What do you do as your community engagement activity? How did you begin to work with your community-based organization (CBO)?

Many medical students at Hopkins are passionate about community involvement, so we leverage student groups to raise awareness, collect donations, and perform service. In particular, I have worked with Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition, House of Ruth Baltimore, and Health Care for the Homeless through student orgs so far this year. Next year, I am fortunate enough to be a SOURCE Service Scholar at Baltimore Crisis Response, Inc., working to construct a garden and plan programming around healthy eating and horticulture therapy.

How do you find time for service in your busy schedule? How much time do you spend on service per week/month?

As a medical student, my schedule is unpredictable. Our obligated activities change weekly, and the intensity of our studies fluctuate from all-day study affairs to more manageable loads. As a result, I have had to redefine my traditional understanding of community engagement because making a consistent commitment to an organization has been a challenge (although many of my compassionate peers have found a way). Instead, I have focused on hosting educational events for classmates, coordinating drives through SOURCE, planning one-time service events for groups, and initiating a Homelessness Outreach kits project with a couple of friends. I am looking forward to the learning how to allocate concrete chunks of time at an organization’s physical location because, when I think about it, my life is not getting any less busy in the coming years, and I want to learn the skill of integrating community engagement nonetheless.

How does your service shape your development as a health care professional? What do you enjoy about or gain through community service?

A physician’s job is equal parts science and empathy. My lectures excel at building my scientific understanding, but Baltimore and its people build my perspective, compassion, and humility. Connecting with community members opens my eyes to their culture, answering important questions like: What motivates them? What barriers constrain them? What would they like for their city, their family, themselves? A student could fill her head of facts and have no impact if she loses the ability to love her patients.

What advice do you have for prospective students who are interested in community service? What would you say to someone who is unsure of the impact his/her service would have on a community?

Your life isn’t going to get any less busy. As I alluded to earlier, I do not buy this common excuse for sitting on the sidelines. Though we can feel harried, as students we have the most time and the fewest responsibilities we will probably have in our adult life. If we value contributing to our community, then our use of time should reflect that, even now.

We are a critical generation, especially in academia, and my peers often choose not to engage in service because they will not make a major dent in the problem they are addressing. Absolutely, all service should be done responsibly with an eye to the priorities and resources of the organization with which you are working. However, to do nothing because you cannot do everything is like choosing to ignore your best friend because you know you will make mistakes in the friendship. Inevitably, your contribution will be small; however, every act of kindness brings a community closer together, alleviates a small piece of the strain imposed by an important social issue, and signals to your neighbors that you recognize your privilege and their value. To be cheesy and quote Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful individuals can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Any final comments or plugs to promote volunteerism? Feel free to plug an opportunity with your community engagement experience and how to get involved.

The Homelessness Outreach kits project is continuing and growing! Thanks to generous donations from student groups in the SON and SOM, both schools will be receiving kits with nonperishable snacks wrapped in the Baltimore City Outreach Card to carry around and use as tools to engage practically and relationally with our neighbors experiencing homelessness. If you are in SPH or can’t wait for the kits, feel free to make your own now -- the outreach card is available online. Shout-out to med students Alex Blum and Vignesh Sadras for their camaraderie on this project.

Thank you, Macy, for all of your efforts on campus with students and for your tremendous service to Baltimore!