

Shanna N. Decker
Plainview-Elgin-Millville High School
Plainview, Minnesota

In the summer of 1998, Shanna Decker's life was changed forever. Diagnosed with Osteogenic Sarcoma, she spent most of the following year in the hospital. Aggressive chemotherapy arrested the bone cancer, but not before doctors were forced to amputate one of her legs. Shanna was just seven years old.

Five days after her surgery, Shanna was on the parallel bars learning how to walk again. She endured months of chemo treatments and rigorous physical therapy to rebuild her muscles and perfect her gait. She learned how to walk with a prosthetic leg and after 10 months, left the hospital.

"Today I am not only a cancer survivor and amputee," she says, "I am thriving!" Outgrowing five prosthetics, Shanna has become a talented athlete, rides bikes, swims, roller blades, ice skates and plays a variety of sports. She is also a straight-A student.

"I decided to take the challenge presented to me and turn it into a positive experience."

Before leaving the hospital, Shanna asked her medical team if she could share her story with other patients facing similar challenges. Her support had such an impact, they asked her to come back. Soon, other orthopedic doctors, oncology staff and social workers from the Mayo Clinic and Johns Hopkins University were asking Shanna to visit newly diagnosed cancer patients and young people facing limb loss. The encouragement begins the minute Shanna enters a hospital room with one of her custom-designed "Hearts of Hope" boxes she's filled with inspirational materials and gifts tailored to their interests.

In nine years, Shanna has made over 600 visits to patients from across the country and around the globe, sometimes working with an interpreter. When she can't travel, she provides support by phone, discussing treatment issues and offering reassurance. Shanna spends 300-400 hours a year volunteering her services, and with her family's support, pays all of her own expenses. Several of the patients have become lifelong friends.

"I consider it an honor to be able to provide hope and support. ... It's my passion."

Since she was eight, Shanna has been dedicated to raising public awareness about cancer research and patient support. At first sharing her experience with church groups and local events, today she is a guest speaker at fundraisers nationwide supporting the American Cancer Society (ACS), Make-A-Wish Foundation and the Ronald McDonald House. She regularly addresses new nursing staff working in the pediatric oncology unit at the Mayo Clinic and has shared her story at a summer camp with 500 children facing life-threatening illnesses or living with special needs.

Shanna appeared in a PBS documentary on children fighting cancer and has showcased her "amputee abilities" in two films designed to educate and encourage other patients facing limb loss. She participated in a Mayo Clinic study comparing amputation procedures and made a presentation to an international congress of orthopedic doctors.

She has been interviewed in newspapers, on radio and on television. For two years, she served as a member of the National Youth Advisory Board and published stories of hope in *Youth InMotion* – a national magazine for children living with limb deficiencies.

An honorary chairperson for the American Cancer Society's Relay For Life, she has made presentations promoting the events and for three consecutive years, led her own team of 50 volunteers in fundraising efforts. Twice she was asked to carry the torch in the "survivor's lap" around the course.

Shanna has designed greeting cards which are sold on-line to raise funds for Give Kids the World and the CureSearch National Childhood Cancer Foundation. Her many fundraising efforts have helped raise more than \$120,000 for various charitable organizations.

"I have learned to appreciate every day and will never take a single moment for granted."

Shanna plans to continue her work with the Mayo Clinic, helping children affected by serious illnesses.

Karlynda M. Johnson
Killeen High School
Killeen, Texas

“Leadership is an instinct, but it takes hard work to become effective.”

Active in scouting, school activities and soccer, Karlynda Johnson naturally gravitates toward leadership roles. An avid camper, she became involved in Venturing, a youth development program for boys and girls run by the Boy Scouts, when she was 14. The next year, she persuaded an adult advisor to launch a local chapter, Venturing Crew 229, and was unanimously elected president.

Karlynda took her position seriously – establishing systems and procedures for the new crew. She studied the BSA leader manual, drafted and published crew by-laws. She set an example for future presidents effectively running bi-monthly meetings, supervising fellow officers and organizing community service projects.

As a bonding experience, Karlynda convinced the 15-member crew to participate in the Boy Scouts’ Challenging Outdoor Personal Experience (COPE) Program – a series of trials designed to test leadership, mental and physical skills and build teamwork. She also planned a highly successful two-week canoeing trip to the Northern Tier High Adventure Base in Canada. She secured all the necessary approvals, and ensured that each crew member was a certified swimmer and prepared with basic canoe training. A year later, she was nominated for a second term, but stepped aside giving another student the opportunity to lead.

