

teen ink

By teens, for teens

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Making a Difference

How do you make a difference in the world?

HOW I MADE A DIFFERENCE FOR STRAY CATS



ARTICLE BY SANIYA ISKAKOVA, ASTANA, KAZAKHSTAN

PHOTO BY MARIAN DE SILVA, GAMPAHA, SRI LANKA

In our neighborhood, five stray cats made their home in the shadows, silently asking for help. Every day, I would see them huddled together, their fur matted and their eyes filled with a mix of hope and fear. As I watched them, I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to take action. These weren't just cats. They were creatures that deserved care and love, and I decided to become the one who would provide it for them.

Every morning, I would gather cat food, excited yet anxious about what I might encounter. I would venture out to our courtyard, pouring the food into small piles. Each time I arrived, the cats would appear, cautiously at first, then rushing toward me as if they had been waiting all along. This simple act of feeding them became a ritual that strengthened our bond.

As winter approached, my concern grew. The cold was biting, and I couldn't bear the thought of those innocent creatures suffering in this weather. I decided to take a bold step, and I transformed the damp basement of our building into a safe haven for them. I set up cozy corners with blankets and even created makeshift beds from old cushions. It became a place where they could escape the harsh wind.

However, not everyone shared my compassion. One neighbor was adamant about getting rid of the cats. He wanted to call animal control to have them removed, believing that they were a nuisance. Our debates became heated, but I stood my ground, advocating for these vulnerable beings. I knew that they had no one else to defend them, and I couldn't let them be thrown out into the streets. As weeks passed, I felt compelled to find loving homes for these cats. I reached out to friends and family and posted on social media. To my delight, three of them found new families who promised to love and cherish them. I was over the moon, knowing they would no longer face the dangers of the streets. Each adoption felt like a triumph — a small victory in my mission to make a difference.

Then, there was one cat who stole my heart

completely. I named him Joy, a handsome black-and-white boy. When I took him in, it was as if he had always belonged in my home. His playful antics brought laughter to my days, and his gentle purring at night brought me peace. Joy became more than just a pet; he was my confidant, my source of joy, and a reminder of why I had embarked on this journey in the first place.

Through this experience, I learned valuable lessons about compassion, responsibility, and the impact one person can make. I discovered that kindness doesn't require grand gestures — sometimes, it's as simple as showing up for those in need. I found strength in my

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voice, learning to advocate for the voiceless. Now, every time I see a stray cat, I remember my journey with Joy and the others. I am reminded that we all have the power to make a difference, no matter how small our actions may seem. Whether it's feeding a stray, advocating for animal welfare, or simply spreading kindness in our communities, every effort counts. In the end, my quest to help these cats transformed not only their lives but also mine. It taught me that love and compassion can create ripples of change, inspiring others to join the cause. I may have started this journey alone, but it has led me to a community of compassionate individuals who believe in making the world a better place for all beings.

And so, I continue to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves, hoping that my story encourages others to do the same. Together, we can create a world where every creature, no matter how small, feels safe, loved, and valued. ♦



a reward with no cost

ARTICLE BY ENZO PAESANO, CORAL GABLES, FL

ARTWORK BY ANONYMOUS

When I was 14 years old, I started volunteering every other Saturday at Breakthrough Miami, a non-profit organization that offers academic enrichment opportunities to underrepresented middle-school students. When the summer arrived, I spent every weekday for six weeks teaching Math and Language Arts, as well as academic electives like Robotics. I'd also play sports with the "scholars" during physical electives. This kind of time commitment might sound like a lot, but my mother and grandma, who understand the value of giving back, encouraged me to continue.

At first, I was skeptical. I was new to the act of volunteering and thought that the scholars wouldn't notice my presence. I also thought it would be impossible to balance other activities. Weekends already consisted of homework, baseball games and practice, and spending time with friends and family. I was also shy, simply teaching the scholars and helping them with activities rather than trying to connect with them on a personal level. But I kept on going back. Soon, the scholars were running up to greet me in the mornings. Waking up early on Saturdays was hard, but small acts like these cheered me up, putting a smile on my face and energizing me to teach.

When I was in middle school, I always looked up to older people to set examples for me. With the consistent presence of role models, the Breakthrough scholars were surrounded by a positive community. I realized that our kindness and curiosity were reflected in them. Service can be contagious. Seeing someone care for members of their community encourages others, even those who might not typically go out of their way to help. This past year, I started The Book Link, collecting books through donations and delivering them to facilities in need. I thought that this would be a solo project, but when I began posting my progress on social media, peers at my school began to reach out, wanting to help.

Community service is like moving a boulder; once one person starts pushing, it attracts others to help. Once I began to understand what volunteering is and the amazing effect it has on ourselves and others, that bolder kept on rolling. ♦

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ARTICLE BY NEVYL PANICKER,
CERRITOS, CA

ARTWORK BY ANONYMOUS

BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE AUTISM COMMUNITY

Three years ago, I volunteered for a program called SunnyBlue, which works with people with autism. When I signed up to help this program, my mind viewed this as some kind of "easy" outlet for getting community service hours. I saw myself as not much more than an extra set of hands. The value of the work was something I was not familiar with. But that changed once I stepped onto the badminton court. Helping run the activity, I discovered I was involved in something so much more than I expected.

