

Mary Gauder

When I first heard about the Emerging Leader Institute, I was very excited to apply. My first semester of college had been pretty bland, and I figured this would help me become more active around campus. When I walked into the classroom on the first day, I was hit with everyone else's achievements. I was really intimidated by some of the people in class, who had done things on national levels, and who already had powerful positions around campus. It seemed like this class was going to turn into a leadership competition, where everyone scrambled to get recognition for their achievements.

I dreaded going to the meetings. Although the presenters were very informative and had some good ideas about leadership development, I felt like I wasn't leader enough to fit in with the rest of the group. I was not in any campus organizations, and I hadn't even done anything really great in high school.

But, things began to change. As I began to exchange smiles and greetings with more and more people, and work in more small groups, I realized that the other ELIers were normal people, just some of them had accomplished huge things. I think when finally I realized this, I was able to cross some invisible barrier I had put up, allowing myself to truly participate in the group: I began to speak more in class discussions, to offer ideas to people for their own projects, and to actually make friends with my classmates. I realized that each person in the group had a passion, something that made them happy, something they wanted to work for. Many of my classmates had accomplished things because they were passionate about them, and those things really mattered to them. After noticing this, I decided I had to find something I could really put my heart into.

After a lot of brainstorming, I realized my passion. I love children. In my lifetime, I have seen several children who need a lot more love than they get in their families. It saddens me to think that some cruel people are able to have children, and raise them however they want.

So, I decided to put on a day for little kids where they could come play with UK students. Hopefully, this would allow them to forget about any problems they were having for a few hours, and let them leave happy. I called several day cares and women's shelters before I finally connected with Angela from Big Brothers/Big Sisters. She was enthusiastic about the project, so we decided to have an Easter egg hunt on the Saturday a week before Easter.

I was in charge of getting prize donations from businesses and recruiting volunteers; Angela got the candy and the kids. I quickly learned that businesses and their money will not soon part. After calling every restaurant, grocery store, and Wal-Mart in a seven-mile radius, I had nothing. All the stores required letters to their higher-ups with tax exempt numbers attached. So, I typed the letters, and I got the tax exempt numbers, and Angela and I went back to the businesses in person to give them the letters. Out of the six businesses we solicited, two gave us gift certificates. Both called on the same day to tell me they accepted our service proposal, and I think that was the happiest day of my life. It felt so wonderful to realize that other people were in on this project, and that they thought it would be beneficial to the community. This gave me a sense of validation, like I was doing something that mattered. I began to eat, sleep and breathe the Easter egg hunt. I wanted everything to go perfectly. Finally, with only two days left, I had all the donations, all twenty volunteers, and I was just ready to wait. When Saturday morning

rolled around, I was so excited. I piled into the car with my friends, and we drove to the parking lot to meet the other volunteers. Only two came. This was kind of a large setback, since I had been expecting 14. Here, I learned to let go, because there was nothing at all I could do at that point. The eight of us drove to Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and we had a great time playing with the kids. They were so happy to see us, and they really liked the prizes and candy they found. The day was a success!

I was so happy that I had made a difference, however small, in these 29 children's lives, and I was proud of myself. Then I heard Angela talking about the scheduled activity for the next month, and I realized they did activities like that every month. I was very impressed at that feat, considering how much work I thought I put in. This made me realize that there is so much more I can, and will do, to help other people.

I began to examine many of my other values, and I switched my major to social work. This is the first of many steps I am taking to brighten children's lives. I also am going to be a Big Sister next year, so I can meet with a child on an individual basis, too. Figuring out my enthusiasm for working with children made me feel calm and settled inside, because I finally knew what I was called to do with my life. At the same time, this enthusiasm stirs me up, invigorating me, because I see so much that needs to be done.

Now, I look back on all the ELI classes with happiness. In addition to growing in a way I never realized I could, I befriended some amazing people. I hope we will stay in contact, because the ELI class of 2001 can do great things together.