“I hope the people who gain from my community service will give back in their own way.”

A Girl Scout since kindergarten, Karlynda has always been involved in community service projects. The summer before her sophomore year, she championed her troop’s plans to build Camp Celebration, a primitive campground available to local youth groups. After scheduling and planning out each work day, she helped identify and select campsites, dig fire circles and clear brush until Camp Celebration was ready to welcome new campers. Karlynda devoted over 100 hours to the project – nearly twice the time required to earn her Girl Scout Gold Award.

“I couldn’t always do what other kids could – play sports, go out with friends, participate in difficult classes.”

Diagnosed with epilepsy at the age of five, Karlynda suffered seizures throughout elementary and middle school. In some years, she had as many as three seizures a day, and missed 2-5 days of school each week. Despite feeling different and isolated, she was determined not to let her illness sideline her. She enrolled in advanced classes – placing on the honor roll every year. Although cautioned by her doctor not to participate, she competed on local soccer, baseball and softball teams. Before 8th grade, she was hospitalized for a week, undergoing tests and adjustments to her medication. She hasn’t experienced another seizure since.

Today, school, sports and service projects keep her in constant motion. Karlynda entered her high school’s International Baccalaureate program last year, taking college-level courses. In addition to her Venturing Crew activities, she volunteers as a coach for a community league soccer team of seven and eight-year-olds.

Karlynda plans to become a neurologist and one day write a book about growing up with epilepsy.

July Lee
Calexico High School
Calexico, California

“Just like a ripple effect on water, we can make a big difference in this world.”

Whether she’s collecting food for the poor or raising funds for charity, July Lee is drawn toward projects that help others. An energetic supporter of the American Red Cross, she co-sponsored a campaign at her school to encourage classmates to give blood and raised money to help students get their first aid certification.

When a friend died of leukemia, July became active in cancer-related organizations. She recruited and organized an 18-member Relay For Life team that walked around the school track for 24 hours straight to raise money for the American Cancer Society. July even donated her own hair to an organization that makes wigs for cancer patients.

“Growing up in a community where a helping hand was most appreciated, I began to develop my leadership skills.”

In her freshman year, July helped organize a schoolwide Katrina Relief Fund. As a sophomore, she was named treasurer of her school’s chapter of the California Scholarship Federation (CSF) – which promotes scholarship, service and citizenship throughout the state. She became CSF president in her junior year.

In addition to running club meetings, July found opportunities for the 60 CSF members to donate hundreds of hours of service to benefit not just their community, but neighboring towns in Mexico. The students served Thanksgiving dinner at the community center, and collected clothes and food for the poor. They also distributed shoeboxes with personal care items for impoverished families across the border, and raised scholarship funds by selling doughnuts and chocolate.

A member of the Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement (M.E.S.A.) club, which encourages students to pursue higher education in math and science, July placed 1st and 3rd in bridge-building competitions. When she was elected treasurer of M.E.S.A, July realized that many of her peers could not afford to visit prospective college campuses. She helped organize and raise funds for a club trip to the San Francisco Bay Area to visit the University of California, Stanford and other schools.

“What was supposed to make me weak, in reality has made me a much stronger person.”

July’s parents emigrated from China to Mexico and then to California in search of a better life for their children. In the process, July learned to speak Cantonese, Spanish and English so well, at 15 she was teaching English to Chinese children every Saturday. She now serves as a translator for local churches serving the immigrant community.

Though she never thought of her family as poor, July’s parents struggled to support their children. The family slept on the floor, using blankets as mattresses. They raised chickens and grew vegetables to eat. Her mother sewed uniforms and clothes, while her father – July’s hero and role model – worked long hours as a cook in a Chinese restaurant. July pitched in, doing housework and watching her younger sister. At 12, she began busing tables at the restaurant, was a waitress and finally a supervisor. During the summer, she also worked as a cashier and sales person at a shoe store, and made extra money cleaning the local church.

Early one morning, July’s father was killed while trying to prevent a robbery. Devastated by his death, July was determined to honor her father’s memory by fulfilling his wish that she succeed in life. She worked even harder, taking the most difficult courses available in high school. In her junior year, July ranked first out of 709 students in her class. She played varsity tennis and softball, and was in the varsity drumline.

