

Teens Get Real

Adolescents get a bad rap today, but many are choosing an unfamiliar route: Doing good

BY ANGIE CANNON AND CAROLYN KLEINER



“When people aren’t really doing anything after school, that’s where trouble starts. People get bored and start joining with the wrong crowd.”

Master Madison, distributing free clothing in Washington Heights

It’s not even 9 o’clock on a Saturday morning, but this gang of teens is already up to something: painting a needy family’s house a lovely shade of mint green. “All I hear is how teens are lazy or scary,” says Jay Perez, 18, armed with an array of brushes and working on the window trim. “But we’re proof that teenagers are still good—that not all of us are lazy, that we can get stuff done.”

It’s been nearly one year since the massacre at Columbine High School. Families in Littleton, Colo., are preparing to spend April 20 remembering the dead and talking about how they’re rebuilding a shattered community. “Sometimes I just want to shout at night, ‘I don’t know why it was us,’” Sergio Gonzales, a senior at Columbine told the *Washington Post*. “It isn’t the regular life of a teenager.” Meanwhile, others around the country are calling for stricter gun control, less violence in popular culture, and more help for truly troubled teens.

But the loudest response to Columbine comes from kids themselves, who say that despite unspeakably brutal deeds by a few troubled peers, teenagers aren’t all bad. Many experts concur: “I think kids have gotten a bad rap literally for centuries,” says Samuel Halperin, senior fellow at the American Youth Policy Forum. “But if we are talking about a generation of young people, I think you could argue that they are the best we’ve had.”

MASTER MADISON, 15, gazes at a hill full of broken bottles and beat-up tires at a local park as he waxes philosophical about litter, graffiti, and homelessness in the Washington Heights section of New York City, where he has spent most of his life. “Why would you throw stuff on the floor, when there’s a garbage [can] right there on the corner?” he wonders. “I want to let people know: Don’t do that, make this Earth a better place,

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, APRIL 17, 2000

SCIENCE & IDEAS

make Washington Heights a better place.”

In the past three years or so, Master has logged more than 400 hours of community service with the help of Fresh Youth Initiatives, a local nonprofit organization. Although a growing number of teenagers are doing community work to fulfill graduation requirements, Master’s service is strictly voluntary. Though his family recently moved to Harlem, the ninth grader still travels an hour and a half by bus and subway to his old neighborhood every day after school, and most Saturdays, too, to lend a hand. He’s always at it: picking up discarded McDonald’s wrappers in parks, covering up graffiti with rainbow-colored murals, or making sandwiches and—his favorite—sewing sleeping bags for the homeless. “It’s service, but it’s mad fun,” says Master, looking like every other teen, in a black T-shirt and baggy black sweats, as he rakes up a pile of dead leaves.

Master remembers the moment he first felt the do-good urge: He spotted his favorite cousin cleaning up the park behind his old apartment building and decided to join in. “It just hit me that I didn’t want to live someplace where there was garbage around, graffiti all over, a lot of homeless people, just a lot of bad things happening, because someone might come here and say, ‘Washington Heights, that’s not a good place to grow up in.’”

He also knows that service has kept him out of trouble. “When people aren’t really doing anything after school, that’s where trouble starts. People get bored and start joining with the wrong crowd, and they get arrested, get hurt, get killed,” he explains, noting that he initially dived into community work and pulled away from certain friends, “because of a lot of bad stuff they were doing, like smoking weed or selling it, or stealing from stores.”

About a quarter of all high school students today regularly perform community service, while an additional 40 percent do so occasionally. Those rates had been fairly stable since the mid-1970s; but during the 1990s, they began rising. James Youniss, a psychology professor at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., believes part of the explanation is generational. “In the ‘60s and ‘70s, it was activists against tradition. In the ‘80s, you had an apathetic generation, and in the ‘90s, kids were coming back to the idea that they should have a hand in helping change society,” he says.

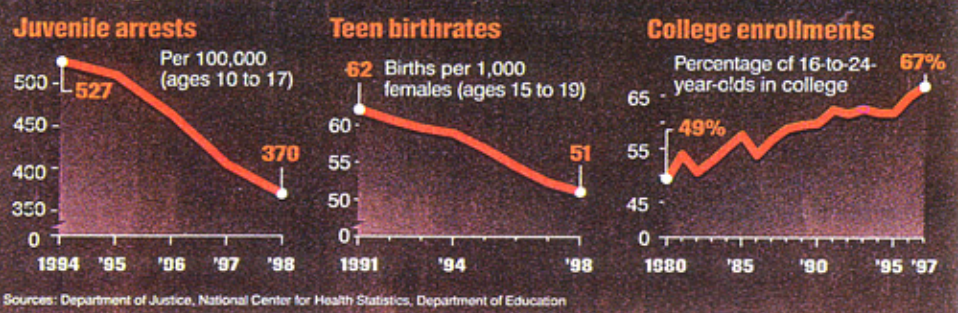
“If I can save another person’s life or make that person feel a little better or more comfortable, that feels better than money,” says Master, who wants to become a brain surgeon. Service has clearly changed how he looks at the world—and his own life. “In the past, things like home-

less people just didn’t bother me. I was like, it’s not my problem,” he says. “Now I feel bad . . . I want to know what I can do to help.” Doing this work also has made him grateful. “It’s made me realize that even though I don’t have everything I want, a lot of people don’t have what I have,” he relates. “I may not be able to get all the name-brand clothes or the best sneakers, to stay in fashion, but I should be happy for what I’ve got on now.”

As Master and a motley crew of peers

drag multicolored rakes, rags, and brooms to a local park, they walk past young people loitering on the corner who jeer at the do-gooders, past adults who laugh and sneer. Some embarrassed volunteers look away or sink down into their hooded sweatshirts to hide, but Master strolls on with his head held high. “Man, it used to bother me a lot . . . [when] my friends would call me names, make fun of me,” he says. “Now I don’t care where we go; I don’t care what other people think. All that matters is getting the job done.”

In the right direction



Sources: Department of Justice, National Center for Health Statistics, Department of Education