

A Q&A Session

Start by Reading This

Why is this important?

- There are 923 million people who do not have enough food to eat. This is equal to the number of people in the United States, European Union, and Canada.
- By 2030, there will be no more glaciers left in Glacier National Park.
- In the United States, 37.3 million people live in poverty. That's more than one out of every ten Americans.
- Nearly 7,500 people become infected with HIV every day.
- More than 47 million Americans do not have health insurance, making it nearly impossible to go to the doctor and get the medical care they need.

Although it's possible to go on and on with the statistics, this book isn't intended to be depressing. Instead, it's about enriching your life by doing what you can to make a meaningful difference in the world. You can use what you have—your skills, knowledge, and talents, to help change these statistics. In the process, you will also change your life. This book shows you how.

Can I really change the world?

Yes. You can improve the lives of others and solve local and global problems. To be sure, this is not “saving” the world, solving every problem that exists. No person is capable of doing this. However, initiatives to college students (what I did) or join with friends to “adopt” dependence on fossil fuels. There are infinite ways that you can make a meaningful impact. This book will inspire you with examples of people who have done this and will show you how you can as well. You do not have to be a millionaire, genius, or celebrity.

Will this change my life?

Without a doubt. By making a meaningful difference in this world, you will start to feel empowered. This isn't just about traditional community service. By combining your efforts to improve the world with your most ambitious goals and dreams, your life will gain meaning. You will realize that you have the ability to do great things and that you can change your life for the better. You'll build a living legacy and your actions will be remembered by others.

Do I have to be as wealthy as Bill Gates or Oprah?

No. This is about a new way of living, not just sending a huge check to charity. Many people think that simply writing a check will make a difference and absolve them from any social guilt or obligation to serve. They are wrong. As I explain later, nonprofit organizations are not doing enough to solve our problems. The government isn't off the hook either. Giving these institutions more money is not the solution. Despite the best efforts of the nonprofit industry and government programs, many of our global problems are getting worse. Because of this, it's up to everyday people to get involved.

Is it enough to just buy a Prius and eat organic vegetables?

Although driving a hybrid car and buying pesticide-free produce are steps in the right direction, you have much more to offer the community besides choosing to buy certain types of carrots at the grocery store! You have a mind and unique ideas and skills that can be used to solve local and global problems. This book shows you how you can make a much bigger difference, one that will be meaningful to you and your life. You owe it to yourself, your family, and your world.

Will this fit into my lifestyle?

Absolutely. I'll explain how you can solve the world problems you care about without adding an eighth day to the week. In the following pages, I've also interspersed motivating profiles of people, including an investment banker, working mother, med school student, and father of five, who have already done this. It's true that sometimes it is difficult to balance everything, but regardless of your professional, familial, or financial obligations, it is possible to make this work. I have broken down the process that has enabled me and many others to make a meaningful difference in the world.

Will this cost anything? Are my yearly donations enough?

Service doesn't have to cost anything at all. Even if you aren't in the habit of donating money to charities or church, a small amount can go a long way toward creating social solutions.

I've never volunteered before and have no interest in attending political rallies or joining interest groups. Is this okay?

Absolutely. Previous experience isn't necessary. Plus, changing the world and improving your life transcend partisan political bickering. This is about pragmatism, doing what you can; not activism.

Chapter 1

Diplomat 101

Beginning with the Basics

Service is the outer expression of your inner values.

When is the last time you did something that mattered, something that truly had a significant and lasting influence on your life or on the life of someone else? If you have trouble thinking of anything, that's okay. Many people are living lives that are unfulfilling. Many of us work over forty hours a week in jobs that are not personally satisfying and don't fully utilize our talents. Yet we want to live lives that matter and are worth remembering—lives that can make a meaningful difference, lives that can change the world. Seeing the endless stream of homeless people, sick children, and melting icecaps in the morning papers is sad and frightening. However, as I learned after starting Students Serve—and as you see—anyone can make a difference in solving these problems and can live a satisfying and fulfilling life.

Reading this book will enable you to find your “world piece,” your unique way to do your part to change the world. You'll also find an inner peace, a sense of contentment about your life. You will feel empowered by the knowledge that you have done something that really matters. You will also gain confidence and realize that you can accomplish your dreams.

Before getting started, it's important to lay a few things on the table.

