



# TEEN VOICES



New York  
Public  
Library

A Magazine By and For Teens  
Issue #1

“As an Asian American, seeing acts of violence committed over and over against people in my community has been heartbreaking. Thus, I turned to art to cope.”

—Tiffany Deng on *Hate Is a Virus* (cover image)

## Teen Voices

At The New York Public Library, we believe what you have to say matters. That’s why we’re publishing *Teen Voices*—the first issue of a new magazine by and for teens at NYPL. The 25 pieces here—all winning submissions in our 2022 summer writing contest—encompass poetry, prose, and artwork that showcase the creativity of teens from all five boroughs.

We asked you to tell us about your community, what you care about, and how you make waves for positive change. Some pieces focus on the experience of being a teen today, asking the big question, “Who am I?” Others are vivid snapshots of communities and powerful statements on climate change, anti-Asian hate, women’s rights, and more. This stunning work is arranged into three themes: **Myself**, **My Community**, and **Make Waves**.

## The Library Is Here for You

The Library’s Teens 360° initiative gives you the tools and support you need to create and succeed. As well as providing a platform for teen voices, we offer welcoming and well-equipped spaces at branches across the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island for teens to hang out, read, learn, and collaborate. Come to the Library to check out our free events and programs, including games, movie screenings, and book discussions. Explore a wide array of learning resources and online homework help. Plan for the future with our college and career advice team, and explore paid internship opportunities. If you need extra support, we have mental health resources to help you. Everything is free. Plus, did you know? There are no more late fines on any of the books or other materials you borrow!

The Library’s got you covered whatever your plans and hopes for the future. Get started and discover everything the Library offers teens today: [nypl.org/teens360](https://nypl.org/teens360)

*The New York Public Library*  
Fall 2022



The End, Elizabeth Lu

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# Myself

*“I love writing because I need writing. How else could I share my experiences? How else could I express the little anecdotes I collect over the years into a well-crafted parcel, ready to sprout parallels and relevance? Otherwise, wouldn’t our stories go untold, unheard?”*

**Ying Chen**

Excerpt from “Wind Dispersal”

# Hair Is Who I Am

Penelope  
Velazquez

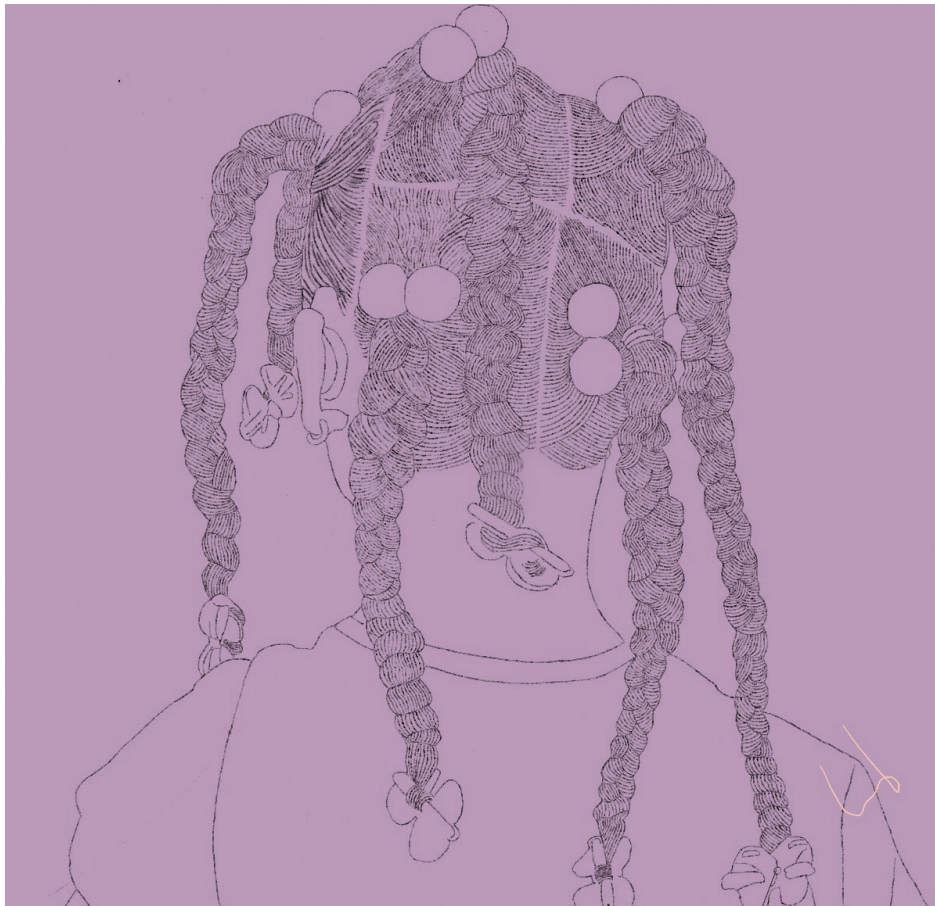
I have always straightened my hair.  
From the age of 5  
to the age of 17  
I have straightened my hair.  
It has always made me feel prettier.  
Prettier, neater, more appropriate  
It was a tradition to straighten our hair  
Every birthday, every party, school concert, and every picture day.  
It was the norm and I never deviated from it.  
I grew up believing that this simple act was justified.  
It was necessary for me to feel beautiful.  
I am from Dominican and Puertorican descent.  
I have beautiful curls that distinguish me from many others.  
I am proud.  
I am proud like I just received a 100 on a test.  
When the straightener stopped touching the root of my hair like the root of a magnificent tree  
I began to grow into who I truly needed to be.  
I was a clone to who I sought to be and who others pushed me to become.  
Breaking free of the heat and sitting in a seat with a woman  
slathering oil onto the frizziness of my hair.  
It took a long time for me to realize the power I held.  
To be a change in all of the ranges of straight hair.

*My cultural background and heritage has allowed me to develop a poem that expresses the hatred that many young girls of Afro-Latin descent have of their hair. To hate it and wish it was manageable. I hope that this poem motivates young girls to love their curls and coils and to not despise them.*

—Penelope Velazquez

# Bows: A Rite of Passage

Megan Golding



*I decided to create my submission based on hair because the culture attached to little Black girls, no matter what their complexion, and their hair with bows will always be with them. In Brooklyn and even all parts of the city that are mainly Black and other people of color, the culture continues to spread and be vibrant. The subject of hair is very important to me because according to the University of Southern Carolina scholar Tiffany Nicole Peacock, “The embracing of natural hair expresses an essence of reclaiming and recentering of African cultural symbols such as the theory of Afrocentricity. Considering the reemergence of natural hair, using an Afrocentric lens provides a platform for Black women to discuss the symbolization of reclaiming natural hair while also explaining how natural hair empowers women through acceptance of their kinkier hair texture.” It is very important to teach young Black girls to love and appreciate their natural hair and not ridicule them. —Megan Golding*

# All at Once

Ava T.



