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The people in my life are like mirrors, reflecting myself back to me and helping me to know who I am. That is a great gift, and I am grateful for this because as a teen in today's world, it is sometimes challenging to know who I am and what I truly have to offer. There are so many confusing images on T.V. and in magazines. I want to know who I am and what is the best I have to offer so that I can develop it and grow to my greatest ability and then contribute to the world by offering back all the best I have to offer. When thinking about writing this essay, I asked some of the people in my life what they saw in me. Like many young people my age, I am not always sure what I have to offer or if I am enough. I was really touched when I began to realize how much I offer to others, and how many others feel I have been a gift in their lives. So this essay is helping me to grow as a person by helping me to realize that.

People told me I have a positive caring attitude and a sense of humor that brightens their world, that I am a helpful, considerate, and responsible person with lots of compassion and a kind presence. It's kind of humbling to think that about myself, but I realize it is good to accept your gifts and learn to live from them more. With this feedback, I started thinking about ways those gifts have come out.

One of my neighbors and best friends is 18. I have known her since I was 7 years old, so she is like a big sister to me. She has definitely been a positive influence in my life so it made me very happy to hear that I have also been a positive person in her life. She is a very happy and good natured person, but like all of us, she sometimes gets grumpy or upset. When this happens I know that it's not directed at me, so instead of being grumpy back I try to act especially nice and supportive to her. She told me that this helps her to get back to her normal happy self. Not only does this help her, but it also helps me to watch my moods and how I act towards others. This friend also told me that my imagination, creativity, and determination inspire her. She also told me she admired me for the way I always try to be fair and kind to others, even those who may have wronged me.

Another way I make an impact is my doing community service. This summer, I volunteered at Camp Stepping Stones, which is a camp for children with disabilities. I'll admit, when I first arrived on the training day, and they taught all the trainees how to clean up human feces, I wasn't too excited. But after my first day as I volunteer I had fallen in love with it. When you get there, you're assigned a camper. My camper was a little boy, we'll call him Corey. He was twelve years old, but he looked more like nine. He had trouble talking, and he hardly ever did. He would make noises but never actually said words except yes and no. Corey loved to take walks, so sometimes while the other campers would do activities Corey and I would go on walks. On one of these walks we decided to stop and sit on a bench for a little while. As we sat there Corey started to make a little mumbling noise, but I didn't really pay attention to it because I thought it was just one of his noises.

After a couple of minutes he tugged on my sleeve, so I looked down and asked him what he needed. To my astonishment, he didn't need anything; he wanted to tell me something. What happened next made my whole summer. Corey said, in a barely audible voice, "Friend." I couldn't believe it. But I knew I had made a positive impact in that boy's life. I felt how great the power of just being present to someone in an accepting, patient way, and I will never forget that. Others have told me that I am a good

friend, a good listener, fair and respectful, but this one word, spoken by such an innocent and sweet heart really affected me deeply to remember what I can be and give.

My mom and dad have always been there for me. Since fifth grade, my dad has had to be in Maryland a lot due to his job, and my older brother and sister have gone off to college. With just my mom and me here I have had to mature and take on more responsibility. This greater maturity helped a lot when out of nowhere last summer my mom had 3 massive seizures, had to have brain surgery, and has spent months recovering. This flipped my world upside down. Now, it was almost like I was the parent and I had to learn to be there for her sometimes. Some days, I not only had to take care of myself, I had to take care of her, too. It wasn't easy, but I tried my hardest to help her on her way to a full recovery – bringing her things, making food, cleaning, brightening her day with a positive story. I learned to love and think about another in ways that I never had before and to show care even when I felt tired. It showed me the joys of giving. Although it was difficult at times, I learned to extend myself and see how much I had to give and could give. My mom and I are closer now, and I realize the depth of my own strength and the happiness of giving from there.

The last event I would like to talk about is possibly the most important and difficult event of my whole life. We have some close friends who are like family, Sue and Nelson are my parent's friends, their oldest daughter Amy is my sister's age and their son Matt is my brother's age. Amy and Matt are like siblings to me. In the summer of 2009, Matt fell off a balcony and died while my brother was there. It was so painful and hard for all of us. But in dealing with my own pain, I found ways to be there for the Smiths and learned how healing it was for me to offer comfort to others. I saw the kind of simple ways I could do that, just by being myself and being there. I remember once, days after it happened, my mom and I went over to their house. Amy was lying on the couch and Sue was in the kitchen. My mom walked into the kitchen so I was about to follow her but then Amy called me over to the couch. All she said was, "It's not fair." And then she grabbed my hand and started to cry. I sat with her and held her hand and rubbed her arm. In the moment I wanted to say something but now thinking back, I don't think there was anything to say, I think Amy just needed someone to be there with her, and I was happy to be that person. It was probably hardest on my brother, because Matt was his best friend in the whole world. I was always trying to be there for him, and most of the time that just meant listening to him, and crying with him. This experience really helped me mature and learn to support others and see how much I have to give. Sue recently told my mom that people trust me, and that I have a natural gift, a calmness, and an empathy. She said she thinks this is why so many of my friends confide in me and come to be for advice. But I was so grateful to know that those qualities came through to her during all this very painful time. And I will be happy to continue to offer it and comfort her grief however I can. I want to be there for my family and the Smiths, and for that matter for anyone who needs a supportive heart when they are in pain.

These are some of the positive ways I affect others, and I look forward to growing and maturing and finding more and more inside myself all that God has given me in my heart that I can offer to inspire, comfort, help, be a friend, make someone laugh, brighten someone's day, or just be there. I feel very grateful for any opportunities I will have to offer myself and my gifts as I grow up.