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The Vanity of Volunteerism

By Sara Mosle

I am sound asleep. The phone rings. I fumble for the receiver in the dark. James is calling collect.

"I'm at 125th Street and need a token," he says.

I strain my neck to see my bedside clock and flop back on my pillow, groaning.

"James, it's after midnight."

It is June 1999 and James is 13 years old. For the last six years, I have been a mentor to him and his older brother, Adam, and to several other kids who at one time all lived on or around a single block on West 164th Street in upper Manhattan. (To protect their privacy, I have used their middle names, except when they don't have a middle name, in which case I have used a nickname.) Although James and I go weeks at a time without talking -- his family can't afford a phone -- he sometimes calls me collect three times a day. We are in the middle of one of his calling jags. When the phone rings, I am a sleepy, grumpy and inadequate volunteer, partly because what James really needs isn't a token.

"You shouldn't be out this late," I say wearily. James is often out when I think a 13-year-old should be in bed. Despite the boom, his family has been in free fall for a year -- ever since his father lost his longtime job as a butcher when the store closed after its owner died unexpectedly. Soon, the family was evicted from its apartment, and the parents, who had been together all the time I had known them, split up -- although the break doesn't appear to be permanent. As a result, James and Adam have lived in two different shelters with their mother. Their father is working again, and their mother is newly employed, part time, as a consequence of welfare reform. The boys, who used to be on a tight leash, now frequently go unsupervised. Or at least, I think this is all correct. To be honest, I don't really know. I've cobbled a lot of it together from things James and Adam have said in passing and from conversations with one of Adam's teachers. (Partly because of the phone situation, I haven't spoken to the boys' parents in months.)

James is now saying something about how he was supposed to spend the night at his dad's apartment, on West 120th Street, but his father isn't in, and he thinks he misunderstood and that his father is at his mother's place in the projects south of Houston Street, and he doesn't have any money to get home, and it's dark and there are all these crazy drunk people wandering around.

My eyes are closed.

"Why don't you explain to the token clerk and see if he'll let you in," I suggest groggily. It would be hard to overestimate how much I don't want to go up there.

"I already tried that," he says miserably.

I am no longer even holding the phone -- it's lying next to me on my pillow. "You could try another entrance," I say softly. A sweet nothing.

"O.K." His voice is far away. I hear a click and a distant dial tone. I am drifting, I am dreaming. I am dreaming of a little boy named James who is lost in the dark. . . .

I sit bolt upright in bed, electrified by the knowledge that I am an evil person. I have to go get him. But where? On 125th Street? Or did he say 120th? I have no idea. Twenty terrible minutes later, the phone rings again. He is still on 125th Street. "Start walking down Broadway," I say. "I'll meet you at 110th." Soon, I am in a cab headed uptown. Of course, in the broader context of James's life, this kind of rescue mission is "vain," as one writer has put it, "in both senses of the word." But it's a balmy night, and suddenly there is no place I'd rather be -- which is to say, I'm getting something out of it, even if he isn't.

I am a volunteer. For three years, I taught public school in New York City, and since 1994, the summer after my last third-grade class, I have served as an unofficial mentor to the families of four of my former students -- Adam and James, Jaber (and his younger brother, Lloyd), Keemy (and his older siblings, Clara, Elizabeth and Angelo) and Burger, plus a few of their friends. At any given time, "the group," as we have all come to call it, has numbered from 6 to 12 kids, a few of them Dominican, the rest of them black. I am 36 and white.

Over the years, we have gone ice skating, bowling, to movies, to museums and on the occasional overnight trip (to Washington, the east end of Long Island) and have generally hung out. I have been on hand for happy moments (the 100th birthday of Jaber's great-great-grandmother) and sad ones (his grandfather's funeral). When I met "my" kids, they were 7 and 8 years old, smaller than I am, and liked to hold my hand when we crossed the street. Now they are 15 and 16, nearly all are in high school and they hulk over me in puffy parkas or with long legs and gangly arms protruding out of shorts and tank tops. Not one of them would be caught dead holding

my hand.

For more than a decade, politicians and civic leaders have been looking to volunteers like me to take over the government's role in providing vital services to the poor. Although the movement arguably began in 1988 with the candidate George Bush's invocation of "a thousand points of light" as a response to Reagan-era cutbacks in social spending, it has been embraced by the current Democratic administration, which has continued those cutbacks, and culminated in the 1997 President's Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia, where President Clinton and Gen. Colin Powell touted the power of volunteerism. Now George W. Bush has picked up his father's theme of "a kinder, gentler" America by pushing "charitable choice" -- the provision in the 1996 welfare reform bill that allows faith-based organizations to contract with government to provide social services to the poor. (Al Gore supports it, too, though less vigorously.)

