

What does it mean to be an #iwill Ambassador?

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THE JUBILEE CENTRE
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#iwill

Introduction

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, at the University of Birmingham, has partnered with Step Up To Serve since the launch of the #iwill campaign in 2013. Each year, we have celebrated 50 Ambassadors as exemplars of social action and service to others, creating a cohort of 300 Ambassadors from across the United Kingdom. The intention behind beginning the Ambassadors programme was not only to celebrate the achievements of civic-minded young people, but to offer an opportunity for those young people to reflect on the character strengths that they have developed whilst undertaking their social action.

Step Up to Serve and the Jubilee Centre, as well as a number of other delegates, articulated the 'double benefit' that participating in meaningful social action has at a consultation at Windsor Castle in 2014. The resulting [Statement on Youth Social Action and Character Development](#) states that 'Social action provides a double benefit. It develops a range of capacities in young people, while simultaneously and enhancing the communities with which young people engage.' Where it is the impact of the social action that often takes the attention, the character development also taking place may go unnoticed or unrecognised. The Jubilee Centre and Step Up to Serve have sought to address this, in part, through the Ambassadors programme, with a conscious focus on acknowledging the strengths of character

that young people feel that they have developed through their social action.

The language of character and the language of social action have huge synergies, and at times are synonymous. Such language, confidence in using virtue terms, and reflecting on their own character development – even if they did not use the term 'character' – has been prevalent in each of the cohorts of Ambassadors celebrated each year since 2014. However, that character development did not end when they became Ambassadors. In many cases, it accelerated and entrenched strengths through exposure to a range of new opportunities, new people, and a growing confidence in the language of character.

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A Habit of Service

Research by the Jubilee Centre has found that pupils who take up social action from a young age are more likely to continue engaging in it in future. It has also shown that those who have strong supportive networks around them are more likely to get involved and stay involved, whether that is through opportunities presented to them at school, college or university or with family members and friends who are involved in the same kind of activity. Those with a habit of engaging in social action are also more likely to be familiar with the language of character, be able to identify virtues within themselves and others, and want to develop these in themselves.

By character, we mean 'a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct'. In other words, character refers to the virtues or strengths that make up who we are and how we respond to the world around us. While many young people are able to reflect on the development of their character through doing social action, and this was borne out in our research with #iwill Ambassadors here, not all were comfortable with the language of character – particularly using and applying specific virtue terms. Nevertheless, Ambassadors generally appreciated the chance to reflect upon their own character

and personal growth, and could see how social action had contributed to cultivating such virtues as confidence, empathy, leadership and communication.

For this research into the experiences of #iwill Ambassadors, we contacted a target pool of 40 Ambassadors to invite them to attend a 25-minute interview, conducted by video call. After securing ten interviews, we then opened the opportunity to the entire Ambassador cohort and conducted a further five interviews. Each participant was asked a range of questions from a predetermined list, focusing on the kind of social action they had been involved in, their personal development, their views on youth empowerment, their experiences of the #iwill campaign, and their hopes and concerns for the future of youth social action in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews were transcribed and the content analysed, and through this we were able to identify three main themes that connected the experiences of all Ambassadors interviewed. Indeed, although there was great strength in the diversity found amongst #iwill Ambassadors, we were particularly interested to see that there was also a great deal that unites this community of young people.

Findings

Each Ambassador's story about the social action they have carried out is inspiring. Through the interviews, we were able to understand better how they understood their social action journeys; the kind of changes they have seen within themselves, to their character, and in the communities around them; and whether being an #iwill Ambassador had altered their perspectives on civic life. Ultimately, the main aim of the project was to explore what being an #iwill Ambassador means to each participant. The three main themes identified are explored below.

Changing their community, developing themselves

The 'double benefit' of social action was something that all Ambassadors had felt in the impact of their social action. They had brought about change in their target communities and demographics, as well as building their own character. As one Ambassador affirms:

...social action gave me the skills to communicate with people who are of a really young age to right up to, like, people who are influential. And a lot of that wasn't taught, it was kind of me copying someone else I'd seen do it...which then allowed me to kind of apply that to my education and things that I wanted to do for myself.