“I have come to realize that giving anything less than your very best is to sacrifice a gift.” The challenges she has faced have opened July’s eyes to the difficulties faced by others. She plans to become a nurse or a doctor, while continuing to help others as a translator.

Emily E. Lester
Seminole High School
Seminole, Florida

From an early age, Emily Lester has been championing good causes in her community. She and her sister Catherine rallied neighborhood children to pitch in and lend a hand – whether it was raising money for charities or providing meals for the elderly. Helping care for a younger sister who is mentally handicapped, Emily volunteered every morning before school reading to children in the special education department. When a soldier returned from Iraq, she helped organize a welcome home celebration.

“I am happy to tell my story if it will make a difference in the life of someone else.”

Once the fastest girl on her soccer team, a strong swimmer and standout softball and basketball player, Emily began to slow down in the 6th grade. She was plagued by headaches and fatigue. After several days with a soaring fever, she was taken to the hospital where she learned she had acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia.

The next day Emily began three grueling years of chemotherapy during which she saw many new friends die of cancer. She lost 15 pounds and her athletic body atrophied, but Emily kept up her spirits and her studies – earning straight A’s while completing her coursework online and through Hospital Homebound.

When she was able to go back to school, she walked into her freshman class nearly bald and fragile-looking. By the end of the year, Emily was in the top 20% of her school’s International Baccalaureate (IB) program, taking demanding college-level courses. She organized a support group for other students and faculty whose lives had been touched by cancer, convincing them to actively pursue fundraising efforts. And, she began running again.

At the start of 10th grade, her symptoms returned. Readmitted to St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, Emily learned the cancer was back – this time even stronger. Enduring toxic chemotherapy treatments and plagued by infections, she nearly died from septic shock. The doctors informed her she needed a bone marrow transplant. Fortunately, two of her siblings were perfect matches.

“I want to do everything I can to stop this disease from hurting any more families.”

After her transplant, Emily spent months in the isolation unit at the hospital battling further complications and waiting for her new immune system to start working. Refusing to give in or give up, and with the support of her family and friends, she continued her IB curriculum and finished 10th grade with all A’s.

Throughout her recovery, Emily has been a tireless advocate for the American Cancer Society (ACS). Participating in its Relay For Life for the last six years, Emily spends several months each year fundraising – collecting donations door-to-door, holding garage sales and soliciting local businesses. Captain of her own Relay For Life team, she rallied 50 friends and school volunteers to participate – winning the Spirit Award each year. She participated in a breast cancer walk and the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s (LLS) “Light the Night”, carrying illuminated balloons to commemorate lives touched by cancer.

She’s been just as dedicated raising public awareness. A Hero of Hope and spokesperson for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, she has shared her story with thousands of people. She speaks at schools and local events, gives radio and television interviews and videotaped a segment for the “Pennies for Patients” fundraising program. She’s also been a spokesperson for ACS since 2004, addressing the Chamber of Commerce to raise funds for a Christmas party for pediatric cancer patients. This year, she was invited to model in a fashion show benefiting the Pediatric Cancer Foundation.

“Today, I am happy and healthy. I am ready to continue my life, stronger from this experience.”

Following her successful transplant, Emily convinced Beach Charities in St. Petersburg to host an annual blood and bone marrow drive. Emily served as poster child, planning the event, giving news interviews and organizing “Emily’s Team” of runners to highlight the need for minority donors.

In her ongoing effort to help people affected by cancer, Emily plans to become a pediatric oncologist.

Kathleen A. McGlynn
Althoff Catholic High School
Belleville, Illinois

“Watching my little sister suffer made me want to do something positive for her and for others.”

For Kathleen McGlynn’s little sister, Mary Claire, the perfect meal was pizza followed by cake and ice cream. But as much as she loved them, her favorite foods made her sick. When the doctors concluded there was no cure for Mary Claire’s gastrointestinal condition, Kathleen decided to find a solution.

Just 12 years old, Kathleen poured through cookbooks looking for foods her sister could safely eat and enjoy. She spent more than 3,000 hours researching digestive disorders and dietary restrictions. She interviewed medical experts, dieticians and chefs nationwide. She talked with other people suffering from similar conditions. In her research, she learned that millions of Americans also cope with digestive problems that can be controlled with certain dietary practices.

