

Eli (names changed for anonymity) is a whiz at math, loved reading, and knew the names of every active soccer player, but he hates writing. Carlos is incredibly smart, but dislikes showing his work, and has adorable ways of not following directions. They made volunteering with Youth Empowerment Services (YES) in my first year not just exhausting but also the highlight of my weeks. However, while both of them were so enthusiastic to learn, I was disheartened to find out there are big gaps in their knowledge and few resources for them to get support. I remember the gratitude in Carlos's dad's face when he thanked me for my time, saddened by how his lack of English meant he could not help Carlos. Disappointed with the status of New Brunswick education, I decided to work with other volunteers to form a large-scale tutoring program (A2E) that facilitated not only academics but also practical skills and character building. After multiple run-ins with bureaucracy, many failed attempts with Board of Education approvals, and limited funds (estimated budget = \$20,000), I was told by my deans, Rutgers community service faculty, and even the New Brunswick Mayor's office that while they admired my headstrong nature, perhaps I was too idealistic. No freshman could possibly succeed in creating a tutoring program inside a school at a size and scale much larger than any current program. A2E launched October 2016, with over 80 committed and trained Rutgers volunteers, and 46 New Brunswick first/second graders.

To give a little background on me: I have a lot of Rutgers pride -- perhaps a little too much -- and I'm not afraid to wear it on my sleeve. For example, I can tell you important dates in Rutgers history and my email signature is "In Rutgers Spirit". Therefore, it will come as a major shock to people that I selected Rutgers on a whim. When I first came to Rutgers, I viewed it as an institution where I would stick to the pre-med checklist and keep my aim on medical school throughout my four years. It was a fortuitous Involvement Fair encounter and an inexplicable gut feeling that caused me to start volunteering with YES. It was these volunteering opportunities, along with my Rutgers Alternative Break service trip that caused me to start feeling a strong pull towards community engagement. I had never been one to be a leader or even be passionately involved in high school, and it was the strength of the New Brunswick youth and the spirit of the other volunteers on the A2E executive-board who inspired me to step out of my shell and try to make a difference.

The first semester of A2E was incredibly stressful behind the scenes. I remember being at A2E three days a week that semester, sometimes even skipping class to do so, as there were many times we were concerned that the program wouldn't stay together. To our surprise and joy A2E was a smooth success, and we received lots of positive feedback from the kids, teachers, and volunteers alike. Personally though, I took the most pride in connecting with one of the "troublemaker" students Joshua. He was quite the rascal, but I never did stop laughing when I was around him. By the end of the semester, Joshua would start his homework without being told, could read the descriptions on all his Pokémon cards, and even picked up other people's trash. That is my pride: by not giving up, Joshua and I were able to become friends, and both of us are better people because of the other.

When it came to selecting a president for A2E (which we decided to be run out of Youth Empowerment Club), I was really taken aback when the team unanimously decided I would be the best fit for the job. I accepted after vocal apprehension, but after spearheading Youth Empowerment Club for two years I am elated by the impact we had made under my leadership. Don't get this mixed up: A2E wouldn't exist in any form without the tireless work and countless hours by the entire Youth Empowerment Club eboard and the dedication of our volunteers. We need to make sure we have all our day-to-day requirements fulfilled (from recruiting volunteers to curriculum development), while also laying the groundwork for sustainability after we graduate. Developing future partnerships, ensuring our financials were in order (whether it be through grants or fundraisers), taking metrics, using those metrics or feedback to stay innovative in our approach, and presenting the club/program in a professional manner to outside organizations to be taken seriously despite being almost entirely student run. Due to everyone's Herculean efforts, we did know our work made an impact: the kids who went through the A2E program for a year had an average Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) level over 1 letter above a Roosevelt student not in the program. This was particularly positive as the students in our program were chosen for having lower DRA levels than their peers. Similarly, teachers were telling us that our students were better behaved and more engaged in their classes.

At first, I only focused on the growth of our kids. However, in talking to one of my freshmen professor's junior year, he mentioned how in many of his discussions for letters of recommendation, students mention volunteering at A2E and how it impacted them as individuals. This was further affirmed by a RAA [*Rutgers Alumni Association*] member who worked in the SAS [*School of Arts and Sciences*] office, who spoke about how students consistently mentioned being an A2E volunteer as a means for growth in their SAS scholarship essays. In hindsight, this made sense. In my four semesters of leading A2E, it had over 480 volunteers, 480 students who became engaged in their community. Many of our volunteers return to the program and tell their friends to join, and we are even finding volunteers seeking out other ways to be involved in New Brunswick. To me, the crazy thing is how many of these volunteers started out in the program from vastly different places and with vastly different visions. At the beginning of every semester at Rutgers, you will see me tabling in front of dining halls, asking students to carve out time, discussing their misconceptions on the New Brunswick community. Especially the sheer numbers of volunteers we work with, there are always students who join our program just "for the resume" or for volunteer hours. They may not realize it, but it's quite obvious: they're the ones who aren't engaged when I talk them into joining or the ones looking to leave training as soon as possible. Nevertheless, after hearing the feedback from my professor and the RAA member, it hit me that a lot of these same volunteers are the most engaged by the end of the semester, the ones who stay offering extra help. Building on that realization, in my last semester at Rutgers, we planned reflection workshops and volunteer-centered events to help strengthen our volunteer experience.

