



**2021 Recipient ~ Lila Zacks  
Byram Hills High School, Class of 2021**

**One Step at a Time**

Four years ago, when I was in eighth grade, I became more aware of the major issues in the world around me, and felt a significant urge to help in my community. At first, I felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the hardships occurring and could not decide where to begin: endangered animals, climate change, mental health issues, people without a facility to call home and the list goes on. Finally, I came to the decision to help underprivileged children, realizing that helping our youth will create a brighter future. If I could help these children feel supported and realize their potential, no matter what background and difficulties they have arisen from, their future and thus our world will have a better tomorrow.

Once I learned about the Cottage School and its mission, I was instantly intrigued. Through my research, I learned that the Pleasantville Cottage School program aids emotionally troubled children from the ages of seven to sixteen, and helps to improve children's lives through therapy and engagement, so they can ultimately go back to their respective homes. This organization aligned with my desire to connect with young vulnerable children to improve their lives for a better tomorrow. As soon as I learned about their teen volunteer opportunity, I immediately enrolled. Initially, I went in with the mindset that I would help their children, little did I know how much of an impact this program would have on me. One Sunday a month, for the past four years, I have spent two hours playing games, coloring, talking and connecting with children who have been through numerous tragedies.

Overtime, I have grown to have a better understanding of how blessed I am to have a home, family, friends, and an education, which greatly motivated me to seek out ways I could help the world in general, and more specifically with my involvement at the Cottage School. Starting in middle school, I began to participate consistently within the Cottage School community and realized, these children need someone to look up to, a person outside of their Cottage School community that can motivate them to see their own potential. This understanding came from a program at my high school that changed the course of my high school career. When I was a freshman entering high school, there was an amazing program called 'Mentor' where a senior student would support and mentor the incoming freshman class. Being a part of this program had a huge impact on my success in high school, as it eased my stresses about entering a new school, helped give me the skills I needed to succeed, and role models to look up to. Similar to this, the children at the Cottage school greatly benefit from a mentor.

Whether it is someone they can look up to, bond with or feel connected to as they go through their rough patches in life. The time I spend with these children allows the opportunity for us to bond, help them understand that life is full of opportunities, and there is so much more beyond their small community. I chose to volunteer at the Cottage School propelled by the recognition both of the blessings I have in life and the impact I can have on these children.

As I strive to be a mentor for these children, I have experienced unforgettable moments, which further prompt my drive. With my enthusiastic personality, I have easily formed bonds and connected with many students I would have never encountered if I had not joined the Cottage School community. One story I can clearly recall, was when a young girl named Arianna had a visit with her Grandmother during our volunteer hours. When she first returned to our group session, she was extremely upset about leaving her family. I instantly walked over and began to ask her questions about the monkey on her shirt, and within minutes she was back to her bubbly self. This is an example of how I have learned to use my strengths, such as my ability to connect, listen and engage with a positive outlook, to relate to these children. Another memory that has stayed with me is meeting a girl who was my age and quite similar to me, other than the hardships she had faced in her life. While I do not remember her name, I can still recall walking into the Cottage School, and seeing her head down, sitting alone in the corner. She was new and intimidated by the volunteers so I walked over to her and began a conversation. As we spoke, and she began to open up, I realized how similar we were. This interaction helped put into perspective my life's blessings and realize that we are all people who deserve to feel accepted, loved, and important.

The Cottage School program has helped countless children grow into adults who will live successfully on their own, and I am extremely proud to be a part of this community. What I love about the program is that it finds each child's strength, and uses this to help with their areas of difficulty or weakness. At the Cottage School, there are structured school days, job skill workshops, internships, a youth advisory council, and community employment opportunities that help ready them to lead independent and productive lives. Once a month, when I volunteer, I come up with a specific activity along with supplies to engage, connect, and motivate everyone to have a great time together during our visiting hours. These projects allow the students to feel comfortable with the volunteers, and allow further connections to be created. One month, before Halloween, I brought in fifteen pumpkins with markers, snacks, and soda and had a small Halloween celebration. All of the students had massive smiles across their faces, while engaging with the activity, and the room was filled with laughter, chatter and music. The importance of emotionally vulnerable children creating safe and supportive relationships through shared interests is important in their development.

From my many years of volunteering at the Cottage School, I am happy to say that now I am a mentor for not only the students at the Cottage School, but my peers in my community. I have learned that helping others has allowed me to believe in myself and strive for a greater world. Joining this program was the introduction of my

charitable work. During the pandemic, it reinvigorated me to find ways to give back to others during these challenging and unprecedented times. A few months ago, I began volunteering with an outstanding charity called 914 Cares. This organization works to collect necessities, such as clothing, diapers, and shoes, for people who are less fortunate, in order to ease their stresses. Over time, I became a member of their Advisory Board. I have realized how, similar to myself, many in my school community may be looking for ways to help in our community. Now, I am creating a club at my school to encourage my peers to volunteer and realize the importance of giving to others. Volunteering at the Cottage School has not only allowed me to make a difference in the lives of these children, but it has also enhanced my desire to help others as a way to improve the world around me, one step at a time.