



2021 Recipient ~ Cristiana Santos
Maria Regina High School, Class of 2021

The word "service" oftentimes gets a bad rap. Many think that serving others is beneath them, that it's doing something for nothing. I feel sorry for these people. Clearly they have missed the point and haven't ever truly experienced the joy and fulfillment that comes with devoting your time and energy, heart and soul, to a cause, to a community of people that cannot properly be of service to themselves.

I am extremely fortunate to have engaged in a number of service opportunities that have enriched my life. One such experience is my volunteer position as an assistant teacher in the CCD program at my former elementary school, Annunciation, in Crestwood. I began to volunteer in 2018, as a sophomore at Maria Regina. The program runs from November to June and classes take place every Wednesday from 3:15-5:15 pm. Annunciation truly holds a special place in my heart. It gave me a strong foundation of faith, charity, humility, and Christianity, and at the moment I graduated, I knew that I wanted to give back to the place that gave me so much. I found the opportunity in this program. It combines all of the things that I am passionate about; namely, my faith, helping children (I want to be a pediatrician) and giving back to my parish community. Oftentimes, the children cling to the younger teenage volunteers, and I take the responsibility of working with them to learn about our faith very seriously. I love engaging with the little kids, teaching them about God, singing hymns with them and answering their questions, no matter how silly they are!

In addition to serving the children of my parish community, I have also had the fortune of serving the children of my cultural community by volunteering as an assistant teacher for a Children's Italian Classes at the Westchester Italian Cultural Center/Generoso Pope Foundation in Tuckahoe since the 8th grade. The class, made up of approximately 15 students ranging in age from 4-6, were held on Saturdays from 10:30am-12pm from the months of September to June.

As a young child, I took classes at the center with my cousins and absolutely loved it, mostly because the teacher's assistant who volunteered there back then was a young girl with whom I connected. She made things so much fun and helped me become more confident in speaking, and singing!, In Italian. I wanted to be able to do that for young children as well. And am happy to say that I have many times over. My favorite time of the program has always been during the religious holidays of Christmas and Easter because they are times of such tremendous joy. The children learn all about the celebrations and traditions in Italy, including how to make delicious Italian treats that are associated with each!

But far and away, the most rewarding part of my years of volunteer experience at the center was with one particular student-Luca. He was a five year old boy with special needs. His muscles did not function properly and he could not walk or sit up straight without assistance. One day, Luca asked me to help him use an eraser, a task that most kids accomplish easily. I got down on eye level, told him how to say it in

Italian and showed him how to use it. The look on his face was something that I will never, ever forget. He broke out into a huge smile and his face lit up. His mom teared up and told me that he never had a moment in any "class" before, and then I began to tear up. I learned a tremendous lesson that day -- no act of kindness is too small.

As if that experience could have enriched me for a lifetime, I was blessed to have a similar experience during another volunteer opportunity right before Covid shut the world down. I visited the sick children at Blythedale Children's Hospital with the members of the Greenburgh PD. These children were sick and in pain, yet they found joy in a simple magic show in which I performed. Seeing the smiles on their faces during the performance was extremely fulfilling. One little girl in particular, like Luca, touched my heart and soul. As she watched the show, she began to cry. I was standing next to her, and she held out her arms as if she wanted me to hold her. The nurse tending to her put the little girl in my arms. A huge smile broke out on her precious face, and I hugged her. I realized that as I comforted her, she was the one comforting me. It was difficult being in that room, seeing those beautiful souls all suffering from one affliction or another, but her hug told me that she was ok.

All of these experiences and more have strengthened my resolve to remain steadfast in my commitment to service. Should I be honored with the award from St Vincent's, I vow to carry out its mission during my time at Boston College where I will strive to be a woman for others, and beyond.