*I was inspired by the end-of-year chaos surrounding me at school. I tried to capture all of the “noise” around me as a soothing sound to make myself calm. The face is looking in two directions but is trying to be centered and calm in the cacophony surrounding her. —Ava T.*

# Wind Dispersal

My dad immigrated to this country a long time ago. He was a chef for a while, but now he's a delivery driver. He drives an electric bicycle, and he is particularly proud of his radiant delivery app ratings. One time his electric bicycle was stolen; I like to think that the sparkly pumpkin sticker which I affixed to the tail of the bike helped my dad identify his prized possession a few days later.

My mom, on the other hand, doesn't work in delivery. However, she also has an electric bicycle. The bike was purchased when the COVID pandemic subdued and people gradually flowed back to work. It was also purchased amid countless Asian hate crimes. It was decidedly more preferable to bike through scorching hot days and drenching rainy days than to take the risky subways.

Once, my mom was biking home and she reared to a stop at the traffic lights. She witnessed a person on the other side of the road, also waiting to cross. They were possibly drunk, somewhat shifty. It was dark. No one was around.

My mother's stomach churned. You never anticipate some things happening until they do. The red lights withered to broken, blinking

# Ying Chen

white. The man paced forward and forcefully bashed my mom's helmet. My mother took a tumble, but was, thankfully, not injured.

What stunned me the most was how my mom didn't tell me the story immediately. She nonchalantly interjected with this tale during casual conversation. The event has been added to her mental filing cabinet containing Things that Just Happen Sometimes. The file lives beside my mom, my sister, and I being dubbed "Pretty, pretty ladies" when arriving home from a happy family dinner. It is near the drawer that holds my little cousin watching videos with gags about Chinese people being tiny-eyed and disease-spreading. It is not far from the cupboard overflowing with snide remarks regarding our accents.

Since when did I live in a world where such acts of ignorance flood the sidewalks and houses? Were the changes brought about one night when I was sleeping and unaware of an evil Santa slipping resentment down my cursed chimney? Or has bitterness been gradually invading my city, leaving a sludgy trail of hostility?

\*\*\*\*\*



I am firmly in reach of certain East Asian stereotypes. I do well academically. I had a bowl cut when I was just a tad shorter than the necessary height to reach the freezer section of my fridge. I am glasses-wearing, perhaps a little shy. If I were to pursue acting, a likely role for me is the nerdy Asian girl who won't take anything less than solid A's. Alas, my love of science is one that may be wordlessly expected.

But, not as many could guess my love of writing. Before I wanted to be a singer and before I wanted to be a zookeeper, I wanted to be a writer. My first computer (a rather basic yet cozy Chromebook) was won in an essay writing contest hosted by my elementary school. I kept countless diaries that I never ended up committing to. I would take printer paper, fold plain reams into mini booklets, and write myself a library.

I love writing because I need writing. How else could I share my experiences? How else could I express the little anecdotes I collect over the years into a well-crafted parcel, ready to sprout parallels and relevance? Otherwise, wouldn't our stories go untold, unheard?

My experiences are dandelions, puffed up with prototype parachutes. The soil, sunlight, and water are my craft. The wind is my writing. I hope my dandelion seeds land on someone on a lovely summer day and reach into their very soul.

My adventures as a Chinese American are unique to my life, but I know that many share my pride and sorrows. I want changes for the Asian American community; I want changes for those afraid to share their stories. I hope more dandelions break through the soil and sprout. Because that is the way people learn about others. The way people connect. The way people grow.

*My life is quite different from those seen in movies and TV shows. I used to feel mortified when my dad brought me to school on his electric bicycle, with everyone staring. I remained noiseless when others asked, "What jobs do your parents have?" Yet, I have come to embrace my background with all of its glory and drawbacks. My writing expresses the struggles my family has faced and the complicated relationship I have with stereotypes. I hope my writing can inspire others to speak their truth.*

**—Ying Chen**

# My Community

*“Overall, as a proud member of my community, I make waves in my school clubs, volunteering, but first and foremost, simply caring for those around me.”*

**Clarice K.**

# Window to the City

Adele  
Sin Yee Ho



*Similar to the diverse backgrounds and stories of each individual residing in New York City, this mixed media print consists of various colored and textured papers. In this piece, I wanted to highlight the assorted array of cultures in the city I love. The composition of a window brings a sense of familiarity that I commonly associate within my community in New York City. The building shown through the window reflects the growth in the population, allowing for growth in oneself in bringing together the community.*

—Adele Sin Yee Ho

# Filled to the Brim

Tashfia Diha

I'm from the wardrobes *overflowing* with denim jeans and lehengas with hues like tropical birds,  
From forest-green prayer rugs scattered on the bed and damp white t-shirts hung on fans to dry

I'm from a house on the *noisiest* street in our neighborhood,  
From the house with a grotesque daffodil-colored exterior, stark broccoli-green roof, and a  
toothpaste-white gate  
The pandemonium of cackling from the two younger cousins living with me whenever they do  
one of their vexatious pranks

I'm from the giant weeds sticking out of my front yard, enshrouded by long grass  
The leaves falling *every* season from the scrawny tree outside my window  
I'm from doi, mishti, biryani, and all the other good stuff stuffing me during our Eids  
and going to that tall new masjid down a couple streets during Mawlid an-Nabi

From importunate arguing with my mother and shopping excessively with my father,  
I'm from a gazillion hugs from my family all day, every day—  
And from talking too much just because we can  
I'm from “*That’s my daughter*” and “*I’m here for you.*”  
And incessantly singing the animated version of *Mulan’s* soundtrack in a screechy voice

