

**Peter DeSimone,
1995 Ethical Society of St. Louis Humanist of the Year**

Sunday, April 2, 1995: Peter DeSimone has lived a life of service from the time he was one of the first Peace Corps volunteers until his present position as the executive director of the Missouri Association for Social Welfare.

Peter has characterized the progression of his life as a partial mystery. In fact, the best way to describe him might be *sui generis* (his own type). He could have been an educator, with his great verbal gifts. Or he could have applied his understanding of laws and politics as a lawyer or legislator. Certainly he could have been a worker in humanitarian causes thanks to his compassion and devotion to those in need. What he has done is combine all of these talents into a pursuit of social improvement that is uniquely his own.

Peter was raised in a working class family in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and earned a B.S. in civil engineering from the University of Connecticut in 1961. His life changed from this inauspicious start during the Kennedy administration, when Peter joined the Peace Corps. He spent two years in Tanganyika as a road engineer and a teacher at a technical college. He was next hired by the U.S. Information Agency to serve in Uganda and then Sierra Leone. Following this, he was supposed to spend a year in Washington learning Vietnamese in preparation for an assignment in Vietnam. But influenced by the climate of the times and his friends in the Peace Corps and in foreign service, Peter chose to change the direction of his career.

Influenced by the counter culture, but not totally part of it, Peter took a position in Kansas City, Missouri, with the Office of Economic Opportunity (the "War On Poverty"). He spent three years as a VISTA program manager supervising volunteers in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Iowa. He spent an additional three years in Atlanta, GA, before being laid off during the Nixon Administration.

Peter found the opportunity to re-enter human service work when he took a position in Jefferson City as director of the Missouri Association for Community Action, a statewide association of 18 antipoverty agencies, which operates in Missouri to this day. Then, in 1977, Peter became the executive director of the Missouri Association for Social Welfare.

At the MASW, Peter and his associates study legislation, communicate with lawmakers, and alert the public about issues associated with poverty and homelessness. The organization exists to be articulate for people who may not themselves be articulate or who have no access to channels of communication. The people he helps do not pay him—often, they may not even know he exists.

Peter's accomplishments are many, creating a list that summarizes the progressive ideas of the last hundred years. He has become an outstanding leader of advocacy for improved social policies in the areas of child welfare, nutrition, health, housing, social services, prison reform, and the environment. He has improved the accessibility and affordability of basic human services for low-income and vulnerable populations. He works with key members of the state legislature to assist in drafting bills that improve the quality of life of the poor and in finding public support for the initiatives. All of the issues that have concerned Peter over his career are presently back on the table and must be fought for all over again. As we honor Peter for his lifetime of effort in social justice, we look forward to his continuing leadership in our community.