

Find Yourself in the Service of Others

Service learning is not a job but a way for students to grow.



Photo courtesy: the author

Eraj Din (left) makes a connection with a younger student while working on a service learning project.

For 16 years, “Eraj” hid timidly inside me. My mother had taken my name from the root word “Urooj,” which in Arabic symbolizes spirit, aspiration, enthusiasm, and ambition. But, not until I became involved with service learning did I begin to fulfill the meaning of my name.

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Every day I went to school, studied, came home from school, studied, fulfilled my responsibilities to my family and religion, and then retired to my bed, unaware of the issues outside of my home in Illinois.

I never tried to understand why things functioned as they did. I kept to myself and left the problems of the world out of my life. I was living a self-ish life. My life lacked passion, reason, and motive.

By Eraj Din

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

I needed to understand that education was the key to success, but before that, I needed to learn that success was more than receiving an A on a test or having a stable career. Instead, as Lady Antebellum sings, successful individuals strive to do “something that matters, something different, something that sets the whole world on its ear.” They are individuals who “want to do something better with the time they have been given.”

Service learning involves applying knowledge from books to real-life problems and developing a solution using that knowledge.

Fortunately, a teacher at Harry D. Jacobs High School in suburban Chicago approached me during my sophomore year and said, “I see potential in you. There is an extraordinary leader hiding inside of you.

“What do you know about service learning?” he asked me.

Within a few weeks, I discovered that service learning involves applying knowledge from books to real-life problems and developing a solution using that knowledge. I realized youth could make a difference; in fact, youth were making a difference across the globe.

That year, our school was focusing on driver safety. Project Ignition, a program sponsored by State Farm Companies Foundation and the National Youth Leadership Council, awarded schools \$2,000 to develop a driver safety awareness program as well as a chance to attend the National Service-Learning Conference. My classmates and I developed a program called “In a Blink of an Eye — Think Before You Drive.”

The program made a big impact on the school and its community and also had a huge influence on me. We conducted seatbelt checks, staffed information booths, invited speakers, did in-class activities, staged mock accidents, and more. After our prom week initiative, Jacobs High School enjoyed prom without any alcohol-related incidents for the first time in 20 years. A Jacobs

student thanked our team for the seatbelt check, saying it saved his life during an accident.

As time passed, our signs, posters, events, and more could be found in every corner of town. Students working on the effort networked with people from across Illinois, including Gov. Pat Quinn, and the project was featured on Chicago’s Channel 5 News and local radio. Our effort eventually reached across America at the National Teen

Driving Summit in Washington, D.C.

It was as if service learning had taken me on a magic carpet ride and introduced me to leaders across the world who were learning to fight for their rights, developing solutions to solve world hunger, striving to create advanced medical treatments. In other words, I met individuals who were using their education to change the world with hopeful hearts. I met young leaders who devoted hours upon hours to service, to change.

Through service learning, my mind grew and developed; now I can travel the world while simply sitting in a classroom. Today’s professors must guide youths across the globe to let their minds question what, when, why, where, and how. With my experiences, I now believe those who wish to learn must also learn to teach. Initially, like other students, I volunteered in order to receive membership points or simply because it was something asked of me. Soon after, however, the points and the material benefit faded, but the passion remained.

LEARNING FROM SAFETY TOWN

Through Project Ignition, I received multiple opportunities to volunteer in the community. I felt my heart rush with the excitement of being of service for the first time during Safety Town, another component of “In the Blink of an Eye.” I spent two weeks

teaching preschool and kindergarten students basic safety with topics such as fire safety, road safety, stranger awareness, and animal safety. In two weeks, these children learned how to call 9-1-1, ride their bikes safely, cross the street with caution, avoid strangers, and more. On graduation day, a student eagerly ran over to embrace me for helping her learn to ride a bike and for being her friend. While holding her in my arms, I realized that the world can’t wait for change — people, including myself, have to make the changes.

As I became more involved, I saw service learning’s effect on the community. Working with leaders in our school, I developed lasting friendships, and together, we helped save many teenagers from injury and death by promoting safe driving.

After implementing multiple programs, our team hosted a Great Lakes Teen Driving Summit to reach youth from three or four different states. I remember standing on stage looking out into a crowd of 200 to 300 youth, all striving to create change in their communities. During the two-day conference, participants exchanged ideas and helped one another to become better leaders. Moreover, with every opportunity presented through service learning, I developed skills that will benefit me for years to come, such as public speaking, time management, problem solving, team building, and more.

Today, I embrace the unfamiliar in hope of learning something new. I have become “Eraj,” the woman my mother had always wanted me to be. Many people recognize my awards and scholarships associated with service learning, but I see the individual that service has allowed me to become.

Mahatma Gandhi, who struggled finding himself in a way similar to me, described the impact that my accomplishments have had on me when he said, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

Yesterday, a friend said to me, “Eraj, where there is a will, there is most definitely a way.”

Today, I say let your heart be your will, and let service be your way. ■

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