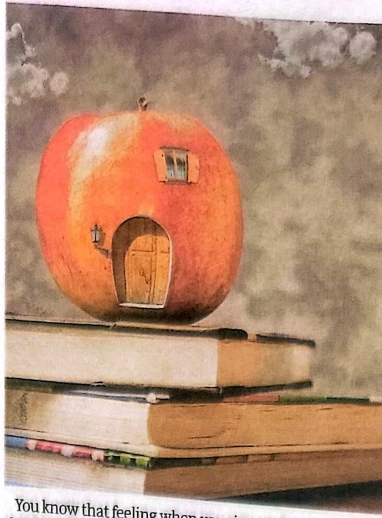


Letters

LETTERS

What volunteering taught me that school never did



You know that feeling when you sign up for something thinking, "Well, this is going to be a long afternoon"? That was me the first time I volunteered. I showed up expecting to do a few boring tasks and go home. Instead, I walked away with something I never saw coming.

Volunteering sounds noble and serious, but honestly, it's kind of a blast. A lot of people don't realise how much it actually gives back to you. I didn't sign up thinking I would gain new skills, but here I am, now somehow better at talking to strangers and not panicking when things go sideways.

Take the time I volunteered at a local food drive right here in our community. I thought I would just be handing out cans. Instead, I ended up mediating a heated debate between two grandmas over who would get the last box of pancake mix. One insisted she had been waiting in line longer. The other argued that her grandchildren would be devastated. I learned very quickly how to stay calm, joke my way through tension, and make sure everyone left happy. Spoiler alert: I found a second box hidden in the back. Crisis averted. That's not something you learn in a classroom.

And yes, volunteering brings people together in ways you wouldn't expect. I've seen it happen in my own neighbourhood. There was this alley behind our home—you know the type. It had become a trash magnet. People treated it like a second dumpster. A few of us got tired of looking at it, so we grabbed some gloves, trash bags, and a whole lot of sarcasm, and just started cleaning. By the end of the day, half the block had joined in. We were laughing, telling stories, and, for the first time, actually talking to neighbours we had ignored for years. The alley looked better, sure, but the bigger win was suddenly feeling like we belonged to something. That sense of connection? You cannot buy it.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking: "Volunteering is a waste of time. It doesn't pay." I get it. Money is tight. Life is busy. But I've also seen how those "unpaid" hours can pay off in unexpected ways.

A friend of mine spent a summer helping out at a local youth centre. She was bored and just wanted to put something on her résumé—nothing more. It turned out that the director later recommended her for a job she wouldn't have even been considered for otherwise. They didn't just see her résumé—they saw her showing up every week, being reliable, and handling chaos with a smile. That kind of thing sticks with people. Employers notice. Communities notice. Life notices.

So here's what I've come to realise: volunteering is not just about being a "good person." It's about growing. Connecting. Sometimes even finding your people. Whether you're 20 or 50, it's one of those rare things that makes you feel like you're part of something bigger without having to completely change your life. Well, okay, you do have to leave the couch—but trust me, it's worth it.

If you've been on the fence about volunteering, consider this your sign. Check out your local food bank, community centre, or even that messy alley down the street. Grab some gloves, bring a friend, and see what happens. You might just walk away with more than you expected.

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