5 Summer Programs for Teens That Teach Empathy through Community Service
Teenagers looking for a way to make a difference can turn to a variety of new programs aimed to help them do some good, and get a new appreciation for the world and people around them.
By Amy Tara Koch
It’s tough to be a teen these days. High school plays out under a social media microscope, one that parents and young people can find difficult to free themselves from and focus instead on what’s really important. To help expand their children’s horizons, boost their empathy and make a difference in their communities, parents (and teens eager to change the world) have several summer programs with community service elements to choose from.
These “travel with purpose” itineraries (often in developing countries) weave community building into cross-cultural adventures to encourage empathy and promote leadership skills that hopefully will extend beyond the trip. All programs earn community service hours and offer financial aid, scholarships, or both.

A Global Experience with Decades of History
With almost seven decades of experience, Putney is the granddaddy of educational student travel. Their service taps into an international network of teachers, farmers, merchants, artisans and other NGOs to allow high schoolers to safely step out of their comfort zone and dive into a different way of life.
“A service-based experience is the difference between just going somewhere and wanting to do good, said Jeff Shumlin, Putney’s co-director. “Kids feel disconnected from public policy and energized by the opportunity to improve the world and represent their version of who Americans really are.” One available trip, Community Service Tanzania, involves collaborating on small scale construction projects like building a classroom, farming, teaching English to local children, market shopping and cooking combined with nature excursions and a stay in a remote Maasai village.

Outdoor Adventures in National Parks and Public Lands
Apogee combines the power of an outdoor experience with achievable challenges and light volunteerism like food banks, orphanages, state parks, and farms, all tied closely to the communities students visit.
Most itineraries are based in the United States, in regions like the Pacific Northwest; central Maine; Cape Cod, Mass.; the central Rocky Mountains; and more. One of the banner service programs is a two week stint in Puerto Rico where volunteers offer hurricane relief and work on community projects like repairing rain forest trails and cleaning trash and debris from coastal wildlife refuges on Vieques Island. Groups are capped at 12 participants.

Living — and Serving — Like Locals
Rustic Pathways has been crafting student adventures for 35 years, and added service-specific trips in the late 1990s. With over 100 itineraries in 19 different countries (they also have spring break and gap year programs), trips range from a week in the Dominican Republic with a single day of service to the more intense Come With Nothing, Go Home Rich bare-bones itinerary in Thailand, where participants travel to Bangkok with just a backpack, gather essentials at the local market and spend three weeks in the mountainous hill tribe region living and working with villagers. There participants build schoolhouses and bathrooms, and dig or repair wells for fresh water.

Blending Tourism and Cultural Appreciation around the Globe
The popularity of WE Day, a countrywide, stadium-filled celebration of youth activism headlined by names like Selena Gomez, Kelly Clarkson, Nelly and Malala Yousafzai, underscores the power of the ME to WE community service movement. The organization gives children, families and schools (more than 15,000 of them) the tools to make a difference in their neighborhood and the world at large.
For example, the organizations’ summer programs, called “take action camps” (located in Arizona and Canada) and youth volunteer trips to countries like Kenya, Ecuador and India, blend sightseeing and fun with rural community immersion to inspire self-discovery and an appreciation for new cultures. In contrast to volunteerism, WE has year-round partnerships with the countries visited so the summer service work (which includes providing food, water and health care to suppressed communities, helping build schools or participate in classes) is part of a larger investment in the community.

