Quail Run Elementary Book Club
Jialun Wang, 16
Lawrence Free State High School, Kansas

Mission
To foster a deep interest in learning among elementary school students by exposing them to a rigorous middle school curriculum, and to inspire students to pursue other learning opportunities outside the classroom.

My motivation
I attended a book club when I was in elementary school, and I enjoyed everything from reading *Time for Kids* magazines to watching the movie *Where the Red Fern Grows*. When I went to middle school, I heard that the book club was discontinued. So last year, I contacted my fifth grade teacher, Ms. Meyers, to ask if she would sponsor the book club for Quail Run once again. She agreed—if I would serve as the teacher.

The club meets for an hour once a week after school. Instead of focusing on current events and politics as the club had when I participated, I decided to emphasize creativity and liberal arts. I focus on introducing the students to thought-provoking literature, which I choose in collaboration with one of my former English teachers. The students read a new short story every week, and when we meet, they lead the discussions. The stories run the gamut of genres and authors, from Langston Hughes’ Harlem Renaissance tale “Thank You, Ma’am” to Gary Soto’s “Seventh Grade.”

Challenges & rewards
During the first couple of lessons, it was tricky to find a rhythm for the book club. The 15 students learned at different paces and in different styles, and it took me a while to realize that assigning pages and worksheets wasn’t the most effective way to teach. Eventually, I revised my curriculum to include more engaging discussions and interactive lessons. I am very grateful that the students stayed patient during the challenging first weeks.

Every Friday, when I walk through the doors of Quail Run and am greeted by both familiar and new faces, I see the importance of my work. The growing number of participants tells me that I’m providing a worthwhile activity for kids who value learning. I’ve been running the club for two years, and I plan to continue through my high school years. When I graduate from high school, I hope a former book club student will fill my spot.

Some words of advice
The right service organization is one that aligns with your interests. Many students volunteer just to stack hours on their résumé, but they’re missing out on the real rewards that come with doing something personally meaningful. If you don’t find an organization doing work you’d like to support, take initiative and organize efforts that fulfill the mission, even if it means you have to be the one in charge.
Barbados METI Khan Academy Math Initiative
Alexander Eiden, 17
Montclair Kimberley Academy, New Jersey

Mission
To provide Barbadian primary school children access to a world-class education—and eradicate the fear of fractions.

My motivation
For three weeks in the summer of 2013, I was in the Caribbean for an advanced scuba summer program. When our group stopped at the islands, I noticed young children dressed in uniforms walking long distances on dirt roads to get to school. I wondered how their educational system compared to ours. My brother and I have taken several courses with both CTY and Khan Academy, so I wondered whether these students used computers and had Internet access in the classroom. As this scene repeated itself day after day, I became more curious.

At the conclusion of my summer program, I was able to arrange a meeting with Senator Harcourt Husbands, Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Technology, and Innovation (METI) in Barbados. The senator described the challenges of teaching math at the primary school level—which included fractions in particular. At the time of that trip, I was an avid user of Khan Academy. So when the senator described this “fear of fractions,” I opened my laptop and shared Khan Academy videos on mastering fractions. Senator Husbands was surprised to see how easy and engaging learning fractions could be.

Over the next year, I worked with METI via email and Skype and returned to Barbados in the summer of 2014 to help prepare for a three-week math pilot program in three schools. That successful pilot led to plans to bring Khan Academy to 10 schools, where today more than 2,500 students are complementing their math curriculum with Khan Academy.

Challenges & rewards
For sure the most challenging part of my work is the lack of modern technology. Many of the schools I work with have computers that are anywhere from 8 to 15 years old, and the Internet connection is slow. Donated computers from JetBlue have helped, and some schools are fundraising for faster Internet speeds.

It is rewarding to hear from the kids. One of the children using Khan Academy said, “I get to try and try and try again. It doesn’t let you stop trying.” And it is rewarding to see principals and teachers empowering their students. The success of the program so far has attracted attention from foundations, including Rihanna’s Clara Lionel Foundation, as well as support from the Apple Education team. We are also working to fund qualifying students to participate in CTY Online programs. I hope this will translate into even more opportunities for the Barbadian students.

Some words of advice
Your personal determination and commitment are what will convince people that you are ready for the challenge and that your cause is worth supporting. If you keep trying, you will reach your goal. Don’t give up, no matter what.
Community Chess Club
Sangeetha Bharath, 15
Mountain House High School, California

Mission
To teach young children in my town how to play chess, give them opportunities to compete, and provide the environment to instill a lifelong love of the game.

My motivation
Four years ago, the town I lived in was picking up the pieces of the U.S. housing crash. Homes were being foreclosed left and right. We were one of the most underwater communities in the nation. I was desperate to do something, to do my part to build my small community up. Starting the chess club was a simple way for me to make a difference in this neighborhood, to invite young children to learn a hobby, practice, and grow to love it the way I did.

