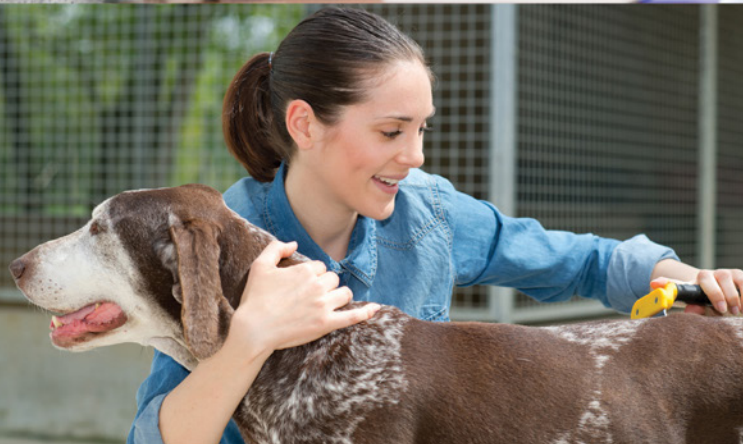




Teen Guide to **VOLUNTEERING**

Stuart A. Kallen





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Volunteer Close to Home

When you envision volunteers, you might picture people handing out bottled water after a natural disaster or dishing up turkey and mashed potatoes at homeless shelters on Thanksgiving. And plenty of volunteers perform such tasks. But some volunteers make the world a better place without leaving their neighborhood, or even their house. If you are just taking your first steps into the world of volunteering, you can look close to home for ways to help others. You might find that you can volunteer without maxing out your schedule or making a long-term commitment.

In 2017, high school student Michelle Lemieux cleaned out her closet for charity. She donated a used prom gown and other accessories to a group called Catherine's Closet that provides formal wear to students who cannot afford to buy the items. Catherine's Closet, founded in 2002, was named after Catherine Johnson, an honor student and valedictorian of her high school class in East Orange, New Jersey. Johnson was killed in a car crash and was buried in the gown she never got to wear to prom.

Lemieux saw Catherine's Closet as a perfect opportunity to volunteer—and she got others to join her:

I used social media to spread the word locally and collected 58 dresses, plus accessories. My house was filled to the brim with gowns—it was amazing! . . . I witnessed a mother cry as she watched her daughter find the perfect gown for her prom. . . . I was so thrilled to see so many girls and women walk out of the event not just with gowns, but many of the ones I knew came from my friends and community.⁶

Many of the gowns Lemieux collected were from big-name designers like Vera Wang, Ralph Lauren, and Michael Kors. After collecting the formal wear, Lemieux worked with other student volunteers to sort through the dresses and assist customers on distribution days that were held before prom season began.

Catherine's Closet, which also collects toys and books, is active in New Jersey, New York, and Arizona. By 2020, over sixteen thousand girls had benefited from the group's efforts. There are dozens of other organizations that depend on volunteers like Lemieux, people who are willing to spend a few hours sorting through unwanted items, boxing them up, and donating them to people in need.

Other groups provide services similar to Catherine's Closet. Becca's Closet, which operates volunteer-led chapters throughout

"I was so thrilled to see so many girls and women walk out of the event not just with gowns, but many of the ones I knew came from my friends and community."⁶

—Michelle Lemieux, student volunteer



A Utah teenager who helped start a chapter of Becca's Closet shows off some of the prom dresses that will be given to students who would not otherwise be able to afford a dress for the high school prom.

the country, gives away prom dresses, shoes, accessories, tuxedos, suits, ties, and more to young women and men. In California, Maria's Closet hosts dress drives, while Project GLAM is active on the East Coast. Beyond formal wear, groups such as the Vietnam Vets of America, St. Vincent de Paul, and The Arc are always in need of donated items, including toys, furniture, tablecloths, towels, bedding, and unopened toiletries. Sometimes donation boxes for nonprofit groups can be found outside supermarkets and government buildings, making it easy to donate items to local organizations.

Neighbor to Neighbor

Donating to Catherine's Closet is one of several volunteer projects undertaken by Lemieux. She also puts in time at the local chapter of Neighbors Helping Neighbors (NHN). This organization, which is active in many communities, connects volunteers to older and disabled homeowners, or anyone who has trouble affording home repairs. Volunteers for NHN trim trees, rake leaves, clean gutters, and even fix roofs and paint houses. In cold climates, volunteers remove snow from driveways and sidewalks.

You can offer to shovel a driveway or do housework for a neighbor in need without joining NHN. A quick walk around your neighborhood might reveal a yard that needs maintenance or a house that looks in need of repair. You can also post a notice on a neighborhood's social networking site such as Nextdoor or Front Porch Forum. A help-offered post should include your age, your general location, and the tasks you are willing to perform as a volunteer for neighbors in need.

In 2018, Jacob Shoulders of Orting, Washington, found a great way to help an older neighbor named Paul. Shoulders said his mother always told him to stop and chat with an elderly person he sees sitting alone. After striking up a conversation with Paul, Shoulders learned that the man's roof leaked, which is a big problem for anyone who lives in rainy Washington. Shoulders

Clean Out That Closet

While cleaning out closets is never high on anyone's list of fun things to do, it is a great way to find clothes, toys, and other items at home that can be donated to those in need. The best way to approach closet cleaning is to commit to a date, mark it on your calendar, set an alarm, and make it a priority to follow through. Marie Kondo, who is widely known as a professional organizer, has some closet cleaning tips based on methods she calls the KonMari way. Kondo believes that being neat and well organized brings joy. Writer Murphy Moroney explains how to clean out closets using the KonMari way: "Hold up each item and ask yourself whether or not it sparks joy for you. Start with things that feel easy—the ones that make you feel an immediate 'yes!' or 'no!'—before tackling the trickier items." If an item does not spark joy, or if you have not worn it for a year or more, toss it on the donate pile. Whatever method suits you best, it should not take more than a few hours to separate your clothes into three categories: keep, donate, toss. Sharing with others what you no longer use is a simple way to help people in your community.

