

# MY PASSION TO INSPIRE

by: Eric Smuda

Service has always played a pivotal role in my life. From a young age I was taught that the greatest reward one can receive is helping another person in their own life. My first service experiences included going to the Sparta Library and participating in the giving tree, making three course meals with my mom for needy families, participating in Tilly's Kids through my church, donating to the Red Cross and Salvation Army, and many other events. I remember after each and every one of these events a peculiar feeling would sweep over me. I never understood this wave of emotion but I knew that it felt good and it was somehow related to what I had done. As I grew older the community service events that I was involved in were maintained and I also began to broaden my community service horizons. One of the many new charities I began to participate in was Operation Christmas Child through the Samaritans Purse organization. As Christmas approached my family and I would fill countless shoeboxes with little toys, clothing, religious items, school and hygiene supplies, and candy to be delivered all across the world to children of all ages. I was still young when I participated in this organization but I knew that I was helping bring Christmas magic to so many children across the world.

There have been several huge eye-opening experiences that have allowed me to somehow be a part of the suffering of those that I have helped. The most prominent of these experiences occurred when I was young. First, there was the time we went to the library to get ornaments from the giving tree. The ornaments had labels attached with the gift idea for a local, needy child. I was so excited to grab as many ornaments as I could when the librarian stopped me and told me I couldn't take them because the deadline for the program had ended. I was dismayed when I realized these children would probably be gift less and even though I was very young I realized someone had to help all the needy children. I wanted to fix that in as many ways as I could. Then there was the time after we sent the shoeboxes off into the world we watched a video of similar shoeboxes being delivered to their recipients. The image of their joy and the bliss still resonates within my mind as I speak. I remember crying for hours after seeing this video, and these tears were tears of joy. That spring, I went outside to get the mail and I found a large, old yellow envelope addressed to my family. As we opened up the envelope we uncovered the stories of Jerrimiah, Manman, and Habib, three Ugandan boys who had received our gifts. We first read of their happiness and then the reality. The children told us of how their parents had been killed in a war that they personally had to fight in since the age of five and how they now lived with their dying grandmother and made necklaces out of newspaper just to gain pennies a day. Every time I looked at their faces in the photo I wept. These experiences were a turning point in my life. I could not understand why there was so much suffering in the world

and I knew I had to change it. We have gotten similar letters from children in Haiti in the years since then.

I have since been involved with Pass It Along and several other charities. My Pass It Along experience in particular has been like an angel for me. Pass It Along has helped me to find my passion for service and I have since become involved in every event I can. At one event called Tilly's Kids I had the chance to speak with a boy from Newark, New Jersey named Andre who told me of his love for basketball but his inability to play the sport due to gangs on the only courts he had access to. Therefore he was unable to logically pursue his passion. This resounded within me. Here I was with all of these opportunities and some kids did not even have any. This is where the idea for my program came into play. Last year me and about six other volunteers worked with children in Franklin by teaching them sport skills and giving them real life examples of athletes who rose to glory despite seemingly insurmountable adversity. To see each child's face light up with excitement at the thought that they can achieve anything was priceless. My hope is that my program will continue in the future and new elements such as the children journaling and drawing their dreams will be introduced. I also hope that the program will move to Sparta so the many that wished to be involved, but couldn't due to location, can get involved. I now hope to study International Affairs at Syracuse and become an International Diplomat for the United Nations so I can continue to go above and beyond what is expected of anyone when it comes to serving others and fulfill my own personal duty as a human being. I also hope to start my own charity that focuses on helping children with learning disabilities. This summer I traveled with Campfire U.S.A. to Washington D.C. to work with kids in the projects and I will be traveling to New Orleans with Habitat for Humanity. I will also be going to Kwa Zulu Natel, South Africa with the U.N. and HOW Global, Inc. to bring water wells to the poorest of villages and an orphanage. In Washington D.C., I had the chance to teach kids the most fundamental of skills, I was able to give a girl who could not sleep due to nightmares of her family being murdered a shoulder to sleep on and I was able to give a child the "best day of his life" just by giving him pizza.

Thank you

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