

Leadership Essay

My neighborhood elementary school gave me more than just a primary education when I immigrated to the U.S. in third grade, it gave me a goal: to serve my local community by becoming a mentor to kids who come from a low socio-economic background just like I do. Therefore, as soon as I entered high school, I reached out to my old third-grade teacher asking her if I could spend my time volunteering for her class at Rosa Parks Elementary, and it's been a summer tradition for me every year since 2016.

As I conversed with students early in the morning over breakfast, I learned about their lives at home and at school. I learned how to cater to their needs by studying their behaviors inside and outside the classroom; being a leader was not just about being in charge, it was just as much about being compassionate and understanding. I've talked to students through their struggles and have offered the companionship that they may have lacked at home. Through the words that I shared and the examples I led, I strived to become more than just a classroom assistant, but a role model that they could look up to. In leading them through reading discussions and helping them with math concepts that they struggled with, I aimed to inspire them to do well in school and take charge of their education and futures.

In college, I joined the Volunteer Committee of BioScholars—an honors undergraduate biology program at UC San Diego—and connected college volunteers to elementary kids of all ages at Rosa Parks for tutoring. This time, with the help of other volunteers, we were able to deliver presentations to kids from kindergarten to fifth grade, instead of being limited to the third-grade classroom that I was once in. To me, this was the epitome of both my community and leadership work as it allowed me to use the resources I've gained to give back to the community that gave me everything I needed to get where I am today.

I wasn't able to change the lives of the hundreds of students that I've met over the past eight years, but my efforts had a secondary impact: through these experiences, many of my students were inspired to become leaders of their own as well, regardless of where they are now and what they do.

Compassion Essay

Not many people will remember my name, but I remember every person I've met who has left an impact on me, especially Ronda whom I've met once back in my first year of college.

It was a Saturday morning and our group was walking around handing out care packages to the unhoused folks as part of our weekly outreach trips. When I approached her, she seemed to have been preoccupied and irritated at something, but I couldn't fully grasp the extent of the situation. Eventually, Ronda broke down crying and shared that someone had burned a hole through the corner of her tent, and she was struggling to cover it up. In an instant, I turned to grab three of my other friends, found some spare safety pins and pinned down each corner of a tarp over her tent to cover any exposed openings as she wanted.

Ronda's story is not an uncommon one, and I wish I could say that was the worst thing I've heard. However, Ronda's story was the start of my personal commitment to service and community work and the reason why I continued to be a part of the Mustard Seed Project (MSP) at UCSD. Guided by a "hand-up, not hand-out" mission, MSP hopes to connect unsheltered folks to services and programs through a relationship-based approach. During the past four years as I made my way from being a general member to president of the organization, I am reminded daily of people like Ronda who are alone, vulnerable, and at risk every day that they are still on the streets. I am reminded of the young girl who told me she "wished [she] was in college like [me]." I am reminded of the Vietnamese man that says "chào con" every time he sees me, and most importantly I am reminded of how I hope to be able to do more for these folks one day.

It is through meeting all these different individuals that I am constantly motivated to improve on our community services. In recent years, we've expanded MSP from a small newfound club to one that constantly holds clothing/blanket drives, hot meal events and weekly outreach shifts to downtown. Although MSP has grown in size, I remain connected to our original mission and humble beginnings. Like a mustard seed, although small, we hope this amount of effort can one day move mountains.