

**Lexi Parsons**

**Sacred Heart Greenwich**

Over recent years, I've realized compassion is the core of who I am and something I continuously strive to develop. Compassion for me came from quite an unexpected place, a rundown local soup kitchen at the First Reformed Church of Mt. Vernon.

The rundown property, creaky floorboards, and stench of food trapped by carpeted stairs did not seem like the place I, a young middle school girl, should be. I didn't return to the local soup kitchen until two years later as a freshman in high school. My second visit wasn't pleasant either. I uneasily served meals as two intimidating men argued in a corner and wondered if I was supposed to be there.

However, as I begrudgingly returned week after week, I began to feel more comfortable. What had started as fulfilling service hours changed into something meaningful one day when a young girl, no older than fourteen, came in. Her pink coat and face covered by big curly hair stuck with me as she silently grabbed her meal without looking up. Watching her, I felt guilty for ever thinking I didn't belong at the soup kitchen because it wasn't the easygoing environment I was used to. It was about compassion, not comfort. Seeing her vulnerability, I realized the courage it takes to accept a stranger's help and how meaningful even small acts of service can be. At that moment, I began to understand how important it is to meet people where they are and treat every person with quiet respect for their dignity, regardless of their circumstances.

Since that day, I've spent every Monday of my off-season volunteering, serving an approximate total of 76 hours over the past four years. My commitment to the soup kitchen sparked a deeper love for community service and giving back. I no longer hesitate to go alone and have formed close bonds with the regular volunteers from my church as well as the Mt. Vernon patrons who return week after week. I now serve as the youth representative on the Mission Council for the soup kitchen at my church, the Reformed Church of Bronxville, motivating other youth to get involved and learn like I did.

This past summer, I had the privilege of going on pilgrimage to Lourdes, France with a group of my classmates. There, we served as aides to sick and disabled pilgrims, providing one-on-one care and support throughout their journey. Over approximately 71 hours service, I assisted with daily needs ranging from helping someone eat to supporting other aides in bathing an elderly woman. While the responsibilities were meaningful, what impacted me most were the relationships formed in just ten days. I had formed lifelong friendships and learned profound lessons about myself, my faith journey, and what it means to be compassionate for others. The elderly pilgrims taught me to put others before myself without hesitation, and the experience confirmed my desire to pursue nursing. Each act of care, no matter how small, reinforced that presence and compassion can profoundly affect someone's experience. In Lourdes, I learned that the greatest miracle was not physical healing, but the gift of hope, witnessed in the selfless actions of the abled and disabled alike.

This experience motivated me to run for Head of Student Body Community Service my senior year; I have had the privilege of serving this role, organizing service projects, and

expanding my own understanding about what it means to give back. Along with my partner Grace, we have organized several movements that aid different disadvantaged populations in our community, committing approximately 32 hours since September to these projects. We began the year with a Sacred Heart, division-wide service project called Lace Up 4 Kids to raise money for The Scarlet Fund in honor of pediatric cancer awareness, raising \$2,394 in total. In further partnership with The Scarlet Fund, I have participated in two card sorting events, approximately four hours each, where I worked alongside the James family and other volunteers to sort holiday cards written to pediatric oncology patients and healthcare workers at Memorial Sloan Kettering. Additionally, I assisted in coordinating a holiday toy drive, collecting and delivering three fully packed cars worth of toys to be donated to the Carver Center in Port Chester. Currently, Grace and I are organizing a service event to take place this April in partnership with the Abilis organization to host a Special Olympics at Sacred Heart for those in our community. Through these roles, I have worked to build a stronger sense of shared responsibility and commitment to the community. I have learned that meaningful service is built on consistency, humility, and a willingness to show up for others.

True service isn't about hours or recognition; it's about showing up for others. I have learned that it requires excellence not only in action, but also in intention—approaching service with care, purpose, and meaning behind why we give back. I hope to continue transforming compassion into action to serve others selflessly, in the classroom, local community, and with my peers, inspiring others to find meaning in service.