

To Change the World

By Audrey Molina

When I was young, I thought an important life was one that changed the whole world. I figured if I just went to Mars or led a global movement or cured cancer or did some other revolutionary thing, I would matter. As I grew up, though, it became clear that accomplishing these lofty ambitions would be much more difficult than I had anticipated, if not utterly impossible. I realized I wasn't smart enough to cure cancer, or strong enough to start a movement, or brave enough to go to Mars. I feared that I would have to settle for an insignificant life.

Until, that is, I started volunteering with the Stamford Public Education Foundation. My junior year of high school, I caught wind of an opportunity to mentor 3rd graders once a week at the local elementary school through SPEF. There, I soon discovered an affinity for children and the fascinating ways in which they view the world. That summer, I was offered a position as an unpaid intern at the SPEF Summer Voyager Camp, a free pilot program for 4th and 5th graders who struggle academically and are from low-income families.

One little boy, Ludy, quickly became my pal. One day, he got frustrated when he didn't understand an assignment. He said to me through tears, "I'm not stupid! I'm just... not smart like they want me to be!" This comment stuck with me. It was so astute and wise. Here was a 10-year-old boy who couldn't yet read at his grade level but who still possessed the intellect to realize that the education system was pigeonholing him. Some kids with incredible potential are never given a chance to thrive in school just because their brand of intelligence is different from what is on the tests. I talked with Ludy about this for a long time, and he felt better.

This is just one story of many from that summer, during which I spent over 200 hours connecting with 127 students from across Connecticut. For the first time, I felt like I was making a difference. It was then that I realized that I don't have to change the whole world for my life to matter; changing the life of just one kid is enough. It's probably not difficult to guess that I plan to become a teacher one day.

I still volunteer with SPEF once a week. To me, making an impact means recognizing the hidden potential in every child and finding new and innovative ways to unlock it. Making an impact means showing compassion to every single student. Making an impact means caring unconditionally. I don't want to go to Mars anymore. I'd much rather stay on Earth, where I can enable the stars that are already here to shine even brighter. Volunteering with underprivileged kids in my community has given me a new perspective and a path to a truly fulfilling life. For that, I am eternally grateful.