Murphy Moroney, "Declutter Your Family's Closets in 6 Easy Steps Using the KonMari Method," Popsugar, January 11, 2019, www.popsugar.com.

knew nothing about roof repair, but he was familiar with crowdfunding. He engaged the help of a local community volunteer organizer who helped coordinate the effort.


Shoulders found a local roofing contractor who offered to replace Paul's roof for the cost of materials only. This meant an \$11,000 roof replacement job would be done for \$5,500. Shoulders organized a fundraiser on the crowdfunding site GoFundMe and in one month raised enough money to fix the roof. When the project was completed, Shoulders wrote on the fundraising page: "We are a community, one body, and I will close with saying, Thank You All So Very Much for all you do in this great Orting Village!"⁷

Pets to People

While not everyone can raise funds to fix a roof, almost anyone can volunteer to help a neighbor. Elderly or ill neighbors might need help with simple tasks, such as walking their dog. Or, if you

own a friendly dog or cooperative cat, you can take it around to visit seniors who live nearby. There are many emotional and physical benefits associated with what is called pet therapy. Studies show interacting with pets helps lower blood pressure and reduce anxiety and depression while bringing joy. This type of therapy can take place in a number of settings including a retirement home or a senior's home.

If you are unsure about your ability to handle your pet around new people—or if you do not have a pet—the group Pet Partners might be your answer. This organization, which has chapters throughout the United States and Canada, has run its Therapy Animal Program for more than forty years. The program caters to seniors, veterans with PTSD, patients in recovery, people with intellectual disabilities, and others who benefit from interactions with dogs and cats. Pet Partners also provides other therapy ani-



Not all volunteer projects involve dozens of people and extensive planning. Volunteering can be as simple as offering to walk the dog of a neighbor who cannot get out of the house to do that.

mals, including miniature horses, rabbits, macaws, and even rats. Those who register themselves and their pets with Pet Partners will have access to free online courses. They can also attend the Pet Partners Handler Course, which the website says is for “the human on the end of the leash.”⁸ The course teaches volunteers what to expect when working as a Pet Partners handler.

Trash It and Post It

If pet therapy is not on your agenda, you can make your neighborhood a better place by picking up trash. No matter where you live, you will likely find litter that needs to be placed in a trash can—fast food wrappers, water bottles, and all types of plastic junk are easy to find almost everywhere. You can start on your block and work your way out to local parks, beaches, and hiking trails. Inexpensive claw-type trash pickup tools, which can be found at hardware stores and online, can make it easier to pick up all sorts of objects. Other necessities include a pair of work gloves and a few large trash bags.

Most volunteers do what they do for altruistic (unselfish) reasons; they do not expect to receive awards or see their picture in the news. But most people like a pat on the back, or the modern equivalent, likes on social media. If you appreciate virtual kudos, you can participate in the #trashtag challenge promoted in 2019 by Facebook user Byron Román. “Here is a new #challenge for all you bored teens,” Román wrote. “Take a photo of an area that needs some cleaning or maintenance, then take a photo after you have done something about it, and post it.”⁹ Román’s post was accompanied by a “before” selfie in which he posed along a riverbank marred by a mess of ugly trash. The “after” selfie showed the results of Román’s work: nine large garbage bags completely filled and tied next to a spotless area returned to its natural state.

Román is not a teenager; he is a fifty-three-year-old banker from Phoenix. But his #trashtag and #trashchallenge went viral among teens on social media; within days it was shared more

than 323,000 times on Facebook. Within a week, hundreds of teens from the United States, Thailand, Germany, India, and elsewhere were sharing before-and-after pictures from their cleanup

“Usually I’m against doing good deeds just to post it online but in the case of #trashtag i am 100% for it, if that’s what it takes. Good people are good.”¹⁰

—Megan, #trashtag volunteer

efforts along roadsides, riverbanks, and beaches. Some trash challenges included dozens of bags filled by ten or more people. Others’ cleanups consisted of a single bag of junk the poster had picked up at a campsite. A tweet by a user named Megan summed up the satisfaction felt by many volunteers: “Usually I’m against doing good deeds just to post it online but in the case of #trashtag i am 100% for it, if that’s what it takes. Good people are good.”¹⁰

A Kid Changemaker

Caleb Oh wanted to be one of the good people who volunteer, but the eighth grader from Gambrills, Maryland, often suffered from debilitating migraine headaches. Sometimes he could not even attend school due to the painful throbbing in his head. In 2011, when Oh was in first grade, he was home with a headache reading the biography of Jane Goodall, the world’s leading expert on chimpanzees. Inspired by Goodall’s animal rights activism, he decided he would try to make a positive mark on the world. But Oh said he had trouble finding a place to fit in: “There was a fixed mindset that kids could not help. Most places require you to be at least 18 to volunteer.”¹¹

Oh was only six at the time, but he decided to launch his own initiative, Kid Changemakers. He recruited some of his friends, made one hundred bagged lunches, and donated them to a homeless shelter in nearby Annapolis. After the successful lunch donation, Oh found other ways to help. He launched a drive to collect toiletries and baby supplies for a local women’s shelter.

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