

BUILDING A NEW COMMUNITY

STREET BY STREET

SOCIAL ISSUES: John Gardner, founder of Common Cause, continues a lifelong battle against society's cynicism and alienation.

By **RICHARD SCHEININ**
Knight-Ridder Newspapers
From Stanford

John W. Gardner sees cynicism "growing like a tumor" in the nation, but won't be discouraged. He sees politicians squabbling in Washington like "two scorpions in the bottle," but won't join the fray.

After six decades of public service, he knows about political rancor. He's been there. He knows about the public's alienation. That's nothing new. What's more, Gardner is convinced that the situation is fixable. Millions of Americans, he says, are ready to chip away at the prevailing sense of hopelessness by building new homes

government more responsive to citizens, and citizens more responsive to government. Now he is chairman of the board of the nonpartisan, Denver-based National Civic League, which has launched an Alliance for National Renewal that hopes to foster a "universal ethic of volunteerism" and stimulate cities to tackle their own problems.

In less than a year, with Gardner as its guide, the alliance has brought together more than 100 organizations that work at community development in more than 100 ways. It's "a new kind of governance," as Gardner puts it, a partnership between local governments, businesses and non-profit organizations.

From the National Council of La Raza to the Points of Light

He's 82, tall and patrician, his ample white hair swept neatly across his head. Gardner is a professor of public service at the Stanford Business School, not far from his campus home. He has long fingers and huge hands that he cups into an orb: This symbolizes the proverbial community, the nurturing body from which a healthy society grows. Gardner likens families and communities to "seed beds and greenhouses," because they are "the generators and preservers of values and ethical systems. The ideals of justice and compassion are nurtured in communities."

Without strong communities, he writes, freedom is threatened.

But in a country where a sense of community is destroyed by social disintegration and where

Gardner says, "reweaving the fabric" of society is a story that goes largely unreported.

Despite the conflagrations of the nation's well-known cultural wars, Gardner believes people can share enough "core values" to tackle problems together. His hope is that the alliance "will persuade Americans that their communities hold the future of the nation."

"We're trying to push the action back into the neighborhoods where people can engage in community activity," he explains. "It's something they can do with their own hands. It isn't Bosnia or the savings-and-loan crisis. They can get their hands on it. They're doing it in their churches and schools. They're cleaning up the streets and closing down

"They feel they have a role. People want meaning in their lives and in this turbulent era, a context of meaning is not necessarily handed down to you — it's not part of your inheritance as it once was. So you have to build it yourself."

This has been his life's work: building "contexts of meaning" for Americans. He is a visionary who remains forward-looking and refuses to get bogged down in the "scorpions in the bottle" scenario. After Robert Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, Gardner was offered his U.S. Senate seat from New York and declined. In 1972, he was prominently mentioned as a Republi-

National Urban Coalition, which joined business, labor, religious, civil rights, and political leaders in response to the urban rioting of the '60s. He went on to found Common Cause in 1970 because, as he explained at the time, "Our political and governmental processes have grown so unresponsive, so ill-designed for contemporary purposes, that they waste the taxpayers' money, mangle good programs and smother every good man who gets into the system."

Yet Gardner decided it was possible to do something for alienated citizens who worried that "their parties are in decay, their states aren't working right,

and co-director of the Alliance for National Renewal. "I see an underlying optimism that has never faded — and never even edges toward cynicism. ... Our nation is engaged in a rancorous political debate in Washington, but in other places there are good things happening. People have decided to take control over their own futures. And that message of national renewal is grounded in Gardner's work."



Gardner was born in Los Angeles in 1912. He majored in psychology, then got his doctorate in that subject from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1938; from this emerged his lifelong interest in human motivation.

There have always been those who look at Gardner askance: "Some academics and some journalists think I'm very didactic — that I'm, what's the word?

Moralistic," he says. "And it's true."

Gardner takes the long view of the evolving U.S. community. He concedes that the massive social programs of the past few decades have proved, in some respects, to have serious shortcomings. Yet he continues to stress the federal government's role: "There's no way that civil-rights legislation could have been accomplished other than nationally. ... When I was a youngster, black men were being lynched throughout the South, hanging from trees. Does anyone with a bit of sense want to go back to that?"

For information on the National Civic League's Alliance for National Renewal, call (303) 571-4343 or write to the National Civic League at 1445 Market St., Suite 300, Denver, Colo. 80202-1728.