

Laura Dykstra
Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy

I have been serving in various ways since I was young. Although I have always enjoyed service projects, I realize that there are other, more important, reasons for serving: to bring help to those in need and because Jesus wants us to love others and joyfully serve them. I believe that serving others is one way of showing God's love to them. I pray that my service projects will brighten the lives of those I serve, just as Aubrey Rose brightened the world around her with her positive attitude and smiles.

Since I was 5 years old, my family and I have been shopping for and packing 20-25 shoeboxes every year for Operation Christmas Child. The boxes that we pack with school supplies, hygienic items, toys, and a T-shirt are delivered to very poor children in Africa and other parts of the world who may have never received a Christmas present in their lives. Along with these shoeboxes, a message of God's love is also presented to these children. It humbles me when I see a video of children receiving the Christmas Child boxes because this is the most they have ever been given. These children, like Aubrey, always have a smile on their faces, even though they are living in difficult circumstances. I am happy to participate in this program that gives hope to children in their times of need. I have also received letters from two girls who received our boxes, one in India and the other in Zambia. They were both very grateful to have gotten our gifts. I wrote back and forth several times with the girl in Zambia. Her name was Tahila, and I realized that we had several things in common even though our lives were very different. For example, we both play stringed instruments; Tahilla plays the cello and I play the violin. Whenever I make these Christmas Child Boxes, I always do it with a smile and I'm sure that the kids who receive the boxes smile too, because they know that they are loved and cared for by people across the world and also by God.

My first mission trip was when I was 7 years old. My family and I went to the Appalachian Mountains in West Virginia with some other families from our church. We worked at a community center in a very impoverished town. I helped serve Thanksgiving dinner to over 100 people, cleaned, set up Christmas decorations, and delivered meals to people who couldn't leave their houses. All of the families that we served were very grateful for the meal we gave them. When I saw how happy the people were, I decided that I wanted to serve more to spread joy and love to even more people.

I have also served at my church, 4Corners Community Church, with the 2-and-3-year-olds, the 4-and-5-year-olds, and the elementary kids as a Small Group Leader Assistant. There, we worship with the kids and then teach them a Bible lesson. The kids that we serve enjoy learning about the Bible and are excited to come back next week.

I also have served several times at Matthew 25 Ministries, a local organization that collects donated supplies and sends them locally and all over to the world to people in need. I have done many different things there, including sorting shoes, sorting lotions, and repackaging soap (in Africa, they call soap "gold" because it is so rare and valuable). At Matthew 25 Ministries, they have a model of a typical house that a poor person from Africa might live in. The houses are small and made mostly out of materials that we would call junk; Matthew 25 Ministries assists these people and I am glad to help out this organization which is brightening people's lives.

I am a member of the National Junior Honor Society at our school. My NJHS committee delivered Thanksgiving Baskets full of food to three locations in the Cincinnati area. We

delivered the baskets to three organizations that distributed them to poor families who couldn't afford to buy a Thanksgiving dinner. The people who received the food were so thankful. One woman called us back after we had delivered the baskets. She was so happy and kept saying "thank you" over and over again.

I am also in American Heritage Girls, a Christian scouting organization whose motto is "faith, service, fun". Service is a very important aspect of this program, so we spend a lot of time serving others. We have made cards for soldiers and brightened the lives of those who are defending our country overseas. We have also cleaned up weeds at a state park, made packages for the Ronald McDonald house, made dog treats for the SPCA, ran a Fall Festival booth at our school, and planted flowers at our school. The service that we have done has helped people going through hard times and has also helped brighten up the world that we all live in. In addition, as a result of my serving, I have earned the Presidential Volunteer Service Award every year since fifth grade (5th grade—50-hour level; 6th grade—50-hour level; 7th grade—100-hour level) and I will earn it again this year.

I also enjoy finding ways to help local people who may need a little love and attention. I went to the Bethany House with my family and members of my church. The Bethany House is a residence for single moms with children who can't afford private housing. We served breakfast and played with the kids there. This made the residents there happy because they realized that people cared for them and wanted to spend time with them. I have been to nursing homes several times with Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy. One time, we went to the nursing home and played games with the residents, including balloon volleyball. The residents were smiling and laughing and having a lot of fun. We also just talked to them and sang songs. They were happy to have company and some new faces to see. I have also visited nursing homes with Strings Club, an extracurricular activity at CHCA. The residents enjoy meeting us and hearing us play our instruments.

By packing Christmas Child Boxes, going on mission trips, serving at church and Bible Quiz, volunteering at Matthew 25, delivering Thanksgiving baskets, going to nursing homes, and doing other service projects, I have learned how many people service can impact. I serve because Jesus has told us to love others as ourselves. Like Aubrey, I always have a smile on my face while I am serving. You can brighten anyone's day with just a simple action or even just a smile, no matter how far away or close they are. When we serve people, it shows them that we care and gives them hope for the future. I have realized that a small shoebox or a few words of encouragement can really change someone's life, and I plan to continue to find new ways to love and serve others when I get to high school.