

SIMPLE ACTS

The Busy Teen's Guide to
MAKING A DIFFERENCE



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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Natalie Silverstein, MPH

free spirit
PUBLISHING®



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Silverstein, Natalie, author.

Title: Simple acts : a busy teen's guide to making a difference / Natalie Silverstein, MPH.

Description: Minneapolis, MN : Free Spirit Publishing Inc., [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Audience: Ages 13+

Identifiers: LCCN 2021030532 (print) | LCCN 2021030533 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631986260 (paperback) | ISBN 9781631986277 (pdf) | ISBN 9781631986284 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Voluntarism—Juvenile literature. | Young volunteers in community development—Juvenile literature. | Young volunteers in social service—Juvenile literature. | Social action—Juvenile literature. | Social problems—Juvenile literature.

Classification: LCC HN49.V64 S583 2022 (print) | LCC HN49.V64 (ebook) | DDC 302/.14—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021030532>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021030533>

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Edited by Ruthie Nelson Van Oosbree
Cover and interior design by Shannon Pourciau
Illustrated by Joanne Lew-Vriethoff

Printed in the United States of America

Free Spirit Publishing
An imprint of Teacher Created Materials
6325 Sandburg Road, Suite 100
Minneapolis, MN 55427-3674
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freespirit.com

Free Spirit offers competitive pricing.

Contact edsales@freespirit.com for pricing information
on multiple quantity purchases.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my three big-hearted teenagers/young adults—Emilia, Archie, and Alaina—and to a generation of young people whose kindness, resilience, and generosity of spirit inspire hope for our future.

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Preface



This book was drafted over the course of three months in the spring of 2020. After the joy of publishing my first book, *Simple Acts: The Busy Family's Guide to Giving Back*, in 2019, I was delighted to be able to write a follow-up specifically for teens. I enthusiastically jumped into the project in early March. Within days, the world flipped upside down. Due to the growing concern around the spread of COVID-19 in our community, schools and offices were closed, and we were asked to stay at home. Along with millions of other Americans, and countless others around the globe, my family and I began a lengthy period of quarantine and isolation, social distancing, working from home, and remote learning.

During this time, several tragic, deadly incidents involving Black Americans and law enforcement sparked renewed outrage and amplified the national discussion of racism. Massive protests, often organized and led by teens and young adults, drove a worldwide reckoning on racial inequality. We were also in the midst of a contentious presidential election, and there was a heightened sense of urgency around voting rights and the importance of registering to vote so that everyone's voice could be heard. It was a time of tremendous upheaval, and illness, loss of life, financial hardship, frustration, and despair threatened to overwhelm us. While many yearned for a return to "normalcy" as we struggled in lockdown and quarantine, it became clear that going back to "the way things were before" was impossible. We needed to do better, to be better, and to work together to achieve those goals.

Over the course of the pandemic, my children, ages 12, 16, and 19, dealt with bewildering change as their lives were upended overnight. Like young people around the world, they were disconnected from friends, school, activities, and routine, and they suffered disappointments large and small. As a parent, I found it challenging to maintain

my sense of optimism as I supported my children and allowed them to grieve their losses. I worried for their mental health. There were many weeks during this time when I lost motivation. I didn't know if I had the heart to finish writing this book or if the subject would resonate. The future seemed so uncertain.

Then, day by day, I watched my children emerge from their sadness with new resolve to make the best of their situation, to make lemonade out of abundant lemons, to continue to care deeply about others and the world around them. Their resilience lifted my spirits. I used my social media platform to amplify stories of generosity, kindness, and hope. I encouraged families to find ways to engage in “kitchen table kindness” activities at home. As a family, we went back to the basic principle of *Simple Acts*: do what you can, your own small bit of good. We baked cookies for first responders, wrote letters to isolated seniors, recorded birthday tributes for friends whose celebrations were canceled, sent pizzas to the ICU staff of a local hospital. We did what so many generous souls did during this time: we found small but meaningful ways to help. We couldn't fix the considerable and overwhelming problems in the world, but there was *something* we could do to ease the burden on others. Those small actions also made us feel better, as service always does, providing light during some very dark days. I was inspired to see how many people answered the call to service in my community and beyond. Following Mister Rogers's famous suggestion, I looked for the helpers, and I found them all around me.