On both sides of the net, I got to know the participants

I WAS PART OF PROVIDING A SAFE PLACE FOR [PARTICIPANTS] TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES AND TO EMPOWER CONFIDENCE IN WHO THEY WERE

individually. I learned to love their personalities, quirks,

and the explosion of fun they have with each swing of the racket. One of these moments was enabling a player with autism to become a real part of the group. With just a little bit of guidance and patience, I watched them grow in confidence, their smiles getting wider with every rally. At that moment, I realized my position wasn't just about helping everything go smoothly; I was part of providing a safe place for them to express themselves and to empower confidence in who they were. It was the excitement of those children and the resilience of their parents that opened my mind to the difference I could make by merely being there and being present. This experience not only changed my perception of community service but also taught me a valuable lesson in the building of authentic relationships.

Thereafter, I continued as an active SunnyBlue member, always committed to serving individuals with autism. Events like the meet-and-greet held with our local sheriff's department helped me bridge understanding with our neurodivergent kids, their families, and our very receptive police officers. This meeting opened doors for a greater understanding of the neuro

disorder and fostered a newfound sense of compassion within our city. In the organization, I had taken initiative as vice president to coach tennis lessons for our autistic participants. The outdoor experience helped them learn a new sport and further develop their social skills, building new interests. One of the highlights of my time with SunnyBlue was holding a talent show for our kids with autism. I even took the stage to perform with our talented individuals. Linked with the core skills they learned at SunnyBlue, our participants were allowed to express their particular talents, and our community was allowed to celebrate their skills in a supportive atmosphere. Today, my team and I have grown the organization into a total of 15 volunteers committed to improving the lives of individuals with autism and increasing awareness about the disorder in our community.

Through my journey at SunnyBlue, I have learned that the difference we make may be small in number, but it grows even more with every single person we reach and every connection we go out of our way to make. Be it through coaching or organizing events, I feel

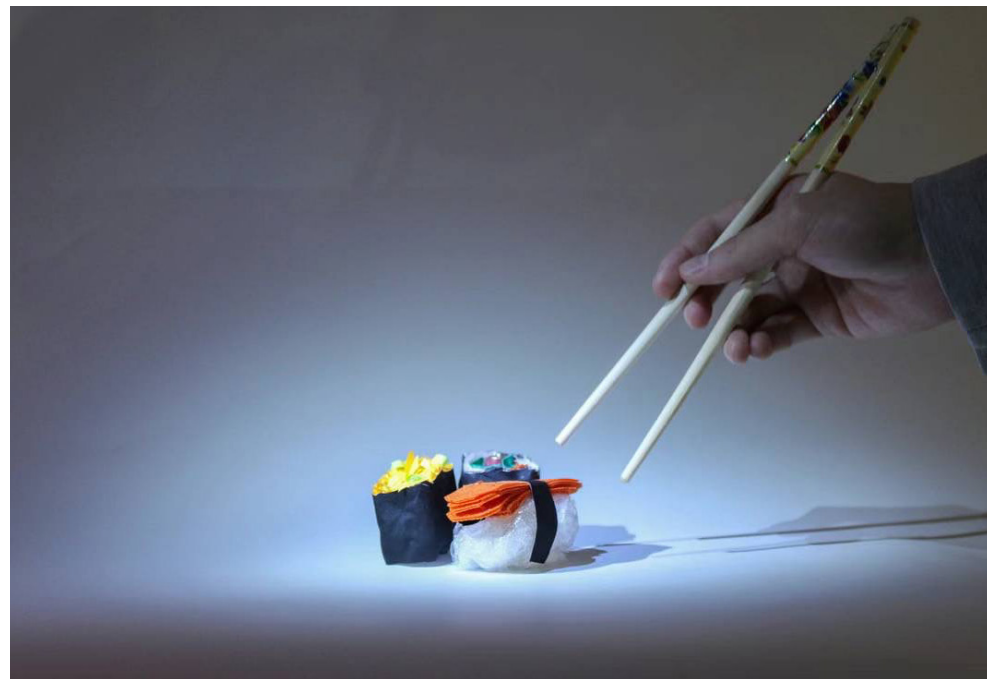
proud knowing that every contribution has helped

THIS EXPERIENCE CHANGED NOT ONLY MY PERCEPTION ABOUT COMMUNITY SERVICE BUT ALSO TAUGHT ME A VALUABLE LESSON IN THE BUILDING OF AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

create a welcoming space where our community's neurodivergent members can thrive! ♦

a focus on...

PHOTOGRAPHY



ECO-SUSHI
BY JUNYUAN BAO,
SUFFIELD, CT



AMAZING NATURE SERIES
BY NEVIN TAMILSELVAN, SAMMAMISH, WA



- 1 **NICE TO MEET YOU LONDON** BY ANONYMOUS
- 2 **UNDERPASS** BY ANONYMOUS
- 3 **FOGGY SHANGHAI** BY ZIXUAN WANG, FOSHAN, CHINA

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