Working with her mother in the kitchen, Kathleen became a highly skilled chef. She developed and tested recipes, compiling them into her own cookbook – *Yummies for Sensitive Tummies*. She worked with the head dietician at a local children’s hospital to ensure the recipes complied with recommended diets. Kathleen’s cookbook and its companion website, www.sensitivetummies.com, describe cooking techniques, lifestyle recommendations and will eventually provide 100 recipes for people suffering with gastrointestinal conditions.

“My hope is that the book will show children they can live normal and productive lives.”

From her cookbook, Kathleen created a laminated sampler of nine recipes. She collected donations to print the sampler and recruited 41 volunteers to distribute over 700 free copies to children’s hospitals and doctor’s offices. Before the cookbook is published, she plans to get the recipes approved by the American Dietetic Association. Meanwhile, the sampler is being translated into Spanish, and will also be distributed in the Dominican Republic and South Africa.

Outside the kitchen, Kathleen sought other ways to help those in need. Spearheading the effort, she and her four sisters collected and donated 2,000 books to hurricane-ravaged schools and an organization for the blind. When Kathleen was 13, they created an art contest benefiting the local Humane Society. Each year, she supervises a team of volunteers who plan and produce the event – coordinating artists, soliciting financial support and handling publicity. Over 2,900 racially and economically diverse children have participated in the event which raises awareness about animal welfare.

As vice president of her school’s St. Vincent de Paul Society (SVdP), she collects money, clothing, household necessities and toys for the needy and helps prepare meals for the homeless. She works on the SVdP’s Soup Bus project – loading food onto converted buses and serving meals to disadvantaged people. At Christmas, she wraps and presents gifts to families in East St. Louis.

“I know I cannot help every child, but I want to help as many sick children as I can.”

Kathleen knows what it’s like to be a sick child. When she was 12, she learned she had a congenital back problem, Spondylolysis with a Pars defect. The doctors said physical activity – anything more than walking one city block – risked surgery and could lead to paralysis.

Once a star player on the soccer, basketball, volleyball and track teams, Kathleen was benched. Constantly in pain, she had difficulty sleeping and concentrating on her schoolwork. She felt left out of the activities her sisters and friends enjoyed. Choosing to deal with the pain over feeling isolated, she stopped taking her medication and began playing soccer again. But when the pain became so unbearable, Kathleen realized she was jeopardizing her health.

Through her own experiences and her volunteer work, Kathleen has learned to adapt to the changes in her life, instead of fighting them. After college, she plans to pursue a career in pediatric gastroenterology or dietetics.

Eric Ndikumana
North High School
Denver, Colorado

“Winning isn’t everything. It’s how hard you work and how you feel inside that matters.”

As co-captain of his high school’s cross country and track and field teams, Eric Ndikumana’s main job is to motivate his teammates. From the start, he embraced his role eagerly, with an eye to winning a state championship. But when his team didn’t even place in the top three, Eric was disillusioned.

Knowing his team needed him, Eric refused to let his personal feelings show. Instead, he set an example, redoubling his own training efforts and running 80 miles a week. He pushed himself and the team harder at practice. He prepared them for each race as if it were the Olympics. When they finished a disappointing sixth in the state finals, Eric again rallied his teammates encouraging them to improve their performance in the next competition.

“I learned education was the only way to success ... but I didn’t know it would be so difficult.”

Born in the Central African country of Burundi, Eric grew up in a culture where education was not always accessible or affordable. Many children dropped out of school after the 6th grade to farm and help support their families. However, despite expensive tuition fees, Eric’s father was determined his children would get an education as a way out of poverty. Life was difficult. The family raised food to eat, but often went hungry. Then in 1993, things got far worse.

After the newly elected President was assassinated, Civil War ravaged Burundi. Eric and his family joined thousands of refugees who fled their homes with nothing. For three years, they traveled from province to province, trying to escape the violence. The war took a tragic toll when Eric’s father was killed. Eric, his mother and his eight siblings fled to neighboring Tanzania, where they lived in a refugee camp for the next five years.

Still, Eric was determined to continue his education – attending classes outdoors even during the four-month rainy season and when the temperature hit 105 degrees. When paper ran out, he pressed leaves to write on. He shared a single pencil with 10 students, and learned from the few available textbooks.