I realized that my work in promoting family and youth service had become even more important. The message of this book is very clear, and it hasn't changed since I began writing it: you don't need to change the world to make a difference, and *everyone* has something to give. Simple, intentional acts of kindness and service, sprinkled throughout your busy everyday life, will create a positive ripple effect in your home, school, community, and the wider world. I can assure you from personal experience that this kindness practice will be a great source of comfort, motivation, and joy, getting you through even the most difficult times in your life. When you are good to others, that goodness is reflected back to you. My fervent hope is that this book will inspire you to share your goodness, your light, with a world that desperately needs it.

Natalie Silverstein

Introduction

The Truth About Being a “Changemaker”



“How Can I Change the World When I Have Homework and Basketball Practice Every Day?”

That’s a great question. Here’s the simple and truthful answer: you probably won’t change the *whole* world. Realistically, you can’t fix all of the world’s problems as you sprint through your days at school, afternoons playing sports or working, and nights filled with homework (not to mention a little well-earned downtime). However, there

2 Simple Acts

are lots of simple things you can do every day to make the world a little kinder and gentler, to make life easier for another person, to improve your own community. This book was created to help you figure out what those things are, which ones spark your interest, and how to fit them into your hectic schedule. Here is what you need to get started: a curious mind, a caring heart, and a willingness to try. I hope this book will help you incorporate small but meaningful acts of service and kindness into your busy life.

If you watch the news or follow social media, you'll often see stories of young people doing amazing things to create positive change in the world. Teens are volunteering, starting nonprofit organizations, collecting donations, organizing protests and marches, launching social media campaigns, circulating petitions, and raising awareness. They're taking these actions in response to many important issues that impact their lives and society: hunger and homelessness, poverty and economic injustice, climate change, racism, sexism, LGBTQIA+ rights, common-sense gun legislation, mental health, immigration, bullying, and countless others. These young people are rightly gaining the attention and respect of the media and the public, helping their neighbors in need while influencing government leaders to move the needle on social policy. They aren't waiting around for others to fix the problems; they are jumping in, using their voices and their media savvy to amplify the conversations around these issues. This is amazing and inspiring work, and it reminds us that everyone should care and try to make a difference.

It can also be intimidating. The bar has been set pretty high, and tackling some of these issues in real life can be daunting. Just getting through the day, the week, the quarter, and the school year can be a challenge. Most teens take care of family responsibilities, work hard in school, hold down part-time jobs, and manage lots of other commitments. Sometimes it's a struggle—emotionally, mentally, physically, academically, and financially—to juggle all of this. Saving the world is a little too much to add to your overflowing plate.

I get it, and I hope I can provide some perspective on this whole subject. If it feels like the pressure to be a “changemaker” is overwhelming, let me share an idea you'll hear again, and which is at the heart of this book: creating change doesn't *have* to be grand or global. It doesn't have to take over your entire life, and it doesn't have to put

the weight of the world on your shoulders. This book was written to inspire a more realistic approach to service for teenagers, a more organic way to make the world a better place: one simple act at a time.

But . . . Why?

You may be asking yourself, “Why is service so important for me right now?” Well, to keep it simple, I think it can change your life. In my work as a speaker, writer, and consultant on this topic, I witness firsthand the power of volunteering to change lives. I encourage children and teens (and the adults who care for them) to keep their eyes, hearts, and minds open so that they can find meaningful ways to help others. Service expands your worldview, introducing you to new people, problems, situations, organizations, and experiences. Connecting with others through service organically reminds us that we are all more similar than we are different. We find common ground. Every person we encounter is deserving of our kindness and respect. It’s important to reserve judgment and to recognize that we have no idea what challenges another person is facing. There is no pity, no handout, no us-and-them mentality in meaningful service. While we are helping another person today, we will almost certainly need help ourselves someday. Like any skill, empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person) is something you need to practice. Volunteering, engaging in community service, and intentionally doing acts of kindness are easy ways to flex your empathy muscles, and I’ve witnessed the good that can come from that exercise.

