



**2024 Recipient ~ Emma Gornstein
Ardsley High School**

Being part of my community was something that my parents always taught me

My twin sister and I had to choose a charity for our birthday. I wasn't too fond of this. I thought we should split it. That was what everyone else was doing. But we had to do it all. I get it now, at 16. At 5, not so much. Looking back, I am glad they did this. I certainly needed to have the experience of not receiving all these gifts. And, as a kid that was growing up in Westchester, that was able to get pretty much what I wanted, I needed to see that others could not. This is obviously the lesson. One of my favorite ones was the backpacks. I loved how many we collected. I guess that's the point. Because we could see the impact. Our whole family room was filled with them and supplies for school. It was pretty cool.

I loved being a girl scout. We did community service projects throughout Westchester. We helped at the Food Bank, played games and sang at the Atria Woodlands, held a food drive at Decicco's, delivering cookies to veterans, and collecting stuffed animals for homeless children. I remember all of them.

When I started high school, I was definitely searching for my place. It was still during Covid and I had not been in school for a year. I think my school offers many diverse opportunities, but I wasn't sure that it was the right fit for me at the time.

I became involved with BBYO at the end of 8th grade. The Jewish teen organization has been an important part of my growth as an individual, community member and a leader. I've had many opportunities for service and advocacy through BBYO since I joined. Locally, I have participated in food drives each year. I have been able to help raise funds for the organization on a regional and international level. Asking people for money to support causes is challenging for many people, but I'm glad it's a skill I've learned because I can carry it with me into my future volunteer efforts. I have taken trips internationally and done service projects in Israel and in Central Europe with BBYO. I hope to have the opportunity to speak about my trip and why it's important as a teen to learn about the Holocaust, even today, in the spring.

I started off in 9th grade by volunteering my time at Chabad Rivertowns in the Hebrew School. I enjoyed working with the kids. They were rambunctious, but excited to be back in school and together. I loved to be interacting with kids and felt like myself again. I did this for just 9th grade, but am so grateful for the experience. I gained confidence and it allowed me to pursue other interests.

My mom also encouraged me to try Clubhouse Stars in Ardsley. It is a program that helps children ages k-4 with social skills. I have been volunteering weekly since 9th grade. Last year, I started teaching a yoga class. I love going there. The kids brighten my day. I can't wait to go each week. As I have become more comfortable in my role, whether it's playing legos on the floor or teaching how to regulate emotions. I dedicate two hours weekly here.

At the start of this year, I participated in two projects on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. I made Blizzard Boxes for individuals that were just moving to this country. I bought the items to go in them, decorated boxes and created cards. I also made a feelings book kit with J-Teen Leadership. These are used in different communities to help children express their feelings. I know how important it is for young children to express themselves and how hard it is, so I am

grateful tools like this exist.

I was honored to be appointed to the Ardsley High School Planning and Performance Leadership Team. This is made up of administrators, parents and some student representatives. As one of the 11th grade representatives, I welcome the opportunity to have an impact on the Ardsley High School community. In our monthly meetings, we discuss things from the building policies to how best to provide resources to students. This is a one hour per month commitment. I also joined the Stand with Us Teen Leadership Council this fall. We meet monthly. The internship helps educate me about what is happening in Israel right now, which is so important. It also gives me the ability to teach others more coherently. I am working on developing programs for BBYO right now around current events. This is a one hour per month commitment plus additional program planning.

In December, I worked on surgi dolls for Project Sunshine. These are dolls that need to be cut out, sewn together, and stuffed. They are then used in hospitals by child life activity coordinators or doctors with their patients. I think this is incredibly important. My sister has spent time in hospitals and I am interested in working as a Child Life Specialist. I think this is the perfect tool to help explain how scary procedures are and I think if they can be explained well, it can bring a sense of relief to a child. I'm so glad I can participate in this project. This was a twenty hour commitment.

For the holidays, I decided to create 25 watercolor holiday cards. My sister had created incredible crochet animals and I thought it would be nice to have beautiful cards to go with them. They each went in an individually designed gift bag and were delivered to residents at the Atria Woodlands. I heard that the residents loved their holiday gifts. This was a five hour commitment. For much of this fall, I've been doing advocacy work. I journeyed to Washington D.C. for the March for Israel. I spent the night before hearing from experts on Israel at the Bender JCC and making signs. I also have been to three events with Israeli teens hearing about their experiences and how we as American Jewish teens can help them. As a Jewish American teen, who has been to Israel, I want to make sure to always tell the right story and make sure I share facts.

I also found a passion for journalism through BBYO. I write for Shofar, the online magazine and supervise a team of writers. Many of my pieces are about advocacy and service and how it's important to be involved in community. This is a three hour monthly commitment. I believe it is important to be involved in your community and have a commitment to something. I like coming back to Clubhouse Stars each fall. It is nice to return and see how the kids have grown, emotionally and socially. I have such pride in each of them. I have gained a deep respect for others and their differences.

I know that no matter where I live in the future, I will continue to find ways to be involved in the community and give back. It makes me feel good about myself and expand my abilities. I've decided to explore new career opportunities because of my volunteer work. I am hoping to pursue psychology or occupational therapy in college. I hope that the individuals I've met along the way have also gained from my work with them too.

I am grateful for the opportunity to apply for the St. Vincent's Hospital Youth Awards.