My story starts when I was in elementary school. My mom was working at our local church at the time and had decided to start a group called “Difference Makers”. It was simple: taking kids on field trips to volunteer around our community. At first, I didn’t think much of it. We got food and even had a candy buffet one time, so I was all in!

I distinctly remember one occasion with the Difference Makers where I could feel myself growing up a little bit and changing. We had partnered with a school in Africa-I don’t quite remember which country, but I do know that it was a poverty-stricken area. We all sat criss-cross on the carpet as the staff turned on a video for us to watch of those students in Africa.

They were crowded around desks with nothing but their meager textbooks and papers. Their teacher stood at a chalkboard that looked like it was from the seventies. My heart broke a little bit when the teacher pulled out a bag of pencils that we had sent to the school and began handing them out to the students. I still remember the pencils; they were holographic and rainbow.

The kids were screaming with excitement and racing to the front of the room for a pencil. A pencil! Meanwhile, my spoiled American self would have looked at the pencil and asked why it wasn’t mechanical.

One of the students went up to the camera and held up the pencil they had been using. It was no longer than a baby carrot and sat in the palm of their hand. After the video, we were tasked with writing letters for the students to read. As we finished our postcards, we thought about the giant class compared to our meager number of kids.

My sister and I asked a question. “What if there’s not enough cards for everyone?”

So, while the rest of the kids were playing and waiting for their parents to take them home, my sister and I sat and wrote card after card, hoping that each and every student would

have a letter to read. I'm not telling this story to make myself seem like an American savior who is telling people to finish their plates because of starving children in Africa.

My dad is a first generation immigrant from Zambia, which is located in central Africa. He grew up in a similar situation: shoes duct-taped to his feet, malnutrition that caused him to lose hair as a child, walking miles and miles to school every day with an empty stomach. I think about my dad and those kids from the video and want to make a difference. I know that some of my family in Zambia is living similarly, and it's not fair that I live in comfort every day while life is such a struggle for so many people.

This experience inflicted a need for community service in my heart. I strongly believe that it is when I began to develop my deep sense of empathy and compassion that has greatly shaped my character since then. I know that there's not a lot I can do at the moment, as I am a middle class high school student. However, I try to help any way I can.

Even if it's just washing dishes at the local soup kitchen or giving a few dollars to a struggling mother on the street, I try to do whatever is possible to make this world a little bit better. Life is unfair, and it breaks my heart that some people have to live through such struggles every day. I strongly believe that I will always be focused around service and equity. It always comes back to those kids with the pencils who made me realize that the world is far from perfect and needs the help from people like me to begin to solve its problems.