

Maggie Squyer
Alpha Phi
University of South Dakota

Maggie Squyer is a junior double-majoring in Biology Conservation and Sustainability with a minor in Political Science. She is currently the Director of New Member Education for Alpha Phi, a Morale Captain for Dakotathon (our school's Dance Marathon), a teacher's aid at a local elementary school, and a research assistant for the university's Biology Department. After graduation she hopes to get her Master's Degree in Public Policy and work for an environmental non-profit or in local government.

Compassion.

What does it mean to be compassionate and how will compassion change the world?

As a little girl, I remember gathering in the guidance counselor's office at my elementary school for our monthly Student Council meetings and studying the colorful poster on the wall that stated The Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. At the beginning of each meeting we would chant "TRRFCC! That's what character means to me!" but as an eleven-year-old, I don't think I knew much about compassion, let alone what the word even meant. In the fall of 2006, that changed. I was seated on the living room floor next to my four brothers and sisters when my mom delivered the news that my father had died of a heart attack earlier that afternoon. In movies, depictions of characters receiving "bad news" are actually incredibly accurate-- my world slowed to sluggish blur of adults toting casseroles, tight hugs, and a never-ending wave of sympathy cards. Our dining room table practically turned into the Hallmark aisle of Walgreens, and I couldn't figure out why people kept bringing us weird concoctions of tater-tots and cooked vegetables that could be reheated the next day.

I was told that there is no proper way to grieve and that each person has his or her own way of coping with loss. It wasn't until I received a terrified look from my coach that I realized maybe it wasn't normal for me to play in a soccer game 36 hours after hearing my dad had died. There was no stopping me, though-- I ached for a way to get my life back in motion. After one day off of school, I showed up to my fifth grade classroom expecting a normal day beginning with the Pledge of Allegiance and ending with math problems or spelling words. I was greeted instead by a hug from my teacher and a bouquet of flowers addressed to me from my 25 classmates. You guessed it—I bawled like a baby.

This was the first true act of compassion I can remember experiencing in my life, and it was given to me by 25 ten and eleven-year-olds. There was a genuine feeling of empathy and kindness in that classroom that I try to carry with me still today. As a child, I learned that being compassionate didn't mean sending sympathy cards; it meant other children letting you take the good jump rope out of the closet for once and parents volunteering their time to carpool you home after school. Compassion looks like an extension on a homework assignment, feels like the warm spot on the couch you share with a dog, and tastes like the Krispy Kreme donuts

your friend's mom brings home the morning after a sleepover.

Compassion is a powerful and frankly underrated tool that has the ability to evoke large-scale change in our world. The microcosm that was Mark Twain Elementary School speaks volumes to the world I want to live in today: a global community filled with truthful politicians, respect for mental health issues, responsible interactions with the environment, a fair judicial system, care for struggling nations, and a sense of citizenship that encourages individuals to be better community members. It was compassion that brought a struggling fifth grader back to her feet after the unexpected loss of a parent, and it is compassion that can permanently change the lives of people around the world.