"Compassionate conservatives" would probably claim that I am the kind of "caring adult" who can transform the lives of disadvantaged kids more effectively than any government program. I'm all for volunteering, but I would disagree. While I don't doubt that I have had some positive effects on my kids' lives -- studies show that mentoring can reduce dropout rates and drug use among teenagers -- they have mostly been of the "boosting self-esteem" variety that conservatives, in other contexts, usually disdain. Besides, I'm not a very good volunteer. To work, mentoring has to be performed consistently, over a sustained period of time and preferably one on one. For the first couple of years, I saw my kids as often as twice a week. But now I'm lucky if I see them once a month, and I almost never see them individually. In their lives, I'm less a caring adult than a random one. And my failure is representative.

Although 55 percent of Americans reported that they volunteered at some point in 1998 -- a 7 percent rise over 1995 -- this jump does little more than recover ground that was lost in the early 1990's and represents just a 1 percent increase over 1989. Moreover, the total number of hours that people are giving has actually declined. "It's a new trend," says Sara Melendez, the president of Independent Sector, which compiled this data. "People are volunteering, but when they do, it's more of a one-shot deal -- half a day one Saturday, instead of once a week for x number of weeks." Overall, Americans donated 400 million fewer hours in 1998 than they did in 1995.

Consequently, while Powell has made recruiting 100,000 new mentors a top priority of America's Promise, his volunteer outfit, there is little evidence that people are sufficiently answering his call. In New York, for instance, Big Brothers/Big Sisters receives just 4,000 inquiries each year from potential mentors. Of these, two-thirds never follow up once they learn they have to commit to seeing their kids at least twice a month. Another 700 lose interest after the initial training session or are eliminated through the program's rigorous screening process. Only 600 people ever become mentors -- this in a city with more than one million schoolchildren -- and

nationally, the program has a waiting list of some 50,000 kids.

To help nonprofits cope with this new unreliable work force, groups like Impact Online and New York Cares have sprung up that act like temp agencies, matching the interests (and busy schedules) of what might be called the impulse volunteer -- someone with an urge to give but only a few hours to kill -- with openings, arranged by time slot and geographical location. But this Filofax approach to giving often robs volunteerism of the very thing that was supposed to recommend it over government in the first place -- namely, the personal connection that develops when you regularly visit, say, the same homebound AIDS patient.

And in a volunteer's market, not every need has a buyer. "People will come in and do a project -- a school painting, a school wiring -- and think they've done a good service and go away," says Paul Clolery, editor of *The NonProfit Times*. "But it's not the type of traditional, week-in and week-out volunteering that a lot of organizations really need." No case perhaps better illustrates how idealism has run amok than that of Bank of America, which under the rubric of "volunteerism" encouraged its employees in San Francisco to "adopt an A.T.M." -- mentoring it, so to speak, by visiting it regularly, sprucing up its surroundings, wiping away the little smudges from its face -- until the California labor commissioner ruled that the company had violated labor laws by trying to get its employees to work without pay.

The experience of Meals on Wheels in Dallas is typical. It can't find enough volunteers to commit to even a few hours a month to help deliver meals to the city's elderly shut-ins. "People can't get away during the middle of the day," says Helen Bruant, the program's director. "So, they ask, 'Why don't you deliver in the evenings?' Well, we looked at that. But for a lot of our clients, this is their only meal. They eat half at lunch and save the other half for dinner. Plus, it's not good for the elderly to eat a big meal at the end of the day." Therefore, the program must hire 30 percent of its drivers. Even paying people, Bruant cannot find enough help. "We can't compete with McDonald's," she says. "It can be draining working with the elderly. A lot of people would prefer to flip burgers." Yet, if anything, the need is increasing. "The aged population has grown by leaps and bounds in the last decade," Bruant says, "but giving and government financing haven't increased."

Indeed, according to a study by the U.S. Conference of Mayors released in December, requests for emergency food and housing have climbed at their steepest rate since the early 1990's. As a result, the heads of some of the most reputable nonprofits -- the United Way, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities -- have reported that they can't keep up with rising demand for their services. "We're having to turn people away, or ration portions, to stretch supplies," says Deborah Leff, the president of America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest network of soup kitchens. And while charitable giving is up sharply, the growth has not kept pace with reductions in government aid to the poor. "People have replaced some of it with volunteering, some of it with cash, but not all of it," says Richard Steinberg, a professor of economics at the joint campus of Indiana and Purdue Universities in Indianapolis. He estimates

that for every dollar of assistance that's cut, charitable organizations can recoup at most a third.

