

When the Call Ends

When I think about volunteering, I don't picture awards or hours logged. I picture a Google Classroom call full of curious, restless middle schoolers - arguing about whether brain cells can text each other - while I plan to stay up late again, reworking slides until everything finally makes sense. I keep thinking back to this past week, when I said goodbye to my coaching team and students for the last time this season. The screen filled with waves, emojis, and "thank yous." Even though I'll probably see some of them again in future courses, it still felt final, like closing a chapter I wasn't quite ready to end just yet. Moments like these remind me that volunteering is about showing up for a community and realizing that the small things you do can ripple outward in ways you might never expect.

Interestingly, my story with the North South Foundation (NSF) didn't start with joy; it started with frustration. When I was younger, my parents enrolled me in NSF math prep classes, hoping to give me an edge. But as I sat in those virtual classes, staring at slides about complex probability when I was still struggling with long division in normal school, I only felt lost. I knew the coaches were kind and they were trying their best, but the material was overwhelming, and no one seemed to know how to bridge the gap. We sat in silence, cameras off, trying to make sense of this blur of math that moved too quickly for us to understand. I carried that frustration for years, believing I wasn't "built" for difficult problem-solving.

However, everything changed in the summer before high school, when I decided to give NSF one last try - this time, in physics. To my surprise, something clicked. It wasn't that physics came easily; I still struggled with all the math equations. But I stayed after class every day to ask my coach, Shrihith, questions. He was a high school senior who admitted he had signed up for volunteer hours but ended up staying because he genuinely loved teaching. Watching his enthusiasm for explaining science made me wonder: maybe volunteering could be more than checking a box. Maybe it could help people like me grow too, as both a teacher and a student. That realization made me see that volunteering helps strengthen who you are while also lifting others who might be where you once were.

A year later, I applied to be a life science coach. The process was intimidating, with a demo lesson, a panel interview, and the weight of teaching students who would be trusting me to guide them. What would happen if I messed up, started stuttering, or accidentally taught them the wrong information? Yet when I was accepted, I felt something I hadn't felt back in those math classes: genuine excitement. That summer before sophomore year, I poured myself into it. Beyond just teaching microbiology, anatomy, and epidemiology, I was connecting with students - seeing their personalities come through in writing, watching their curiosity spark during discussions, and realizing I was starting to see myself differently, too. I wasn't the kid zoning out in the back of a math class anymore. Now, I was the person helping students believe that they could figure out tough concepts.

But it wasn't always easy. The slides I was given to teach from were hard to read and poorly designed. I realized I was in the same position as my math coaches years ago, scrambling in the middle of class, trying to make sense of something broken. I also remembered the silence of those old classes, the way I gave up because it felt pointless. I didn't want my students to feel that.

So, even though it wasn't required, and no one asked me to, I redesigned everything. I started adding diagrams and videos, breaking concepts down into stories, even sneaking in memes and jokes when the timing was right. Then, I built review games and designed research projects for students who wanted to chase their curiosity even further. I stayed late to talk to parents after class, grade optional work, and email students needing help, not because I had to, but because I wanted to know if their kids were feeling engaged. Slowly, I watched the classroom transform. Students who used to sit quietly started unmuting themselves. They debated, laughed, and even teased me sometimes ("It's lagging because of all the tabs you have open!" or "Time to steal all your points!"). The class finally felt alive. For me, that became one of the most important reasons to volunteer. Being able to help create a space where kids felt supported and interested, even when resources were limited, was something I realized I truly loved.

At the end of that first summer, the admin team saw my work and promoted me to curriculum development lead. Suddenly, I wasn't just coaching my class of 30 students. Now, I was helping build courses

that would reach hundreds more. I took the opportunity to recruit and lead a team of first-time student volunteers, designed new slide decks from scratch, and expanded the courses NSF offered. In the end, I had stepped into the role I once needed myself: someone working to make learning accessible, exciting, and easy.

Volunteer impact cannot be measured with just numbers, but those numbers showed me how service grows. One classroom turns into many, one student's curiosity can inspire others, and before long, the effort of a few volunteers can help reach an entire community. And that is exactly why the numbers - 200+ students, 50+ lessons taught, and 60+ volunteers led - don't tell the story I hold onto most tightly. What stays with me are the simple, human moments. These were things like a shy student unmuting for the first time to ask a question. A coach texting me that they finally felt confident because we fixed up a complicated lesson plan. The group chat exploding with texts about past lessons and funny memes. And especially moments like when a parent tells you their child stayed up late reading about anatomy because "your class made them curious."

That's why this past week, logging off from my final classes of the season, I felt a lump in my throat. Saying goodbye to my team of coaches, I realized how much we'd become a family - laughing about mischievous students, sharing inside jokes about our favorite moments, and cheering each other on through tough lessons. Saying goodbye to my students was even harder. They filled the chat with thanks, questions about next season, and requests for "one more game." As I waved back, I knew I'd miss their energy more than I could explain.

That moment taught me that volunteering is about a sense of connection. It's remembering what it feels like to be lost and deciding you'll do everything you can to keep someone else from feeling the same. It's building spaces where kids feel safe being curious, where they believe they can handle the "hard" stuff, and where coaches discover the joy of teaching.

Volunteering with NSF taught me that I love creating those spaces. It gave me confidence, mentors, and a sense of community I never expected, while also reminding me that goodbyes are hard precisely because the experience mattered. Middle school me used to think volunteering was just about giving, but I've since learned

it's also about receiving: the lessons, the friendships, and the moments that stay with you long after the call ends. In the end, it's about building communities where each act of service makes someone feel better supported and more capable. To me, that's the greatest gift of all.