



Listening and Learning: The Ripple Effect of Change

By Chase Hartman

Through the process of volunteering and participating in our communities, we, in turn, receive so many personal benefits as well as make an impact on those around us. I'm a 16-year-old entrepreneur and changemaker with a focus on making this world a better place. I didn't start out wanting to change the world, but I realized quickly that one good deed could have a ripple effect and that one act of kindness could start an epidemic. I would like to share my story with you.

In elementary school I participated in community service through groups such as the Boy Scouts and National Elementary Honor Society. During a routine book drive for NEHS I learned that thousands of kids in my area didn't own books of their own. That was hard for me to understand. I was surrounded by my favorite reads and loved trips to the local bookstore. Once I heard this problem, I knew I had to do something to be part of the solution.

In this instance, I developed a passion and drive for serving others, which eventually led to starting my own service project with my best friend in the 5th grade. Our project, "read.repeat.", emerged from the minds of two 10-year-old boys who didn't understand limitations, only the need for solutions. Soon enough, the community learned of our efforts and supported our growth.

Now, 6 years later, "read.repeat." has grown into a 501c3 non-profit called Eco Brothers which I run with my little brother. We've donated over 200,000 books to schools and Little Free Libraries in all 50 states and have impacted the lives of more than 45,000 students in our area by promoting the importance of literacy and raised more than \$100,000 for new books and the environment. We even developed a partnership with our county school system hoping to improve literacy rates by giving kids more access to books. Our youth-led project began receiving attention from Prudential, NHL's Lightning Hockey team, the EPA, and numerous state leaders. Quickly, the project grew, however, it wouldn't have developed into what it is today without listening to and learning from our community.

In the beginning, I was only focused on the recycling of used books. I wanted to keep them out of landfills, helping the environment and, in turn, the people in my area. This was great for our community, but something sparked in me when I turned an ear toward the leaders in my area who worked daily with the problems I was trying to solve. Talking with principals, media specialists, and teachers in some of the schools I was supporting, I soon realized that the students didn't just need books for a better education - there was a more specific focus that we had to dive into right away.

In order to help students develop better reading skills or a love of reading it was important that we obtain more books-with-diversity and dual language books. One principal informed me that 35 percent of students in my county are Hispanic, and 20 percent of kids speak Spanish as their first language. I immediately saw the challenges this could bring to a young reader. Many of the kids entering elementary school are just starting to learn English. This meant that a lot of the books I was providing were too challenging. Luckily, my project quickly shifted gears to raise funds for this need. Furthermore, with providing more diverse books, I discovered that these books allowed children to see themselves in the chapters they were reading. They were able to feel more confident and engaged while they were reading, which, in turn, led to a greater interest in picking up a book and getting lost in a story.

With these more compassionate and refined efforts, students are now not only reading, but they are also developing self-confidence and gaining skills to help build the foundation for a successful future. It all couldn't have been accomplished if I didn't listen and learn from others. I was ecstatic to learn that one of the schools that I've donated more than 10,000 books to over the past 3 years has improved from a "F-rating" in their state reading levels to a "B-rating". It's moments like these that keep me motivated to continue making a positive impact.

My advice to others: if you want to find ways to achieve change, simply start by listening to those around you. At the age of 10, I started a ripple effect by casting one stone into the water of change. I heard of a problem that needed fixed and I didn't focus on the challenges or roadblocks, only on how to get the best solutions. Hearing problems and lending a compassionate hand is the best way to unlock untapped creativity within. And, having meaningful conversations about social issues is necessary, even with kids. We can't settle for an average world, and we should always strive to create impactful change. It starts with just one person – you!