I'm from enthralling dark brown eyes like ebony wood  
I'm from fields of kempt silver wheat and the boon smell of ripe mangoes in Bangladesh  
And my home: New York, with its pitch black sky and vast skyline tracing the clouds  
Burnt hot dogs from the street vendors and addictively tearing through another slice of pizza  
From the pictures of picnics with too many people I don't know, graduations next to buses and  
train stops, and the patterned hills of Bangladesh  
As I make silly faces and everyone else says “cheese” to the camera  
I'm from that photo album filled to the brim with those stories  
(the pink album that's either buried underneath my lehengas or in the third drawer of my desk)

I am from those moments

*This is about the community I knew my whole life. This poem was supposed to put a smile on the faces of others by reminding them that you decide your home and family because no matter what, home and family shape a person the most. I think what people don't realize is that just by being there you make the largest positive difference. While you might not be able to fix what's causing their problems, you can just be there to be a part of another person's life. Just like how the narrator (me) and the people she calls family are there for each other no matter what. Being in someone's life is something that can be seen in ANYONE'S story, not just mine. It's just your choice of who to be in their story as well as your own story.*

—Tashfia Diha

# Summer Mist

Ryan Zhang



*The photograph depicts a young boy cooling off in the misty sprinklers as the warm summer heat beams through the water vapor. In the background stands the superb Unisphere of Flushing Meadows–Corona Park, a symbol of global interdependence. For me, summer is not a break from schoolwork. Instead, summer is a time to explore, feel, and remember. When I was little, my friends and I were not fortunate enough to go camping or to another country. However, that did not hold us back. Often we would spend the whole summer together, from sunrise to sunset, wandering around the local community and playing in the sprinklers. I think Summer Mist encapsulates that warm nostalgic feeling. I will forever cherish the dreamy emotions of summer. —Ryan Zhang*

# Flushing, New York

Clarice K.

Towering buildings, vibrant and lively;  
An iconic sign, reading 新世界商城, New World Mall.  
Freshly roasted duck wafts through the air,  
In the distance is a robin's call.

There is the lake;  
Every Monday afterschool,  
We would run 'round it twice (drenched in sweat but gleeful),  
Downing water 'til we were cool.

There is the food pantry;  
Every Saturday morning,  
We share our painstakingly peeled onions,  
Though the achievement is more than rewarding.

There is the garden;  
A lily and an orchid,  
blooming with love and warmth,  
free of pesky weeds we uprooted.

There is the small, tender shop;  
We all purchase from and support.  
Peach-shaped ice cream, passion fruit yogurt,  
laid on a truck for the shop owner to transport

There is the park path,  
Where the elderly ladies gather.  
To dance to traditional music,  
To mill and chatter.

There is the school,  
Where we hone our minds together.  
Joining clubs to stand and advocate,  
Many in one endeavor.

There are the students,  
Who proudly don their pride pins;  
Write letters for those who fight for equity,  
To aid their goals and ambitions.

This is Flushing, New York,  
My roots, supporting flourishing branches.  
In this community, lies my solace and home,  
Which I hold dear and precious.

*My submission describes the various places that are important to me within my community, Flushing. I thought about the little, memorable aspects of the city that were significant to my life and values. With those places in mind, such as the food pantry (La Jornada), I compiled them into my poem, describing vivid memories and how I have contributed to positive causes. For example, in stanza 8, I discuss activities done in support of Pride Month, as well as Write for Rights, the largest Amnesty International event. Overall, as a proud member of my community, I make waves in my school clubs, volunteering, but first and foremost, simply caring for those around me. —Clarice K.*

# Vida

# Silvia Bravo



*As a person who values family and culture, I decided to create a piece of work that is common within my culture. Alebrijes are colorful sculptures of creatures with fascinating body parts and are a common piece of work used as decoration. My Mexican culture has inspired me to create this piece of work to represent where I am from and the life that these creatures can bring to our eyes.*

**—Silvia Bravo**

# Kababs Within the Chaos

Jackson Heights is chaotic. It's crowded with immigrants from all over the world. It's like a compacted box, stuffed with people equally annoyed by how crowded it is. Sidewalks are filled with spokespeople, luring people into their stores to save 30 percent off their latest items. Everyone is exhausted, navigating through the intense traffic and we are infuriated when someone abruptly stops in the middle of the street. Corners of streets are flooded with trash bags, thrown against trees.

Within all this havoc, there happens to be even more inside a restaurant located on the corner of 73rd Street and 37th Road: Kabab King.

They are notorious for their long wait and the jam-packed lines that spill out onto the streets. It's sweaty and parents yell into my ear as they navigate through the packed store to find their lost child. The workers run around, shouting orders to one another. Even then, the people sigh and complain about how it's been over 30 minutes and they have yet to receive their two pieces of naan and chicken kabab. Then, there are the privileged: those who have a seat in the back of the store, isolated from the rest of us. Only four tables with a whopping ten chairs, reserved by brown people sipping their chai. They smirk at us with maliciousness in their eyes while we suffer in silence. Yet, with all this commotion, we continue to go.

# Sumaiya Sayeed

As a kid, after a long day of shopping through India Sari Palace, New Debosree Fashion, and Payless, my legs were drained and I wanted to go home. Luckily, my mother took my family and me to Kabab King to ease our leg pains every time. The store smelled like me: paprika, cumin, turmeric with a mix of sweat from the humidity of the store. While we waited for our order, we admired the mishtis, pulao, and samosas heating up behind the glass; the aroma of spicy ginger paste, sweet cardamoms seeping through the cracks of the glass, and the citric taste of coriander in the air made us crave food even more.

Different languages like Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, and Nepali filled the air alongside the sound of searing meat in the background. They presented their culture, through language as well as clothing, and diffused with other cultures. Hindus witness Muslims saying their prayers before eating while Muslims see Hindus limit specific orders from the menu.

As an outsider, seeing these Hindus and Muslims enclosed in the same environment peacefully may appear abnormal, but this is standard behavior here. They don't just serve food, they serve as a connection and unite



us despite our differences. Muslims have religious tensions with the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. In America, this hostility carries on but when we eat at the store serving our traditional foods, we forget the differences for a second. As I run to the seats once our food arrives, trying to claim the seats of privilege, we sit beside those of different ethnicities, but we are connected by our love for kababs.

Through this obsession for the commodity, we share our lives: exchanging our favorite orders of biryani and our stories. As we gobble down our food, my father reaches out to the people sitting next to us, asking about their journey to America and their favorite shops. Food isn't just for eating, it's for sharing and hearing the tales of others. Food bridges the gap between us and makes us realize that regardless of how we look, we all value the delicate balance of spice and pungency in our kababs.

