



**2021 Recipient ~ Peter Gillespie
iona Preparatory School, Class of 2021**

As a child and even for much of my high school career, reading was a challenging task for me due to amblyopia, an eye condition that slowed my reading speed. As a kid I would come home crying because I couldn't read as well as the other kids in high school I felt left behind as other students flew through reading assignments. I did not want other children to struggle with reading the same way I did.

While there were not many with amblyopia in my community, I did tackle a more prevalent obstacle to reading in my community: the language barrier. My local community has a large population of children who do not speak English as a first language, setting them behind others in reading and eventually leading to even more drastic divides in education. Each child deserves the opportunity to succeed in education regardless of their background, and I thus endeavored to mend this gap.

I began a reading program at the library. After selling whatever personal belongings I could at a garage sale and collecting plastic bottles to be returned at the supermarket, I raised enough money to provide four books to each of the 20 children to keep and grow their own library. I created crafts and worksheets to improve and spark an interest in reading, and with friends as volunteers we dutifully completed each book, craft, and worksheet.

At first the children were clearly flustered, intensely staring at the page while slowly stumbling over the words just as I had. In the children I saw myself, initially struggling in the same way, but I knew that with support behind them they would overcome this barrier. Each session I watched the children spark a curiosity that grew brighter, learning not just the basics of reading but excelling, and I knew I had to continue to fan this flame of curiosity even when Covid-19 could have quenched their efforts.

I continued this program virtually during Covid-19, filming book readings for the children and still sending out worksheets in Spanish and English. Upon witnessing the immense growth of the children, I wanted to expand my efforts beyond my local community to give all children the opportunity to reach beyond the educational barriers they face. I hosted a Valentine's Day sale to raise funds for charities with a global impact, and eventually presented my program at the Loukimi Good Deeds Celebration where I collected even more donations to be used by charities with a more global outreach.

After 50 hours of efforts, a total of more than \$800 and 355 books, the program ignited a burning desire to grow in service even more. I became more curious about the barrier's minorities face, and I have partaken in DEI discussions with speakers at my school about microaggressions against minorities. I was able to speak with past alumni of my school to understand and hear about how our community has grown, and still looking to make giant leaps in progress.

After learning about the obstacles women in poverty face in obtaining proper hygiene products, I began an initiative to provide feminine hygiene products to

homeless women and to end the luxury tax on feminine hygiene in certain states, raising more than \$500 to be donated to the ShoeBox Project. Most recently I have focused on bullying, LGBTQ acceptance, and mental health amongst young men, all issues that need to be addressed.

I began the "Iona Tough" movement in my school, providing students the opportunity to discuss these issues in front of the entire school and designing Iona Tough masks to show unity and solidarity in our school community, raising more than \$200 to be donated to the Tyler Clementi Foundation. Through service, I seek to ensure others know that I care for them, I respect them, and that their life has value and through support they can reach their full potential.