

I was in my sophomore year of high school, when my father unexpectedly called. He wanted me move with him to New Jersey for school. At that time, my parents were divorced so I was living with my mother and younger sister. Next thing I knew, I was saying goodbye to my friends and teachers. A part of me felt excited about the new people and places I would see, but another part was saddened by the fact that I had to leave my familiar environment, school, friends, and family behind.

The first day at the new school was a struggle. Finding my way around was no easy task; the school seemed like a maze to me. In addition to my unfamiliarity, I was embarrassed to ask for help. Once I arrived at my classroom, I couldn't stay focused as I constantly worried about making new friends. Lunch was no better than my classes. Knowing no one in my lunch period, I found an empty seat and ate alone. After school, I stressed about my school work and new academic expectations. For the first week without any friends, I had a rootless feeling and felt more inclined to isolate myself. At night, I would curl up in bed unable to sleep, thinking about the daunting day ahead of me, while imagining how eventually I would be bold enough to talk to people. I felt confused and depressed.

A month later, the school chamber music club, which I became a member of, organized a live performance event at the County Manor. This is a local rehabilitation center that cares for elderly suffering from physical and mental disorders. Two peers from my orchestra class and I played a string trio, two girls played a string duet, and another student played a piece on the piano. After our performances, we were encouraged to have small chats with the audience. An elderly woman was sitting alone with a despondent look on her face. I sat down next to her and greeted cordially. A worker gave me her name, Jane, and said that she had Alzheimer's disease which explained why I was getting no response. Unfortunately, she could not speak comprehensible English or even recognize her loved ones. That day, Jane's daughter came to visit her so I left them alone. The daughter had a sad look on her face as she sat down next to Jane and talked to her as if she could understand. Getting up to leave, the daughter was crying, knowing that Jane didn't remember her. The disconnection between mother and daughter saddened me. I came to realize that my own problems seemed less intense in comparison to Jane's suffering from dementia. I felt a great empathy towards Jane. Determined to make a positive difference in lives like Jane, I followed up with the activity director and began my volunteering. Helping Jane allowed me to take my mind off of school and kept me from being swallowed up by my self-pity. Her memory of me may not last forever, but what mattered was that every time I greeted her and waved goodbye, I could see her lips smiling and eyes shining.

Judy, another elderly woman I was frequently around, is quite talkative and has a lively personality. Judy's love for music was strong at a young age when she played the piano. She really enjoyed the music my chamber music club played and told me that one of her favorite classical music pieces was Canon in D. Coincidentally, it was one of my favorites as well. Playing the violin since grade school, I practiced at least an hour almost every day. Ever since I moved, my daily practice became only sporadic. Motivated to play the song for her, I took this as my responsibility and found a greater interest in music again as I started to practice more often. The day I performed the song for the seniors, I had a sense of accomplishment, knowing that Judy would be pleased.

Judy used to hike quite often as a leader of a Flushing hiking group. She hiked every trail on Bear Mountain and many others in the local area. I was especially interested in her stories as I enjoyed spending time outdoors, since I grew up next to a large park in Missouri. One day, she gave me a hiking map of the Bear Mountain area in New York. The first thing she taught me was that the contour lines were used to determine elevations. After teaching me symbols of the map, she gave me contact information of a hiking group she used to go with. My first hike was tiring, but I immediately fell in love with it. Hiking became a weekly excursion and a huge stress-reliever while I was adapting to the new environment. I found an inner peace

while trekking through nature. It relaxed me and gave me time to think of all the challenges overcome since the relocation.

Through weekly contact with peer volunteers, health care workers, and seniors patients, I developed authenticity and cultivated trust. I found a stronger connection to those I helped and a boosted self-esteem. Helping others developed my social and relationship skills which offset my tendency toward isolation. To know I made a difference in someone's life truly counteracted the effects of stress, frustration, and anxiety as I transitioned into the new environment.

Moving to a drastically different community is filled with new experiences and a rollercoaster of new emotions. Feeling lonely and left out was the biggest challenge I faced. Having somebody to talk to or ask help from facilitates the process of adapting to the new school. Although finding the right social group can be intimidating as a new student, there are abundant clubs and sports teams in which friends can be made. Wanting to find people with the same interests as me, I immediately joined the volunteer and math club. When winter sports began, I signed up for the high school swim team. By taking a part in school extracurricular activities, I met students of all grade levels. Having these connections gave me the chance to ask questions about school without embarrassment. Outside of school, I joined a local swimming club. Not only did I meet more people from my school, but also others who went to different schools. High school students who are relocating should always join any group within and outside of school. Whether it is a school club, sports team, or church, seeking friends within the community makes the transition a lot smoother from all of the help and support they can give. Reaching out for help is essential, but remember that giving help can also be self-healing.

#### Extracurricular Activities

- NJIT Provost Summer Research Internship
- Volunteering at County Manor Rehabilitation Center
- Swimming
- Hiking
- Robotics Club
- Math Club
- Chamber Music Club
- Chemistry Club