RESEARCH SAYS GIVING BACK IS GOOD FOR YOU

But don’t take just my word for it. If you need more reasons to try volunteering, there’s plenty of scientific research to prove that giving back to others is also good for *you*. By every measure, adults who volunteer are happier, healthier, more connected, and less lonely. The benefits for teens who volunteer are even bigger. According to research conducted by sociologists Jane Allyn Piliavin and Erica Siegl at the University of Wisconsin, teen volunteers, even those who are considered “at risk” themselves, report a positive effect on their grades, self-concept, and attitude toward education. Youth volunteering also leads to reduced drug use and huge declines in school

dropout rates and teen pregnancies. Other research shows that creating good service habits starts in the home with your family. In 2005, the Corporation for National and Community Service and the US Census Bureau conducted a national survey of over 3,000 teenagers (ages 12-18) that collected information on teen volunteering habits and school-based service learning. The survey found that kids from homes where at least one adult volunteers regularly are nearly three times as likely to volunteer on a consistent (weekly or monthly) basis. A 2012 study by DoSomething.org also found that the majority of kids and teens who volunteer do so because of personal motivation, not as a school requirement (meaning they're volunteering because they *want* to, not because someone is forcing them to do it). Kids like to keep things social—both online and in person—so it's not surprising that the same study found that three-quarters of American teens whose friends regularly volunteer also do so themselves. Forming good habits when you are young is also important. Kids who volunteer are more likely to continue volunteering as teens and adults. The best news of all: studies have shown that adults who volunteer remain physically active and socially connected, leading to happier, healthier, and longer lives. Please note, when I say "socially connected," I mean in the old-fashioned way—face-to-face with another person, without electronic devices.

Research aside, if you've ever felt the deep satisfaction of helping another person, making them smile, and giving them comfort, ease, and joy, you will appreciate what I'm saying. People who actively seek out ways to be helpful just feel better about themselves. They experience a "helper's high," a feeling of personal satisfaction that has been compared to an endorphin rush, and they feel less isolated and more connected. The bonus is that volunteers provide critical services that would



otherwise cost a tremendous amount of money, contributing to the economy and the public good. Volunteers improve the lives of others

and strengthen our communities while experiencing great personal rewards. It's a win-win-win.

Taking the Next Step

Now that you have a little inspiration, or at least a spark of curiosity about how you can incorporate service and acts of kindness into your busy life, here are some instructions on how to use this book.

I believe that every person has something to give, and the many suggestions, tips, and ideas shared in *Simple Acts* will prove it. Whether you have a little time, a lot of energy, a new idea, a special talent, a few extra dollars (or the ability to fundraise), or the passion to rally others, you have something valuable and meaningful to give the world.

What You Will Find in These Pages

Each chapter in *Simple Acts* begins with background information. I share research, quotes, or interesting facts from experts in a related field to help you understand what is discussed. Then the chapter dives into specific tips, ideas, and resources. These include the websites of reputable national and international nonprofits that are working in the field, as well as suggestions for how you might connect with local community-based organizations doing this important work. I provide lots of ideas for how you can use your time, talents, and passions to be of service to the people around you, in all of the various communities you call home. You'll find sidebars sprinkled throughout the book that provide definitions, clarifying information, simple instructions, inspiring stories, websites of relevant organizations, and suggestions for ways you can "stretch" beyond routine community service if you are inspired to do more. My goal is always to provide you with simple, actionable, hands-on tools to make service and acts of kindness a part of your busy life.

A NOTE ABOUT ORGANIZATION MISSION AND VALUES

In my attempt to include a wide variety of resources, organizations, and websites for you to explore, best efforts were made to ensure that the organizations I suggest throughout *Simple Acts* are

reputable, trustworthy, and doing good work in the communities they serve. Some of the organizations may be religiously affiliated, while others could support a particular political or philosophical viewpoint. You should always understand the history, mission, and values of the organizations you support with your time, interest, and donations and be sure that your values align with theirs. In the same way that you are an informed consumer about where (and by whom) your clothing is made or your food is grown, you should be an informed volunteer and supporter. For some suggestions on how to learn these details about an organization, check out the section titled “Making Sure an Organization Is Trustworthy” in chapter 1.

Chapter-By-Chapter Overview

Here is a brief description of what you’ll find in *Simple Acts*:

Chapter 1: What’s Your Why? The first chapter begins with a quiz—I promise, you don’t need to study for it! It will help you identify issues you care about, and the rest of the chapter will teach you how to find trustworthy organizations to work with and suggest various ways to make a difference, both at home and at school.

