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Gen Z Speaks: How volunteering taught me that the key to saving the world is the power of community

BY CHRISTINA GAN TZE XIN

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Christina Gan Tze Xin

When she started on her green activism journey, 20-year-old Christina Gan Tze Xin struggled with cynicism and scepticism from her family and friends.

today

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GEN Z SPEAKS: When 20-year-old Christina Gan first started on her green activism journey, she was dismayed by her family and friends' cynicism and scepticism. Eventually, she found her tribe among like-minded groups and learnt the most important lesson of all: That no one can save the world alone.

Like many of young Singaporeans of my generation, I was first exposed to community service and volunteerism through a compulsory Secondary 2 school activity where I spent time supervising children with special needs, like those with high-functioning autism, to create simple foods like peanut butter sandwiches.

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Each session was an eye-opening but unsettling discovery of new and more complex obstacles the children, their parents and caregivers were subject to educationally and socially. It soon kickstarted my passion for volunteering.

Now six years on, I have had the opportunity to serve a diverse range of communities through organising activities in Care Corner, Heartware Network, CaringSG and more.

In the last two years, I became interested in driving action against climate change, which I believe is the most pressing humanitarian crisis right now.

When I first started out, I made significant lifestyle changes to limit my consumption of meat, plastic, and energy to reduce my personal carbon footprint. While I knew the impact might be small, I was confident it would still be tangible.

In bright-eyed hopes of motivating others to do the same, I explained my rationale to my family and friends.

To my surprise and dismay, I was met with cynicism and scepticism.

Many bluntly pointed out that my actions would not have any impact at all, instead bringing up that my new dietary restrictions would make having meals together inconvenient.

I was still dedicated to these changes, but I quickly became frustrated that those around me seemed to belittle the significance of my hard work and were not willing to limit their consumption as I had.

I was jaded, and wondered if my efforts were, despite my good intentions, truly worth anything.

In my search for answers, I found that I was not the only one in this state of confusion.

After attending many environmental events, I found a place among other environmentalists and within green organisations like NUS College's Ecoplanet and the Students' Association for Visions of the Earth, both at the National University of Singapore.

It was only when I found a community of individuals who shared similar frustrations that I realised: Forcing people to make inconvenient or burdensome changes to their lifestyle will only reduce their receptivity to our green mission.

Discussions with these like-minded folks taught me not to lose hope, but to channel my energy and passion into broader initiatives such as policy changes, education, and top-down approaches.

In 2021, I started Project Step by Step, an initiative under the Youth Action Challenge, aimed at addressing food waste and establishing a circular economy through compost. The aim was to encourage collaborations between farms in need of fertiliser and the largest generators of food waste — namely schools, restaurants, malls, and residences.

GIVING IS FOR EVERYBODY

A survey of 180 volunteers from 112 social service agencies in 2023 by the Singapore Management University's Lien Centre for Social Innovation and the National Council of Social Service identified a lack of time as the leading reason for volunteers to discontinue their service.

Amid tightening time constraints, maintaining focus is increasingly difficult with so many demands and distractions constantly vying for our attention.

In 2000, a Microsoft study found that the average attention span of a human being was 12 seconds. In 2015, that dropped to a mere 8.25 seconds — even shorter than that of a goldfish!

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If we want a more compassionate and equitable future, it is imperative that we start to prioritise volunteerism as a fundamental activity for everybody from all walks of life, not just for the good of society but also for ourselves.

Christina Gan Tze Xin

Seeking support and advice from other environmentalists, the writer learnt that forcing people to make inconvenient or burdensome changes will only reduce their receptivity to their green mission.

Our generation is deeply invested in self-fulfilment, dedicating significant resources to personal growth in areas such as fitness, appearance, happiness, and success.

However, true individual growth cannot be achieved without empathy and social responsibility. Without these, we risk building self-righteous lives devoid of meaningful connections.

Additionally, volunteerism compels us to exercise greater patience, particularly when interacting with those who may have difficulty grasping concepts or communicating effectively.

Regardless of whether you are interacting with an overstimulated child with autism, providing support to an isolated senior citizen, or navigating communication barriers with migrant workers, each volunteerism encounter strengthens your empathy and tolerance.

Engaging in causes larger than ourselves also brings us a sense of purpose that surpasses personal achievements.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

Volunteering is also the gateway to finding one's community, which is not just beneficial but essential for those impassioned by social impact. My community helped dispel my previous notions of powerlessness, instead imbuing me with a fresh agency to tackle climate issues.