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The Most Important Lessons Learned at Yale

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By Kaitlyn Sabin

Katie Sabin graduated from Yale College this May. For the past four years, she volunteered with the Yale Hunger Heroes (now known as “Yale Community Kitchen”), a group that serves in partnership with Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen. As one of the Hunger Heroes Coordinators, Katie

has also served as an ex officio Honorary Board Member at DESK, attending monthly Board meetings and quarterly Program Committee meetings. This fall, she will continue to serve the community as part of Teach for America. We are very proud of the great work Katie has done for DESK and the Yale Hunger Heroes, and we thank her for her deep commitment to serving those in need.—ed.

For the past four years, I've had the privilege of serving as a coordinator for Yale Hunger Heroes – the student-run soup kitchen in downtown New Haven, right next door to DESK. Each Friday and Saturday night, we made our way around the Yale dining halls, collected any leftover food, and served a free, hot meal to members of the city's homeless and working poor communities. These weekend nights began as a way to get away from my homework for a couple hours, but they ultimately became the most important part of my Yale experience.

To summarize my time with Hunger Heroes is nearly impossible; indeed, it would do a disservice to the range of meals we prepared, to the diverse group of guests we served, to the indescribably good and indescribably bad nights we had together: the time we dressed up for Halloween, the time we set the fire alarm off, the time we invited an a cappella group to perform, the list goes on and on. However, across these memories and experiences, I have been moved—in fact, I have been changed—by the compassion demonstrated on both sides of the service line.

Unlike many high schools and other universities even, Yale does not have a community service requirement for any of its students. That is, the success of each meal depended entirely on the willingness and *desire* of students to leave their rooms, cut some sandwiches, and interact with the larger New Haven population; it depended on pure

compassion. Of course, we had our regular volunteers—the ones who showed up rain or shine, the first week of class or deep within midterms. They're the people who knew many of our guests' names, the ones who scrubbed dishes to make the night go a little easier, the ones who left the kitchen with four simple words: "see you next week." Yet, there were countless faces that didn't show up on a weekly basis. They were the students who came once or twice a semester, the ones who didn't know exactly what to do but were eager to help in any way possible, the ones who left the kitchen with four simple but different words: "this was really great."

I am profoundly grateful for each and every one of these volunteers, and the fight against hunger and homelessness needs both types: it needs the people who are tirelessly committed to serving underserved communities, who fight every day and every week. It needs the regulars. But it also needs allies in every field and discipline, those who come to the kitchen expecting to see homelessness but see *people* instead, those who find unexpectedly that serving others is "really great." It needs any and all people moved by compassion, no matter how frequently.

And yet, some of the greatest acts of compassion were not from the volunteers but from the guests themselves. One Friday night this past January, we found ourselves with exactly enough food to go around—no more, no less. Everybody was fed, all the food was gone. As we were beginning to clean up for the night, a single man walked into the kitchen looking for dinner. Regretfully, we told him we had already served all the food for the night. We scurried to find anything with which to fill his tray, but by the time we emerged with a piece of fruit and half a sandwich, he was sitting down and eating a full meal. Other guests had contributed part of their dinners so this man could have his own. It was the ultimate act of compassion.

More than anything else, my time with Hunger Heroes has given me a new perspective on *compassion*, this buzzword often thrown around in political and moral discourse without elaboration on its substance. I used to think “compassion” was synonymous with “sympathy” or “empathy”; I used to think it was a feeling. However, over the past four years, I’ve come to learn that compassion is much more than a passive feeling. It is inherently active, it *literally moves*. Compassion moves the Yale student from the library to the soup kitchen. Compassion moves the soup kitchen guest from his/her table to the hungry man’s empty tray. I genuinely hope compassion moves you to DESK, Hunger Heroes, or your nearest food rescue program because it is only then that you will see how compassion becomes truly transformative.

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