



**2024 Recipient ~ Owen Master
Mamaroneck High School**

From a young age, I understood there were many people who weren't born into the same privilege as I was. As I began helping those who were less fortunate, it became one of my greatest sources of joy. It gives me a sense of pride to create joy in someone else's life, whether that's by playing sports with a disabled teen or handing a homeless man a fresh sandwich. The smiles on their faces will always cause a smile to break out on mine. The opportunity to make a difference in someone else's life is something I will always seek out and cherish.

When I was 12, I was able to volunteer with Backyards Sports, an organization where children with special needs focus on developing athletic skills. Each week, we were matched with one of these students to help teach them to become athletes. I vividly remember the sheer joy the kids experienced from simply getting the opportunity to try. This was my first true volunteering experience, and the sense of fulfillment it instilled set me on a path of striving to help as many people as I could.

Within my community, there is substantial economic disparity, so when Hurricane Ida struck in 2021, a large portion of my town didn't have the resources to rebuild. I reached out to the Fuller Center non-profit organization, which had been helping these low-income families, to see how I could lend my service. When I first arrived at the houses, I saw basements filled with feet of water, cars washed away, and floors torn up. Here I was coming from a practically intact house, and these people were fighting to keep theirs upright. I knew this was unfair and I had to do everything I could to help them. I spent hours cleaning out basements, filling up one bucket of water at a time. Certain houses had laundry machines and couches ruined, with elderly unable to move them. I lent a hand in any way I could. In one instance, I spent an entire day working with a group of pastors to tear up their moldy floor. The church had been running for decades, but at that point, they had to temporarily close and rebuild. Their spirit was demoralized but their gratitude for the help only inspired me to volunteer more.

I've also volunteered for the last few years with Midnight Run, a volunteer organization that helps the homeless by coordinating over 1,000 relief missions per year. During my first couple of years, I worked on the backend of the operation, making sandwiches, sorting clothing, and packing trucks. I did everything except go on the run. Then last year, I finally had an opportunity to go on the run, and it completely opened my eyes to what the organization was truly about. Seeing the smiles on the people's faces when I handed them new clothing or fresh food was incredible, but the most powerful parts of the experience were the conversations I had with them. Some of the people I met had disabilities and struggled to hold conversations; some of them looked barely older than me and had been recently kicked out of their homes. Some looked no different than the man working at the bank down the street but had just made a couple bad decisions. Hearing their stories of what led them to their circumstances made me feel a sense of obligation to help them in any way I could.

Recently, I've begun working closely with Pleasantville Cottage, which supplies education and housing for disabled children whose parents are not fit to care for them. During one of my most recent visits, I spent time with a kid named Mario. Mario was about my age and had lived at the cottages for over 5 years. When I first arrived, Mario was a little quiet. I'm sure he sees people coming in and out every day, never to return. After I spent a few hours with him playing basketball, Uno, and Connect Four, he finally warmed up to me. And no matter what we did, he always had a huge smile on his face. As I continued to visit Mario and we got to know each other more, he would

ask me questions about my life. He asked me about the same story five times and had the same ear-to-ear smile every time I recounted it. The connections I made with him and others at Pleasantville Cottage are something I will cherish forever.

Volunteering has always been vitally important to me and will remain part of who I am as I go off to college. St Vincent's Hospital recognizes the value of making a difference in other people's lives and communities. Through my 185 hours of volunteer service and commitment to my community, I believe I have exemplified St Vincent's mission, and I would be honored to receive this award from an institution that shares my values.