



May 11, 2008

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Saving the World in Study Hall

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Teenagers are supposed to be sullen and self-absorbed, but Rachel S. Rosenfeld never got the memo.

Rachel is a high school junior in Harrison, N.Y., who came down with a painful intestinal ailment that forced her to miss the entire 2006-7 school year. So she resolved that if she couldn't go to school herself, she could at least help other kids who wanted to.

From her sickbed, Rachel sold T-shirts and solicited contributions to build a 316-student elementary school in rural Cambodia. Borrowing an idea from university fund-raising, she offered naming opportunities: for \$25, donors could buy chairs to be named for them. All told, she raised \$57,000, which was channeled through an aid group, [American Assistance for Cambodia](#).

Now Rachel is mostly healthy again and back in school, but over the December vacation she traveled to Cambodia to cut the ribbon at the R. S. Rosenfeld School.

"The children were all so grateful and well-behaved," Rachel said. "It truly was a life-changing experience."

College students used to be the activists, but increasingly they're joined by high school pupils and even younger children. The spotlight may be on billionaire philanthropists like Bill Gates, but one of the country's healthier trends has been the rise of piggy-bank philanthropists.

Two high school students in Massachusetts, Ana Slavin and Nick Anderson, started a nationwide high school campaign, [Dollars for Darfur](#), that has raised \$420,000 for the people of Darfur from 440 schools.

The humanitarian prodigies like Ana and Nick are laudable for going beyond simple protesting to help their causes. Today's young social entrepreneurs come across as more constructive than my generation of student activists, and more savvy about how to accomplish their goals cost-effectively.

Senator Chris Dodd has pushed for a requirement of 100 hours of public service in high school. There's a risk that a mandate undermines the virtue, but on balance I'm in favor. Colleges should also emulate Princeton and encourage young people to take a "gap year" of public service abroad (I list a few possibilities for a gap year and for student activism on my blog, nytimes.com/ontheground).

Climate change has particularly galvanized high school students — perhaps because it's their world that we're cooking. A 16-year-old in San Francisco, [Taylor Francis](#), has been speaking to groups around the

country about global warming; after some training by Al Gore, he has set up his own Web site and is heading to China in June to give a dozen lectures there.

“There’s an enormous outpouring of young people who are trying to do community service,” Taylor said. “Unfortunately, a lot of that is probably just to get into college.”

These days, even some elementary children are getting involved. More than 2.5 million children participated in a drive on Club Penguin, a children’s activities Web site, that directed \$1 million to charity.

In keeping with thousands of years of tradition, I should be wringing my hands about adolescents these days, so lazy and degenerate compared with my own upstanding generation. But when I see high school students working energetically to save the lives of people half a world away, before they are even allowed to buy a beer, I’m reduced to mumbling admiration. These kids are truly inspiring.

As a 16-year-old in Melbourne, Fla., Allyson Brown organized a Valentine’s dance at her high school, with the proceeds going to fight malaria in Africa. That dance grew into Stayin’ Alive, a campaign that has attracted more than 100 schools in 31 states to raise money to buy mosquito bed nets that cost \$10 each and protect a family from malaria.

The aim of [Stayin’ Alive](#), which is run by a group called Malaria No More, is to buy enough bed nets to protect two million children. Allyson, who remains very involved in the program, will have saved more lives as a student than many doctors save in a lifetime.

It’s true that some of the activism may have less to do with humanitarianism than with college applications. But even when greedy, self-absorbed cynics take on some worthy cause for the most selfish motives, they often learn and grow from the experience.

“I’ve seen some people who just want to bump up their résumés,” Allyson acknowledged. But she said that most participation seemed heartfelt — including that of a girl, about 7 years old, who ran a lemonade stand to buy bed nets for African kids.

“A lot of people say that teenagers aren’t thinking about the greater good,” Allyson added, just a hint of protest in her voice. “But when you give teens a chance to help, and they know their contributions will make a difference, then they help a lot.”

So maybe it’s time that we all learn from our juniors.

I invite you to comment on this column on my blog, www.nytimes.com/ontheground, and join me on Facebook at www.facebook.com/kristof.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#) |