



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Community Service”
by Arielle Silver-Willner
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When you do something that benefits others, it feels good; it’s a mitzvah. When I began my bat mitzvah work, I thought that doing 13 hours of community service would be hard, that I didn’t have time and it would be boring. But I was wrong. Since I first began my work towards my bat mitzvah, I’ve done well over 13 hours of community service for a variety of causes: I’ve collected and helped distribute books and school supplies for several organizations that support under-resourced NYC schools, helped young children write letters to politicians urging them to pass climate protection legislation for Parents for Climate Protection, participated in a walk-a-thon to raise money to supply potable water for villages in Africa, and visited with a home-bound senior through Project Dorot, a Jewish agency that provides services to the elderly. In 2008, my grandfather, Poppy took my dad’s side of the family half way around the world to Tanzania, Africa, and while we were there, I gave pencils and paper to poor children in a small village’s school. These efforts made me feel great. I was glad to continue the tradition of community service, which is such a strong value in my family.

Among all of these activities, for me, the most meaningful has been Project Cicero, a citywide book drive to fill the bookshelves in underserved NYC schools. Did you know that while some New York City public schools, like mine, have overflowing libraries in every classroom, many others have no library whatsoever and don’t even have enough textbooks for every kid? I love to read (well, not textbooks), and when I heard this, I was shocked and upset. Project Cicero encourages communities to collect books for their annual book drive - last year over 1 million books were collected. Then, they organize a huge 3-day book distribution and invite teachers and librarians from underserved schools to take the books.

I started volunteering for Project Cicero two years ago by collecting books and helping at the book distribution. I asked The City Congregation if we could sponsor a book drive to collect books for the Project and Rabbi Peter agreed. I was impressed by how eager everyone was to help. We set up tables at KidSchool and collected six boxes of books in one day! For the book distribution at Cicero I recruited two friends to help out. We spent two days sorting books on two tables by age and subject and escorting teachers to tables to find books. While I was helping, hundreds of teachers arrived with suitcases and waited in a long line for their turns to enter the book room to choose books. It felt great helping them, but when I saw how many teachers came, and how desperate they were for books, I wanted to do even more.

This year, I got permission from my school principal to conduct a book drive for Project Cicero at my school. Then, I asked the parent coordinator to send a notice about it to the parents of all the students. Since I work on the school newspaper, I was also able to promote the drive in the paper. I set up donation boxes in 310 and my friends and I made posters to hang in the school to publicize the drive. We collected almost 1000 books, twice as many as last year! Then, with the same two friends, I went back to Cicero and did the same volunteer work as last year. It feels great to be able to help other schools- it’s like one sibling helping another- my school, helping other schools!

In February, my mother and I went to Mexico. When we were there, we saw hundreds of suffering, stray dogs wandering the streets. I remembered seeing hundreds of animals like these during previous vacations in Central America. They were starving- so skinny you could see their ribs, diseased and injured. It was very upsetting and I wanted to do something to help them. I've decided to donate a portion of my Bat Mitzvah gift money to an organization called the World Society for the Protection of Animals, or WSPA, which provides practical and humane solutions to the problem of suffering, stray animals around the world.

Whatever your passion is, there is always a way to use it to help your community. You should do it not only because it helps others, but it helps you appreciate what you have and it feels good to be helpful.