

Grab The Torch, Grabbed Me

As my plane touches down in Hartford Connecticut, I breathe a sigh of relief. My first solo flight is over and I have just entered my 11th state. Although my journey of over 1100 miles is now over, traces of apprehension still linger in my psyche. In my mind I am going over the coming week's potential. Will I be a changed individual after my week at Grab the Torch? Later, I am sitting on a bus traveling to my home for the next week in Simsbury, Connecticut. I chat and get to know several of the other campers-engaging youth from New York City. We talk about our lives at home, what we do in our spare time, what we wish to accomplish someday, and what we are looking forward to this week at Grab the Torch. Traveling to the Ethel Walker School, the Northeastern Corridor's natural beauty is awe-inspiring. I am surrounded by heavily wooded foothills and mountains, flanked by green field after green field with a host of grazing horses. Above all of this a majestic, tangerine sun wanes in the late afternoon sky virtually smiling at all of the young Grab the Torch campers knowing that although its journey has ended ours has just begun.

As I unload my baggage and check in, I look around at the 20 other youth whom I will call my fellow campers for the week. The apprehension that had plagued the back of my mind since the airport begins to fade. As I listen to the laughter and conversation of the smiling young people around me, something tells me that Grab the Torch isn't just going to be another camp. It's going to be life-changing and deeply impactful. I foresee that Grab the Torch will open new doors for me and help to facilitate meaningful relationships with other people. Above all else, I realize that it will help me to channel my passions, finding the right road to travel while making a positive difference in the world.

My experience at the Grab the Torch camp in Simsbury Connecticut in 2011 was exceptionally valuable. Not only did I make new friends, see extraordinary new places, and have fun, I grew as a person, an individual who wanted to make a positive difference in the world. Grab the Torch is a beneficial experience for any young person in that it helps youth to focus in on their goals, identifying what they are most passionate about, and in turn helps them discover different ways of achieving their goals. One of the most unique ways the camp accomplishes this is through opportunities to meet successful and often times legendary members of the non-profit world as well as other noteworthy humanitarians volunteering for a noble cause.

Grab the Torch is a fantastic educational experience for prospective leaders in the non-profit world. Many of us were already formulating ideas of how we wished to start our own generation On or Points of Light Institute. Yet, to do so we needed a little guidance on how to get started. Grab the Torch offered us success stories from many different non-profit leaders and representatives from across the United States. Whether it was a regional organization focusing on eradicating hunger or a national movement such as the American Mural Project, the success stories of these philanthropic institutions gave us the blue prints for our own future triumphs in the non-profit world.

There was one instance at camp in particular where everything came full circle for me. Our group was highly privileged to visit Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp. My fellow campers and I were able to see Mr. Newman's impact on America's seriously ill youth firsthand. I saw smiles, heard laughter, and above all else felt happiness and peace around me. I was able to listen to several of the Gang Camp representatives, including the CEO Jimmy Canton and the camp's coordinators who have made it their life's work to continue Mr. Newman's philanthropy. This singular experience, visiting Mr. Newman's dream, taught me that my passion and dreams-like his- can indeed become reality and, often, have a positive impact on others. Similarly, to achieve one's goals, it helps to surround yourself with like-minded people whom you can call friends. While I was at Grab the Torch, I was inspired by the passions and work of other campers. Whether it was working to promote literacy amongst the young people in a community or working with organizations such as the YMCA to have a positive influence in youths' lives, I learned that anyone dedicated to serving others can find a niche and achieve success in making a difference.

In addition to the motivating friends I made and the inspirational work I saw others doing, while at Grab the Torch, I received encouragement to continue making a difference in my community. Three years ago, I initiated a bilingual reading program for children in my community called Bilingual Adventures in Spanish and English or BASE. The purpose of BASE is to instill in young children a love of reading and a passion for learning another language. Since the programs beginning, there have been various factions within my community who have shied away from the idea of something foreign like the teaching of another language or culture. While at Grab the Torch I was encouraged not to give up my cause. Grab the Torch helped me to see the many strides I have already made with my work.

On my Grab the Torch application last year I wrote: "Our generation today will be the leaders of tomorrow. Grab The Torch camp is an opportunity to learn from current leaders in non-profit organizations who are already making a difference. I want to learn how to "grab the torch" and carry it burning brightly into the future!"

My experience at Grab the Torch was all of this and more. Grab the Torch is a distinctive and beneficial experience. It gives youth the opportunity to see the positive impact of others and it challenges all of its participants to be leaders and grab the torch of their cause and make an extraordinary difference in the world.

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