

## **The Power of Volunteering**

Cleveland was built on a strong foundation of passion, struggle, pain and determination. Despite all of the setbacks from economic, social and political dilemmas, the city we know today wouldn't be the same without all of the hard work that was put into its growth years and years ago. Cleveland as we know it reflects many of the same downfalls and opportunities that have been around since its development, creating a bittersweet relationship with its residents.

Born and raised in Cleveland Heights, I have always been well aware of both the positive and negative attributes that Cleveland offers. Given the opportunity to be raised in such a unique, diverse culture has benefited me in ways that no other environment could have provided. This neighborhood has always carried a safe and welcoming atmosphere that unites people of all different backgrounds - something that many aren't fortunate enough to experience.

Today crime has become more than regular on the news, and hardships seem to be getting closer and closer to home. Poverty, hunger, crime and fear encompass the lives of everyone from all points along the Cleveland boarder. Seeing fights, theft, shootings, drugs and countless other crimes plague the streets has made it increasingly more difficult to try and find hope is such a repressed and difficult time.

Witnessing many of these things at school and around town, I have come to the conclusion that most people who partake in these destructive habits aren't given the opportunities they need to feel fulfillment. Regardless of whether or not these individuals have grown up in broken homes or bad neighborhoods, the main concern for everyone's safety is life enrichment and support from outside sources. Without having love and compassion from family can consequently make it difficult for self appreciation. By giving everyone the same treatment if not at home but at school and in the environment, we can start preventing such things from happening.

The crimes that are committed the majority of the time are usually less detrimental than others because they are simply done for attention. Everyone wants to be given the freedom to express themselves, so why not let this happen in a positive way? Some of the most talented artists came from difficult backgrounds that lacked support and motivation. If teenagers are given the chance to paint murals on buildings downtown,

or sell their artwork at street fairs, wouldn't that be better than robberies and graffiti all over buildings?

No matter what we try to do externally to help stop this from happening, the only way to truly end the destruction is by doing all we can to change the mindsets of those who don't know otherwise. Those who aren't exposed to anything good will never know what they need to do to reach their goals. Equal opportunity employers, fair trade companies, and internships can all be beneficial for people to realize how important it is to strive for success.

Although there are endless options of how we can rebuild Cleveland to what it was years ago, I think the most effective way to do this will be through volunteering. Helping your community and those in need is such an important part of life that most people never take the time to try. Speaking from experience, I know nothing can possibly be more influential on a person than dedicating your time to a cause that you believe in.

I step into the illuminated room of a dying patient on a typical Saturday at Hospice. This is not a hospital; it isn't a place for people to recover, though I can't say it hasn't happened before. I walk towards the frail figure on the bed, displace myself from my surroundings, and enter her world. As I introduce myself, I take her hand and hold it in mine. I look into her eyes glazed over with uncertainty. A glossy shine forms in the corner of one eye, but the teardrop hesitates to fall because her eyelid is too weak to close. A baby cries out in the hallway; a family celebrates a 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in the atrium, and the waves of Lake Erie slowly ice over almost freezing this moment. I study the wrinkles on the patient's face, marks of time and growth, and marvel at her beauty. As I squeeze her palm for reassurance, she slowly places her other hand on mine, alleviating any fear either of us might have.

The five years I've spent at Hospice have prepared me for some of the most emotionally challenging periods in my life. I've met hundreds of patients, strangers who would soon become close friends of mine. I walk through the threshold of their lives, bringing cookies, flowers, pictures, and stories to share. I bake or put on puppet shows with the patient's grandchildren, accompany lonely patients to activities in the atrium, take them around the building or the walkway along the lake, play card games, make collages and cards, or simply sit in their room with them so they know someone cares.

*Dr. Dale A. Kates Student Scholarship Application for Kimberly Hackman*

Out of all of the time I spend with the patients, there is nothing I value more than the stories I hear on these afternoons. I take note of the wisdom these humorous anecdotes, foreign escapades, childhood memories, and countless other tales provide. I aspire to lead a fulfilling life, making adventures of my own, so that I can be the storyteller one day.

As the weeks pass, I listen to these stories and tell my own. The weather becomes a rare topic, and humor seeps into conversation. We are no longer patient and volunteer talking, trying to make the best of this uncomfortable predicament. We are two friends, generations apart, celebrating the time we have with each other – however long that may be.

Like the patients, I do not acknowledge the illness that has brought us together. I can feel the pain they will not admit to, and the fear that is subtly hidden in their words. Despite the truth surrounding us, we carry on with our lives pretending until reality intrudes our sanctuary.

Carrying cupcakes on a plate, enough for any relatives who have also come to visit, I unexpectedly find the patient is no longer here. As I walk past the empty room, I can still remember the pictures, flowers, cards and decorations that once filled this space. I can hear the voice, the laughter and whistles that used to drift into the hallway. I turn around and continue walking through each wing, knocking on doors and introducing myself to new patients.

Though it is always difficult for me to move on, I could never deny an opportunity to hear new stories and meet more extraordinary patients. I could just as easily forget about these people and all of the time I have spent with them by secluding myself in a room and doing paperwork or answering calls. I could volunteer at a hospital where people recover and go home, or even stop volunteering altogether. I go back each week because assisting others is a powerful call I can't ignore. Hospice is, and will always be, an important part of my life.

I am grateful for being offered this unique experience, as intimidating as it was at first. The years I have spent volunteering have put my life into perspective and continue to make me more accepting of whatever my future holds. Now I can only hope that with time comes change and hope, not just for me, but for everyone.

*Dr. Dale A. Kates Student Scholarship Application for Kimberly Hackman*