“When my family was in trouble, many people helped us. Now it’s our duty to help others.”

Eric feels his life really began on July 12, 2001, when his family immigrated to the United States. Able to read and write fluently in Kirundi, Swahili and French, he started learning English, which he found difficult. Enrolled in 6th grade, he had to work harder than the rest of his class to catch up, but as he told his advisor, “School, above all, is the most important thing to me.”

By high school, Eric had outpaced his peers. He earned membership in the National Honor Society and has maintained the #1 rank in his class three years in row, while taking honors and advanced placement courses. The same young man who once used sticks and stones as calculators was the only sophomore to take AP Calculus and Trigonometry.

Eric is as dedicated to community service as he is education. Every Saturday, he volunteers at a veterinary clinic helping care for animals undergoing surgery. He and his cross country teammates spent one summer working with the Montana Spay-Neuter Task Force, where he helped care for stray animals on Indian Reservations and in low-income communities. He also participated in road races to benefit the Denver-based Marcia Mounsey Foundation, which helped cover medical costs for needy children.

Eric plans to become a heart surgeon, because as he says, “Growing up in Africa, I had never heard or seen one.”

Danica S. Samuels
Robert Morgan Educational Center
Miami, Florida

“I might not always have control over a situation, but I can control how I deal with it.”

When Danica Samuels was diagnosed with Crohn’s Disease two years ago, she learned that coping with a chronic illness is a two-fold challenge.

First, she had to manage the physical aspects of her condition. Crohn’s Disease, which affects the small intestine, causes severe stomach pain, fatigue, fever and loss of appetite. Initially hospitalized for observation and tests, she continued seeing a specialist and was put on numerous medications and a restricted diet. It took Danica over a year to regain the 30 pounds she had lost.

Coming to terms emotionally with her disease took longer and was far tougher. Eventually, she learned to accept that her condition is a part of her life, and is not what defines her. She took charge of what she could, learning how to manage her symptoms with medication and practicing exercises to help reduce stress. She learned how to be more assertive, negotiating with her teachers to let her rest or leave the classroom when she needed to. By changing her attitude toward her condition, she became more positive.

“I wanted to share my wisdom with those who have gone through similar experiences.”

Her optimism motivated her to help other young people accept and cope with their personal obstacles. Involved in Girl Scouts since the 2nd grade, Danica created personalized care packages for children newly diagnosed with chronic diseases for her Gold Award project. She was required to spend 65 hours on the task, but devoted nearly twice as much time.

Danica interviewed a mental health professional about how to deal most effectively with chronic conditions. She researched meditation and relaxation techniques to learn more about reducing stress. She designed and produced “coping cards” filled with inspirational messages and practical advice. She solicited funds to support the project, then collected and prepared all the items included in the kits which she distributed to children in hospitals. Young patients opening one of Danica’s care packages found a stress ball, a “worry bear,” a customized journal along with her “coping cards”. To reach even more young people, she is now creating a website to share everything she’s learned.

“The best part was realizing I can positively influence the way a young person feels.”

Children occupy a special place in Danica’s heart. In 9th and 10th grade, as a teacher’s assistant at her temple, she worked with the kindergarten and 4th grade classes. To stimulate the children’s interest in religious studies, she found creative ways to engage them and discovered they responded to an energetic question-and-answer session following each lesson.

When the class was looking for a charity to support, Danica researched options and suggested the American Israeli Culture Fund, which supports the arts in Israel. Her enthusiasm for the cause motivated the class to collect money and make a sizeable donation.

The summer before her junior year, Danica served as a science camp counselor at the Jewish Community Center for 15 elementary and middle-school students. As she guided the campers through various activities including science experiments, rocketry, ceramics and woodworking, she made sure each child felt included and had an opportunity to participate.

Danica plans to attend a liberal arts college and pursue a career in visual communications or design.

Kelsey E. Tainsh
Winter Park High School
Florida Virtual School
Winter Park, Florida

“I’ve always assumed I can still do anything that anyone else can.”

Kelsey Tainsh was in kindergarten when she started having headaches and running into things. The doctor scheduled an MRI and two days later, five-year-old Kelsey underwent emergency surgery to remove a brain tumor behind her left eye. When Kelsey woke up, she couldn’t move her right side and was unable to speak. During the next three months, she underwent radiation treatment to shrink a remnant of the tumor that couldn’t be removed.