1. Politicians, nonprofit organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have failed. This seems harsh, but for decades these institutions have made promises to solve our local and global challenges. Many have done good work and have helped millions of individuals, yet the problems that they were created to solve are still with us. A case in point is traditional food banks. They have fed billions of meals to people who would have otherwise gone hungry. This is an admirable and very important service, but the problem of world hunger still affects millions of people.

2. We're all in this together. To start making progress, we need individuals to come up with innovative ways to address our problems. This means that all types of people— from careful conservatives to diehard liberals,

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Southern belles to Northern Yankees, children to retirees, laboring immigrants to socialites—must contribute. This is democracy at its best.

3. Each of us can improve society. I have learned this through my own experiences and in interviews with others. Simply stated, when we take it upon ourselves to do something to change the world, the results can be profound.

4. It doesn't take a village, at least not at first. Never before in the history of the world have individual people been as powerful as they are now. It only takes one person to ignite a movement that can improve communities.

Even if you've never volunteered or given money to charity, this is fine. No experience is necessary when it comes to changing the world.

Serving for the Soul

Service, in its most basic form, is the outward manifestation of your inner beliefs. You are truly living out your values when you volunteer. Your beliefs are transformed from mere statements about global injustice, evil, or what is wrong in this world into productive actions that you can see, feel, and experience. It is the most sincere form of expressing what is in your soul. You are defining yourself and declaring what is important to you through your actions.

To make your efforts as meaningful as possible, I believe that it is important to connect your donations and volunteering to your inner satisfaction. When giving to others is personally important and has a positive effect on your life, you are more likely to continue making a significant difference. This is a newer and better way to give, serve, and change our world.

Give to Get

Giving to others provides a great sense of personal satisfaction, yet the idea that improving the world can have personal benefits is shocking to some people. "It is better to give than to receive" is a phrase we often hear. Many people believe that community service and monetary donations are purely altruistic, gifts to others or the world provide no advantages to ourselves. However, if you think about it, volunteering and sending checks to charities do not leave the people who are giving empty-handed.

The clearest way to understand this is to focus on donations to nonprofit organizations. An overwhelming 92 percent of American households make financial contributions to churches, charities, and other groups. On the surface, this seems to be a selfless act, yet the organizations are not the sole beneficiaries of these generous donations. Individuals claim sizeable tax deductions for their donations.

Giving your time provides another type of benefit. Whenever people volunteer, they generally feel as though they have made positive contributions to society. This is gratifying and reinforces that these individuals are important to their communities. They feel good about themselves and their inner character. When they give to others, they receive internal self-worth. Giving is also about getting.

A Happier Life, A Happier World

Personal satisfaction with your life can lead to neighborhoods and societies that are better places to live. This is an important realization that is necessary to understanding how improving your life is closely associated with changing the world.

When you are unhappy, you probably do not treat others with kindness. For example, you are more likely to explode with anger when you get cut off by a rude driver (again!) or have to wait in line for twenty minutes at the bank. Because of your lack of personal fulfillment and patience, the bank tellers are likely to be agitated by your bad temper, and your frustrations lead to their irritability. When they go home following the end of their shifts, they are more likely to be cranky with their spouses and short-tempered with their children.

In this case, one person's unhappiness has affected an entire group of people. If we are living a hollow existence, we can cause other people to become unhappy as well. This is why it is crucial to live satisfying lives that fill us with contentment.

Scientific evidence has recently confirmed that happiness is contagious. Our internal well-being can affect the general well-being of our family members and friends, which can then be multiplied exponentially to all the people they know. Service, even seemingly small good deeds, leads to a more satisfying inner personal life. And when you feel positive about yourself, you share that internal joy with all the other people in your life. You change the world.

By serving others, you gain fulfillment and internal self-worth. The inner satisfaction you receive is passed on to the people around you, improving their lives and our communities.

Twenty-First-Century Service

Traditional community service and philanthropy do not emphasize the importance of personal connections to making a difference. This is a problem, though, because we invest parts of ourselves every time we volunteer or donate money. My nursing home "fingernail episode" is the classic example of this. New and better ways to give money and serve are needed to have a more effective and meaningful impact on solving global problems.

A Better Way to Give

Most people give back to the community by donating their time, money, or both. But even if you have developed the admirable habit of making financial contributions to nonprofit organizations, you oftentimes can't say with certainty that the donations were personally meaningful. The better way to give, as described later, will help you maximize both the effectiveness of your contributions and their personal significance to your life.

