

Why is volunteering and making an impact on your community important to you?

I started volunteering when I was 10. Since then, giving back to my community has become a passion and an integral part of me. This year especially, I have witnessed the power of people -- young people--coming together, fueled by a shared passion, and making an impact on our community by joining forces to give back.

My cross country team has a mantra, "Make It Amazing." This spells out Mia, the name of my coach's six-year-old daughter who died in 2017 of a rare childhood cancer, Rhabdomyosarcoma. For me, this mantra has grown into a mission and is my inspiration for volunteering for the childhood cancer community.

Last winter, I decided to start growing out my hair to donate it. But, I wanted to do more than get a haircut and truly Make It Amazing, not just for the child who would receive a wig made from my hair, but for *every* child fighting cancer. After Mia's death, I began working with her dad and his foundation, Infinite Love for Kids Fighting Cancer. Infinite Love fulfills research grants that make it possible for doctors to explore less toxic treatments for children. As president of the new Infinite Love junior board, I have learned how crucial fundraising is to this effort. So, I bridged the two ideas of donating hair and raising money to spearhead my school's first annual "Infinite Love Mane Event".

The Mane Event began as a small idea and quickly blossomed, with 38 students and four faculty members pledging to donate their hair and raise money. All 15 of my town's salons came on board and "sponsored" between one and seven participants. Stylists eagerly volunteered their services and time to chop (or shave) their participants' ponytails.

The haircuts took place in September, during Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. We started fundraising in May at community events, including local farmers' markets, 5Ks, and summer and fall festivals. We set our initial goal at \$10,000. After our entire town, including our First Selectwoman, responded so enthusiastically, we raised our goal to \$30,000--and surpassed it by more than \$1,500.

I admit there were times when I, a mere high school senior, was intimidated by our \$30,000 goal. That feeling never lasted very long, though, because I was never alone. I was constantly buoyed by the 41 other people who volunteered and joined me in this campaign. We were united by our commitment to the same mission of advocating for childhood cancer funding. As a group, we were able to accomplish so much more than if I had simply cut my hair and donated it. Together, we made an incredible impact on our town on the childhood cancer community. I'm proud to say that we we Made It Amazing.

For me, this is the essence of volunteering. It's about being part of something bigger than myself and connecting with others who share the same passion. Volunteering is an essential thread woven into the fabric of community and woven into me.