Starting elementary school with her triplet sisters, Kelsey had trouble concentrating and found schoolwork difficult. Radiation made her extremely drowsy. But the sisters stuck together, and over time Kelsey learned to compensate for her vision loss, memory deficits and muscle weakness.

By 6th grade, Kelsey seemed no different than her peers. She enrolled in an academically-challenging school with her sisters and began competing in wakeboarding – winning at the state and national levels. She played in USTA junior tennis tournaments, was captain of her middle school volleyball team and, by 9th grade, was on the varsity crew team.

“I had a wonderful source of support and hope, and I wanted to give that hope to other children.”

When she was first hospitalized, Kelsey enjoyed playing with pet therapy dogs. She noticed the adult dogs scared some of the other children. So when her golden retriever had a litter, Kelsey and her siblings started bringing the puppies along on her visits to the clinic. “Pet-a-Pup” was born.

Today, Kelsey manages a group of 10 student volunteers who take puppies to visit children on the pediatric floors and in the intensive care units at Walt Disney Cancer Institute and the Florida Hospital in Orlando. Kelsey, her sisters and older twin brother and sister have raised 15 litters over the years. They have donated golden retrievers to Canine Companions for Independence and Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Since 2003, Kelsey has worked tirelessly to raise funds for the Walt Disney Cancer Institute and the Florida Hospital Foundation. At 14, she was featured in a film about cancer survival, which is used by the Foundation to raise awareness of cancer treatment options throughout central Florida.

Kelsey has traveled to Mexico for the past five years with Florida Hospital SHARES – serving as a Spanish interpreter and assisting the medical team that provides cleft lip and palate surgery for impoverished children. As a youth volunteer coordinator, she works on fundraising, organizing donations and scheduling work assignments.

When Kelsey was first recovering, the Make-A-Wish Foundation granted her “wish” to meet film director Ron Howard. Make-A-Wish was such an important source of support that Kelsey became a spokesperson when she was 14. She has addressed corporate sponsors, and met with executives and Hollywood celebrities to raise awareness and funds. She was featured in their “Stories of Light” Campaign and appeared in television, radio and print campaigns that have helped raise over \$250,000.

“I know I will overcome this obstacle, just like I did the last one.”

Just before her junior year, Kelsey’s cancer recurred. Her second surgery, 10 years to the day after the first, was successful, but a stroke afterward left Kelsey paralyzed on her right side. After two months in the hospital, she started months of intensive daily physical and occupational therapy. This time, her family has literally been her right hand, helping her balance rehabilitation with her on-line schoolwork.

The road to recovery has been difficult, but Kelsey isn’t taking it lying down. She has regained use of her legs and now walks unassisted. She’s re-learned how to write and uses a laptop with one hand. Inducted this year into the National Honor Society, she attends high school part-time and keeps up with schoolwork on-line. She swims and has rejoined the crew team as manager and photographer.

Kelsey fully intends to regain all the abilities she had before the stroke. Her goals are to write again with her right hand and run five miles in 34 minutes – a personal record. Then she plans a career in theatre or nutrition.

Kelly E. Wolfe
Page High School
Greensboro, North Carolina

“I get great satisfaction knowing I helped form an organization that is benefiting the community.”

A competitive swimmer since she was five, Kelly Wolfe’s rigorous training regimen keeps her in the pool 2½ hours a day, six days a week, 11 months a year. While she loves the sport, she also wanted to pursue other activities. When the team’s practice schedule conflicted with service club meetings at her school, Kelly decided to create an organization comprised of swim team members.

Kelly launched Teens in Action Service Organization and 30 of her teammates quickly joined. She structured the club so members take turns planning community projects giving everyone the opportunity to build leadership skills.

In three years, Teens in Action has completed nine projects including working at Special Olympics track events, assisting the local Urban Ministry with its “Feeding the Homeless Program” and supporting the local school system’s “Fill the Bus Program” which collects and distributes school supplies to children in need.

“I find the experience deeply rewarding, because I am helping make someone’s life a little better.”

Kelly has managed three Teens in Action projects including an orientation program at a local animal shelter qualifying participants to work at pet adoption fairs. She spearheaded a community program which distributed food to elderly people living on fixed incomes, to grandparents raising grandchildren and to people with disabilities. Knowing her teammates thrive on competition, Kelly turned the event into a battle between the sexes. Encouraged by her daily emails, members collected more than 524 food items in two weeks. (The girls won in a tight race.)