Despite the once impeccable reputation, the store now carries a 3.6 rating on Google Maps with the food and menu no longer being what

it once was, but we go for a reason: we see ourselves within the madness. After all, like the store, we struggle to manage the plate we have at hand, to find ourselves amidst the crowd and in white America. Yet, the employees work within the panic and raise smiles through the scent of simmering curry. The families laugh, feeling relief after finding their lost child, and sit with others broadcasting the almost horror story. Through this chaos, we have connected: finding peace within the mayhem of life.

As New Yorkers, life is hectic but a community can ease one's pain. Places like Kabab King continue to strive with their community. Sometimes seeing others who look like oneself builds solace. Sometimes seeing a community of those from different ethnic backgrounds can also invoke these emotions. Sometimes when we struggle, we end up in Kabab King, tasting the spices of our culture and seeing the workers as well as the customers struggle. Sometimes kababs are the only answer we have in a world full of chaos.

*Growing up in a world that often ridiculed me for being South Asian, I always tried to adjust myself to fit into spaces meant strictly for white people. This piece was made to highlight me drifting away from conformity and finding peace in my Bengali identity while also recounting how even the small action of sharing kababs has built my community. With so many South Asian people around me as a child, I never realized that even my daily actions—the way I ate, greeted people, and even handled myself in Jackson Heights—all reflected my Bengali culture. I wanted to show others how powerful communities can be in finding oneself and the beauty of South Asian culture.*

**—Sumaiya Sayeed**

# Make Waves

*“I love my home. I love where I grew up, I love its people, and I love all the lessons I’ve learned living here. These people are worth fighting for, just as every environmental justice community is worth fighting for.”*

## **Idea Reid**

Excerpt from “The Forgotten People of a Forgotten Borough: Environmental Racism on the North Shore of Staten Island”

# Hate Is a Virus Tiffany Deng



*Asian Americans have faced a long history of prejudice in the US, and it has only increased during the pandemic. As an Asian American, seeing acts of violence committed over and over against people in my community has been heartbreaking. Thus, I turned to art to cope. My work expresses pain but also a cry for help. By utilizing symbols, I wanted to highlight just how detrimental prejudice is, and demonstrate the need for change. For instance, the tape (it's not a mask) represents the long history of AAPI voices being silenced and dismissed. On the other hand, the flowers symbolize the fragility and pricelessness of life. Overall, overcoming hatred is essential, and I hope to illustrate that in my piece.*

**—Tiffany Deng**

# Fighting Back

*Stop. I wish they would stop. Why don't any words come out of my mouth? Why isn't anyone saying anything? Why aren't I saying anything?*

How deeply I wish I had more anger twelve years ago as my classmates pulled their eyes slanted at me, snickering. There were only two Asian students in my class: a boy and myself. I made desperate eye contact with him, but his expression reflected the same discomfort I felt. My family prepared me for many things before the start of elementary school, like raising my hand for the bathroom and memorizing emergency phone numbers. But nothing to prepare for what to do when your new classmates bully you for how you look—for being Asian.

The teacher was next to me when it happened. She was white; all my teachers were. I turned to her expectantly. “Why are they doing that?” I asked, visibly upset. Deep down, I already knew the answer, but I wanted to see what explanation she would offer me.

She said they didn't know any better and left it at that. So I didn't press on.

I didn't realize how traumatizing her dismissive

## Jady Chen

attitude, coupled with the actions of my peers, was for me until years later. Even now, it pains me to recount their names, laughing faces, and eyelids squinted over their blue eyes. A part of me wonders if anything would have been different if I had told anyone else. Perhaps another teacher? Or even the principal? Or my parents, or my siblings? Why were my feelings so easily cast aside? Why didn't the five-year-old me have a little more anger?

Why didn't I fight for myself?

Looking back, I realize that even if my classmates were scolded, it wouldn't have changed anything. I would have received an insincere apology, and the teacher would have forced us to shake hands or hug. I wouldn't have felt any better, and the bullies would have targeted me for tattling. Confiding in my immigrant parents probably only would've made them more concerned and insist I save face by staying out of trouble.

Sometimes I'll try to comfort myself by reimagining the scene, only with a better ending. In my fantasy, a group of older Asian kids would march in and angrily yell at my bullies to stop. I wanted my classmates to realize their wrongdoings, not because their

white teacher gently told them, but because these Asians intimidated them into never doing it again. That would have turned the situation from a traumatic event into an inspiring memory. Even if just that one other Asian boy in my class had stood up with me, I would have been more inclined to put up a fight. A team of Asians is more powerful than just one.

Over time, I searched for that neighborhood group of Asians who would have defended me without hesitation. I pursued a stronger connection to my community. I assisted local AAPI-owned restaurants during the pandemic, interned for Stop AAPI Hate, and volunteered with a nonprofit focused on uplifting AAPI women in leadership.

Community building and education are not complete solutions to stopping hatred; they merely reassure Asians that they aren't alone in the fight. I've learned it's more than hatred we need to fight against, but also dismissal, mockery, and erasure. Every time I get looks on the subway that scream you started the virus or when I hear about Asians brutally assaulted in broad daylight, my heart sinks. While infographics and peaceful protests help strengthen community presence, these could not have rescued me all those years ago in kindergarten. Only passion-fueled anger can truly combat hate, and this notion is difficult to accept for a population that has long suppressed their rage in favor of bleak survival. We struggle to embrace anger—instead, we

swallow it. We are bystanders to our own suffering because it is easier to accept and normalize violence than confront it. Rather than use invisibility as defense, we must equip ourselves with knowledge and a desire to retaliate.

Back then, I didn't know how to use my anger to fight. But if I could go back, I would have done anything to protect five-year-old me. Not only would I be standing up for myself but also my family, my heritage, and my community. We cannot combat anti-Asian hate if we do not channel our anger to confront our perpetrators face to face. Being angry does not mean I want to punch my bullies. It means I want to speak up and share my story. I want to write more about the anger I feel and then shout it from the rooftops. Our outrage will empower our future children to fight back, pass down their stories, and feel pride as Asian Americans.

*Asian hate incidents have increased as a result of the xenophobia surrounding the COVID pandemic. As an Asian American, I'm proud to see that my community has grown stronger in response to the hatred, but I also feel that we are not doing enough to truly "make waves." It is difficult to combat racial and ethnic tension if we are not passionate about it. We must fight back and fully embrace our anger to inspire change in our society. —Jady Chen*

# The Bridge

Angelo Brandon L.



