

Yan Wang

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” The first time I read these inspiring words, I was browsing the online apparel store of the Animal Liberation Front, a non-profit dedicated to animal welfare. I was in the seventh grade, a newly converted vegetarian and animal rights activist. In retrospect, I really had no idea what being an “activist” or a “volunteer” meant. I thought that if I wore the T-shirts—looked the part—that would be it. People would automatically see my trendy wardrobe and think, “That one, *she’s* an activist.” Or so I thought.

From this naive beginning, however, I did develop into a more discerning human. By involving myself in the community, I have found nooks of life that I am truly passionate about. I started volunteering at the Chester County SPCA and working at Frazer Animal Hospital. All of a sudden, my role as an “activist” metamorphosed. Instead of reading articles about animal abuse on the Internet, I was witnessing them firsthand. Instead of browsing through pictures of people helping homeless animals, I became one of those people. I found myself, inexplicably, *living* and *believing* the T-shirt. And this *belief* is addictive and slightly parasitic, I admit. One *belief* spawns another and another...and from there, there is no point of return.

This *belief* parasite causes side effects in its host and I, for one, am not immune. Once I realized that the difference between a bystander and an activist was the simple act of believing, I thought I could do anything. I threw myself wholeheartedly into community service. Through the years, I’ve worked with an eclectic group of people, from toddlers at Chesterbrook Academy to patients at Paoli Hospital to fellow animal rights activists from PETA. When I was in eleventh grade, Dr. Jay Zhu, an assistant professor from the University of Pennsylvania, invited me to join his team of graduate students in microbiological research. I was initially intimidated. The lab was filled with the latest scientific equipment and some of the world’s smartest microbiology students. But Dr. Zhu said to me, “I believe in you” and that was all that I needed. Dr. Zhu isn’t nearly as famous as Margaret Mead, but his words had the same effect. That experience further reinforced my passion for volunteering.

Sometimes people ask me why I volunteer when I could be getting paid for what I do. The answer is that I don’t need financial compensation. The true compensation is believing in what I do and doing what I believe in. The impacts of volunteering proliferate further than any paid vocation simply because the money factor cannot blur the good deeds. When people volunteer, they chose to spend their time towards a cause. Volunteers are the “thoughtful, committed citizens” Margaret Mead spoke so highly of and volunteering has made me believe—yes, *believe*—that I can change the world.