Deep Immersion in Cultures at Home and Abroad
Visions is a 30-year veteran of service adventures, their itineraries veering more hard-core immersion (five to seven hours a day, four to five days a week) than in-and-out tour. A longstanding program on offering poverty assistance on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana also focuses on land preservation and infrastructure projects, like building renovations, fence repairs, building wheelchair ramps and schoolhouses. When not working on improving the community, volunteers also enjoy a bounty of cultural activities like attending a powwow, joining in sweat ceremonies, horse riding in Glacier National Park, and connecting with tribal historians and spiritual leaders.
By Joanne Kaufman

Greet audience members, take tickets, work the concession stands, run the elevator. Point the way to seats, restrooms, box offices and exits. These are some of the tasks of a volunteer usher at theaters across New York City. The lure: a free ticket. The competition: increasingly fierce. Richard Ponce, the house manager of the Helen Hayes Theater, said he has 250 more requests than slots he needs to fill for the 10-week run of “Lobby Hero,” which opens March 26, and has Chris Evans and Michael Cera in starring roles. “It used to be this sort of secret thing,” Mr. Ponce said of the volunteer program. “Now there are hundreds and hundreds more people who want to do it.”

Comparatively rare at Broadway houses like the Hayes, volunteer ushers have long staffed Off and Off-Off Broadway theaters. Lately, they have been signing up in droves. Playwrights Horizons is fielding 10 more requests per month than it did in 2016. The Irish Repertory Theater, which uses volunteers in the interest of budget-trimming and community-building, now has a roster of almost 500 names to draw from.

Volunteer ushers are generally required to be at the theater an hour before the house opens to learn the particulars of the show and the lay of the land. Credit Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

The word is out that “you can watch a show for free for a half-hour of work,” said Eddy Perez, the house manager of the Irish Rep.

Retirees with free time are jostling for slots, as are impetuous drama students who view ushering as a no-cost way to expand their artistic horizons and make connections with members of Off Broadway theaters. (Most Broadway houses employ unionized ushers.)

“To be able to see new work inspires me in my work,” said Ana Marie Mesa, 23, an actor and filmmaker who ushers at Rattlestick Playwrights Horizons. “Going to a play can get expensive, so it’s a way to go without having to pay, and you get to meet the people involved with the production.”

Volunteer ushers are generally required to be at the theater an hour before the house opens to learn the particulars of the show (What’s the running time? Is there an intermission?) and the lay of the land (for example, the location of the theater’s restrooms). In some cases, they are asked to stay around after a show and police the house for dropped programs. Though Rattlestick urges ushers to “come as you are,” most theaters require basic black (the outlier is Playwrights Horizons, where the dress code is black and white).

“There aren’t so many rules for our volunteers,” said Daniella Topol, the artistic director of Rattlestick. “The most important thing to us is that the audience feels welcomed and respected.” Jordan Barbakoff, 61, a retired systems engineer and a frequent volunteer at the York Theater, the Mint and the American Airlines Theater, said that the work sounds easy enough, “but there are people who shouldn’t be ushers.” He added: “They just don’t get it when the house manager tells them that the odd-numbered seats are on this side of the aisle and even-numbered seats are on the other side.”

And of course there are volunteers who do the bare minimum of what is asked, so they can see the show gratis. House managers maintain a black list of those who don’t wear the proper clothes, follow directives, show enough initiative, arrive on time or at all. And don’t get Mr. Ponce started on the volunteers who complain about the location of their seats. “We just guarantee that they’ll see the show,” he said. “Sometimes they have to sit on a stool in the back. This is not a right. It’s a privilege.”

For their part, volunteers bemoan the frequent turnover among house managers, and thus the need to prove themselves again and again. Sharon Ulman, 66, a retired staff member of the New York City Department of Education, ushers at Playwrights Horizons, the Signature and Second Stage, among other theaters. “You want your name to be on their brain and have them think ‘Oh, I know her; she’s good,’” she said. “But that’s hard when the staff keeps changing.”

Initially, she was unenthusiastic about ushering when the idea was suggested to her. “I had my memberships; I just wanted to go in and see my shows and not be bothered,” Ms. Ulman said. But now she is as dedicated a volunteer as you could hope to find.

“For someone who’s single, it’s a wonderful social connection because you’re there representing the theater, and it gives you permission to talk to anyone,” she said. “You kind of feel you have someone to go to the theater with, even if you’re ushering with people you don’t know.”

Because volunteers typically sign up well in advance of a show’s run, they have only a brief description to go on when mapping out their matinee and evening schedules.

