

While growing up, my family struggled to keep our lights on and put food on our table. We often picked up cans from food banks and grabbed old winter coats from friends and family. We were helped by neighbors, who watched me and my siblings when my mom worked late and let us camp out in their living room after we lost our heating. My childhood community was a critical cornerstone of my identity, and it was often the way that my family managed to make it through our day. Because of these experiences, I believe that social change extends past formal roles and organizations, and is critically shaped by the way that we interact with our community and neighbors on a daily basis. I am not only grateful for the formal resources provided to me by my school and community, but also for the neighbors who helped my family with everyday tasks. I believe that small gestures, like cooking an extra portion of dinner for a neighbor and chipping in for a box of diapers for a neighbor are some of the most tangible, impactful ways that I have been able to serve my community. Small, direct change is often overlooked, but because I have witnessed its resonant effects in my own life, I will always think of individual contact as one of the most critical forms of social change.

I have always tried to embody the ideal of small social change throughout my personal life in these ways, but one of the most impactful roles I have taken in order to enact individual change has been as a volunteer with Forging Opportunities for Refugees in America (FORA). With FORA, I serve as a volunteer tutor, where I work daily with a recently arrived refugee student named X to improve his literacy and English communication skills. I have volunteered with him every day since January, and I have enjoyed working to welcome a new citizen into my community. Me and X work together on a wide range of language tasks, including grammar activities, reading comprehension, and communication barriers that he faces as he adapts to the United States. Because X is 15, I have particularly enjoyed helping him learn slang language and communicate with friends. X and I often bond over our younger sisters, and I have found that he is particularly good at remembering new vocabulary words that he can use to tease her. Our work together has been incredibly valuable to me, as I have been able to watch him grow directly as a student. I see him everyday, and everyday I notice as he grows more comfortable speaking in English, confident in communicating with his friends, and willing to share his thoughts with me.

Although I believe that individual change is one of the most critical ways that I have impacted my community, I also engage in more systematic, formal organizations and roles. Most recently, I have dedicated myself to giving back to my neighbors and community through the economic and social hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic. Directly following the government shutdown due in mid-March, I joined the Cleveland Pandemic Response as a lead coordinating volunteer and a founding member. As a mutual-aid organization, we worked to respond to direct economic and legal hardships in the Cleveland area by connecting community members in need with community members available to help. In my particular capacity as a volunteer, I led a team of six other volunteers as we worked to reach out to community members and coordinate aid. I am particularly proud of our ability to respond to the educational needs of low-income families with young children, as we provided over 100 laptops to families in need. We also helped to connect these families to books, learning kits, and free childcare for essential workers unable to be at home during the day. Working in this capacity with the Cleveland Pandemic Response allowed me to interact with members of my community and help them directly on a formal, widespread scale, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to aid my community through such a difficult time.

I have carried this spirit of small, individual social change through my time at Rutgers, particularly within my role as a Lead Tutor with the Plangere Writing Center. Throughout my three years with the Writing Center, I have found tutoring to be a valuable opportunity to help a diverse group of students as they adapt to Rutgers. For me, tutoring has been expansive, and has encompassed guiding students through personal concerns, helping with scholarship applications, and working through the bus system. In this way, I have used my position as a tutor to enact individual social change to positively impact my students during our time together. I have found my role as an individual peer tutor to be particularly important throughout the past online semesters as students struggle with isolation, adapting to online courses, and living at home. I have done my best to respond to their concerns, no matter how unconventional they may be to my formal role as a tutor. Over the past semester, for example, I worked with a film student that was unable to submit film assignments because she could not collect equipment from Rutgers. We worked together to email her professors and their departments until she could be connected to transportation resources, even though it meant taking a step away from her writing work for the day. My experiences as an individual peer educator have allowed me to make an impact on the lives of my students in a personal, observable way, and it is always rewarding to watch my students grow from our time together.

I have also engaged in positive social change in my Rutgers community through my work as the President of the Rutgers Veg Society. In the past, the Veg Society has organized social events, led educational seminars, and fundraised for animal aid organizations. We have encouraged dining halls to expand their food options to be more environmentally friendly, and to make food labelling more accessible for students with allergies and dietary needs. In this way, I believe that my work with the Rutgers Veg Society has changed the Rutgers campus to be more welcoming and accessible for students. But I am particularly proud of the work that the Veg Society has done to adapt to an online platform. Over the past year, we have organized documentary watching parties, study sessions, and a cooking night with the Rutgers Cooking Club. We held virtual chalking protests, in which our members shared vegan statistics with their hometowns, and organized a trivia night for people to test their environmental and vegan knowledge. In place of our in person fundraising events, we are developing a Veg Club Cookbook compiled of our favorite recipes to be sold to profit the Happy Animal Sanctuary. It has been difficult to engage students through the fatigue of an online semester, but I am happy to have built a community where vegan, vegetarian, and veg-curious students can come together to work through our difficulties, bond, and meet new people as we would during an in-person semester. I believe that the Veg Society has been an impactful way for students to step outside of social isolation and interact with their peers while continuing to participate in community change-making.

I have also tried to extend this spirit of small, active social change in order to support others as they create their own community involvement strategies. With the Rutgers Spanish Department, I traveled to Cusco, Peru, where I interned with the Ministerio Público Fiscalía de la Nación. In my capacity as an intern, I assisted full-time governmental workers as they conducted research to better understand barriers to education for adolescents in the Cusco region. In order to do so, we visited local schools and homes to ask students and parents about their largest barriers to educational services. We then helped schools craft programs and policies to reduce these hurdles and to advocate for more comprehensive educational access. The program that I worked most closely on was an after school program designed for students

who needed extra educational support to be assisted by their peers. I found this work particularly rewarding, as it was driven by community members themselves. I believe that a person within a community will always know the best ways to aid that community, and my work in Cusco responded directly to the needs of local people. This form of community involvement was critical, as it taught me how to support other communities as they drive their own social changes in accordance with their experiences.

Following graduation, I will be taking a year away from my education in order to continue to develop my direct community advocacy and organizing skills. I will be earning my Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certificate so that I can more effectively learn to mentor and communicate with English as a Second Language speakers. In reflection of this goal and my interest in education, I am currently applying to work in various positions along the southern U.S.-Mexico border, where I particularly hope to work in educational facilities for refugee and migrant youth in U.S. detention centers. After this year, I will attend law school, where I am studying immigration and child law. My experiences with community service, whether I have been a person in need or a person able to help, have become cornerstones of my development and have created a deep desire to enact social change within me. My career interests are a reflection of this, and I am excited to continue to repay my community and to extend social change throughout my education, career, and personal life.