

Fuelled by altruism

Dawson College student Arielle Elkrief has been named the 2011 Forces AVENIR Committed Student Par Excellence, and with good reason. Her commitment to the common good goes against the current fend-for-yourself trend.

By Annie Boutet

Arielle Elkrief is 19 years old. Given her remarkable list of achievements you'd think she was at least 30. A recycling campaign in Montréal, a humanitarian project in Uganda, an internship in Israel—when she feels strongly about a situation, she jumps into the fray with no holds barred. Driven by relentless determination, Arielle wants to bring about positive, long-lasting change in our society. Her first experiences as an activist date back to high school.

“An article on the Darfur situation in Sudan really touched me,” she remembers. “How can such atrocities still happen in this day and age? I mobilized my classmates, and in a few months we collected 5,000 signatures for a petition we

submitted to the prime minister to spur the government into action. This first experience proved to me that a group that pushes together in the same direction can become a powerful force for change. Since then this connection with others remains my prime source of inspiration.”

In her heroes' footsteps

The desire to get involved can often be a result of our upbringing. Arielle's mother, who worked in philanthropy, had always taught her that we are all responsible for each other and that we should do everything we can to help people in need. “I've heard these messages since I was very young. My mother was an important role model for me,” Arielle stresses.

Another important model was Fusion jeunesse, a not-for-profit organization that works to reduce school dropout rates through stimulating, rewarding school projects for young people. Inspired by its founder Gabriel Lopez and his work, Arielle has served as a volunteer counselor for the past three years.

A profound desire for change at such a young age seems to be an exception to the rule. In Arielle's opinion, even if they're motivated, young people are often quite disconnected from society's problems.

“My friends think it's a bit strange that I volunteer on the weekend,” the award winner explains. “Yet I get so much out of it. In the end you get much more out of it than what you give.”

The impact of citizen action

Of all her experiences, her humanitarian project in Uganda marked her the most. During a visit to an orphanage, she noticed that the number of children far outstripped the available resources. Back in Montréal, she started to raise money and organize a benefit concert with her friends.

With the \$7,000 they collected, the orphanage was able to double its capacity. This was a dream come true for the people managing the orphanage. “More children can now receive the love, care, education, shelter, and food they need. I'm proud to know that the work we did brought happiness to those children,” says Arielle.

Later, her one-year internship in the children's oncology unit of an Israeli hospital set her career plans on a new path. “I met some really courageous children and I saw the effect the doctors had on them. It convinced me to go into medicine. I'll never forget the experience,” adds Arielle.

Arielle is living proof that putting one's daily activities and social life on hold to do volunteer work can provide invaluable benefits. “It's a privilege because I get so much out of the interactions I have with people through my volunteering. There is such wealth in the diversity of human relationships,” Arielle concludes. ■



“My friends think it's a bit strange that I volunteer on the weekend.” — Arielle Elkrief, the 2011 Forces AVENIR Committed Student Par Excellence.