Chapter 2: Don’t Count the Hours; Make the Hours Count: This chapter discusses school-based community service requirements and service-learning programs and how those might inspire you to volunteer on your own. It includes resources so you can find meaningful service opportunities in your community and tips to help you make the most out of the experiences.

Chapter 3: Elevate Your Celebration: This chapter encourages you to acknowledge and celebrate special moments and milestones in your life with kindness, gratitude, and giving back.

Chapter 4: Finding the Fun in Fundraising: Raising money and awareness for a cause you care about is an important way that you can make an impact, and while fundraising can be hard work, you and your friends can also have fun doing it. You’ll find lots of unique fundraising ideas in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Doing Well by Doing Good: This chapter introduces you to the concept of social entrepreneurship: running a business or other

enterprise that gives back to the community while also creating a brand, selling a product, and making a profit.

Chapter 6: Turn Time *Off* into Time *On*: Your time off from school should be fun and relaxing, but it can also be filled with opportunities to learn, lead, grow, and give back, enriching your life and helping your community. This chapter covers information on internships, community service projects, and leadership opportunities that you can take on while you're on school breaks.

Chapter 7: #BeKind: As a “digital native,” your life has always had technology and social media in it. This chapter encourages you to harness your digital skills and savvy to spread positivity, amplify important messages, and share stories of kindness.

Chapter 8: Not-So-Random Acts of Kindness: There are countless ways to be kind in your day-to-day life. *Simple Acts* concludes with a list of 52 intentional acts of kindness—one for every week of the year—to help you kick-start a lifelong kindness practice.

Visual Aids to Help You Find What You Are Looking For

Everything in *Simple Acts* falls into one or more of the following categories. Each category corresponds to its own unique icon so you can easily spot ideas that interest you. Look for the icons at the top of the page as you're flipping through the book. Hopefully, the ideas presented here will help you:



COLLECT AND DONATE: Many of us have stuff lying around—clothing, books, toys—that we've outgrown or no longer use, and we may not have anyone to pass them along to in our own family. Donating these things, or setting up a collection to encourage others to do so, is an easy way to give back. You can collect winter coats for children living in poverty, socks for people who are homeless, canned goods for a local food pantry—the list is endless. Organizing a collection and donating material goods costs nothing (or very little) and is a tangible way to help others while reducing waste through reuse and recycling. In later chapters, I provide instructions and tips on organizing collection drives.



EXPRESS GRATITUDE: I'm not going to bore you with reminders to say please and thank you, but I do suggest that we could all show

a little more appreciation for all of the good things in our lives. Studies have shown that acknowledging and expressing gratitude (by simply writing down three things that you are thankful for each day) lowers stress, decreases depression, and increases optimism. The benefits are even greater when we express gratitude directly to the people we're thanking. Grateful people are just happier people. For me, one of the main motivations for doing service work is my own appreciation for the opportunities and comforts I am lucky enough to enjoy. So, in every setting and with each experience, start from a place of gratitude.



LEARN ABOUT THE ISSUES THROUGH RESEARCH: Throughout this book, you'll learn that the only way to arm yourself with the knowledge you need to make an impact is to do the research, either online or by asking questions of the people and organizations that are actually doing the work. You've heard the phrase "knowledge is power," and it's certainly true when it comes to figuring out how you can tackle the difficult challenges facing the world. A word of caution, though—don't rely on social media and late-night comedians to get all of your information on an issue. Do your own research with reliable sources, ask good questions of trusted adults, and keep your ears open for unbiased and knowledgeable voices. There are also suggestions throughout this book for additional books you can read and resources you can explore to learn more about the topics being discussed.



MAKE TIME TO VOLUNTEER: This is probably the toughest issue, and it's the primary reason I wrote this book. Teenagers are very busy, and finding time to give back in your community will usually mean *making* time, perhaps by saying no to some things in order to say yes to this. I hope *Simple Acts* will show you some manageable ways to do this in your busy life. In the following chapters, there are resources that will help you identify volunteer opportunities in your community and suggestions for ways you can give back in an informal way as you move through your day-to-day life. And there's information on remote or virtual volunteering, for times when it is very difficult or unsafe to volunteer in person.



