

The 2014 Jimmy Brazell Community Impact Scholarship Essay Contest

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You don't have to be someone special, or brilliant, or well known in order to impact the world around you! You simply have to look for need, reach out, and help meet it. I never met Jimmy Brazell, but I've heard his story. He had something figured out - you don't have to be extraordinary in order to help those around you, that what you really need is love paired with action. His life was a beautiful example of this philosophy.

When I was thirteen years old that very same realization dawned upon me. It struck me that all around me there were people that had a need, and the only way that need would be met is through someone answering God's call to reach out and love them.

My chance to make an impact came through a very interesting door - Canine Companions for Independence. CCI is an organization with a mission of giving highly trained service dogs to people suffering from disabilities, free of charge. Each dog in the program is taught complicated tasks such as opening doors, turning on and off lights, pushing elevator buttons, and picking up dropped items. Having one of CCI's dogs gives those with major disabilities the capacity to live a more independent and normal life.

I decided that since I had some experience training dogs I would apply to become a volunteer puppy raiser and take a little puppy to train over the course of a year and half to prepare him for service. So that's exactly what I did. In May of 2010 my Mom and I walked into Canine Companions' Ohio training center and I signed on to train a wiggly, adorable, seven week old Labrador Retriever cross puppy. His name was Dembre.

Dembre and I did just about everything together over the next year and a half. As part of the program, puppy raisers take the trainees into public places to acclimate them to their future job as a constant servant. We experienced airports, restaurants, conferences, debate tournaments, and even the Statehouse together. The bond that we built was close to unbreakable.

Our relationship had its downs too. There were long nights when Dembre would bark and carry on, resulting in little sleep and lots of frustration. My friends heard me pull the, "I can't come, I've got a dog" card many times. Training took a lot of time on a daily basis. Yet, in August of 2011 when I walked back into CCI's training center to hand him back over for his final months of training it all seemed worth it. I knew that it was likely in a few months he would become the hands and feet of someone in need.

While CCI's professional trainers worked hard on adding to Dembre's training, I waited. I anxiously anticipated the e-mail I would get from his trainer each month telling me whether he was still cut out for graduation. Every month it was the same answer. Dembre was doing great.

Months dragged on and May of 2012 came. One day Dembre's trainer called. "Elijah," she said, "Dembre has been paired with his new partner. Her name is Imelda. You get to come next week to meet her and hand Dembre over." Tears filled my eyes. Two years after I discovered that I could help someone in my community, now I would finally get to see that person. I'd done it. I'd made a change.

Graduation day came. Excited and full of joy, I arrived at Dembre's graduation ceremony. After months of being apart, the puppy that I'd spent every waking minute with greeted me with a wagging tale. I wrapped my arms around him and told him that he had made me so proud, that he'd done it!

Then I got to meet Imelda. She's a lady with a huge smile who doesn't let her limited movement and wheelchair confinement dampen her mood. We talked about Dembre, and how he would help her. He would be opening doors, turning on and off lights, and putting her laundry into the washer and dryer, giving her the ability to spend entire days without reliance on a caretaker. It gave her a new life.

I was in awe. What I had done was simple. I'd found a way that I could help and set out to do it. Now, years later, I was looking into the face of that person I'd done all that work for. Those nights that lacked sleep, the missed social events, the hours of training – all of that was for Imelda – so that she could live an easier life.

Today Dembre still gives Imelda assistance around the clock. My little choice to raise a puppy has resulted in a great increase of independence in the life of a wonderful lady. I found something to give my attention to and it really did make a difference that matters.

I believe that everyone has opportunity surrounding them, and that you can help change the world by just finding a small task and doing it. Jimmy Brazell understood that and lived it out better than I probably ever will. He knew that people around him were in need and that he could do something about it. Even though he died young he left the legacy of someone who knows that change starts with love and action.

In honor of Jimmy and the legacy he left behind, I encourage you to find a way that you can change your community. There are always people in need and they're just waiting for you to do something about it. You don't have to be special in order to do good work. Instead, you have to find someone that needs help, reach out your hand, and help them find the love of Christ through your action. That is the legacy of Jimmy Brazell and I pray that we all learn to love our neighbors like he did.