

Connecting Through Service

By: Charlie Beelaert

It was the summer of 2017. Days were shaped by my twelve-year old interests: tennis, tuba, junior firefighter camp, and video games. Spending time with my grandparents would also be a priority since they had recently moved to Colorado. When they asked me to volunteer with them twice a week, I agreed. Begrudgingly. That would be a lot of time away from my interests.

Each week, I worked alongside my grandparents at Gracefull Community Cafe. Unlike any other restaurant I had ever been to, Gracefull's pay-what-you-can concept allowed anyone to get a homemade meal, regardless of their ability to pay. I was beginning to learn that there was more to this place than the dirty work of washing dishes, running food, and cleaning the dining room. I watched my grandparents sit and talk with guests and learn their stories. I noticed guests who could not pay sitting at tables next to those who could. I observed times when guests celebrated with the owner because they got a bus pass. There were days when the police were called to help resolve conflict or manage mental health needs. Each volunteer shift was full of life lessons. Soon, this little café in downtown Littleton became my new interest.

Summer came to an end, but my time at Gracefull did not. My thirteen-year-old self continued to build relationships with the owner, the chef, the volunteers, and the guests on free weekends and holidays. This safe space nurtured me as much as it nourished its guests. I became brave enough to share laughs with guests and get to know their stories. I learned that being unable to pay for a meal or being unhoused does not mean you are homeless. Gracefull was a stable, loving home to so many.

My fourteen-year-old self had to be more intentional about balancing interests during high school. It never was a question of whether or not to continue volunteering at Gracefull, but how to creatively fit it in. I was honored to help the chef with catering orders before school, record promotional audio and video productions for Gracefull's Foundation, and complete my Eagle Scout project by building large planter boxes full of fresh herbs to be used in their meals. My fifteen-year-old self finally had the skills to do more than observe. I had learned how to give back with grace and purpose – this is community service.

Despite the many challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, my sixteen-year-old self was determined to stay connected to the community. I co-founded a high school club that partnered with a non-profit organization to provide daily essentials for individuals who are unhoused. Our club, "Bagging for Homelessness", partnered with Denver International Airport for bag donations, Bombas for sock donations, and dozens of local charitable organizations for distribution, including Gracefull Cafe. To date, our club has distributed over 500 bags in the Littleton and Denver areas.

Little did I know that my 12-year-old self started a journey of self discovery the day I stepped into Gracefull Cafe. Being treated as part of the solution from such a young age taught me the importance of showing up, working hard, and investing in others. I learned to love the dirty work and not shy away from challenges. Here I am now, my eighteen-year-old- self, grateful to those who helped me discover a passion to connect with others and try to make a difference. My days are now shaped by a drive to study business leadership in college while pursuing a career as a firefighter/paramedic, a profession that will allow me to connect with others and make a difference.