Just Like Me Project
Kendall Kissel, 17
Palos Verdes Peninsula High School, California

Mission
To help students with disabilities find niches within the community and to foster friendships among students with and without disabilities. Most of all, the Just Like Me Project gives teenagers with disabilities a way to just be teenagers.

My motivation
When I was about 12 years old, I was recommended for a program at my school in which kids without challenges helped students with disabilities with their academics. Within a few months, I was excitedly pushing past the throng of catty pre-pubescent stares to the special education classroom to meet with my best friends, Colin and Johnny. Every day, during my first period, we watched Sesame Street, ate our second breakfasts, blew bubbles, or worked on some math homework.

I initially started this organization to help my friends with their academics, but I have realized that social interaction is at least as important. With a local high school for students with disabilities as well as students from my own school, I have led, with the help of several friends, a series of fun events—track meets, movie nights, bird walks. We are currently working on a school-level version of Special Olympics.

Challenges & rewards
I get frustrated that there is still a stigma associated with hugging or even waving to my friends in the hallways. I still hear the r-word used as an insult. I wonder if we will ever achieve tolerance and acceptance.

It’s also challenging to raise money, but many local restaurants have been supportive of our cause and we have been able to host some successful fundraisers.

The personal rewards can be summed up in a quick anecdote. Last year, I was walking off campus after an incredibly rough day. The tears began to blur my vision and I kept my head down so nobody would see me cry. Then someone shouted my name. I looked up to see Sonak, who greeted me with a big hug. This is what friendship looks like. He gave me back more than I had ever given.

Some words of advice
If you love what you do, you are already successful. If you love what you do, you can accomplish big things.
Mission
To increase the awareness of computer science and programming among kids of all ages.

My motivation
Learning to code is an essential skill for this generation, but many schools don't offer coding as part of the curriculum. Even if they do offer it, those classes are often available only to students in 11th or 12th grade. My friend Vineet and I wanted to fill that gap by introducing coding to kids as young as eight years old.

Vineet and I both have a passion for computer programming, and as we talked about a way to do something for our community, we realized that this was something we could actually share with other students.

We decided to offer classes at a local library, but none of the libraries that we approached seemed to take us seriously. We were about to give up on our idea when Ms. Bricker, the librarian at Mountain View Library, said she would give us a chance. That day changed our lives. We've now been running this organization for almost two years. Once we were established in a few libraries, other libraries started contacting us, asking us to conduct workshops.

For the first few months, Vineet and I taught all the classes, but we soon realized that we needed an army if we wanted to expand. We recruited friends and classmates, adding volunteers and classes slowly so we didn't take on more than we could manage.

Challenges & rewards
Today, the most challenging part is coordinating 31 volunteers and scheduling classes across 20-plus libraries. This requires a lot of planning and organizational skills. I keep a Google spreadsheet so I can match volunteers with libraries, always making sure to have a backup. Once a workshop is scheduled, I create an online registration for the workshop, and then advertise the workshops through flyers in the libraries and on social media. This administrative work takes seven to eight hours a week.

We now offer several workshops for different age groups, ranging from the three-week Coding for Kids, which teaches Scratch and Tynker programming to third- through sixth-graders, to the five-week Java session for kids in grades six and up. More than 1,250 kids have started their coding journeys with us. They've created more than 1,700 games and projects. They prove that we are making a difference, and that is incredibly rewarding.

Some words of advice
It took us a while to get a library to host our workshops. But Vineet and I kept sending emails and visiting libraries until we convinced one librarian to host us. I think many kids give up too soon if something takes longer than expected. If you think you have a way to make a difference, you have to keep going. Don't give up. Pursue your dreams.

Challenges & rewards
The most challenging thing was learning to work with children and parents of diverse backgrounds and opinions. I wanted to cater to everyone, so I had to learn to deal with anger, disability, and frustration. But there is no greater reward than when a parent of one of my students tells me that I have made a difference in their child's life.

It is also incredibly gratifying to see change happen. I started this club at my local library in 2012 and have been teaching children chess every week ever since. On my first day, I had one student. Now, I have 15 students on a regular basis, and over the years I have taught more than 150 children.

The community library I first taught in took up one tiny floor of a building next to the local dentist (it was that small). When the library moved, I and my club went—and grew—with it. By the second year, I even received a bit of funding from the Friends of the Library Program, which allowed me to organize a two-week summer chess camp. More recently, I established an annual chess tournament. The camp and the tournament each had more than 30 student participants, and I also got a few of my peers involved as high-school apprentices to help out during the tournament and camp.

Some words of advice
First, don't hesitate. If you are even vaguely interested in helping out, go for it. Don't miss the chance to make a difference in others' lives. My second piece of advice: Don't get discouraged. Progress takes time. There were times when I felt defeated, dealing with a difficult student or parent. Regardless of the challenge, I kept teaching, kept playing the game. That's how chess works, after all.