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The Exchange Club

Youth of the Year Essay

March 25, 2019

### Volunteerism: A Catalyst in our Community

Our forty-first president, George H.W. Bush, once said, “any definition of a successful life must include serving others”. Though he made this famous statement in 1989, a full 12 years before I was born, I have chosen to define my future and my success with this quote in mind. To that end, I am a catalyst in my community by actively volunteering to serve others and encouraging my peers to serve others as well. I hope that by being a catalyst in this way, I can change the perception of teenagers and what is important to us.

I believe that I am a catalyst in my community because I actively seek to help others. We all can look around our city, state, and nation and see challenges that need to be overcome. However, it’s not enough to simply identify a problem, we have to step up and be a part of the solution to these issues. One of the ways I have been a catalyst for service is by helping children, especially those with life-threatening illnesses. I have served as a member of the Teen Advisory Board at the Willett Children’s Hospital at Memorial Health. During my term on the board, I spent many hours visiting with and assisting pediatric patients. When we determined the patients needed more items to keep them busy and entertained while they are sick, I decided to fundraise to obtain these items. I raised over \$1,000 to purchase more games and toys to help the patients.

Through my volunteer work at the children’s hospital, I realized that when a child or teenager is critically ill, the top priority is their health and recovery. Sometimes, they are so

focused on who they are as a patient, they forget what it's like to be a regular kid with a normal life. Their physical health is such an issue that their emotional health becomes secondary. I decided to see what I could do to help pediatric hospital patients get back a sense of normalcy, so I contacted the For A Day Foundation. The For A Day Foundation is a non-profit organization that is committed to "creating emotionally therapeutic experiences for seriously ill children - and providing them and their families with a joyful and much needed diversion from the strain of chronic treatment". The foundation serves these children through our "Queen for a Day" and "Hero for a Day" programs. For the girls, we go into the hospitals and give them a makeover - we do their nails, their makeup, and give them a crown to keep. For the boys, we provide superhero or sports hero items for them to dress up in and keep.

As the name of the foundation implies, these children get to have a day of fun, and focus on their emotional health for a day. It is my hope that the joy they feel on their makeover day lasts for longer than a day, and gets them through the challenging and difficult times in their treatment. In order to fund the makeover days for patients here in Georgia, I made it my mission to fundraise for the foundation. Through bake sales, dress out of uniform days, and generous donations, I was able to raise enough money to help the foundation continue our work here in Georgia. I was honored to be named the National Young Ambassador for the For A Day Foundation and plan to continue my work with the foundation for many years.

My commitment to chronically ill children has expanded to include causes that aim to prevent serious illnesses and injuries as well. This year, I was selected to represent the Justice for Children foundation as their youth representative. The JFC foundation is the driving force behind the Heads in Helmets campaign. I was able to speak to members of the community about the importance of helmets in preventing traumatic brain injury, and give helmets to children who

don't own one. It is my hope that through the Heads in Helmets campaign, we can prevent life altering injuries for children.

My goal is to have my volunteer work serve as an example to others my age. I believe that sometimes people of my generation are thought of as self-centered and far too addicted to technology to be aware of the needs of those around them. Unfortunately, in some instances, that is a fair assessment. However, I strive to be a catalyst for change in the priorities of teenagers, and how we are perceived as citizens in our communities. Recently, I had the opportunity to speak to a group of middle school students about volunteerism, and about finding the causes that matter to them as individuals. I was able to share my experience of seeing a need, and finding an organization that I could work with to meet that need. Most importantly, I told them to never let their age or inexperience stop them from lending a hand or their voices.

In conclusion, I am honored to be a candidate for the Youth of the Year award. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you how I use volunteerism to be a catalyst in my community, to both make an impact as an individual and to encourage others to volunteer. My goal is to be successful as measured by helping others, and to encourage other people my age to have a positive impact on their community.