

Katie Eaton – North Carolina

I was at National Convention the first year the Jimmy Brazell Scholarship was created. I heard his family share his incredible story and listened as Alouette Greenidge, the first place winner, read her essay about being on the Human Services Commission and volunteering with disabled children. The next year Sarah Braun won and I heard her read her essay about helping people pay for their groceries, and last year I was inspired by Gina DeLorie who gave bags of supplies to homeless people and started a non-profit organization.

Year after year, I'd hear their stories and I wanted to be like them, to make a difference, but I never actually did. Finally, this past summer, I decided to stop dreaming and do something. I prayed that God would help me find something that was both a passion of mine, and a place in need. I want to be a nurse someday and while looking up Nurses Aid classes, I stumbled across a summer internship at where high school students would have the opportunity to serve inside a real hospital. I knew that was where God wanted me to go and after talking to my parents, I signed up, went to an interview, and was accepted to the program.

The first week in June we had our training day and I was excited. This was my chance to get practical experience for my future job, but much more, I was going to be helping people. As we began orientation, we had a general hospital tour, and then we were split off to be trained for our individual tasks. My specific assignment was in the Surgery Prep and Recovery Unit. While touring the unit, we met some of the patients and got to interact with the nurses. It was running smoothly until something unplanned happened. A patient who was feeling sick ripped out their IV and ran to the bathroom, but slipped and vomited all over the floor. Several nurses swarmed the area and got the patient back into bed, checked on him and went to calm down other patients who were agitated by the incident. As all of the staff members were occupied, there was no one cleaning up the mess. It was disgusting and the vomit reeked, but the job needed to be done, so I asked where to find paper towels, donned some gloves and got to work cleaning. While wiping up the last of the mess, a nurse named Alex came out to help and showed me where to find disinfectant wipes and he helped me finish the job. When it was done, I washed my hands and we returned to our orientation.

When I got home that day, the thought of helping out didn't seem so glorious anymore. I figured that I would be side by side with the nurses helping patients, but instead I was wiping up vomit. Then I realized that I wasn't serving people to get credit or to feel like I was doing

something good, I was serving the nurses so they could do their job better, and I was serving the patients so that I could help their stay in the hospital more comfortable.

After that day, my mindset changed, and I sought to help in small ways. There were a lot of fun things I got to do. I found out that one of the freezers had popsicles so I checked with the guy in charge of the unit and began giving them to the little kids who came through. It made my day to see the smiles on their faces when they got treats. Volunteers for the hospital get a 50% discount at the gift store so I would arrive early with my money and buy flowers to give distribute throughout the day. The hospital was kept at a really cool temperature to prevent the spread of germs so a lot of older patients and visitors got cold so I would put extra blankets in the dryer to warm them up and give them out. I got to spend time with the patients and their families, I'd tell them stories, make them laugh, and try to take their mind off of their situation. I'd help the nurses by changing and wiping the beds when they were busy with patients. I'd touch up the bathroom for the janitor because it meant he had less work to do later. I emptied the trash and sterilized equipment once a patient had left so the nurses could focus on the next person. And I cleaned up when a mess was made so that the staff would be able to do their jobs without having to stop to clean it up. Some of the things I did were unpleasant, or time consuming, or cost me money, but I knew that I gave the nurses more time to help patients in need and made the patient's stay a little easier, which made it all, even the gross parts, worthwhile.

TeenPact is more than just politics. It's about raising the leaders of the next generation. But as leaders, what Jimmy, Alouette, Sarah, Gina and so many others have taught me, we aren't only called to do the fun, attention getting jobs, but to be foot-washers – to do the jobs that are repulsive and go unnoticed – something I didn't really understand until I was on my knees scrubbing vomit off of the floor. Since my internship ended, I have begun to realize that those same principles I learned at the hospital can be applied to the people I meet when every day or even at home. You don't need a job title or a special position to affect your community, you just need to look for something that needs to be done and be willing to do it. I may not have changed the lives of the people I met, but I changed one moment, made one day easier, and in the end, that's all that matters.