

The Thumbs Up Guys Scholarship - Essay

Growing up in a career military family, I have always seen service as a way of life. There was my Mom and Dad, who both served in the Air Force. But, there was also the selflessness of our WWII-veteran neighbor who mowed our lawn when my dad was deployed, without being asked or even expecting a thank you. I've been inspired by groups of people coming together in times of need, like my neighborhood helping a family after a house fire, and students holding a fundraiser after a natural disaster. Every time I have volunteered, I've been reminded of these small, selfless gestures and the positive difference they can make in someone's life. Over the last few years, I've turned a similarly small gesture of volunteering for Lowcountry Orphan Relief (LOR) into a mission that I will carry with me throughout college and beyond.

LOR supports local abused and neglected children who have been removed from their homes often with only the clothes on their backs. I first volunteered in the LOR Distribution Center during my freshman year because, at 14, I felt drawn to helping other children. There, I organized clothing and supplies and saw that people were far more likely to donate used items, like clothing, than new ones. All donations are wonderful, but backpack and school supply donations had to be new. In my own experience, as the military moved us from state to state and overseas, I faced new communities, schools, and cultures. Despite the changes, I could always find comfort in going to school prepared. Sharing that common bond as a student, I started School Supplies for Lowcountry Orphan Relief in my sophomore year. To me, ensuring that the children served by LOR have the tools to return to school prepared to learn is one of the most critical parts of the care kits they receive, especially during a scary and tumultuous time in their lives. Not being prepared could have negative long-term effects on their education and their future.

I started by brainstorming ways I could get my community interested and involved in my mission. I bought the first set of 20 backpacks on sale for \$70 (I later paid myself back) and provided written instructions on how to fill them with school supplies and a request for a small donation to buy more backpacks. Using social media, I shared my idea and suggested that people involve their children as a learning opportunity. People eagerly offered to fill the backpacks, but monetary donations were minimal. Seeking to raise more money, I created a GoFundMe campaign, held donation days on Instagram, and spent days going door-to-door collecting donations as small as \$1 and as large as \$50. My biggest hurdle came when COVID-19 forced us all to stay home, and I had to get creative with fundraising. I couldn't go door-to-door and I didn't want to pester people on social media during a time of such great distress. I had no idea how long we'd be stuck at home so again, I brainstormed. As a hobby, I sell commissioned drawings and I got the idea to offer my artwork for donations. Creating each piece is extremely time consuming, but this idea, born of desperation, enabled me to make my largest single donation of backpacks at one time at the end of the summer of 2020. Not only was I able to continue raising money, but I was told the drawings—of children, pets, recently passed grandparents—brought people a lot of happiness during this sad time.

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To date, I've delivered 371 backpacks filled with school supplies worth over \$5300, ensuring every child who received one could return to school with the tools they need. I learned that when I am determined to help others, things may not always go as planned, but I can always find another way. Major setbacks, like COVID-19, can force me to stretch my creative bounds further than I imagined. I also learned how to coordinate with an organization, how to gather my courage and knock on doors to ask for donations, how to spend wisely and how to manage massive quantities of supplies. The biggest lesson I learned is that by focusing on someone else's need, drawing others in to help, and overcoming obstacles, you can change the lives of everyone for the better. Through just a few small gestures, whether by filling a backpack or mowing a lawn, we all can have a profound impact on those around us.