The individual benefits felt by Ambassadors were not limited to practical skills. Ambassadors were able to reflect

meaningfully on their personal growth through social action. This is something that the group valued highly, and one Ambassador noted the uniqueness of the character strengths that social action develops:

*...doing social action and volunteering definitely makes you a better, more well-rounded person, and it teaches you, like, **empathy** and stuff. And I think that is a trait that is very core to being a good human being but also something that is kind of rare to come across now.*

Ambassadors could readily see how their character had been strengthened through sustained engagement in social action – although most had not reflected on this before becoming Ambassador. Being part of the #iwill campaign has been important in helping them to understand how they are growing as a person:

It is helpful to also see what kind of virtues are important to you and what characteristics you hold really strongly... which could be different to other people on a team. Recognising that was actually quite helpful, seeing where I need to have other people around me to balance me and fill in gaps that I do not have.

Ambassadors were passionate about the causes they champion and the communities they work with, engaging with others to broaden their own understandings. Ambassadors cited the wealth of

opportunities to meet and hear from people different to themselves as a major benefit of social action; learning important lessons from others and feeling more connected to the world around them.

Social action also presents challenges to participants. One Ambassador emphasised the difficulties in seeing real time change in the communities around them. Some Ambassadors had come up against structural barriers, including racism and ageism, but they often perceived these as opportunities for developing **perseverance**:

I think it's just unfortunately part of life and the experience, and you learn how to overcome things and how to process some of those experiences. ... I think for me, the thing that mattered to me most was the beneficiaries and the people that I was trying to help...so I stuck it out for them.

Indeed, the possibility of 'giving back' to their communities was a strong motivator for many to endure challenges. Ambassadors were able to articulate their understanding of the 'double benefit' in recognising that one benefit informs the other in a continuous cycle: their character is developed through helping their society, and they can help their society using that additional strength of character:

*...being able to support the communities that supported me is just my favourite thing, and I think if I did not have that **determination**, then I would not still be able to do that. That will always be more important to me than any soft skill that I might have developed, the ones that you do talk about in interviews and stuff.*





Discovering opportunities, inspiring and being inspired

It was noticeable that Ambassadors, as models of social responsibility and service, rarely chose to limit themselves to just one kind of social action. Very often there was a single starting point—a passion to solve an issue like food poverty, disability rights, radicalisation, or feminism—that launched their social action journey, but from there almost all Ambassadors spoke of branching out into other areas such as health, anti-racism, or environmental conservation. Often such moves were inspired by other young activists that they had connected with on the campaign.

The #iwill campaign has been a positive enabler in providing opportunities to do more, go further, and expand their horizons:

Being an #iwill Ambassador has meant that I am able to be a catalyst for change. They have given me access to all these different opportunities and given me the platform to campaign nationally for the issues I care about, the issues that matter to my local community, which has meant that my local community has been able to see an impact from the campaigning that I have done.

I think what I really enjoyed was that there were not any expectations to stick to what you know.

Being part of a unique community of support and inspiration was cited by all Ambassadors interviewed. Many have been inspired, learned from and found close friendships with other Ambassadors, and Ambassadors particularly valued the chance to spend free time together to socialise and exchange ideas:

I love listening to other Ambassadors. Whenever we have calls all together, there is nothing quite as inspiring as that.

For some, the discovery of this group of committed people was a welcome surprise:

...when I was campaigning by myself, I didn't know...I didn't have any idea that so many young people, passionate young people, were also campaigning like me.

Ambassadors identified a need for more young people to be recognised for their social action, but also encouraged others to participate:

...it is very hard, especially as a young person, to realise how much power you have and when you are involved in social action, you really get to see how much your words and your experiences can empower somebody else. It really fuels others when you get to shine and it's a very empowering thing for you to get to see other people your age shine as well. I think it is very important that everybody gets that experience sometime within their life.