NOTICE WHEN OTHERS ARE IN NEED: Keep your eyes open to those around you who may need help, listen (without judgment) when they are telling you their stories, and ask questions to learn more and better understand how you can be of service. Then, take the next step and *do* something. Even the smallest action can make the biggest impact.



PAY IT FORWARD: This is a super simple concept: if someone does something nice for you, if you are the recipient of something good, think of a way to share that goodness with somebody else. Imagine what a huge difference it would make in the world if everyone else did this. Just remember this phrase: we rise by lifting others.



RAISE MONEY AND AWARENESS: There's a whole chapter in *Simple Acts* about fundraising because it's important to understand that while most nonprofit organizations welcome your time, energy, and donated goods, what they *really* need is money. Young people have the energy and persistence that fundraising requires, and there are many people who have the financial resources and desire to make monetary contributions to good causes. We'll talk about ways to harness your unique abilities and your passion for doing good to raise critical resources for organizations and people who need them.



SHARE YOUR IDEAS, SKILLS, AND CREATIVITY: Maybe you look around your neighborhood and see that your local playground is in disrepair, or you are sick of all of the food waste and plastic containers in your school cafeteria. You want to do something to fix these problems. You are creative, you have good ideas, you have skills—whether those are in using technology or building something with your hands—so you should feel empowered to approach leaders in your school and community to propose solutions. Your suggestions are valuable, but they can only bring change if you have the courage to articulate them clearly and share them with others.

It's important to note: **You don't need to read this book cover to cover.** You may want to jump around, since different chapters and topics may appeal to you at different times. The goal of the book is to

meet you where you are at any given moment and nudge you toward taking the next step. Also, *Simple Acts* is not exhaustive, meaning I couldn't possibly include every service opportunity in every place. Every person will bring their own perspectives and preferences to this work, and every community and organization that is being served is different. You and your family know best what will work for you and what the people in your community need most urgently, understanding that those needs might change at any time. That's why it is so important to stay open and observant and to approach every person and situation with a positive attitude, a smile, and a genuine desire to help. I hope *Simple Acts* will be a useful tool, offering some new ideas and insights that you hadn't considered as you embark on a lifetime of kindness and purpose.

Whether You're Ready or Not, We Need You

Throughout history, the voices of young people have often been the loudest in raising alarms, demanding change, and leading the way.

As a young person, you are not only the future; you are the present. You're here now, reminding adults that today's problems won't magically go away unless adults work together to solve them, and that these problems will negatively impact your life if we don't address them. In my experience, teens speak with honesty and urgency about race, identity, sexuality, the environment, fairness, equity, and inclusion. They face challenges head-on with idealism and hope, and everyone should be watching and listening. I know that I am.



You may feel unprepared for all of this or overwhelmed by the pressure to “be the change you wish to see.” Whether you know it or not, you have what you need to step into your role to make a difference.

Maybe you haven't yet fully identified your unique talents and gifts, the ones that we need you to share, but they do exist, waiting to come out and shine. Every single person, no matter who they are or where they live, how they were raised or what they believe, how much money or time they have, whether they have power or a platform—*everyone* has something to give. Remember: kindness costs nothing, and it is a choice you can make. Your job as an emerging adult is to figure out what you can offer by tapping into your interests and skills and keeping your eyes, ears, mind, and heart open to the possibilities. If you intentionally look for ways to be of service, you will find them, and your life and the lives of many others will be better for it. Young people continue to amaze and inspire me. I hope this book will inspire you to engage in simple acts of kindness as the building blocks of a purposeful life.

What's Your Why?

Identifying Your Passion and Finding Ways to Help



Ask yourself a few questions: What are your favorite activities or sports? What is your best subject in school, and why? What are your hobbies, passions, talents, and skills? These don't have to be organized activities like teams or performance groups. Maybe you easily connect with little kids, or you are physically strong, or you don't bore easily while doing monotonous tasks. You're good at something, and probably *lots* of things.