As someone who once worked in the New York public school system, I am not inured to the problems of government bureaucracy. I have not forgotten the asbestos crisis (which sealed my own classroom), the idiocy of the custodians' contract, the mind-numbing hours I spent at the Board of Education trying to get someone, anyone, to answer a straightforward question about licensing. But what's so odd about the current volunteer movement is how the broad claims often made on its behalf run counter to the on-the-ground testimony of those, like Bruant, who actually do the hard work of ministering to the poor. Compared with someone like her, of course, I am pathetic. Still, in the words of a protester's placard at the volunteer summit, I've "volunteered enough to know volunteering isn't enough." As a substitute for the social safety net, I am as inefficient, indifferent and arbitrary as any government program. The problem isn't with volunteering, but with what we're asking it to do.

"I'm going to punch you," said Jaber (the name rhymes with Babar). His arm was cocked, his fist like a hard plum. It was the fall of 1993, and we were standing near the front of my third-grade classroom. His eyes were dark, like windows with the shades suddenly pulled down. I knew he wasn't going to hit me, but he didn't know it. Jaber was often angry and sullen. (He is nothing like this now.) He would crawl under his desk or into the coat closet, and no amount of pleading could coax him out. You would peer in and see his tight little face, the size of a saucer, staring back from beneath a pile of parkas.

"You can hit me if you want," I said, "but then we'll have to call your mom, and that probably won't be much fun." I was trying to be reasonable. "Or," I said -- I always tried to give my students an "or" -- you could not hit me, and we could get together at lunch and maybe there would be some other way of working this out." He considered his options. He lowered his fist. This was his secret strength. Even when enraged, Jaber was willing to talk through anything.

My school was "under registration review," meaning that its reading scores were so low that it was in danger of being taken over by the state. The school grouped students by ability, and that year, I had Room 306, indicating that I was teaching the third grade and had the sixth, or "bottom," monolingual class. There was nothing subtle -- no "apple" or "banana" groups -- about the distinction; everyone knew what the number meant. I had twice as many boys as girls -- not because boys are less intelligent than girls at that age, but because they're rowdier. They get labeled behavior problems and are often put in the worst classes. This is one reason I ended up mentoring boys instead of girls.

And in truth, the class was challenging. Although Adam and Keemy were sociable and outgoing, they had severe learning disabilities and entered third grade still reading in primers. They were best friends and lived in two-parent households. Burger and Jaber were stronger academically but remained far below grade level. Jaber, a gifted athlete, lived with his mother and his younger brother, Lloyd. Both of Burger's parents had died. He was being reared by a disabled grandmother who struggled to care for him. While other

kids labored to trace action heroes, Burger was a wonderful artist and could draw almost anything freehand. He was also a better reader than his scores indicated; he just got bored easily and couldn't sit through the exams.

Had I not first seen my kids for five hours a day, 180 days a year, I doubt that I would have ever learned that vision problems accounted for a lot of Adam's reading difficulties or that Jaber's older brother was beating up on him (which accounted for some of his anger then) or that James loved to watch cooking shows on television (an odd fact that emerged on one of the many afternoons that he and Adam visited my classroom after school). As a teacher, I had a legitimate role in my kids' lives. As a volunteer, however, my involvement has been far more artificial and superficial. I'm a day-tripper.

Volunteering has always been inefficient. Most volunteers are concentrated in affluent suburbs far from blighted urban neighborhoods, where their assistance is needed most. "There is an extraordinary mismatch," says Lester Salamon, the director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, "between the geographical locus of the need and the geographical locus of the giving." It would often take me 45 minutes each way by subway just to pick up my kids. If we then headed back downtown, that's another round trip. I would often travel three hours just to take my group on a two-hour excursion.

Partly because of this mismatch, volunteering is also regressive. Far from alleviating the gap between rich and poor, it tends to aggravate it. That's because people are most likely to give if they are asked to by someone who knows them or if they already have strong ties to an organization. This is why universities do such a good job of fund-raising: they get your old college classmate Biff to call you up and ask you to contribute to an institution to which you already have a connection. It's a double whammy.

Consequently, time and money tend to stay in a donor's immediate social -- and economic -- world. When people talk about giving, they are often talking about contributing to institutions, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the New York City Opera, that confer prestige on the donor and improve the quality of life primarily for the middle class. Despite the roaring economy, organizations that work with the poor have actually seen their proportion of the charitable pie narrow in recent years. "Poverty relief, disaster relief -- it's a very thin slice," says Ann Kaplan, the editor of the annual report Giving U.S.A.

