own way, rather than be dictated to from above.”

“It’s a wonderful plan. I wish it had been in effect a couple of months ago when I was asked to solicit for Navy Relief,” said Grace Virginia Buchan, farm woman and vice-president of the Navy Mothers. “For three solid days I went from house to house trying to get money. I never had a chance to do my dishes or take care of my baby chicks. No one will have to do that much work with these Block Lieutenants covering definite small areas.” She added, “And the people they’ll be canvassing will be their own neighbors. It’s always much easier to get help from people you know.”

“Things are pretty complicated now. But wait until 1943. Meat rationing, gas rationing, a farm labor shortage,” county agricultural agent Jay Vandelboe commented. “Some of the mistakes we’ve made in the past need never reoccur. Three separate tries to collect scrap and none of them completely successful. The salvage head will have the service of an already organized army of workers. This plan is needed alright. Just because Washington is muddled and confused, there’s no reason why we have to be.”

—The Editor
From left: Walter Peterson and Blanche Jennings wait as Lon J. Allison fills out a war bond application in the Windsor Theatre, Hampton (November 1942).

By November 1942, cuts in meat deliveries had closed down this grocery story in Oakland, Iowa.
November 1942: Just weeks short of her 90th birthday, Elizabeth Goodbarn of Des Moines keeps busy knitting for the Allies. "Most recently," the Des Moines Register said, "she has been knitting sweaters, stockings and mittens for crew members aboard the British ship, H.M.S. Chesterfield. Mrs. Goodbarn was born at Burnt Island, Scotland."

Opposite: Sgt. Eugene Friedricks of Batavia, Iowa, helps repair London homes damaged by bombs. General Dwight Eisenhower had placed 3,000 U.S. soldiers skilled in the building trades at the disposal of the British ministry of works (December 1944).