

**Prompt: Choose one of the PCC Character Qualities of the Month and explain how you put it into practice in your life.**

### Empathy

On the very last day of summer camp in the sixth grade, my counselor gave my bunkmates and I each a handwritten card with short goodbye messages. In mine, she described me as kind, intelligent, and the adjective I would fixate on, empathetic. While I was familiar with the word and its definition, associating it with my character and actions caused me to truly contemplate the meaning of the word and my relationship with it. I never stopped taking pride in my empathy, and find myself seeking those who do the same.

In 2020, I was lucky enough to get in touch with an organization that did just that: the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, which works to provide access to education and healthcare in tribal communities in Karnataka, India. Two virtual internships later, I have never been more confident in the relationship between service and empathy.

For my first internship, I was first offered a project that felt designed for me: the development of a Spoken English Curriculum for their tribal school. I recognized the value of effective, and creative communication at a young age. Hence, school and language learning were the things I was most fervently passionate about. As I perfected my English to be better understood in American schools, I became more insecure about my ability to communicate in my family's mother tongue Kannada. I began to stay quiet unless I knew how every sentence of mine in the less familiar language would be perceived by those who had mastered it. And that was the root of it all. I never wanted the people around me, whether that be my Indian aunt, or my American teacher to be limited to only being able to understand the words I was saying, but to have the ability to understand my thoughts, emotions, and motives behind each word and sentence crafted with intention. That level of language learning is a privilege— one that I had the opportunity to extend to an underserved, and often forgotten, population. To be able to apply my language learning motivations and grievances to a distinct population required my empathy to begin with, and the quality only became more important to me as the internship went on.

While designing the curriculum, I learned about the school, the children, and the lives they led as members of forest bound tribal communities. This felt vital, initially, considering the seemingly drastic differences between my life and theirs. However, learning about the children, especially in the environment of such a mindful non-profit organization, did not entail pity, but rather hope and excitement for their futures. The students were never disrespected for the lives they lived, and suddenly the gap I had created in my mind between myself and the community I wanted to serve shrank. I quickly recognized that the joys of childhood innocence are universal, if only the conditions allow for it. These children had the same potential, intelligence, and creativity as a class of children in the United

States, and deserved equal consideration in the modern world. I was only able to make such a realization through empathy, and the proper consideration of all that we shared.

My work with SVYM went on to inspire me to feel and act upon that empathy to a higher degree. The individuals I had the pleasure of working with never failed to effortlessly demonstrate the immense respect, empathy, and humility that their work requires. This was especially true of my second internship, during which I wrote case studies to document the work my team members were carrying out in the field. The team I worked with primarily consisted of those involved in the Reproductive and Child Health program (RCH), where they aided with tribal teenage pregnancies. My job was, quite literally, to listen and take notes on the immensely admirable stories. Tales of handling alcoholic family members when they would prevent the mother from receiving proper medical care; or of being willing to personally donate blood to at-risk mothers after an exhausting yet unsuccessful search of depleted blood banks during the global pandemic; or of spending hours at a time reasoning with a patient over the value and importance of the medical care they needed. They showed empathy despite the seemingly distinct lives they were trying to improve. They spent every waking second helping the young mothers, rather than adhering to the end of a work day. They personally invested themselves in the wellbeings of others, and in doing so, taught me to do the same.

My empathy allows me to consider humanity above class, race, gender, ability, or background. I was lucky enough to be raised in a home that valued empathy, then a school district that cultivated it, and finally a professional environment that applied it valuably. I strive to lead with it everyday as I pursue a Public Health career and education geared towards service and the upliftment of those around me, and for the rest of my life.