In fact, a lot of what passes for volunteering used to be called simply "parenting": people helping out in their own children's schools or coaching their own children's soccer teams. Kids with parents who already have resources end up benefiting the most. (One reason I even have time to volunteer is that I'm single and don't have children of my own.) And while the rich give to the rich, the poor, it is worth pointing out, give to the poor. Keemy's older brother, Angelo, won a national award for volunteering some 30 hours a week handing out used clothes to people in his neighborhood who are even needier than he is.

While it might seem, at first glance, as if I am an exception to some of these rules -- after all, I am crossing race and class lines to see

my kids -- I am not. I didn't decide, after some careful needs-benefit analysis, to become a volunteer. I would have never called Big Brothers/Big Sisters on my own, for the same reason that most Americans don't: reluctance to commit to a regular schedule. (As a journalist, I'm often on the road.) I also have a proper respect for the flake factor in my personality. Rather, I fell into volunteering -- the way a socialite suddenly finds herself in charge of the charity ball. I was asked to give by someone I knew well (Adam) to an institution (in my case, a neighborhood, Washington Heights) to which I already had strong ties (because of teaching). He didn't ask me to mentor him in so many words. He just walked 100 blocks to my apartment one day after school to see me. It was the hard sell.

Around this time, I wrote an Op-Ed article for The Times about how my students didn't have enough opportunities to play. In response, I got a letter from a group in Washington called the American Committee to Invigorate the King Holiday, which seemed to be some quasi-civil-rights organization with an executive committee in perpetual "formation." The group offered me a few thousand dollars to start a program for my former students. The money was funneled through my old school, as it had to go to a nonprofit organization, and I invited Adam, Jaber, Burger and Keemy, some of their siblings and three girls from my old class to participate.

Some might argue that this is how the system should work: plucky Op-Ed writer gets nongovernment money to run efficient after-school program, entrepreneur-style, for former students. But I wasn't efficient. I enjoyed no economies of scale. My little program served just 12 kids. And to the extent that I succeeded, my success can't be replicated on a large scale. There were 1,500 other children at my old school who could have greatly benefited from an after-school program. Where were these kids' mentors? And even if the volunteers were suddenly to materialize en masse, who would finance their programs? There aren't enough American Committees to Invigorate the King Holiday out there to support them.

Although I was never a better volunteer than I was that first year, my success owed far more to the financial and institutional support I was receiving than to my idealism. My apartment in New York was too small for me to have all my kids over at once. Because the school was the ostensible sponsor of my program, it let me borrow a classroom after hours for my group. This meant desks! And access to scissors, crayons and glue. There was a chalkboard for writing out assignments, a tape player for playing music, an easel for displaying charts, a class library and so on. Because we were officially associated with a school, we could also ride the subway free whenever we took field trips on weekday afternoons. Together, these items -- the room, the basic supplies, the free transportation -- constituted a considerable capital investment in my program, all of it provided at taxpayer expense. This in turn helped me make the most of my grant money. "Government spending causes volunteering," the economist Richard Steinberg explains. "You can't have a volunteer in a school without a schoolhouse. Government institution-building increases volunteering."

It certainly made my own efforts more effective. My kids and I were able to do all sorts of projects. We learned about art theory, which colors made which, how to draw a portrait (how the eyes, surprisingly, are in the center of your face), went to museums, made

panel narratives like Jacob Lawrence and cut-out compositions like Matisse. We studied jazz -- I played them "My Favorite Things" from "The Sound of Music" and then the Coltrane version -- and we talked about the importance of imitation, or practice, and improvisation. We saw documentaries, traveled to Queens to see an exhibit on Louis Armstrong, attended the Young People's Concerts at Lincoln Center, where Wynton Marsalis had the kids riffing on plastic kazoos. I was demanding and strict. We saw only movies that I deemed appropriate, even when the kids moaned, as in the case of "Babe," that they didn't want to see "no pig movie" and that "that's wack." I often felt like a slightly fraudulent magician, pulling back the curtain on each new delight of the city. It was a season of firsts: the first time ice skating, the first time bowling, the first trip on the Circle Line cruise around Manhattan, the first trip to the zoo. Some of it was almost obscenely easy: What do you mean you've never been on a swing?

