

As a young leader, how have you been a catalyst for positive change and contributed to inspiring your community?

Dream it! Plan it! Do it!

by

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For as long as I can remember I have been involved in serving my community - through boy scouts, through leadership roles in Key Club, and on my own. I am a first generation American and my parents, immigrants to the United States, have passed on to me an appreciation for my many blessings. I believe that we all have something to offer and an obligation to share with those less fortunate our time, unique talents, financial support, or something as simple as the pleasure of our company.

The first time I initiated a community service activity of my own I was fourteen. On my first trip to St. Monica's nursing home to entertain the residents with my piano music, I wasn't sure what to expect. I didn't know if the people would be friendly and responsive, or if I would just have to endure an uncomfortable forty-five minutes alone at the piano. I sat down on the piano bench, took a deep breath, and began to play a shaky rendition of *Sky Blue*. That song seemed to last forever but when I finished the final chord, the crowd applauded enthusiastically and their smiles said it all. That moment was a turning point in my life. I realized that it took just a small amount of time and energy to really brighten up someone's day. This has kept me going back for four years.

To go from entertaining a group of octogenarians to professionally recording a CD and selling it for charity might seem like a big leap, but that's exactly what happened. Two years ago, I initiated a service project to combine my passion for music with my desire to benefit the community. I professionally recorded a CD entitled *A New Beginning*, a collection of my own piano compositions, found corporate sponsorship, and donated 100% of the proceeds to charity. As I ventured into this project, I certainly had doubts about my abilities and how the music would be received. Nonetheless my project, *Notes for Hope*, became a reality and a success. I

sold 1,000 CDs at \$7 each, raising almost \$7,000 which I donated to two charities: the United Way of Racine County, earmarked for the Caring for Kids initiative, and The American Kidney Fund, to be used for people who cannot afford dialysis. I thank the nursing home residents, in part, for giving me the confidence to continue composing and playing my compositions publicly.

The success of *Notes for Hope* gave me the confidence to launch several new service projects last fall. For me, the *Christmas Katrina* project was especially satisfying because I initiated and led the project, found a corporate sponsor to cover shipping costs, and involved 100+ Key Club members. We made Christmas gift boxes filled with small toys, candy, school supplies, and hygiene items for children in hurricane-devastated Mississippi. It made an immediate impact on the kids who received the gifts at a difficult time, and may have been the only gifts they received that Christmas. The project is being adopted by Key Club as an annual event. Also, I began working to establish a mentoring program between the Hispanic children of a local middle school and my high school. I hope that my peers, apart from tutoring these kids, will carry the project forward, become role models, and encourage the children to pursue higher education.

Many of my initiatives have received attention in the local and national press, and people often ask why I take on the projects that I do. The simple answer is that I can: anyone can if he/she really wants to! Any road blocks I encounter simply serve to fuel my enthusiasm for solutions. Being an Eagle Scout has reinforced my commitment to service. I am pleased to give of myself with no expectations, but what I find is that community service often brings unexpected rewards and joy in serving others. As the creator of *Notes for Hope*, I benefited enormously in ways I would never have imagined. I learned the basics of how to make a CD, and how to prepare a press kit. I spent hours writing marketing proposals to solicit corporate sponsorship, arranging

retail locations, and promoting the CD. I visited local clubs and organizations to pitch the CD and ended up making strong connections with people in the community. With each presentation, I became a better speaker. Most importantly, I learned what can spring from a simple idea. It did seem like a wild idea at first: record a CD and sell it for charity, but I made the project a success and inspired others to find their own unique ways to use their talents.

“To whom much is given, much is expected”.... a phrase often quoted by the Headmaster of my school. I was very fortunate to receive a generous scholarship to the Prairie School, and I have never forgotten his words. The award inspired me to work hard in the classroom, in leadership roles, and in student government. I was a four-year varsity athlete in two sports, captained both teams, and led the soccer team to a state championship in my senior year. I have always had the desire to lead others and give back to my community, and knowing that people have invested in me and my education, I feel a major responsibility to use my time and energy in a way that will benefit others and give a sense of pride to those who have supported me.

Recently, I co-founded an international charitable organization called Eagle Dreams (www.eagledreams.org). We are working to provide school supplies for children in Uganda in partnership with the Invisible Children network. I am excited to look for creative ways to use my time and talents and test the limits of what I can accomplish. In some ways I feel I am only limited by my imagination, and one day I hope to be a business executive playing a major role in my community.