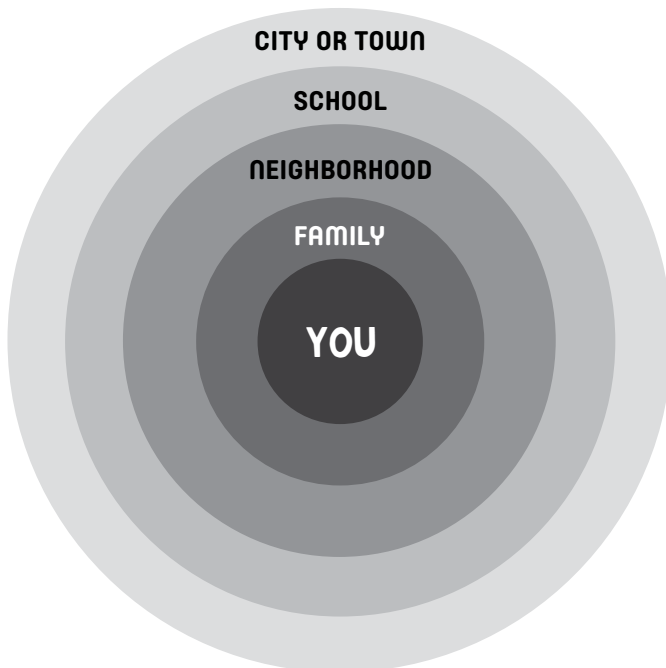
Now let's take a broader view. What concerns you most about the big issues facing your family, your community, your school, or

your town? What worries you about the future of your country or our planet? What gets you fired up? What seems unfair? What makes you angry or sad?

Finally, what do you think you can do to help with any of these problems? I know this last question is a tough one, but if you had to brainstorm a few ideas, what would they be?

Human rights activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously said, “Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.” This chapter helps you start to figure out what your little bits of good are and how to find organizations and people in your community that can benefit from them.

Let’s think about some broad definitions of *community* and *service*. Imagine the concept of community as a series of concentric circles with you at the center. Your family, your caregivers, or the people with whom you are living at this time are the innermost ring of your community. Your acts of service start in your home in relation to these people. Your family may be counting on you to help out in lots of different ways: caring for younger siblings or aging grandparents, running errands, doing laundry, preparing meals, taking out the trash. These may sound like chores, but everything you are doing is important work and should be valued as a contribution to the common good.



Next, there is service that you do for the people who live in your neighborhood. You hold the door open for an elderly or disabled person in your apartment building, pick up litter when you see it, or clear the snow from a neighbor's front porch. Your school community is also counting on you in many ways: to be a good and kind classmate, to help when you see others struggling, to do your part in keeping your school safe. Your city or town expects you to follow the laws, help keep public spaces clean, and support your local food pantry or community kitchen if you are able. Whether you recognize it as service or not, you are serving others all the time in your day-to-day life, so you should feel pretty good about that.

Now let's widen the lens a bit and think about people and issues a little further outside of your day-to-day experience. There are plenty of ways to make a difference for people you don't know and will likely never meet. The mission of many national and international organizations is to have broad impact, and it's possible for you to become a member, learn more, and give back through them.

As you begin to think about the ways that you define community and the issues that you care about, let's take a moment to drill down a little deeper. On page 15, take a brief quiz that will help you identify your strengths and the best ways that you can use your talents and skills to help others. Don't overthink it—just answer honestly and thoughtfully. Your likes, dislikes, strengths, and challenges are the subject of this quiz, and you know yourself best. Hopefully, once you've completed the quiz, you'll have a deeper understanding of the unique tools that are in your personal toolbox and the ways that you can make the most impact. Then, you can keep these in mind as you read through *Simple Acts* and let the icons point you toward the best opportunities for YOU.

What's in My Toolbox?



Self-Assessment

1. How do you approach new people and situations?
 - A. I'm a little shy and hesitant; I usually hang back and observe.
 - B. I'm an outgoing people person. I jump right in.
 - C. I learn by doing and am usually comfortable meeting and working with others who are doing the same activities as me.
 - D. I may start off slow, but if I feel comfortable or I'm with friends, I'm more likely to engage.

2. How would you describe your talents?
 - A. I'm curious and organized, and I like learning and doing research.
 - B. I'm a great teacher. I like making friends and sharing what I'm passionate about.
 - C. I'm creative and artistic, and I love to share my talents with others.
 - D. I don't really know what I have to offer, but I'm excited to figure it out.

3. How would you describe your abilities?
 - A. I'm a hard worker but would rather stay behind the scenes a bit.
 - B. I'm confident and can put others at ease or help them understand new concepts.
 - C. I'm a hands-on person; I like to get my hands "dirty" doing a task.
 - D. I'm willing to try new things.