*This piece is based on my commute home from high school. Every day, I was excited to reach the Manhattan Bridge and get two minutes of sun and views of the city on my train ride home. The title of this piece emphasizes the outer and inner world, inside and outside the train: the train is outside and meant to be on a literal bridge. Inside, the train is a common space for the people traveling, bridging them together on their different journeys. —Angelo Brandon L.*

# This Is America Aryan Pershad

This is America,  
Land of the free  
They say liberty and justice for all  
But threatens to build a wall.  
This is America  
Land of the free  
They preach equality  
But promote police brutality and my skin  
Color dictates my “equal” opportunity.  
This is America where hundreds or even thousands  
Seek as a safe haven only to be separated, raped, trafficked, and killed  
At the border yet they say everything is in order but as we look further we see;  
This is America where our own president commits murder by choosing his  
economy  
growth over his front-line workers.  
*Inshallah*, This is America In God we trust  
Yet our Godly brothers are being blown to dust  
This is America land of the brave  
Where we send our men to put the innocent into the grave for the power and  
riches we so crave.  
This is America power drunk;  
Dear great land, I’m sorry for what we’ve done.

*This piece was written during the pandemic when I had just migrated to the US. I use my voice to bring light to some of the social justice issues I saw in America including: racism, xenophobia, war, racial inequality, police brutality, and abuse of power in this heartfelt and rage-filled piece of poetry.*

—Aryan Pershad

# I Want Better

## Building the Black Community Economically, Socially, and Politically

# Celina Johnson

I remember seeing a little Black girl running up to her daddy on their green spacious lawn and him picking her up and kissing her on the cheek, while the mom, grandma, and other children were around them. He says, “Hey, baby girl,” as he carries her. I thought what a beautiful Black family but most people don’t know we live like this. Unfortunately, some Black people are mis and/or uninformed as they’re only shown articles and TV stories of how low-income and crime-ridden our neighborhoods are. Where I live is a majority-Black middle-class neighborhood. The people are everyday people. And yes, you’ll see Black families riding bikes together in the streets, as well as jogging, walking, and talking to family and friends on their lawns. You’ll hear doves and crickets at night. It’s a neat neighborhood with lots of trees, beautiful parks, and a hidden school in the middle of it all. My point is that this is not how one would generally imagine a Black neighborhood.

I have a goal in life. Primarily, it’s to build the Black Community here in America. What I truly hope for is a more positive influence

within our neighborhoods. I want to see the heavy positive influence that was once there, like during the Harlem Renaissance. I want to get rid of the negative prejudices and doubts some people within my community may have due to the lack of positive representation. I’ll build the foundation for this by improving the looks of what people believe to generally be our neighborhoods. (Which isn’t as I described my own neighborhood.) If we fix up our neighborhoods to the point where none of them are or seem low-income and unprioritized, we are then fixing the most immediate and pressing issues that will lay the foundation for spreading positive representation. I also want to help those who are trying and are, in Alan Greenblatt’s words, “often turned down by private lenders, yet don’t qualify for many government assistance programs.” Which tends to lead to an impasse for many Black individuals looking to “rehab their homes” to build a better community.

Ever since I was in elementary school I planned to become a lawyer. Because I was told I am always defending people, “you should be a



lawyer,” and I stuck with it. As I got to middle school I looked into what I would be doing exactly as a lawyer. And I decided based on what I would see on the news. The injustice my community faced from the failing justice systems. Due to this, I decided I would become a criminal lawyer, to help those in my community suffering from the unjust system. However, as I got to high school I realized I could do more. Rebuilding the source of those negative prejudices. Such as rebuilding infrastructure to encourage cleanliness by working with the local civic groups to identify and eliminate eyesores, and beautify the local environment. This would include getting rid of rundown buildings, creating community buildings as well as job centers. Replacing fast food restaurants with grocery stores as having healthy alternatives will encourage productivity and an overall better lifestyle. Changing our neighborhoods in such a way will drastically convert Black people’s views of how our neighborhoods are supposed to be and look. In addition to rebuilding our infrastructure, Black schools are underfunded according to *The Washington Post*. In schools where there isn’t appropriate funding, those same ones have trouble producing scholarly kids.

What made me so passionate about changing Black neighborhoods, was the collective negative representation of the Black community that I had seen, simple enough. I grew up watching those “Black struggle movies” and I hated them because of how they

generalized and represented us. As if that was the average life of the African American, and I was just living the uncommon fortunate life. Hearing other people’s views didn’t help either. I asked two Black girls what they think when they hear the words “Black neighborhood.” The words “loud” and “ghetto” are what was said, and though one of the girls said, “However, my neighborhood isn’t that way,” the other girl responded, “But that’s what most people think of when hearing the words ‘Black neighborhood.’” I thought: Why do we think like this? What’s causing this? And so I decided to make plans and build foundations to begin changing our community. I want to get rid of the negative connotations that surround the words Black neighborhoods and people. As the synonym of Blackness with criminality is not a new phenomenon in America.

One day I plan to start a nonprofit for exactly this purpose. I want to donate to and fund our schools. Rebuild low-income infrastructure within our communities. Getting rid of food deserts that target our communities, placing community buildings as well as job centers in our neighborhoods to help those who find it difficult to get jobs. Such an idea would be to pay those living in these low-income neighborhoods to help build and improve our infrastructure. A bonus would be to find those who can teach our history and discipline our prejudices and behavior. So that we can better understand how they have and will continue to impact our communities in the long run.

Only recently have I begun to see the unfortunate realities. The many negative prejudices from people within my own community. That is the bias that I wish and strive to change in life. The solution: an overwhelming positive representation instead of the negative. And though I've been laughed at when saying "I'll rebuild our entire communities," it simply serves as my motivation. And though others have attempted to talk me down because "I can't do it," I won't be discouraged. As I know it'll be hard, I know it'll be a lot of money, and I know things won't go the way I expect. I'm prepared, however. As this is my calling in life. I simply want better. To change other people's minds, we need to first change our own.

