

## 'Apathetic Alex' found his voice in volunteering

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He was the kid who spent the better part of that first day gluing ants to the table. "Alex the apathetic" is what we could have called him since, like many other teens, volunteerism was the last thing on his mind.

He was Alex Apostol, a brazen 14-year-old who had better things to do than participate in the week-long leadership academy in which his parents had him enrolled.



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Free the Children founder Craig Kielburger.

Most of that first day, Alex sat in the corner, arms crossed, brooding, watching the ants glued to his desk instead of engaging with the group. He defiantly stomped out at the end of the day, having fulfilled his promise to his mother to try it out. He did not intend to return.

Alex was still upset with his parents for moving in the middle of a school year, forcing him to leave his friends behind. This wasn't going to help.

But his mother dragged him back to try it for one more day. That day, academy kids were learning public speaking. Most of them prepared speeches about volunteerism, the environment, child labour and other global issues.

Alex chose a lighter subject. Under the guise of his speech, he ridiculed the facilitator. Alex made fun of the facilitator's hair, his clothes, his style.

When everyone "except Alex" was excused for a mid-afternoon break, Alex was unconcerned. He relished the thought of getting kicked out.

Instead, the facilitator complimented Alex on his talent for speaking.

"I sat there, thinking, intrigued," Alex remembers. "I came back the next day, and I paid more attention. By that third day, I was in love with the place."

The tolerant facilitator had motivated Alex to think about issues he'd never thought about. By engaging with Alex, and offering inspiring words about the power the young teen had to make a difference, the facilitator helped create a shift. Alex began to understand the power he had to affect positive change.

"Even though I was defiant and I was misbehaving, someone recognized my potential and showed me how I could use this defiance for good," he admits today. "Perhaps work to defy something else

in the world, like poverty, injustice, intolerance.”

Since that defining moment, Alex has led volunteer trips to Kenya, India and Mexico. He has coordinated and led training in high schools, delivered speeches to tens of thousands of young people and facilitated leadership training in North America, Europe, Africa and Latin America.

He spent many of his first 14 summers in camps — art, science, music, math. He didn't become fully engaged with his world until he learned the value of social involvement. In the end, we were wrong about “Alex the apathetic.” He just didn't know how to get started. And he's not alone. There are so many more.

Our experience with the thousands of high school kids we've met through our work with Free The Children has shed light on a very important reality: teenagers across North America are often on the receiving end of everything. They receive instructions from adults, homework from teachers and allowances from their parents.

Unfortunately, because of the common assumption that teens are at the stage where they have little or nothing to give, people often dismiss the valuable contributions that they can make. In doing so, society reinforces feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem so frequently found in this age group.

“For many, the youth experience in North America is artificial,” said Dr. Dorothea Gaither, a registered clinical psychologist. “A child's job is only to go to school. Unless they are deeply involved in church or other organizations, they don't feel connected.

“But when they take the time to step out of themselves and help others, they often get more than they give. They learn about themselves; they learn about others. And they hone skills.”

According to the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, more than 80 per cent of Ontario youth volunteers said they gained interpersonal skills—understanding people better, learning to motivate others and deal with difficult situations. About 75 per cent developed communication skills like public speaking, writing and conducting meetings.

Volunteering is a chance for youth to meet new people and learn about their strengths and weaknesses. Social involvement is a great resume builder for youth, allowing for improved job prospects. It is also a boost to self-esteem.

A University of Virginia study of 695 students showed that volunteering affected their lives in many ways. The students were randomly divided into two groups; half the students volunteered through a community service program, while the other half did no volunteer work.

At the end of four years, only 26 per cent of the volunteers had failed a course. In the second group, 46 per cent had failed at least one class. Among girls—who made up 85 per cent of the entire group—10 per cent of non-volunteers had become pregnant compared to four per cent of the girls who volunteered.

Social involvement is a win-win situation for young people.

In Alex's case, the rewards translated into the TD Canada Trust Scholarship for Community Leadership, which gives 20 young people each year tuition and living expenses for four years of university.

Alex attended the University of Toronto. He sees the scholarship as an opportunity to go to school without having to worry about a paying job. And every reason to put in more and more volunteer hours.

"It's incredible," said Alex, now 21. "I already got so much out of volunteering. It's hard to believe how one speech, one leadership academy changed my life."

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*Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of Free the Children and co-authors of Me to We. With this column, they are exploring the impact of global issues on young people in developing nations and what it means to youth in the GTA.*