A Better Way to Serve

If you do volunteer work, increase the effectiveness of your efforts by volunteering at the same place whenever you're able, instead of going to a new organization each time. By doing this, you can form personal connections and relationships, and the organizations do not need to train you each time you are able to volunteer. You will already know the ropes and can even help new volunteers.

Using your particular talents and gifts can help you make an even bigger impact on solving a global problem. Someone who is trained as an accountant is likely going to engage in more effective and meaningful service if auditing a food bank's financial statements rather than stacking the cans. This definitely doesn't mean the accountant can't do both things, but using special skills and interests will make a much larger impact on the life of the accountant and the world problem.

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted." —Aesop

Catalina Saldivar

"There was never a hesitation. This was what I needed to do. I needed to help in any way I could. It was basic, but it was a starting point for something great."

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Working at a Marriott hotel, many of Catalina Saldivar's coworkers spoke Spanish and only a few phrases in English. Not being able to communicate made it incredibly difficult for them to function in America. They were frequently unable to read road signs, nutrition fact labels, government forms, and their kids' field trip permission forms. Without a working knowledge of English, they couldn't get driver's licenses, attend school, or help their children with homework problems. Above all, they wanted to be able to communicate with the people around them.

As Catalina got to know her colleagues, most of whom were housekeepers, they expressed their deep desire to learn English. Even though she had never been a teacher and had just received her associate's degree, Catalina decided to do something to help. She was bilingual and had taught Sunday School in the past, so she convinced herself that she had something to offer and could help her hardworking colleagues learn English. She used her own money to buy school supplies and developed a four-month curriculum. Classes were held every week at 7:30 in the morning.

Her efforts worked. By the end of Catalina's curriculum, her students had acquired a functional knowledge of English. Following completion of the course, they had a graduation ceremony in which the students dressed up in caps and gowns and had a chance to walk across a stage. This might have been the only opportunity the students would ever have to "graduate." During the ceremony, each of the graduates delivered a thank-you speech—in English. To Catalina, seeing the students interact with guests, using the English they had learned in her classes, was very rewarding. The program was so successful that the local school system adopted it so that an even greater number individuals who didn't speak English could learn the language.

"It's about taking care of others. It's about serving others. It's about the people. And this can be very rewarding."

This type of service is about putting your money where your heart is and your mind where your hands are. You invest yourself in solving a specific social problem. You combine your financial donations, mental talents, and your time to truly change the world.

To help clarify the difference, here's a comparison of the old and new ways to serve.

Old Way

Volunteer a couple of hours each month at a different place each time. You might not be really interested in what you're doing, but you feel like you have a duty to give back by donating your time.

New Way

Instead of volunteering as before, you ask for donations from local businesses and friends so that you can go on a one-week mission trip with your church. Together, you provide healthcare to people who cannot afford to go to the doctor in Guatemala. As your clinic leaves the village after a long day of seeing patients, a ten-year-old girl runs up and embraces you. Her huge smile is beaming at you with thanks. You know that you will never forget this experience.

Old Way

Your father, who loved historic architecture, recently passed away, and you and your siblings want to do something to honor his life and make his legacy live on. You, your brothers, and your sister each donate to a variety of charitable organizations that preserve historic buildings.

New Way

You and your siblings form a family foundation in your father's name. Your sister finds a building near his childhood home that is deteriorating and that he would have wanted to protect. You combine your money to buy it and restore the building to its original condition. You each spend a couple of weekends helping to paint the interior. The end result is terrific, and you donate the building to the city in hopes that it can be used to revitalize that area of town. Your dad would have been so proud.

- You don't have to be a philanthropist who buys a ticket to a \$1,000-a-plate charity dinner. It's perfectly okay if you are not wealthy.
- You don't have to hold a diploma from an elite college. It's great if you do, but you can still solve world problems and make a meaningful difference if you have limited education.
- You don't have to be famous or influential in your community. Celebrities often use their star status to serve others and make a news splash, but this certainly isn't a prerequisite to making a difference.
- You don't have to have a lot of time on your hands. Your contribution can be meaningful to both yourself and the world, even if your project is short in duration.
- You simply have to want to make a meaningful difference in your life and in the lives of others. The rest of this book is your guide to making this happen. If you're not already sure which world problem you want to tackle, the first part helps you choose a cause that you can be passionate about.