*My short story "I Want Better" is about the political, economic, and social struggles of low-income Black communities in the United States and what starts and keeps the cycle of disadvantage and poverty prevalent in less fortunate areas. I expose these conditions, traditions, and cycles and explain how we can better these communities as I also share my story of how I strive to achieve my current plans and future goals of currently collaborating and one day creating a nonprofit organization to change low-income Black communities in the United States, for the better, economically, politically and socially. —**Celina Johnson***

# Women

# Jaela Noel-Joseph

“It’s a free country” they said  
No it’s free to the cis straight white men only  
For women, this doesn’t apply  
We don’t matter in their eyes  
Especially women of color

You’ll never understand the struggles a Black woman faces  
on a day-to-day basis  
Or how Asian women are fetishized  
Do you remember what they did to indigenous/native women?  
Genocide  
You can only imagine what all of us beautiful women of color have been through

They try to get our attention with their staring and catcalls  
Without even knowing us at all  
And when we ignore them, defend ourselves and say no  
We’re called names like slut, bitch or hoe

I think it’s pretty funny how the word “pussy” is used to offend  
But let us not forget nor pretend  
Like we don’t know how much power it holds, how much pain it takes  
How much pleasure it gives  
And all things it can make

Women come in all different sizes, colors, and forms  
So stop trying to make us fit “the norm”  
Oh and just a reminder that trans women are real women too  
If you were placed in our shoes what would you do?  
Would you fight for your rights or let society control you?  
You and I both know what you’d choose

We’ve been fighting these battles again and again  
But we won’t stop until this forever nightmare ends  
Countless years of sexism, double standards and misogyny  
But eventually they will all see  
How powerful women can really be

All women are perfect stop trying to put us down  
“This is a man’s world” they say  
No, babes we run it now

*As a woman of color, specifically a young Black woman, seeing everything we go through made me want to express my thoughts and feelings in writing. I hope to one day be an inspiration to other young girls of color and start something that will change the world. —Jaela Noel-Joseph*

# Morenita

Society hates my brown skin; the color that holds this earth's ground. They hate my Indigenous features because it carries my origin and my ancestors' look. They also hate the nationalism that we stand up to with our lives for our origin country. Society yells "Yo, choose a side, Mexico or America", the truth is "no soy de aqui ni de ayá." In Mexico they say we are too "Americanized" and in America, they say we are "too Mexican." How can we choose a side when Native Indigenous blood and features run through our body?

As a Latina, I'm not embarrassed to showcase my origin country, where I'm from, where mis padres are from, where mis abuelitos, mis tíos, mis tías, y primos son. People hate how we act, how we live, how we talk, how we move forward in life, how we be triumphing, and how we celebrate our lifestyles; but yet they are in love with our traditional foods, drinks, and touristic beaches, dances, and our music. We welcome them with a plate of food and drinks, we also try to welcome them in English as best as we can. We compliment them on how good

*As a first-gen Latina, I would love to encourage my peers, my community, and everybody no matter what race, gender identity, sexuality, or color to keep on fighting for their dreams and to not let social barriers bring them down. Yes, it may be complex but just know that you can always use your resources to navigate to your dreams. YOU as well are a resource. Believe in yourself, don't let that spark that you have dim like the bodega lights. Challenge yourself and set short-term and long-term goals. Consecutively check on the improvements that you make. —Ariana Gonzalez Martinez*

# Ariana Gonzalez Martinez

their Spanish is, but if we try to get along with them they hit us with the "Go back to Mexico!" or "Speak English, you are in America!"

Still, they are the first ones to try out our new dishes with extra guac; the freshly grown avocados by our people's hands filled with hopes and American Dreams straight from their property. My family and I might be an alien in your country but in ours, you are just simply a happy tourist visiting our tourist places. Us Mexicans seem to be forgotten in history and as of right now. No, we aren't trying to steal food or jobs from our fellow Americans, we are just trying to work y salir por delante, make the first generation proud, and feed the hungry. Yes, we too are hungry; but hungry for opportunity, hungry for dreams, hungry for enlightenment. We shouldn't let our brown pigmentation be a barrier to soar for our dreams.

Why should our morenita pigmentation and social hierarchy be our drawback to chasing our dreams?

# Rotten Candy

*It's like taking candy from a baby*

They said  
And They took it away,  
Just

Like  
That

Now it's gone  
Its absence suffocates me,  
Chains me down  
Takes away my ability to move freely

Instead of moving  
I frown upon those  
I once looked up to

They don't look back at me with pity  
They look at me with mocking smiles

They've won  
They took what was mine  
Something so sacred to me that  
only Me  
Would know its worth

Now it's gone  
And I'm left hollow  
I'm once again,

# Suwaida T.

a shell of myself  
A puppet,  
As They may call me  
I have strings attached to my limbs,  
for Them to pull on  
Putting me in positions  
I don't want to be in  
Because in the end,  
I'm just Their doll

I have no more use  
than to please  
Until They decide to cut my strings

But then again,  
I don't really have a choice,  
Do I?

Just like the baby,  
I'm helpless  
When someone stronger  
Steals from me

*This isn't recent news. However, it needs to be discussed and it's something I'm passionate about. In the U.S., women's rights are being stripped away by the day and the overturning of Roe v. Wade is one of the many things that suggests this shift. It upsets me that a woman no longer has a say in what she can or cannot do with her body and as a woman myself, it scares me. Fortunately, I live in New York, where abortions are still legal, but that doesn't mean that it will be forever. I should have full control over anything regarding my body and it's outrageous that I will no longer have that freedom. I try to express how I feel in my poem, "Rotten Candy," and I hope that people can relate to my emotions, and sympathize with what women are being put through. —Suwaida T.*

# The World Is Your Oyster

Madeleine Tait



*This piece illustrates the importance of clear waterways in NYC. When most people think of the city they imagine the towering skyscrapers and overlook the nature all around us. With the Billion Oyster Project, NYC students help seed oysters in the East River at Brooklyn Bridge Park. Oysters are a crucial part of the environment, they provide shelter for other sealife, filter water, and protect the city from flooding and erosion. As a result of the industrial revolution, pollutants filled New York Harbor. I titled my piece The World Is Your Oyster to suggest that we have the ability to restore the health of the natural world. When the community works together change can be accomplished.*

—**Madeleine Tait**

# The Forgotten People of a Forgotten Borough:

## Environmental Racism on the North Shore of Staten Island

Idea Reid

When I tell people I am from Staten Island, I am met with one of a few similar responses: “So you are not *really* a part of NYC,” or “Ew, you have to take the ferry?” Sometimes, it’s a simple mocking of an Italian American accent or my favorite, “Wow, I feel so bad for you.” I know that the reason for these reactions are because I don’t fit the stereotype of a Staten Islander: I am a young Black female, not Italian American, don’t have much of an accent, and my views are, well, progressive. My experience growing up here does not fit the Staten Island that people often describe to me. My childhood was fantastic. I live on the North Shore, about a 10-minute walk from the ferry terminal. I had the best of both an urban and suburban lifestyle. My Staten Island friend group represents the real diversity of the North Shore—Sri Lankan, Indian, Mexican, Filipina, Ghanaian, Albanian. My neighborhood is a mixture of Black, white, and Latinx. These

communities, the ones I have been around my entire life, are underrepresented if not completely absent in the Staten Island narrative. Staten Island is the forgotten borough, mainly because of how different it seems from its NYC counterparts. But why would people care about forgotten communities, in a forgotten borough? Why should they?

