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# look at this:

" I think personally that if I'm not helping people, I'm not living my truth. To me, the whole purpose of life is to be a good person and to help everyone you can. I mean I may reach my Machu Picchu where I find that I've reached inner peace, but even then I'll still work to make a difference in my community and in other people's lives. I think even something as minuscule as that can have a substantial impact on the world."

Transcribed by Vincent Anderson  
Double Exposure by Karissa Branine

## - Sophomore Bex Batenburg

**Anderson:** I'm just going to talk to you about the process of getting a congressional award, what got you into it, and stuff like that. What can you tell us about the Congressional?

**Batenburg:** It was established in the very late 70s and it is meant to recognize initiative, service, and achievement in young people; it began as a bipartisan effort in both the US Senate and the House of Representatives. It was originally signed into law by President Jimmy Carter, and it is the only charity and highest honor a member of the US Senate or House of Representatives may bestow upon a youth civilian. It is non-partisan, voluntary and semi-non-competitive. Participants earn bronze, silver, and gold certificates, and then bronze, silver, and gold medals. Each of the levels involves setting goals in four program areas, including voluntary public service, personal development, physical fitness, and expedition and exploration. The last category was really the most difficult to do in the time of COVID, especially when for a silver medal, you have to plan a 3-day, 2-night trip, and that's ten hours a day of full activity. Every little detail of that trip has to be planned. In place of that for COVID, mine ended up being about a thirty page write-up for my silver. It was certainly very difficult. Initially what got me into the congressional award was that I'd done a lot of campaigning for Jared Polis when he started campaigning to be elected and sort of heard about it through that community, you meet a lot of people who are almost scarily motivated to get congressional awards. I met someone who was 20 at the time and she was like, "I just finished my gold medal and now I'm going for my Nobel peace prize! In addition to all of the other delightful rewards that I'm going for, like my girl scout gold, that are very time consuming. It has to be done over months, and over the course of two years, so it's a very heavy commitment."

**Anderson:** After working and volunteering in so many places, what were the driving forces that kept you going? What were the most valuable emotional rewards?

**Batenburg:** I'm very involved in charity, I work with Project Lighthouse, and I've done about 182 hours, so I'll be getting my silver medal in December which is soon, so I mean out of 182 hours it's

hard to pick out a top moment. The whole point behind public service is you have to pick a particular sector to help, for me I have a grandma with dementia who lives in a care home and over COVID wasn't able to have any visitors, so I decided I wanted to focus on people in senior homes for COVID. I hand decorated and hand planted in the midst of COVID 550 plants with hand-picked succulents and the first home we delivered it to was Care Lon Care Home and I remember the woman coming out and seeing the sheer quantity of plants we had and start tearing up and it was just, "Our seniors are gonna love this so much!" and all of that and I think that was when it really hit me.

**Anderson:** Well, what was the most beautiful part of the work you do?

**Batenburg:** You get to see the impact you have on the lives of so many people; truly the most beautiful thing about this is helping other people feel loved and helping other people feel that sense of community that I get from doing this. Whether you're doing animal shelters or you're doing senior care homes or you're working with food banks, you get to see the live you change or the life that you help and it is so so powerful and it really sort of restore your faith in humanity seeing it. It's just seeing the goodness that is in people's hearts really the core of it and it's awesome and so lovely. There have been times where I had wanted to throw in the towel, especially with my silver. It's just day after day but in the end it's so worth it. It's kind of like cross country, because by the time you reach the end you see these people double over and fall on the ground and that's exactly how it feels, it's like, "I want to be physically ill, but look at what I just did!"

**Anderson:** Is there a point in your volunteering career where you'll reach a point where you know you won't have to look further for a milestone to reach?

**Batenburg:** In all honesty, no, because in the world there's always more people to help, and I also think that everyone likes getting rewards. I think if I reach a peak where it's like, "You're 30 now! Can't get a reward." I'm still gonna go for it, I still want to help people. I had a moment in 7th grade where I was just helped by someone who was there to get some reward, but they gave me advice that I'll carry with me for all time. I've got what, 90 years on this planet? That's plenty of time to help people. I think the only time I'm gonna stop is when I'm physically unable to.

look at this: Bex Batenburg

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