4. How do you handle rejection and difficult situations?
 - A. I'm a little sensitive; I'm reluctant to put myself out there.
 - B. I'm not easily offended; I can brush off rejection and start over.

continued >

What's in My Toolbox?

- C. I like to get feedback and critiques on my work but struggle with outright rejection or having others angry with me.
 - D. I'm usually resilient, especially if I'm with friends who can support me.
5. Are you able to easily name the issues you care about?
- A. There are lots of issues that make me curious, sad, or angry, but I don't really know how I can help.
 - B. I know exactly what gets me fired up, and I'm anxious to get out there and start working to make a difference.
 - C. The specific issues are less important to me as long as I can share my talents through meaningful work.
 - D. I don't really know what issues are impacting people in my community or how I can help, but I'm open to learning.

If you answered mostly **As**, you are a thoughtful information seeker. You might not gravitate toward in-person or hands-on volunteer opportunities right off the bat, but you can still make a big impact on your community and the world. You're more likely to research and learn about issues before jumping in. You might enjoy virtual service opportunities that allow you to help from a distance or kitchen table kindness activities. If you are drawn to political activism and social justice issues, you might be the person who organizes behind the scenes, who sets up the petition, and who sends out information about letter-writing campaigns. Instead of shouting from rooftops, asking for donations or volunteering in person, you might prefer to manage the social media account for the club, organization, or nonprofit you're working with; order necessary supplies; send email reminders; and do the important follow-up.

If you answered mostly **Bs**, you are probably well suited for in-person volunteering and fundraising efforts. Your ability to dive into a new situation and to interact comfortably (and respectfully) with different

What's in My Toolbox?

people means that you will be willing to try new volunteer opportunities that might be outside of your typical comfort zone. Because you are a people person, you might notice the needs of others more easily. Perhaps you'll realize you have a knack for fundraising. As you'll learn in chapter 4, having the courage to ask for donations on behalf of a worthy cause is a gift, as is the ability to stay motivated and positive when people say no. Your outgoing personality will serve you well in leading your peers in volunteer outings, rallying around service events in your school, and approaching new or challenging tasks with a can-do attitude.

If you answered mostly Cs, you enjoy hands-on work. You may be reserved and shy, very outgoing, or somewhere in between, but as long as you have a task or project to work on, you're comfortable both being with people and working alone. You might find yourself crafting items to donate, using your artistic skills to create posters, or planting a tree. If you have a specific talent, you might even find organizations looking for people with your skill set! Not all organizations and nonprofits have hands-on work all the time, but your adaptability will help you push yourself outside of your comfort zone occasionally when you need to. Your creativity and your ability to pick up new things quickly as you do them will help you in any volunteering situation.

If you answered mostly Ds, maybe you've never volunteered before. If that's the case, your initial hesitation or uncertainty is totally understandable. The important thing is your open-mindedness and willingness to learn and try. You are a person who should absolutely find peers who care about the same issues that you do. Then, make an effort to volunteer together as a group. Everything is easier and more fun when done with others, and you are more likely to continue the work if you are with people who are just as enthusiastic and committed as you are. Use the resources in this book to identify the issues that concern you, and then connect with peers, teachers, community volunteers, or family members to work together toward a solution.

continued >

What's in My Toolbox?

What Do You Really Care About? List All That Apply

This list will help you identify the people and issues that really tug at your heart and spark your curiosity. No judgment here—check only the ones that you really care about. You'll be able to keep this list in mind and refer back to it as you read through the book and find suggestions for ways to learn about, volunteer for, or fundraise for a particular cause or issue.

I really care about / worry for / get upset about:

- Animals (pets)
- Animals (wildlife)
- Children/adults who are living with illnesses or disabilities
- Children/families living in poverty or dealing with economic inequality
- Children/teens navigating the foster care system
- Discrimination and inequality (in all forms)
- Educational disparities
- The environment / climate change / maintaining our green spaces
- Finding cures for illness and disease
- Food waste
- Global poverty
- Gun violence
- Isolated seniors and elderly people who need help with day-to-day tasks
- Natural disaster relief
- People experiencing hunger or food insecurity
- People experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness

What's in My Toolbox?

