

“More glitter!” the little boy squealed, dumping green sparkles on his foam gingerbread man. He squeezed glue on top of that and then proceeded to pile even more glitter on the already sparkling cut-out. His eyes were alive with joy and greed as he reached for the red. I laughed at him and started decorating my own gingerbread man. After the chaos of my last visit to the homeless shelter, the other volunteers and I had decided that crafts would be a good activity to keep the children at bay. An Old Navy volunteer with colored hair and multiple piercings had brought glitter and foam paper.

“I think Tank pooped,” a teenage girl said, holding the chubby baby out away from her. She was a high school student like me but with no home and a broken family. The other volunteers had warned me that I may see students from my own school living here. This girl did not attend my school, but the thought that she could have had never occurred to me before. Not everyone has a home to return to. I offered to take baby Tank from her and made a face as I caught a whiff of his diaper. But I did not mind, he was beyond adorable, and he giggled as I bounced him up and down on my hip. He was only fourteen months old, but weighed thirty-one pounds, earning himself the nickname Tank. We did not have a change of diapers, but his mother would be out of her Life Skills class soon. I made an elephant out of play-dough for him. He tore it apart. At the end of the hour, his mother came for him and his brother, dressed in an oversized heavy-duty jacket and muddy work boots. She thanked us. I handed baby Tank over, sad to let him go. I wondered how much Tank’s mother sacrificed for her two children.

To my surprise, her two little boys ended up in our home through the emergency foster care system. It brought volunteering to a whole new level. I came home from practice one day to find Tank in my sister’s arms.

“I know that baby,” I exclaimed, confused yet overjoyed to see him again, “Why is he here?”

My mom called over from the kitchen. “Remember how your father and I signed up for emergency foster care? We finally got kids!” Her voice was filled with excitement. I ran downstairs to find Tank’s older brother, eager to see if he recognized me. He did not, but we became friends after a game of Octopus Pirate.

Though the first night with the two boys was fun, I soon found them intruding upon my life like annoying little brothers, breaking my routine and egocentric style. The baby needed constant care and the toddler constant entertainment. They became a drudge, a duty, and a dreadful delay to my high school career. Their presence interrupted the centripetal forces of pride and privacy that kept my world revolving around me. When would they leave? Why were they here? Then it occurred to me that I had it easy. I came home from practice to the toddler begging to play, to read, and to play again and the baby crying or wandering or needing a diaper change. But this work was spread out between the seven people in my family. I hardly had to even bother with them if I did not care to. What about their mother? Suddenly, I had a glimpse of her life. It was a small, teensy peek, hardly worth a penny, but a glimpse just the same. This woman—this incredible young woman—worked long hours every day to provide for her family. She came home, tired from construction work, to a toddler begging to play and a baby with a diaper to change. All she had was a car. She was tired, she was scared. Here was a girl willing to sacrifice all that she had to put food in her children’s stomachs and a smile on their faces. Here was a mother with a heart full of love that knew not how to fail. Here was a homeless, desperate woman who understood more about love than I did.

In time, the two boys began to wiggle their way into my heart. The baby's cheeks, plump beyond compare, rested against my chest as I rocked him to sleep. I found myself staying up late to do my homework because I had offered to read too many books to the toddler. I began to live each day serving others. Making it to every club meeting was no longer a priority. What really matters in the end anyway; how many hours I wrote down on my volunteer log? After my experience babysitting those boys at both the homeless shelter and in my own home, my view of volunteerism changed. It became for me not about lending a hand because I had to, but because I cared. It became something I sought to do at every opportune moment. I want to live to serve others. Tank and his brother inspired me to become a missionary. They showed me that life takes humility and sacrifice and that nothing worthwhile is ever easy.