That's not to say everything always went smoothly. There was the time Lloyd had a meltdown on 161st Street and St. Nicholas Avenue -- hysterically screaming, kicking, my physically having to restrain him so he wouldn't bolt into traffic, as people stared, shaking their heads at my poor "parenting" skills -- all because I wouldn't let him go to McDonald's. And there was the time I started yelling at the grandmother of Tyree, a boy who was briefly in our group, on the steps of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington. The occasion was the 1996 Children's March. I was working as a writer and had persuaded a magazine to send me -- and my kids -- to cover the event. (The grant money had long since run out.) I drove 12 kids, and Tyree's grandmother, who was acting as a chaperon, down in a rented van. Most of the kids had never been out of New York. The creative financing required that we actually attend the march, squandering a precious afternoon. But the kids had fun, creating water-bottle worlds for the slugs and tadpoles from the reflecting pool -- until Tyree's grandmother reduced several to tears by dumping out their aquariums.

She and I finally came to verbal blows next to the Apollo spacecraft. We were waiting to see an IMAX movie on the space program, and the grandmother, who had filled in for another parent at the last minute and had been insisting that we return to New York since before we had arrived, was again demanding that we leave immediately. I had just bought the tickets and had no intention of wasting them. "Let's take it outside," I said, preposterously, as the kids looked on, goggle-eyed, barely able to contain their snickers. To this day, Keemy likes to refer to "the time Ms. Mosle and Tyree's grandmother got in a fight." But by and large, the trip was a success. We visited the White House and the Lincoln Memorial, among other landmarks -- although for the kids, the highlight was spending the night at the Holiday Inn.

Still, after two years, my mentoring was beginning to seem awfully vague and open-ended. I was earning about \$40,000 a year freelance, and several of my kids had begun to age out of the "child" category. They could no longer ride the subway free and were beginning to require "adult" admissions, effectively tripling the cost of many outings. A bowling trip, including meals and transportation, often cost me more than \$200. Plus, the kids were tired of bowling. Although the three girls had dropped out, the group was becoming unwieldy. Whenever I went up to the block, a crowd of kids would form, begging me to take them with me, as

the drug dealers on the corner looked on, smirking. I wasn't very good at saying no -- it all seemed so arbitrary, who could come and who couldn't -- and I began to understand why the age-grouping of kids by grade had ever arisen as a custom: it provided a way for adults to care about children, and then to stop caring about them, without the kids' ever feeling abandoned.

My apartment was littered with "to do" lists -- get all the kids tutors, get them into summer camp -- that I never quite made good on because of the logistical or financial hurdles involved. Even the Washington trip had been little more than a grand gesture on my part to make up for the fact that I was no longer seeing as much of the kids. And when I did see them, I found I was becoming less and less ambitious: instead of a "unit" on jazz, we had seen an awful lot of movies lately. Their titles testified to the growing poverty of my imagination: had I really taken them to see "Spawn" and "Home Alone 3"?

In "the tipping point," Malcolm Gladwell's book about social epidemics, he cites an experiment devised by two Princeton psychologists to test why people give. The experimenters met individually with a group of seminarians and asked them to prepare a short talk. Some were asked to discuss the parable of the Good Samaritan. Others were given a more neutral topic. Then, just as they were about to leave for their presentations, they were told either that they were running late or had a few minutes to spare. On the way, the seminarians would encounter a man slumped in an alleyway, coughing and groaning in obvious distress. The idea was to see who would stop and help. Invariably, people assume that those who were asked to talk about the Good Samaritan were the most likely to assist the man. In fact, the only factor that influenced the outcome was time. Among those who thought they were in a hurry, only 10 percent stopped to help. Among those with extra time, 63 percent stopped. As Gladwell concludes, context, far more than conviction, influences behavior.

One obvious reason for the decline in volunteering is that Americans are working harder. "With the rise of the two-income family," Paul Clolery says, "the traditional volunteer who stayed at home with the kids no longer exists." According to one study, middle-class parents now punch the clock 335 hours more each year -- that's eight solid workweeks -- than they did in 1979. "I don't know how you ask people who are working 50-, 60-hour weeks, who already have children and elderly parents to care for, to volunteer on a more regular basis," Sara Melendez says. "The rhetoric about volunteering hasn't caught up with the reality of people's lives."

Between 1995 and 1997, for example, I cut back the amount of time I saw my kids by three-fourths, to about once a month. The reason wasn't that in 1995 I was a good person and in 1997 I was a bad one. Rather, in 1995 I had a flexible job with a lot of downtime, and in 1997 I took a full-time job as an editor and often worked into the evening or on weekends.

Before I made the shift, I began to look for an exit out of my kids' lives. At one point, I was approached about a job in Washington and figured that was how my mentoring would end: I would leave the city. But the opportunity fell through. I eventually decided I would get my four original students into a good, small junior high. (I also helped Angelo get into a good high school.) The younger

siblings, I figured, could then follow suit. My idea was not to improve the city's schools systematically -- my children would almost certainly take the places of other poor, equally deserving students -- but to pass the kids off, into new caring hands, like batons.

