

Ben Rodell – Immaculate Heart of Mary – McNicholas High School

I've learned that there are many ways to help others, and some of those ways are very unique. Looking back, I've had an interesting variety of opportunities to help others. My journey also includes being on the receiving end of others' help. Being on both sides has given me a different perspective about service.

One of my early experiences with helping others was very unique. Four years ago, my mom came to me with an unusual question. She told me about a research study that would give me the opportunity to help kids with autism and the medical conditions that effect kids with autism. She asked if participating in the study was something I wanted to do. I thought about it, but I was scared because being a participant meant that you had to give a blood sample. After all, who likes to get stuck with a long needle if you don't have to? I told my mom that she could sign me up, but I secretly hoped I wouldn't get picked. After about a week, Mom said she got a call from the researchers at Cincinnati Children's saying that I was a perfect "normal" match for a child who was in the study as an "affected" study participant. I had mixed feelings, but decided to go through with my commitment. Mom said the study would compare my blood with that of the child with autism. Since we had the same mixed racial background and were the same age, my blood would be a good baseline comparison. I've never met that child, but I hope that I have made even a small difference for him and for autism research in general.

I am also glad that I took part in that study because one of my classmates and football teammates has a brother with severe autism. I have known that family since I was in first grade and noticed the struggle and blessings they have had. I have also experienced how research has improved the quality of his life. My family and I have participated in many walks and fundraisers for kids with autism and kids with Down syndrome. In the last two years, research on autism has enabled my friend's brother to use a special computer to communicate. I was fascinated to learn how much he knows about math and politics! It's great to see how others now understand him more, and how much his quality of life has improved. I also realized that despite what you see on the outside, people with disabilities actually have incredible abilities.

My experience with the research study and medical science continues to capture my interest. My family has a long history in the medical field. My grandpa came to the United States from the Philippines to practice medicine in West Virginia. Now, two of my uncles are surgeons too. I've been inspired by their enthusiasm for returning to the Philippines to perform surgery in poor villages through a medical mission. I want to follow in their footsteps and be able to help people who would have no other way to get these services.

I also know how much it means to receive help from others. As a former participant at Fernside, an organization to help grieving families during times of loss, I knew first-hand how much grieving kids need a place to release and express their feelings to those who have had similar experiences. After my baby sister died, my

parents and I attended Fernside for a long time. I was young, but I will never forget how much it helped my parents and me. Since then, instead of asking for presents and money for my birthday parties, I asked my friends and family to donate money to Fernside. I was able to donate several hundred dollars over the years to benefit children who have lost a loved one. While finding it to be too emotional to volunteer in person, I knew I had to give back to the people who helped me. By donating my birthday money I hope that I can make a difference in other people's recovery.

In my parish community, I help my mom with teaching preschoolers and kindergarteners in our Sunday religious program. I believe that even at this young age, these kids can understand who God is and how He is a part of everything we do. While I only help the kids with simple lessons, and we do crafts that teach something about Jesus' life, I know that I am helping to set a strong foundation for the development of their faith in Christ. I believe that learning this at a young age will result in them growing up with solid values that include helping the less fortunate.

While my experience of helping others has been unique, I think it shows that there are so many ways to help others. This scholarship and foundation is also a unique and special way to give to others and to help develop young people who want to do the same. Thank you for the opportunity.