



**2021 Recipient ~ Isabel Laing
Scarsdale High School, Class of 2022**

On Sunday afternoons, a few of my friends and I, go to a place called Pleasantville cottage to spend some time playing with the girls who stay there. The cottage is a place for kids with severe learning disabilities whose parents cannot currently care for them. Often the parent is an addict or is in such extreme poverty that caring for a child isn't an option at the moment, so the kid gets placed in the cottage until a more permanent home is found. The 15 kids who live in the cottage attend a school nearby specializing in teaching kids with similar issues. While the primary concern is the girls' educational issues, they also suffer from a whole other host of problems brought on by being abandoned at such a young age. I have been committed to working at the cottages for the last three years and spend numerous hours there each week, adding up to about 55 hours in total.

Attending the cottage at first was a bit awkward. We'd start by asking everyone how their days were and moving on to more generic questions like their favorite color. It was clear we were having a tough time connecting with the kids. It was challenging to try and find something in common with a kid whose upbringing seemed so drastically different from our own. On the car ride home from one of our first meetings, I reflected on how awkward and forced everything felt. The kids would talk to one another as if we weren't there, and when we did finally find something to talk about, the conversation would end quickly, and silence would take over. I began brainstorming ideas on how to improve the situation and decided to bring some music next time. Music, the undeniable connecting force, would help bring us together.

The next time I went to the cottage, I brought a speaker and some beads along with me. We blasted Justin Beiber on the speakers and everyone laughed together as we made fun of his new haircut. This seemingly minor action changed the relationship with the girls completely.

Rather than accept this subpar experience, I worked to improve the reality. In the same way that St. Vincent's understands that creating a community requires commitment, I understood the importance of staying committed to building a bridge between our two communities. This small step sparked an opening that helped us begin to form the relationship with these girls that we so desperately wanted. The music led to more natural conversations about our favorite artists and passionate debates about why we did or did not HATE Justin Bieber. Once we felt comfortable with one another, the entire atmosphere shifted: from awkward silence to lighthearted vibrate conversation, eventually turning into a safe space where people would open up about their past traumas and experiences. We fostered an "atmosphere of support," Just as St. Vincent's Hospital does and highlights in their missions and values statement.

My decision to refuse to be content with how things were ended up bettering the experience for everyone. I've been told I'm the type of person who can't give up until things feel comfortable, honest and right. I took away from this experience the importance of not settling and continuing to look for ways to improve others' lives. I could have just left my volunteering experience as being subpar and moved on with my life, but instead, I worked through it because I knew I had the power to be able to connect and help others. As I continue in my path I know that giving back will always be a part of my journey.