Sometimes, they’re lucky enough to get in on the ground floor of a hit. Lori Wolf, a retired elementary schoolteacher, was an usher for the “The Band’s Visit,” “Dear Evan Hansen” and “Hand to God” before they transferred to Broadway. “I remember walking out at the end of ‘The Band’s Visit’ and thinking, ‘what a great show,’” Ms. Wolf said. “Some shows you’re not as enthused about, but it’s an evening of theater. You take a chance.”

There are different attitudes among ushers on this issue. Some, like Ms. Wolf and Mr. Barbakoff, will see pretty much anything. Because Ms. Ulman never went to the theater or ballet during her childhood, she is similarly adventurous; she knows she has lots of ground to make up.

“Every show is new to me, even when, to my friends, it’s a revival,” said Ms. Ulman, who has a weakness for plays about dysfunctional families. “If that’s the subject, I’m definitely signing up to usher for it.”

Ms. Wolf, who grew up in what she described as a culturally rich household, will often go to the theater as a paying customer. The free ticket is lagniappe; her attraction to ushering is membership in a community of kindred spirits.

On a recent Wednesday, while she ushered for “Jimmy Titanic” at the Irish Rep, she said she felt as if she was part of the family at theaters around the city. “This is an underground network,” Ms. Wolf said, as she headed downstairs to find her seat. “It’s a whole subculture. The thing that binds us together is our love of theater.”

So You Want to Be an Usher?

Some tips from veteran volunteers:

SIGN UP Check theater websites for a list of volunteering opportunities and an email address to sign up. Alternatively you can inquire at the box office.

GET ALONG Different house managers and other volunteers all have their personalities and quirks. So do you. Be patient and respectful.

FOLLOW ORDERS If you’re told to wear all black, wear all black. Don’t accessorize unless you’re told to accessorize. Pick up the programs at the end of the show if that’s what the house manager requests. Don’t be a diva. Let the divas be onstage.

KEEP CALM You may meet celebrities who are in the show or who are there to see the production. Don’t gush or ask for an autograph.

DISCRETION MATTERS Don’t bad mouth the show, even if you didn’t like it. You never know who’s listening.

BE PROFESSIONAL You’re a volunteer, but you should treat the role as a job. Otherwise, buy a ticket.
Volunteer Leadership Education and Network Events

Southern CA Registration Deadline: August 8, 2018 / Northern CA Registration Deadline: August 15, 2018

JULY 13, 2018 Joan Cardellino, CAVS
California Association of Hospitals and Health Systems (CAHHS) Volunteer Services is convening two meetings in a “mini-conference” format using selected speakers and topics from our 2018 California Hospital Volunteer Leadership Conference. The Southern California meeting is August 13, 2018 at The California Endowment Center, Los Angeles Conference Center. The Northern California meeting is August 20, 2018 at North Bay Healthcare Green Valley Administration Center, Fairfield. Please share this information with your volunteers and staff.

Mini-conferences offer participants the opportunity to:

- Review the information shared at the February 2018 conference.
- Hear six-month progress reports from those who attended the February 2018 conference.
- Network with professionals, peers and other volunteer leaders, many of whom are new to their positions.

Topics include:

- How social media is used to tell patient/volunteer stories.
- How volunteer resources support the patient experience, emergency management, retail, fundraising, advocacy and social determinants of health programming.
- Processes to support the effective management of volunteer workforces especially recruitment, interviewing, placement, recordkeeping, recognition, termination, and risk management.
- How volunteer organizations are supported at the system level.
- How auxiliary/league/guilds/all volunteer groups are responding to the current health and community benefits service delivery environment.

2018 California Hospital Volunteer Leadership Conference

Click here to review the February 2018 conference program including educational materials/sessions, photos, sponsors and events.

Register today

August 13, 2018, The California Endowment Center, Los Angeles Conference Center (Deadline August 8, 2018)
August 20, 2018, North Bay Healthcare Green Valley Administration Center, Fairfield (Deadline: August 15, 2018)