

Ben Baker  
Loudoun Valley High School  
Purcellville, VA

## **A Servant's Heart – Choosing to Serve**

For me, serving others is not a choice. It's part of my DNA.

One of my first memories was the time I was allowed to serve dinner at the Daily Bread soup kitchen in Leesburg. My family regularly volunteered there, but I was too young to participate. Only after a lot of begging, did I finally get to accompany my parents on their shift. Although very small by most standards, the kitchen filled me with awe. It was scrubbed clean and stocked with huge, shiny pots and pans and stacks of Styrofoam plates. It seemed to buzz like a beehive as adults in green aprons bustled about to prepare whatever food had been donated that day. I remember standing quietly in a corner, watching the activity and feeling very excited and grown up to be a part of it.

I remember peeking into the dining room when the guests arrived for dinner. I saw mothers with children, elderly people and a scruffy man who looked a little scary. One of the volunteers handed me a Styrofoam plate heaped with chicken, rice and salad. I hesitated for a moment then asked my mother what I should do. She told me to place the food on the table in front of the guests and treat them like royalty. Timidly, I marched into the dining room, approached a man sitting alone and set the plate before him. My heart was pounding out of my chest. He didn't look at me. I bowed to him as if he were a king. Then I witnessed the most amazing transformation. His downturned eyes began to twinkle. His growing smile revealed several missing teeth. He laughed, then patted me on the shoulder. I felt very important and quickly ran back to the kitchen to get more plates.

That nameless man was my first inspiration to serve others, but there have been many more – more than I can count.

I am inspired by those living on the edge of society. The ones who struggle with mental illness, lack of opportunity and hopelessness. They are all around us, but few truly see them as God sees them.

When I think of those who inspire me, I think of Roy\*, who wears an old work glove on his right hand and waves to passersby on Main Street in Purcellville. I have heard people refer to Roy as that "crazy" guy who waves at people. But few know the depth of his character. I met Roy through Friends Being Friends, a group that organizes social outings for residents of local group homes for the mentally disabled. These outings include bowling, picnics, trips to baseball games and an annual Christmas party. It has proven an important way for people who deal with stigma and discrimination to build confidence and social skills. And the volunteer requirements are easy: Just be a safe and encouraging friend.

I joined the group three years ago after serving at the Christmas dinner. It was hard to get volunteers, so I showed up to serve the potluck meal. It could have ended there, but when I

started talking with the guests, I was drawn in by their stories. Roy, for example, wasn't just the guy who waves on the street. He's the good Samaritan who shovels the entire sidewalk along West Main Street after every snow storm. Mitchell wasn't just some old man who used a walker. He is a physicist who loves to write meteorological code and who remembers every volunteer's name, birthday and personal needs he can pray for. Walden isn't just a recluse who sits alone in the corner. He is an avid fan of everything western, with an impressive collection of bolo ties, cowboy boots and hats. He can also belt out a great rendition of "Happy Trails."

I joined Friends Being Friends with the intention of helping these individuals have fun in a nonjudgmental environment. It felt great to watch men who never talked or made eye contact start to greet me with smiles and "high 5's" at the bowling alley and out in the community. Yet over the years, I found that I was the one receiving most of the blessings. Their unconditional acceptance of a socially awkward teenager has helped build my own confidence. They are as interested in my life as I am in theirs. They encourage and inspire me to treat everyone with dignity, respect and as God's loved ones.

But it hasn't always been that way for me. As an ambitious Boy Scout with a drive to achieve the rank of Eagle by age 14, I learned that service can be self-serving. I volunteered to help with every Eagle project, community event and church outreach project I could to rack up the service hours required for Eagle rank. I parked cars in the rain, handed water to runners in the blistering sun, cleared thorny paths along the Appalachian Trail and dug more post holes for fencing than I can remember. By that point, community service had become just a means to an end for me. I rarely thought of the people whose lives I would help by serving.

Fortunately, God intervened to connect me with a group of selfless people who would inspire me to change my attitude and my character. When it was time for me to select my own Eagle project, I learned of a homeless shelter for single mothers that needed a safety fence around its tot lot near a busy road in Purcellville. It seemed simple enough, so I contacted the Good Shepherd Alliance to offer my services.

While most Eagle Projects take more than a year to plan and execute, this project was time sensitive. The fence had to be completed before the new families were scheduled to move in. That was only 10 weeks. It would take a tremendous amount of planning, recruiting donors and rallying volunteers – and it would require me to sacrifice my own summer plans to accomplish the task. I started to have doubts and considered selecting another project – until I actually met the homeless children this project would serve. That's when the meaning of service became not a goal but a calling for me.

After talking with their mothers, I realized these children had experienced more crisis and uncertainty in their lives than most adults. I wanted the children to experience the joy of

childhood play free of worry or danger. It was one small way the five-year-old inside me could bring a smile to their faces. And it was amazing how everything fell into place when my heart changed course.

I was humbled as volunteers – known and unknown – streamed in throughout my two work days and late into the night to help complete my project on time. Even the mayor of Purcellville made a special appearance to encourage us in our work. It became a community effort much larger than a simple Eagle service project.

As I watched the children play in their tot lot for the first time, their elation was far more rewarding than any recognition I was planning to receive. I achieved the rank of Eagle by age 14, but more important, I started serving for the right reasons again.

Homeless children, the impoverished, people battling mental illness – these are the people who inspire me. These are the people who live by faith that their worlds will change for the better. These are the people who remind me every day how blessed I am and how serving them is not a choice but a calling.

*\*Names have been changed to protect the individuals' privacy.*