"Look at this pizza!" Jaber exclaimed in mock horror as we sat in a booth at John's Pizzeria on the Upper West Side. The pie had arrived slightly burned around the edges, and Jaber was feigning outrage. "Why do they give us the black pizza?" He intoned, as the other kids dissolved into helpless giggles. "Do they give the black pizza to the white man? Nooooooo!" he said. "They give the black pizza to the black man!" I had never heard Jaber talk this way. "Should the black man accept the black pizza. No! The black man should demand the white pizza!" I was laughing, too.

I took the performance to be an impression of Al Sharpton, who had been preaching outside Jaber's window during the previous month to protest the death of Kevin Cedeno, a 16-year-old boy who was shot in the back by police on the corner of 164th Street and Amsterdam Avenue in the wee hours of April 6, 1997. I had innocently picked up my paper the next morning, and there on the front page were pictures of the block -- my block, our block -- cordoned off with yellow police tape, the familiar hubcap store and bodega where the kids and I often bought sodas in the background. I thought, He could have been "my" kid.

At the time of the shooting, I had not seen the group in months. In some ways my strategy had worked. At their new school, Jaber and Adam had come under the wing of a wonderful teacher named Natalie Novod, whom I had known my first year teaching and who worked with them individually as a "resource room" instructor. (Burger and Keemy didn't have her, which they frequently lamented.) Novod later told me that the kids had been completely unstrung by the shooting, and I took Jaber's routine to be just another way of coming to grips with Cedeno's death. But the kids continued to call. Before long, we started seeing each other again, though less frequently, and I realized that I wouldn't be breaking my bond with them. I resisted this knowledge for a while. Then I didn't.

"Crack dealers be wandering all over the ocean," James said. We were walking on a path toward the sand dunes near Amagansett, on the eastern end of Long Island, on a summer night in 1998. Seven city-bred kids, scared of the country dark, were simultaneously hanging off my arms. I had driven them early that morning to a cottage I had rented. Several had claimed to have never seen the Atlantic -- even at Coney Island. How could you live on an island off the coast of America and have never gone to the ocean? All afternoon we had played in the waves. The kids learned about tides (why was the water receding?) and the principles of sand-castle construction (namely, don't build too close to the water). James, marveling that nature would leave "free" shells on the beach, hauled 100 or so back to the cottage. We barbecued in the backyard. Burger revealed heretofore undiscovered skills of food presentation as Jaber dragged a boogie board around the yard, the wrist leash attached to his neck like a giant ornament worn by Flava Flav. It was a cloudless night, and I pointed out the Big Dipper and the Milky Way. (More firsts.) Down the beach, there was a bonfire, and a party, and for a while we lingered at its edges.

The cottage had only two rooms, so we separated the mattress and box springs to create four double beds. I slept on the sofa in the living room. I felt like a single mom at her son's first slumber party. The kids talked among themselves. There were thumps and giggles and some mooning. There was discussion of a girl who appeared to be the object of much sexual fantasy. When things threatened to get out of hand, I mouthed the clichés of parenthood: "Don't make me come in there!" This elicited only tantalized squeals. The kids appealed to me with loud wails, "Ms. Mooozzzlleeee, nigger put toothpaste in my hair!" or alternately tried to "get away" with things. "Shhhh! Ms. Mosle will hear you," in a loud stage whisper. I'd say, "I can hear you." More peals of laughter. Finally, at about 3 in the morning, the house was quiet. Sometime later, a car alarm went off. I heard a tiny voice in the dark. It was James: "I told you crack dealers be wandering all over the ocean."

My renewed commitment, however, didn't mean I was any more effective as a volunteer. Nineteen ninety-eight was not a good year for most of my kids or their families, but I did little more than stand on the sidelines and watch helplessly as events unfolded in sometimes tragic ways. After Adam and Jaber's family was evicted, the boys began to unravel. Adam, who had always had good attendance, stopped going to school and was apparently hanging out on the streets in the South Bronx. He was avoiding our outings. James also seemed at loose ends. One afternoon at work, I got a call from the Toys "R" Us near the shelter where his family was living in Brooklyn. It seemed that James had damaged some product -- he often spent long hours in toy stores yearningly looking at video games he couldn't afford -- and was being held by security. The store couldn't reach his mother (since there was no phone). Could I pick him up? Otherwise, he would be turned over to the police. I did the quick calculations in my mind: at least 40 minutes by subway just to get there. It was 4:30, and I was editing an article that had to go to press that afternoon. It was out of the question. (The security guard took pity and let him go.)

