

To Whom it may concern,

I would like to share with you my story of how I have grown in the past year working with YFC. My name is Kayleigh Brugger; I am seventeen and have grown up in Brandon, Manitoba. I would like to tell you how volunteering with YFC has changed my life, the way I think, and the manner in which I view the world.

Last year I was told by a friend of mine about the Literacy Center through YFC. A program in which people volunteered after school to help teach children to read, write, and speak in a safe environment. Now, I was looking for somewhere to volunteer, but was unsure as to where to go. When I heard about this I thought that this would be a great fit because it was after school, through a Christian run organization, with kids, and I had previously worked with a tutoring program called Kumon to help children to learn to write properly. I applied and was later accepted.

I went in to that room thinking that I was going to go in there, teach the kids, help them succeed, learn a little bit about their lives, go home, and come back next week. While I thought through this program I was going to help the kids learn and learn a bit about them, I could not have been more unprepared for how my life was going to change through this year. This program is not a do your hour and then go home until next week, it is something that changes the way one thinks throughout their life. I went in there with the predominant idea that I was going to teach them something, and yes I have taught them but, I was not prepared for how much they were going to teach me.

Through the kids interactions with one another, to guests we had, and even to myself and the other volunteers, I was able to learn many things through them. Not to say that some of the children did not have fights or disagreements with other children because they did, but they were able to resolve their conflicts and move on with ease. The kids demonstrated quickness to forgive and the ease to move on. Their genuine concern for other kids was displayed numerous times and by watching them help each other, one can see that if we all behaved this way how much better relationships would prosper.

I also had many children come up to me and confide in me their stories about what was going on in their lives whether at school or in their homes. The fact that these kids were coming to me displays the safe environment that YFC presents to these kids. Some of the stories I have been told have really tested me, to hear a young child who I have grown to have a connection with, go through something as horrible such as bullying, abuse, or neglect changed me. I remember the first kid that came to me had a bullying problem which made me angry to see that other kids could treat each other this way. The advice I gave her and by telling her my own experiences with bullying I hope and believe helped her take appropriate measures. As more stories came to me it made my compassion grow and I became more sensitive to issues I may have overlooked before.

Through working with the kids in the Literacy Center at YFC I had the amazing opportunity this past summer to take part in a program called the Justis program in Abbotsford BC. I was accepted around late May and was excited and a little fearful. I was excited because I knew I would be stretched and would grow. The fear however came because I knew we would be going to East Hastings and surrounding areas to do our work. Being from Brandon Manitoba we have the homeless, addicted, hungry, needy, a bit of prostitution, and suffering, but in Brandon the numbers are lower compared to East Hastings. I had not been in an area where the amount of prostitutes, homeless people, the addicted, and the hungry where ten times more dominant than what I was accustomed. I knew about how high the rates where in other countries, yet in Canada I was naïve and thought that it could not be as bad as the United States. I was wrong.

I started preparing in June for my trip making plans and getting ready. It is important for me to say that this past summer was the most painful one I have ever had, yet that being said it was also the best. I had a friend his name was William who lived in Aberdeen, Scotland at the time, who came to Brandon every couple years. He was one of those guys who lived his social life through the computer and had only a few close friends in the world. We would email everyday or every two days. In the summer I moved to our cabin at Clear Lake, Manitoba with my family. I told him I would not be able to keep in contact with him on a daily basis, but could maybe reach out every two weeks. I did not know what was going on his life at the time and he was struggling. Around the second week of July I went home to Brandon for a day and I looked at my emails and saw I had one from him, I even read the first line, but I was in such a hurry I did not read the whole thing. The worst part is I started up my stairs and had that gut pulling you need to read this email feeling, yet I ignored it. Later in the week I received a call from a good friend of mine in Brandon who was Williams's best friend. It sounded as though he had been crying and I knew something was wrong. He told me that William had shot himself, not using a gun that would fire once, but one that fired twelve shots upon pulling the trigger.

I tried to pull myself together the next morning as I walked into work. I was a complete mess and my boss sent me home after hearing what had happened. When I returned to my cabin I started thinking more and more about what had happened. I had this new fear that my friend who was still alive may attempt suicide as he was distraught about what had happened. My Mom thought I should go home and check on everything for a bit, so I did, and my friend was doing better and I knew he'd be ok. I then checked that email I had neglected to read. It was a farewell letter sent three hours before William had pulled the trigger. I believe so strongly that the power of words can change the outcome of a situation and for the majority of the summer I felt this huge cloud of guilt looming around me. If I had just bothered to read the email and reply maybe he would not have done this. This taught me the importance of making time for others.

After this I had a close relative experience problems with mental sickness. Anyone with a family member who is mentally ill understands how difficult it is for the whole family. It takes a toll on all the connected relationships and each individual is in a constant state of worry. It was hard to leave my family to go to Abbotsford, but I knew that it was important for me to go.

I learned so many things I could never have learned in a classroom during my one week at this camp. We worked with kids that accepted us from the second we came to play with them; we talked with the homeless, drug addicted, and mentally ill. Three of the best things I experienced there was I braided a lady's hair that had bugs in it but, how thankful she was that someone would do that for her was unforgettable. I was talking with an older homeless lady one day for about an hour and in the middle of talking another homeless man came over and gave her five pieces of jewelry. He had all of his possessions on him and he could have sold them for money, yet he gave them to her. The way her face lit up was like a kid on Christmas morning. He was her friend and he demonstrated how valuable their friendship was. The third event was serving meals at a homeless shelter the conversations were enriching and taught me so much. The thing that stood out to me though was at the end we sang songs and this one man in the front row sang as loud as he could with a big smile on his face. All of these people showed me that you have to look for the light in the darkness. They found joy in the midst of despair and it is the little things that kept them going. It was a huge eye opener.

About halfway though I received a call from my Mom telling me that my cousin Amber, mother of an eight year old and a one and a half year old had passed away without warning. I remember sitting on the floor, listening to my mom, and crying. I do not remember everything my Mom said but my one friend saw my reaction. She did not know what was going on but she just sat there and hugged me until I was done crying. She did not ask why or say anything until later when I looked ready to talk. She reinforced to me that actions speak louder than words.

I had the option of returning home or staying in Abbotsford. My uncle said he would hold the funeral until I was home if I so chose to stay. I thought about everything that had happened all of my experiences that week, the Literacy kids being light, the three stories that also demonstrated light in the darkness, and my friend who held me being my light in the dark. I decided to stay because if I could just be one persons light in their day that would make everything worthwhile.

I ended up sharing my story with the group that was with me and the response I got was complete and genuine love. Through the start of volunteering with YFC to now I have learned how to talk about my problems with others, I have learned to be more compassionate, to make time for others, I learned what a simple conversation, smile or even braiding someone's hair with bugs in it can accomplish. I have a changed view on the world and the way people react to each other. I have grown in so many ways and see things differently than I ever thought I would. Most importantly I have learned to stretch myself out of my comfort zone and I hope to do more of this in the future. My number one goal is to be the light in the darkness as people were the light in my darkness.

Thank-you for taking the time to read my story.

Kayleigh Brugger