

Teens in Indiana have discovered that service makes a big difference for everyone in the long run.



SEASON OF SERVICE

By David A. Edwards
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When Nick H. was thinking about ideas for an Eagle Scout project, he knew he wanted to do something meaningful and personal—something that represented a unique contribution from him.

“I remember sitting on my couch in my living room and thinking, ‘We all have talents

and skills and abilities. How can we use those gifts from Heavenly Father to bless the lives of others?’” says Nick, 19. As this question went through his head, he thought of his love of running and then asked himself how he could combine serving others with running.



And thus was born an event that has become an annual Christmastime tradition in Nick's community in southern Indiana.

For his Eagle Scout project, Nick organized a 5K run and partnered with a local charity that helps fulfill the needs and Christmas wishes of disadvantaged children. Those who signed up for the race received information about specific children's needs and pledged to fill them. Through an arrangement with a local store, racers could also get discount prices on the items they purchased for the children. In addition, Nick organized donations for a Christmas dinner at his ward's meetinghouse for the families of the children, who would be presented with their gifts there.

Youth in Charge

About 15 runners participated in Nick's Eagle Scout project four years ago. But everyone who participated felt it was so worthwhile that it should be held again the next year. A nonprofit organization was created, and the event has been held each year since. Both Latter-day Saint youth and non-LDS youth have organized the event, which had 300 participants last year, as well as a great deal of community support, including offers from other local churches to host the dinner.

Julia G., 14, who helped organize the event last year, points out that "this is a great organization to serve with because you do it with other youth."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIFER MCNEELY AND DAVID A. EDWARDS



Nick



Jessica



Luke



Julia

Jessica S., 18, who took on the leadership of last year's event, says, "I never realized just how much actually went into making this come about. If you're 'anxiously engaged in a good cause' [D&C 58:27], you're excited and anxious and stressed sometimes, but it's all worth it because you're doing it for a good cause."

During this time last year, Jessica had a testimony-building experience as she faced a personal challenge. After agreeing to be in charge of organizing the Christmas service project, she learned that her father had been diagnosed with cancer. She wondered if she ought to back out of the event, but she went ahead, she says, because "I had received a confirmation from the Spirit that this service was what I was supposed to do. This experience has taught me about serving others and relying on the Lord in your trials. I've gained a stronger testimony of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and that He suffered for my pains. When I was having a hard time, I was able to find thoughts of peace through the gospel."

Other lessons have come through this service as well. For Nick, who is now serving a mission in Honduras, the story of this Eagle project that grew into so much more is a lesson about what youth can accomplish. "I've noticed the fire of the youth spirit," he says. "It doesn't set boundaries. It doesn't say, 'Oh, this isn't possible.' Teens are innovative, they're creative, they're young, they're vivacious. When they have a righteous goal and have the right mindset, they're going to accomplish it."

Julia's brother Luke G., 18, has been touched by seeing what can happen for the youth themselves when they choose to serve

others. "As youth, we don't always choose what's best for us," says Luke. "Choosing to do something good can make the biggest difference in your life. Just choosing to be involved, even if it's just for a couple of hours at the run or the dinner, can change your whole outlook on life."

Blessings All Around

All of these youth have noticed that service brings blessings both to those who are being served and to those who are serving.

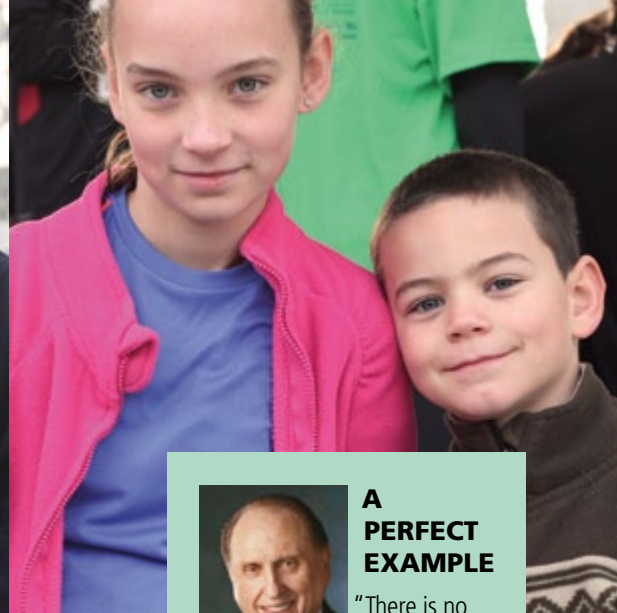
"There's the scripture that says, 'When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God' [Mosiah 2:17]," says Julia. "And my dad has always told me that whenever you're serving others, you're not only helping them, but you're helping yourself. I think that's very true, because serving other people helps you get through your struggles also. I know that service is very important and changes people's lives."

Nick, quoting one of his favorite hymns, says, "'Because I have been given much, I too must give' [*Hymns*, no. 219]. We've been given many blessings and have a responsibility to serve. We're able to learn so much and grow through helping others. It's magnificent how many blessings we receive just from our willingness to serve others."

"I know there are times where I can be selfish or self-centered," says Luke. "But this project gives us an opportunity to do something that not only changes hundreds of children's lives but also our own through serving and leading others."

Coming to Christ through Service

Luke remembers the first time he saw the



A PERFECT EXAMPLE

"There is no better time than now,

this very Christmas season, for all of us to rededicate ourselves to the principles taught by Jesus Christ.

"Because He came to earth, we have a perfect example to follow. As we strive to become more like Him, we will have joy and happiness in our lives and peace each day of the year. It is His example which, if followed, stirs within us more kindness and love, more respect and concern for others."

President Thomas S. Monson, "Because He Came" (First Presidency Christmas Devotional, Dec. 4, 2011), <http://broadcast.lds.org>.

smiles on the children's faces at the Christmas dinner. He thinks it's the first time he ever really felt the Christmas spirit. "I don't think I'd ever cried before because of the Christmas spirit."

As President David O. McKay said, "The Christmas spirit is the Christ spirit" (*Gospel Ideals* [1953], 551). And these youth have felt the Spirit of Christ through their service.

"I think it's important to do whatever it takes to be an example of Christ," says Julia, "to show His love and share His love with everybody."

Nick has discovered that a life of service has given him a new point of view. "It's definitely changed my mindset,

my view on people," he says. "It's helped me see others the way that Christ sees us, to see the potential in people and the power of hope."

Through her experiences, Jessica has gained a deeper sense of the purpose of service and what charity really means. "When you think of charity according to the world's standards, you think of just giving. But we're taught that 'charity is the pure love of Christ' [Moroni 7:47], and when we are showing charity, we are spreading the love of Christ, especially throughout this Christmas season. We're being examples of Christ through service." **NE**