While A2E is my proudest accomplishment, I aimed to make my mark at Rutgers through a few other avenues. For instance, when Rutgers was being rocked by conflicts regarding “unprofessional” debates, both campus-wide and within my dorm, I decided to found Knights Table with a peer of mine. Through this civil discourse forum, we brought speakers to debate intentionally controversial issues, and then allowed for students to engage with the topic with each other and the speakers, always focusing on respect and understanding. Similarly, after realizing there was a lack of peer-mentorship I founded the HC Ally Mentoring Program for first year students at the Honors College. Each year, we would have 300 first-year students paired with 75 upperclassmen mentors, meticulously paired according to major, professional goals, and interests; each year, I am honored by mentees attributing their success to their mentors. Likewise, after realizing the large issue that is domestic violence and sexual assault, especially at an institution like Rutgers, I decided to be a part of the solution by becoming a Crisis Response Advocate for the Office of Victim Assistance and Violence Prevention. Through this experience and in hearing my peers when they were most vulnerable, hearing their pain and struggles, it was very easy to be furious at society. However, my role also allowed me to see the immense inner strength and resilience of my peers, who shoulder such a burden throughout everyday life, and who I can only hope I was able to empower through my conversations and accompaniment. Subsequently, wanting to give back more directly to the Rutgers community, I became a Resident Assistant for Rutgers Residence Life. Although my community historically kept to themselves, many of my residents knew each other. An unthinkable number would come to my events, and I became a personal friend and mentor to many of them. The fact that many of my residents still reach out to me, for both advice and to just catch up, is a satisfaction I constantly carry with me to this day.

The end of my junior year was one of mixed emotion. On one hand, I was so invested in my Rutgers involvements (as mentioned above), and I knew I could do so much more in my senior year. However, at the beginning of junior year, I was accepted into the 7-year Rutgers-RWJMS BA/MD program. Through this program, my senior year at Rutgers would serve as my first year of medical school at Robert Wood Johnson. My devotion to my activities caused me to pause: is it the right thing to accept this program and miss out on the impact I could make at Rutgers in my senior year? Moreover, as a result of my involvements, I knew I didn’t want to be a traditional physician; instead, I wanted to combine my passions of service and medicine in a nonprofit setting. With this in mind, should I be rushing into medical school? This decision came to a head when I received an email from one of my professors. In my final reflection, I had briefly added a line mentioning how I was rethinking medical school. He sent me a long, passionate, well-written email speaking to how proud he was to have me as a student, how he sees so much potential in me, and imploring me to realize that medical school was not incongruous to my future goals of impact at Rutgers and the world. He mentioned how he holds great respect for a few of his colleagues who were community-oriented practitioners: “They made differences in the world that [he] can’t”. He is one many Rutgers faculty and staff who

made life-changing influences on me, and due to this email, I decided to accept my offer to attend medical school senior year.

Medical school is tough, there's definitely no denying it. The rigor and pace of the material is like no other class I have taken before. However, I refused to let this stop me from continuing to try to make a difference in my community. For example, while I couldn't be involved in the day-to-day of running A2E, I joined the Board of Youth Empowerment Services, where I help oversee all the YES programs, including A2E. Likewise, I continued with Rutgers Residence Life, this time as a Graduate Apartment Assistant. This role is very different than being an RA: unbeknownst to many, graduate students are a very underserved population at Rutgers, and I have been and will continue to advocate for them as well as try to get them engaged with the greater Rutgers community. At medical school, I was able to join Robert Wood Johnson's student-run clinic for uninsured patients called "Promise Clinic". Here, I was on (and next year I will chair) the Quality Improvement Committee, where we make sure our patients and student doctors have the best experience. Moreover, I am involved in a research project studying the impact of medical students' volunteering on nonprofits; our results have been exciting, and I hope to extend this work to the undergraduate population at Rutgers. Last, I make sure I make time to go to Town Halls, be involved in student-panels for interviews for Rutgers administrators, and give feedback at community meetings. I may not have the availability I used to when I was an undergraduate, but I know I can continue to bring about change at Rutgers.

In my freshman year, when trying to start A2E, I was relayed the complex history of Rutgers with New Brunswick, and how many residents believe that Rutgers students are apathetic towards each other and the city they reside in. I suppose this makes sense. When you walk down George Street, you'll hit the beautifully designed Honors College, the immensely green quad and flower beds of Voorhees Mall, until suddenly you hit the train station, with its ever-present wet walls and crumbly staircases. With this in mind, it's important to remind ourselves of the fact that Rutgers is a land grant institution, and how it is part of our mission to perform public service in support of the needs of the citizens of the state. But I would argue it's more than that: we are members of the Rutgers community, nay the greater New Brunswick community, and it is our duty to be active citizens who want to support our neighbors as best we can. I have seen the potential of Rutgers students: their potential for growth through A2E, their potential for resilience through VPVA [*Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance*], their potential for engagement through Residence Life, their potential for greatness. I can only hope that during my time at Rutgers, and in my remaining time at RBHS [*Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences*], that I can redefine our views of duty to our community and build bridges connecting Rutgers across itself and to New Brunswick.

*[Italicized text added by editor]*