

Pass It Along's Effect on Me – Luke Huelsenbeck, AmeriCorps Member

I have helped build a playground. I have slept in a box to help raise homelessness awareness. I have mentored youth from both the inner city and our own county. I have seen the crippling misfortunes of others down on their luck. And I have seen the unyielding power that exists among a group of volunteers. Pass It Along has been the gateway to my love of volunteerism, whether it be cooking for a soup kitchen or raking an elderly woman's lawn, I feel I am able to connect with my community, other people, and myself.

I first started with Pass It Along at a young age, but did not quite comprehend the impact I was making. More recently, I joined Pass It Along as an AmeriCorps Member (the domestic version of the Peace Corps). I had no idea what I was getting into. From the first time I walked into the office I was greeted with at least four smiling people, immediately treating me like one of the family; I thought they were crazy. As time moved on I served on more projects; participating with Tilly's Kids, working with Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) to raise homelessness awareness in Sussex County, and doing anything I could to help out.

However, it was not until my first trip to Newark under "Cooking with a Mission" that I realized I was a part of something special. It seemed like a routine thing: enter the mission, cook, serve, and clean up. But something happened that day that will stick with me forever. A little boy named Clarence came into the kitchen, and immediately made us all smile. It was amazing to see that through all of the hardships, the bad luck, and the uncertainty that filled his own and his parent's lives, we could all see the innocence of this child. I was quick to notice a change in my own thought: we were no longer the middle-class helping the poor, nor were we the well-off helping the needy; we were humans, helping humans, through the love and compassion that we all shared in our common struggle of life.

I cannot say I was suddenly enlightened, and suddenly my life's goal was drastically changed. I can't even say that I went home that day and gave up all my possessions because I was so moved. All I can say is that I learned how to appreciate the life that is within all of us as well as the connections established through volunteering that are able to traverse all races, cultures, and backgrounds. I realized why on my first day I had been greeted with so many smiles; it was my first connection in my career of volunteerism, a salute to a fellow humanitarian, and the welcome to a world that has changed countless lives, including my own, forever.