

## **St. Vincent's Hospital Youth Award Essay**

As I unpacked the box of elementary school books and started to fill the empty book cart, I heard the footsteps of the children running towards me and excitedly asking if I could read with them. I had never believed in the power of books and the impact of equality in education until I started to volunteer in the Reach and Read Program at Open Door Family Medical Centers in Port Chester. As a student interested in science and medicine, I first applied to be an Open Door volunteer in hopes to learn more about healthcare. Because I was only 14 years old, I was then assigned to Reach Out and Read, a program that provides books and teaches young patients reading skills in order to build a strong foundation for academic success. For me, the opportunities and resources available at Harrison High School have enabled me to easily succeed as an honor student and IB diploma candidate. However, I quickly learned that even in neighboring communities, children struggled due to inequalities in education, sometimes leaving no choice but to become disinterested and drop out. Through volunteer work at Open Door, I came to realize the true extent of the educational crisis in low-income communities. I was shocked to learn that more than half of New York City public school third graders read below grade level. In areas of concentrated poverty, the lack of resources and inequalities in education make it almost hopeless for many children to break free from the cycle of poverty. I questioned how it was possible for students in New York City Title 1 schools to learn and excel when only one age-appropriate book exists for almost every 300 students.

For this reason, I decided that I would help children in such communities acquire the resources necessary to succeed in school and encourage them to develop a passion for reading. Throughout the past three years, I have volunteered over 70 hours at the Reach Out and Read Program at Open Door Medical Centers where I have assisted children select age-appropriate books, read with them, and reinforced good study skills. I also noticed that the book cart is oftentimes lacking age-appropriate and popular book titles so I have reached out to local elementary schools and other organizations for book donations and hosted book drives to support the program. I have donated over a thousand books and have currently collected hundreds more.

I also volunteered at New York Junior Tennis and Learning (NYJTL) since my freshman year of high school. NYJTL aims to bring together underprivileged communities from all five boroughs of New York City and uses tennis as a stepping stone in order to inspire a passion for learning. Once a month, I have attended day-long events including the Fall Festival, Serve and Connect, and Youth Tournaments.

In addition to my community service locally, I wanted to make a greater impact worldwide and applied to be a student ambassador for the non-profit organization, Give More HUGS. This organization focuses on ensuring students' access to a quality education in the United States and abroad. Give More HUGS has become an invaluable part of my life since it has helped me grow

as a leader and impact the lives of many students. For the past two years, I have spent two to four hours each week involved in meetings, preparing for events, and organizing book drives. I have also assisted in book signings at the Harrison Public Library in an effort to raise awareness and fundraise. As part of this event, people signed inspirational quotes or messages in the books to personalize each book and inspire students to read. Afterwards, I was responsible for delivering the books to Title 1 schools. This year, I have organized my own event, A Book-Fair Share on the Road. I first contacted some of the Local Girls and Boys Club to tell them about the mission of Give More HUGS and then set up dates that the ambassadors from the tri-state area could deliver and read books to these children in need.

As the president of the Harrison High School Spanish Club, I have also had the ability to motivate my peers to enlist in the mission of Give More HUGS and collaborated on book signing events in an effort to inscribe books with Spanish messages of hope to deliver to Puerto Rico. Books signed in Spanish were also donated to ESL classrooms in New York and New Jersey. By working with others that share my passion and having the ability to raise awareness, I feel that together we are making a big difference for one community at a time.

This has especially been true even during this Covid-19 pandemic time. I feel that educational inequalities may have a greater impact on children already adversely affected by the educational crisis, so it is important for me to remain dedicated to my service. I am working with Give More HUGS to reach out to underserved schools and offer online assistance with homework and tutoring. I am also engaging in weekly virtual book read alouds, so children can still experience someone reading a book to them who otherwise would not.

My commitment and service to my community, local and beyond, has become an important part of my life and has taught me the strength of advocacy. The mission of St. Vincent's Hospital to be respectful, compassionate, provide excellence in service and have dignity for human life not only reflects my outlook but the high standard that I strive for in my daily life.