Part of the reason living in Staten Island is so great is because of the open space. Not many New Yorkers realize it is two-and-a-half times the size of Manhattan! Yet, this “green borough” is facing more environmental issues than the urban mecca across the Hudson River. On the surface, out of all the issues Staten Island is put on the map for, environmental would not seem to be on the top of that list. But just like the unseen communities, this unseen problem is huge—and they are facing the brunt of it.

Environmental racism is not an issue unique to Staten Island. Environmental racism, or environmental injustice, is the term used to describe the injustice that stems from environmental harm/climate change impacting a certain group of people more on a basis of race and socioeconomic status.

According to the National Black Environmental Justice Network, Black Americans in 19 states are 79 percent more likely to live in a polluted area than white Americans. Black people breathe 56 percent more pollution than they cause, whereas white people breathe 17 percent less pollution than they cause. A history of redlining and segregation is a primary cause of the issue. It is the reason that there were (and are) so many concentrated areas of Black and Brown people for industrial building to occur. The North Shore of Staten Island just so happens to be the largest concentration of Black and Brown communities on the island.

The people and living things of Staten Island face very specific and serious environmental threats. To understand them one must grasp the island's historical and geographical context. Not only is climate change making Staten Island most at risk from coastal flooding, we face pollution, toxicity, and radioactivity.

Factory air blowing in from New Jersey creates some of the poorest air quality in the New York

City region, and the businesses contributing to this pollution are not legally held accountable.

In addition to the polluted air, a toxic waterfront proves to be a serious issue on Staten Island's North Shore: The Fresh Kills Landfill is Staten Island's most notorious environmental burden, but 5.2 miles of Richmond Terrace's North Shore, waterfront, and surrounding communities have at least 21 contaminated sites that are a result of over a century and a half of industrial development. Staten Island's industrial revolution resulted in locations that were previously open beach waterfronts and freshwater streams and ponds becoming power plants and factories.

Staten Island is a flood-prone area. Hurricane Sandy was a destructive, and eye-opening, disaster for residents. Along with the water damage that storm surge itself caused, contaminants that exist in the surrounding water came onto shore. As sea levels continue to rise and storm surges from hurricanes worsen, contaminants from the water are only becoming more of a serious problem.

Lastly, a fact not well known about Staten Island: part of the Manhattan Project, the atomic bomb from the Second World War, is buried in the site under the Bayonne Bridge. The buried raw uranium, stored by the Archer-Daniels-Midland Company from 1939 to 1942,



is still radioactive, yet low-income housing continues to be built there. This area, around Richmondtown, predominantly consists of Black people and immigrants of color.

Despite all of these health impacts, Islanders living in this region can still be found clamming and fishing by the waterfront. It is not by choice. Catching the protein that they need in their diets instead of going to a grocery store is an alternative that they can actually afford. The lack of access to healthy foods and grocery stores is another form of environmental racism, one that is contributing to a never-ending cycle.

Environmental racism works on the assumption that impacted communities won't be able to fight it off. That simply isn't true. I learned a lot speaking with Beryl Thurman, Director of the North Shore Waterfront Conservancy. It is the only organization of its kind fighting for environmental justice in the North Shore, and all of Staten Island. She made strides in educating the public on the type of environmental racism impacting Islanders. Now, many others are joining her fight—notably the youth of Staten Island. I am one of them.

Living on Staten Island comes with its challenges. Of course, I have a longer commute than most people, adding to the struggle of getting friends to visit. There's being written off as not being a part of NYC. On a more serious

note, there's invisible pollutants impacting the health of residents in unforeseen ways, and the threat of climate change ever so looming as sea levels rise. The icing on the cake? None of these issues are being taken seriously by our own island representation, by the city, or by the state. But I love my home. I love where I grew up, I love its people, and I love all the lessons I've learned living here. These people are worth fighting for, just as every environmental justice community is worth fighting for.

*This research paper is an informative and personal essay meant to bring attention to the impacts of environmental racism on Staten Island. I was inspired by environmental leaders on S.I., the youth climate movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement. This paper was initially written as a final public policy project at the Professional Performing Arts School under the guidance of Lisanne Testerman in 2021 and has been shortened for this magazine.*

**—Idea Reid**

# There Will Come a Last Earth Day

Zoey Marks

A thick summer's evening  
like so many others before  
ferocious temperatures  
Water coasting beneath its point of boil  
a humidity inescapable

A humidity that doesn't discriminate  
Not the rich nor the poor  
I knew what none of their weather apps could tell them  
I'd been intently observing  
The anger brewing in my children

My children so bruised, so sore  
my oceans, their shores

I am nature and I am true  
I'm not as intricate as life  
I can't feel like you  
I watch and create  
I've done everything there is to do

I thought it was worth it  
permitting this life thing to play through  
I'm in pain  
As it slips away

I was naive  
But the destruction they warned of  
proved gravely true

To time I beg and plead for more  
But my land is tired  
Too weak and too worn

*Climate activism has been my central interest throughout high school. The topic can be overwhelming and intimidating as a young person who deeply cares. For this reason, connecting with my peers about the crisis is difficult. My own source of inspiration and motivation comes from hopeful artists and writers. This is why I felt poetry could be a great way to raise awareness and invoke passion. I wrote "There Will Come a Last Earth Day" from the perspective of Mother Nature. I wanted to convey the despair that a personified nature must feel. I emphasized that immediate action is not optional and that the effects of current negligence will be fatal. Creative expression can be the key to connections when advocating for climate justice. —Zoey Marks*