After seeing the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, Kelly’s coach suggested a fundraiser for the victims. The entire swim team planned and participated in a continuous “24-hour Swim for Relief.” As co-chair of the Scheduling Committee, Kelly mapped out a timetable for the event and maintained communication with all participants. She also helped publicize the fundraiser – appearing on television, photographing her teammates and writing a story for the local newspaper. Swim for Relief raised more than \$10,000 for the local chapter of the American Red Cross.

Kelly has also volunteered with Urban Ministry for the past five years, collecting and distributing donated food, and preparing and delivering meals to needy families on Thanksgiving Day.

“You can’t keep trying to change yourself because you have flaws. Those flaws make us unique.”

Balancing an Advanced Placement curriculum, a challenging sport and community service would test any young person, but Kelly faces an additional challenge. Hyperhidrosis, caused by an overactive sympathetic nervous system, makes Kelly perspire far more than most people. Any anxiety can exacerbate her condition, so certain situations – like taking written tests and public speaking – are especially difficult.

For years, she kept her problem secret, going out of her way to avoid situations that might make her symptoms worse. But with the support of her family and teachers, Kelly has learned to think of her condition not as a problem, but as one of the quirks that make her unique.

After completing college, Kelly plans to pursue a career in the sciences, with a focus on biology.

Stephanie L. Wong
Northwood High School
Irvine, California

“I like to believe that everything happens for a reason.”

Stephanie Wong was just 10 years old when her mother was diagnosed with oral cancer. For the next six years, she spent countless hours at her mother’s bedside through extended hospital stays. She supported her through chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and helped her communicate with others when surgery impaired her speech. Stephanie also helped with her mother’s in-home nursing care, preparing intravenous food and changing bandages, and looking after her younger brother.

When Stephanie’s mother passed away last year, her life turned upside down. Her mother had been her role model, her confidante, “the strongest person in her life”. She worried about how her father would cope, and took on even more responsibility with housework and caring for her brother. Stephanie helps with meal preparation, laundry and transporting her brother to school, while maintaining straight A’s in a demanding high school honors curriculum.

“After learning how cancer can devastate a family, I became involved in raising money for a cure.”

Realizing the critical need for cancer research funding, Stephanie joined her school’s American Cancer Society (ACS) Club three years ago. She is now vice president, and organizes fundraising events including campus sales of lollipops, daffodils and smoothies. Last summer, she staffed a cancer awareness booth at the Festival of Children Foundation, talking with young people about healthy eating habits and the risks of tobacco use.

For the last three years, Stephanie has helped organize her school’s involvement in Irvine’s Relay For Life. The 24-hour event gives her hope, because she sees so many people coming out to help in the fight against cancer. As a member of ACS’s Orange County Junior Board, she manages local fundraising efforts and promotes cancer awareness, and acts as a liaison coordinating county and school events.

Every summer since her freshman year, Stephanie has helped run a week-long activity camp for local children, many of whom have family members battling cancer. Stephanie helped secure school and ACS approval for the project, recruited students to run the camp and publicized the event throughout the neighborhood. During camp week, she and the other camp directors registered campers, set up the space and equipment, and coordinated on-site logistics.

Stephanie says the best part is working directly with the children. She helps plan activities, teaches tennis to four to seven-year-olds, and organizes soccer, dodgeball and other sports activities. Working the camp each summer and supervising more than 40 kids has helped polish her leadership skills.

“I believe that encouragement and positive thinking can make a difference.”

Throughout her mother’s illness, Stephanie strived to maintain a positive outlook. In addition to her excellent grades, she has competed on the tennis team since her freshman year and represented her school in regional tournaments. Elected captain of her varsity tennis team, Stephanie helps keep players focused and motivated. Her efforts paid off last year when her team went undefeated in a local league competition.

Volunteering as a candy-striper every Sunday at St. Joseph’s Hospital, Stephanie helps comfort patients, assist the medical staff and run errands in the oncology center and maternity ward. Her favorite task is discharging patients and seeing the smiles on their faces as they get into their cars to go home.

Working side by side with medical professionals also provides valuable experience for Stephanie, who plans to study medicine and one day become an oncologist.