Burger, meanwhile, was having trouble in school, and the school recommended that he be placed in foster care because his grandmother was having a hard time caring for him. For a while, he lived with an uncle, in a kind of compromise, but was eventually placed in a group house in Brooklyn during the week and returned home on weekends.

Keemy's father, although a present and caring parent, has struggled with drugs. In 1998 his addiction worsened. He started stealing from the family, and Keemy's mother threw him out. He broke back into the apartment, shattering a window, which cut up Keemy's sister Clara. For the first and only time, one of my kids called me to ask directly for assistance. Keemy left a heartbreaking message on my machine, asking, all in a rush, if I could lend the family some money. (I did.) His mother was now scared his father would return again and wanted to move. After months of wrangling, they finally got a new place, but it turned out to be in a terrible neighborhood, and everyone came to regret the move, particularly after the father and the family were reconciled.

Sometimes my kids would just drop these devastating bombs. One day as we were riding the subway downtown, another kid,

William, a late arrival to the group, was sitting off to one side. He looked different. I realized that his clothes were too big. I asked him what was up. He quietly explained that his father had recently been released from jail. William had begged his mother and sister to let him live with them. "I didn't know my father and wanted to have a relationship with him," he explained. His mother and sister were reluctant but relented. Shortly thereafter, everyone but the father went on a family outing in Queens. In their absence, the father stole every item in the apartment -- clothes, CD's, even the food in the refrigerator. William now felt horribly guilty. A few months later, in a separate incident, his apartment building burned. For the next several months, the family lived, with no heat, in the charred shell as they waited for new housing. Only Jaber's life remained relatively stable during this time.

But this recitation of sorrow creates a hopeless picture. None of these kids are in any serious kind of trouble. They are all good, sweet, decent kids. After six months or so, Adam stopped hanging out in the Bronx, not because of any intervention on my part, but because he broke his leg and was homebound in a cast for several weeks. This broke the spell of the streets. Angelo, Keemy's older brother, has continued to excel and is headed to college in the fall on a partial scholarship. (I am also helping, by paying his room and board.) Burger seems happy in his group home, and this may in fact be a good solution for him -- although it is worth noting that as a volunteer, I had nothing to do with it. Jaber and Keemy are both doing well. And William -- well, William is the Rock of Gibraltar: bright, self-possessed. He will almost certainly go to college. I say that. He should and wants to. But unless he wins a full scholarship, he will have a hard time affording it. His family is destitute.

For all the talk about children in this country, we do very little for them -- or their families. What my kids really need, I can't give them: better housing, less crowded schools, access to affordable health care, a less punitive juvenile justice system, and for their parents, better child care (so they can work without leaving their kids unattended) and a living wage. Even the churches, in whose name the claims of volunteering are often made, have begun to protest. In February, a surprisingly large and diverse coalition of religious leaders -- from the conservative National Association of Evangelicals to the liberal United States Catholic Conference -- came together in Washington to inaugurate a new group, Call to Renewal, to insist that government do more to fight poverty. "Since welfare reform passed, all these problems have been dumped at churches' feet," says the Rev. Jim Wallis, one of the organization's founders. "But we can't do it all."

As it stands, the government isn't even doing what it said it would. One reason that hunger and homelessness are on the rise is that many states, including New York, have prevented even the deserving working poor from receiving basic benefits, like health care and food stamps, to which they are legally entitled. Nationwide, a million people have lost Medicaid benefits and are now uninsured. As a result, many working families are worse off financially than they were under the old system. Minnesota, by contrast, has offered ample assistance -- cash allowances to supplement income, job training, more opportunities for health and child care -- in addition to requiring that welfare recipients work. The approach hasn't been cheap, but the results, according to a widely praised study released

in June, have been remarkable: not only have poverty and homelessness declined but the marriage rate has also risen, domestic abuse is down, truancy rates have fallen and children are doing better in school. The best way to help kids, in short, is not to recruit strangers to take the place of parents, but to help those -- their families and teachers -- who are already in the best position to help them.

That's not to say that volunteering has no value. But it doesn't offer a systematic solution to entrenched problems like hunger, poverty or homelessness. If I had to say what I've done for my kids, I'd point to "the Six Flags effect," named after our first trip to the amusement park two years ago. "It's going to be a scorcher -- 103 degrees," my clock radio announced on the morning of our departure. An hour or so later, I and six teenage boys crammed into a Ford Escort -- two in front, four in back -- that I had rented from Rent-a-Wreck. It didn't have air-conditioning. Jamming to Hot 97, their favorite station, we drove along the sweltering highway as they tried to top one another with brave boasts about which rides they would soon conquer. None of them had ever been to Six Flags. By the time we got to the park, even I couldn't wait, despite the heat, to witness their first roller-coaster ride.