# The End

Elizabeth Lu



*The ocean is home to thousands of species of marine life, but with the ever-present acidification of the ocean, many of these species are ceasing to exist. What was once a sea of fishes and corals has instead become a cesspool for litter. The left side of my piece depicts a colorful array of sea life prior to being affected by climate change. The right side depicts the aftermath of climate change on the ocean. There are no traces of marine life and the coral reefs have turned white. A plastic bag sits at the middle crossing into the right side demonstrating how one plastic bag could completely alter marine habitats. The ocean has become a trash bin for plastics. If CO<sub>2</sub> and pollution continue to end up in our oceans, it will eventually be the end for our oceans. —Elizabeth Lu*

# Fugue of the World

Harleen Bawa

She closed her eyes and slipped into sleep, chasing a dream through her blurry mind.  
She opened her eyes and slipped outside, chasing a future through the blurry weather.  
She collided into the mind's fantasy, stumbling back with a gasp.  
She collided into the sea of people, stumbling back with a grunt.  
*What is happening? What happened to the world?* her subconscious whispers in shock.  
*This is happening. This is the world,* her mind whispers with determination.  
She walked through the barren gray landscape, filled with rusted metal, piles of debris, and scrawny creatures trying to find a home and a meal.  
She walked through the crowd, countless people, of copper, ebony, eggshell, cream, trying to  
rock the earth in a new direction.  
Crackling metal towers pierced the sky, belching out pollution that turned the sky black.  
Colorful signs pierced the sky with chants, booming out like thunder.  
She turned and fled, shaking and screaming.  
She turned and stayed, shaking and screaming.  
She woke.  
She was always awake.  
Her heartbeat hung in the air, counting every moment for it to be over.  
Her heartbeat hung in the air, counting every moment for it to continue.  
She drags herself to the window and stares at the sky, lightening to a pale pink.  
She drags herself to the front and stares at the sky, darkening to purple.  
"I will save the earth," she says quietly.  
"We will save the earth!" she shouts.

The ground began to shift, as if it heard her pledge.  
The veil between infinite worlds falls away:  
Tall grass slithered out of the cracks.  
Flowers curled in the light breeze, iridescent colors.  
Mountains, thick with storm and forest, began to rise.  
Lightning riddled a robin's egg sky.

The golden sun began to rise in the sky.  
Animals and organisms found a new taste.  
Flurries of snow gently fell, mixing with drops of rain.  
The sands of time began to shift in the desert.  
"We still have much work to do," she says.  
"It will not be easy, but we will try."  
"And we will save the earth."

*Through the worlds of dreams and reality, "Fugue of the World" is about a girl's experience that is mirrored in her mind and in her real life to save the world from climate change. —Harleen Bawa*

# Unrequited

Vincent G.

Summer breeze runs its fingers through my hair  
Sunlight caresses my skin  
As the sky's painted a pale blue, you lay against me  
Air flows from my being to your lungs, giving you life.  
I am the creator of your body  
I am the reason you can walk, write,  
    and read  
I have power over whether you live or die  
I give you my whole soul so you can be someone  
I take your pain and burrow them in my roots  
I listen  
I hear about your journey under the Sun  
    or about the woes you carry  
I see the way tears well in your soft eyes, threatening to spill over  
I offer you peace in the shade and a place to rest.  
However, you look away when something passes by  
A mere flash of color  
You leave me  
Never bothering to give  
You take  
And take until I am bare.  
My soul still brightens when I see you come back  
Even though you take, I give myself to you  
That is all I've ever known.  
Until, I see the metal blade gripped in your hand  
An axe.  
You swing it high in the air,  
    the sharp tip reflecting the sunlight  
I avert my gaze, eyes drooped, as you strip me of my bark.  
My life.  
My soul.

*My poem is titled "Unrequited." It is written from the perspective of a tree in summer, delving into the relationship between itself and a person. My inspiration lies in the current relationship we have with nature and how destructive we have become, especially with deforestation and climate change. We are killing the very thing that gives us life. —Vincent G.*

# A ‘Story’ that Sparked My Story

Jerry Chen

Beneath the rusted apartment doors in NYCHA are faces of those who could only gesture gratitude in an unfamiliar language. When my friends heard about my volunteering experiences, I received long stares and subtle looks. This was at the height of the pandemic and, for me, the most vulnerable time to be in as a sophomore in high school. For many New Yorkers, the pandemic affected the morale of the city and we suddenly became more isolated. Clinging onto the base of my phone, I mindlessly scrolled through the Instagram stories until I realized a story a friend posted about volunteering for a local politician. Curious and intrigued, I applied, and since then I have been helping out with the State Assembly office in lower Manhattan. I wasn’t an expert in local politics but I soon came to realize that local offices have a tremendous influence on the neighborhoods that millions of people live in.

Because of this opportunity, I became more focused on local campaigning, canvassing, and most important of all, helping the community out. For an introvert like me, talking to others continues to be out of my comfort zone. When I was going to rallies and met other interns and volunteers that had the same passions that I did, I began to learn the art of public speaking and civic engagement. Throughout the last few summers, I volunteered to deliver masks and sanitizers to NYCHA apartments all over the Lower East Side. With hot weather and sweaty arms, me and another volunteer began trekking miles from one NYCHA building to another. During those times when we could afford a break, he told me life stories about himself and how he wanted to volunteer for the community. Although he was a year older, I began to bond with him during the times when we knocked on the metal doors—hoping someone would answer. Bending down, we would struggle to slip the wrapped PPE kit through the door.

After volunteering for days, I began to realize what community service has meant to me. Volunteering was a way for me to value my work and to get out of my comfort zone while enjoying seeing the smiling faces of those who greeted us. Looking at the tall, brittle, dull houses up and down the streets, I came to the realization that many New Yorkers lived in public housing like this. Going to these apartments was not just about volunteerism but also witnessing the lives of the elderly and the residents who live in underfunded housing projects. This experience became a sparking moment for me to help change the lives of public housing residents and low-income families who live in terrible conditions. I soon shifted to public advocacy and began a life surrounding the rights of tenants and increasing funding for public housing. From meeting new volunteers to finding value in my life, this opportunity sparked my further interest in politics and community service. Since then I have worked with several nonprofit organizations and volunteered throughout the city. All of this, however, wouldn't have been possible without the Instagram story from a friend of mine.

*I began volunteering for a local politician who serves in lower Manhattan and I wanted to share the experiences volunteering there over the past couple of years. That experience inspired me to continue to volunteer for different projects and advocate for those who cannot.*

**—Jerry Chen**



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