Many Ambassadors identified **leadership** as a key strength they had developed through social action. However, they also talked about learning from others and recognising limitations as other key aspects of being an Ambassador. Almost all Ambassadors connected the Power of Youth to a need to recognise the validity of the lived experience of young people, and the importance of including their voices in decision-making.

Challenging stereotypes, defining their own lives

Almost all Ambassadors recognised that there are stereotypes about the kind of young people who participate in social action. Most indicated that these were based on social class or family income. Others spoke of encountering scepticism around their motivation for taking up social action, that many assumed they were “only doing it for their CV”, and that older adults often make negative assumptions about young people:

Yeah I think there [are] some stereotypes. I think the biggest one is that young people just don't really care about things if it doesn't concern them.

Yet Ambassadors emphasised that although there were personal advantages to social action in terms of building their career or advancing their educational opportunities, these were not a primary motivation for them:

...it's none of that for me...it's like, I have a genuine passion to go and help my community, and that's why I want to do it.

In most interviews, Ambassadors acknowledged that schools and teachers had provided the gateway that allowed

them to see how their actions could make an impact.

Many Ambassadors admitted to having experienced challenging starts to their lives, with bullying, social exclusion, poor mental health, socio-economic deprivation, and even terrorism featuring in their life stories. However, their decision to engage with social action has helped them to transcend these difficulties and instead define themselves and their own path. To be an #iwill Ambassador is to demonstrate great courage in the face of adversity, by taking steps to determine their own lives. One Ambassador noted:

...it's something that I think can be really life changing. I think it can give a sense of purpose where I know in my case it was, you know, it was really challenging just dealing with like mental health and feeling depressed and feeling anxious... just yeah, I mean really getting to grow in your own voice, and I guess feel valued and to see that you have something helpful and useful to share.

It is evident that social action has allowed these young people to explore their potential, build their character strengths, and shape their own worlds. Although #iwill Ambassadors are a hugely diverse group, they share in common an appreciation that participating in social action empowered them to live their lives differently. They are extraordinary young people, but they emphasise themselves that they are from ordinary backgrounds. They value the whole of their journey specifically because it has helped them to be who they are today, as one Ambassador expressed:

I think just about everything's changed, and I don't think I would – I wouldn't change anything: the good, the bad,

the ugly. Because ultimately that's made me who I am and hopefully it's made other people who they are, and it will shape things going forward.

As a group, #iwill Ambassadors are concerned for the voice of young people in the future, in that they are determined that inclusion should not be tokenistic. Yet in general, they remain distinctly hopeful; the evidence of young people taking up volunteering opportunities and social action during the COVID-19 pandemic has simply confirmed what many of them already knew: that young people care and they are eager to make a difference.

Being an #iwill Ambassador has meant a lot of things to me. It means that having an opportunity and a platform to raise my voice. It means having an opportunity to raise awareness...and it means that having an opportunity to help people and to be compassionate and empathising to the people around me, and to be serving the community in the best way possible.



Conclusion



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Through these interviews, it was clear that while no Ambassador's journey has been exactly the same as another's, there is some universality to the meaning each derives from the experience of being an Ambassador.

While many were not confident in using the language of character, in that very few Ambassadors naturally emphasised and deployed virtue terms when talking about their own development, the value that all of these young people see in social action was undeniable. As Ambassadors progress through their lives, it is evident that social action has become ever more embedded in their journeys and understandings of themselves, as they continue to reflect on how it impacts both upon their communities and their own character.

Moreover, there is a network that has been created by the #iwill campaign, founded on each young person's desire to speak with others like them, to listen to their experiences and plans for the future, and to affirm and empower each other to continue. All are determined to be heard, and to ensure others around them are given a voice too. The #iwill Ambassadors refuse to be pre-judged or to allow others to determine their lives for them. They display great humility in their priorities and concerns, and great courage in seeking to be a catalyst for change – regardless of the obstacles.



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