But once inside, the mood suddenly darkened. I led them to a set of airborne swings that on the scare-o-meter ranked just above a merry-go-round. Suddenly, my tough inner-city kids were balking. "I'm not going on no swing ride," Jaber announced first. Keemy chimed in, "That's wack!" It's just a giant swing, I implored. Remember swings? We'd been on swings. It was this way ride after ride. Adam and Burger were slightly more adventurous. Through sheer force of will, I managed to get them and James onto the Runaway Mine Train; their shocked, amazed expressions afterward at their own bravery were worth the price of admission. But I couldn't even lure the others onto the Ferris wheel. I kept trying to explain that the scariest ride we had been on all day was the New Jersey Turnpike. But they were unmoved. I was dumbfounded. When I was their age, I had already graduated to the full-throated screamers. What was going on here?

Then I realized: when I was their age, I had been going to Six Flags since the time I was 2. I had watched an older brother try every ride before I did, giving me confidence that I wouldn't die on, say, the parachute plunge. Over the years, I was slowly introduced to each new level of fright. To my kids, however, Six Flags was a foreign world to which they had been introduced all at once, relatively late in life. They were 13 and 14, already at that tender age of adolescence when they weren't inclined to set themselves up for embarrassment or ridicule by trying a ride they couldn't fully predict their reaction to. But if Six Flags scared them, how frightening must a real roller coaster -- like college -- seem? How do you imagine a world that you've never been to or seen? If I've done anything for my kids, it's to introduce them to new worlds: chopsticks, Avery Fisher Hall, the Staten Island Ferry, Mexican food, Duke Ellington, even the Hamptons.

They have done the same for me. A year later, we returned to Six Flags, and sure enough, the kids were now nonchalant, pronouncing

rides "boring" that they found terrifying just a year before. Some of this was clearly bravado. But it's as if their entire youth had been condensed into a few months. They had gone from being "babies," as they would put it, to adults, without ever getting to enjoy the time in between. I sometimes felt this about their entire lives. When I first started seeing my kids, people would smile at us on the subway, as in, "Look at the nice white lady with the cute little black children." Now I found, when I was standing at the center of a group of teenage boys, people sometimes shot me expressions of alarm, as in, "Are you O.K.?"

In the public's eyes, my kids had morphed, in the matter of one or two years, from being "cute" to being potential superpredators. I often noticed as we walked around the Upper West Side how people gave us a wide berth, how store managers stiffened when we walked in, how people moved when we sat down in a theater, how, if I hailed a cab and my kids stepped off the curb, it would screech away or how, incredibly, the ticket agents at the Museum of Modern Art once refused us admission, insisting that a group of six with one chaperon was too large -- would six Chapin girls have received the same treatment? -- until I threatened unspecified legal action. I wanted to hit people when these things happened. My kids just shrugged. It wasn't news to them, and it shouldn't have been to me. But all I can say is that it's not the same until it happens to you.

I finally did leave New York, as I hoped I would. (I now live in Texas.) But I am not happy to have abandoned my kids. While I would be lying if I said I didn't sometimes still wish that my kids' lives had never become linked to mine, in truth, when I try to imagine my life without them in it, I can't: it would all seem so pointless and empty, I think -- my 30's with nothing to speak of but career.

"When did I first meet you?" James asked in February, a few weeks before I left. I was paying him to help me pack up. As he worked, I was trying to reassure him that I would be coming back, that we would stay in touch, that I would even have a toll-free number, so he could continue to call me "collect." For his part, he was trying to earn enough money to buy one of his beloved video games.

"You remember," I said. He claimed not to. "You were 7," I said. "You used to come with Adam to my classroom after school."

"Oh, yeah," he replied.

I suddenly realized I had known him half his life.

"If we're going to insist on smaller government and lower taxes," says Sara Melendez at Independent Sector, "then we're going to have to give more individually. But if what we're really saying is that we're giving as much as we can, that we're volunteering as much as we can, then we have a choice. We can either say, 'I don't care what happens to people in need,' or we can make sure that we have the government policies in place to pick up the slack."

One night, as I stood on the block of West 164th Street, the usual crowd having formed, a kid who hoped to join our group cried out,

"Ms. Mosle, you need to start a center!" I laughed. I knew what he meant. What these kids need -- what all these kids need -- isn't me, but a real after-school program.

Photos: The author takes "the group" to Amagansett . . .; where they compete for Scrabble points . . .; and go for walks in the great outdoors. (Sylvia Plachy)(Brown Brothers)(New York Times Photo Archives)

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