

Reuben Gist; An Advocate For the District's Hungry

By Patricia Sullivan
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Reuben Long Gist, 57, the director of advocacy and community outreach for the Capital Area Food Bank, died Sept. 9 at his home in Silver Spring after a heart attack.

Mr. Gist, who worked for the food bank since 1999, was a well-known advocate for the cause of the hungry and ill-nourished. He spoke to students, nurses, corporate boards, the D.C. Council and anyone else who could help.

When the city's summer food program for children ran into repeated problems over the past eight years, Mr. Gist was the behind-the-scenes player who pushed and prodded until the program was straightened out.

The food bank took over the responsibility of providing a third meal each day to hungry children in summer when federal regulations barred local government from doing so.

"It's not about the lack of food," Mr. Gist said in 2006, correcting a common misperception of hunger in the District. "It's what's eaten. You can feed a family on the Dollar Menu at McDonald's. People short of money buy the cheapest foods. Most of them don't shop at the major supermarkets, where you can access fresh fruits and vegetables."

Lynn Brantly, director of the food bank, said Mr. Gist's generosity won him friends everywhere. When she accompanied him to the John A. Wilson Building, she said Mr. Gist would buy hot dogs and half-smokes for the security guards.

"There was nobody better, smarter, more streetwise," she said. "It was powerful, what he did. His voice was heard. The truth was spoken, but it was in a way that people could hear truth."

Born in Coatesville, Pa., Mr. Gist graduated from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. He worked for the Peace Corps in Honduras and became director of the national Olympic track and field program there.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he was a supervisor in the Library of Congress mailroom and the library's records management office.

In 1981, he joined the National Health Screening Council for Volunteer Organizations, a group providing free preventive health education and screening services at the local level. He designed health fairs for African American communities, then, on behalf of that group, moved to Jamaica in 1983 to set up a nongovernmental organization to do similar work.

By 1987, he returned to the United States and founded Health Promotions Inc. That firm worked with at-risk youth on primary prevention health strategies until Mr. Gist joined the food bank.

He coached Little League and basketball teams in Takoma Park, and refereed soccer games.

Survivors include his wife of 24 years, Arlene Goldberg-Gist of Silver Spring; a son, Joshua Gist of Silver Spring; a brother; and a sister.