- Public health concerns (raising awareness around the importance of exercise, a healthy diet, vaccines, and organ donation, as well as the dangers of drugs, alcohol, vaping and cigarettes, and so on)
- Spreading kindness generally
- Voting rights

Finally, the “Good List”

Quickly (without thinking too much—off the top of your head) write down EVERYTHING you are good at doing. Don't just list things that people typically call “talents,” like singing, drawing, or playing a musical instrument. List it all! Are you patient? Can you do complicated math problems easily? Are you physically strong? Do you like to organize things? Is your handwriting neat? Are you a good driver? Do you have a loud voice? Are you funny? Are you good with young kids? Go ahead and brag about yourself a little bit. I hope you'll be pleasantly surprised by the number of things you have on your list. Keep it handy as you read through the book—first, as a reminder of how amazing you are, but also as a resource. And don't hesitate to add to the list later on! When you have an idea for a cause that you care about, pull out this list and see if there is something here—a skill, talent, or ability—that you can share to make an impact on that issue.

KITCHEN TABLE KINDNESS TIP



Hopefully, you'll find ways to volunteer in your community by sharing your time and talents with nonprofits and social service agencies and their clients face-to-face, in person or perhaps virtually or over the phone. This hands-on work is an impactful way to give back to your neighbors and community, and you'll get so much out of connecting directly with the folks who are benefiting from your good work. However, direct service is not always possible for a wide variety of reasons. Beyond health and safety concerns, you may face other barriers to engaging in direct service, including geographic distance, lack of transportation, academic and family commitments, and limited free time. The good news is that even if you can't go out and volunteer in person, there are many ways you can help virtually and from home. I call this type of service "kitchen table kindness," and throughout *Simple Acts*, there are sidebars that highlight ways to do good work on your own time and in a setting that is convenient and accessible to you. Look for the cloud and sun icon above to quickly locate these Kitchen Table Kindness Tips as you flip through the book. I hope these suggestions will encourage you to find meaningful ways to help even when you only have a little time to spare or aren't able to venture out into the community or plan a big event. Every little bit of kindness helps, and even when we're physically separated, there is much we can do to stay connected.

Making Sure an Organization Is Trustworthy

As you read through this chapter and identify the causes that you care about and the types of volunteer work you'd like to do, you'll need to find organizations to help. *Simple Acts* will point you toward some reputable national organizations that have been operating for a long time and are worthy of your time. Many of these will allow you to search for local affiliates. You'll also want to identify trustworthy organizations based in your own community. Keeping your eyes and ears open is sometimes the best way to find these opportunities—you may hear about things from friends, classmates, and trusted adults who volunteer. Pay attention to social media posts sharing positive service experiences, notice flyers hanging in coffee shops, and be aware of upcoming events on your school or community calendar.

Next, you'll want to research (or "vet") the organizations that you are interested in helping. Use the following steps to check whether a particular organization is the right fit for you:

- Navigate around the organization's website (if there is one). Does it offer specific information about how to volunteer, the types of volunteer activities, and whom to contact for more information? Does it include testimonials from other volunteers? Do they welcome young volunteers? Understand the rules around age requirements and whether you'll need permission from a parent or guardian or need to be accompanied by an adult if you are under 18.
- Check to see if the organization you are exploring is rated by Charity Navigator (charitynavigator.org), GuideStar (guidestar.org), or GreatNonprofits (greatnonprofits.org). These rating organizations use criteria to ensure that nonprofits are meeting their stated missions, utilizing donated funds appropriately, reporting their finances to the government, and providing quality volunteer opportunities. A positive rating is a good indication that the organization is well managed, effective in achieving its mission, worth your time, and deserving of your donations.
- Follow the organization on social media, and pay attention to the tone and content of its posts. Are the posts well-written (without inappropriate language), positive, and supportive of the clients they serve? Do the posts celebrate and show gratitude to their volunteers and donors? Does the organization amplify and share important information about the issues it addresses? Check out the number and types of followers and the comments they write. Make sure these are in line with your values. Chapter 7 will dive deeper into the power of social media to spread positive messages and promote service.
- Identify a volunteer coordinator or an executive director at the organization, and contact them to ask questions about the types of volunteer opportunities available and any training being provided. Notice how quickly the organization responds to your inquiry and how forthcoming it is with information. This will give you a sense of the mission and culture and whether it is a place where you will feel welcome and comfortable.