BGGS Joint Young Women’s Forum – Priya Sekar

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and distinguished guests. As Steph has mentioned, my name is Priya Sekar and I was service captain here at Girls Grammar in 2010 alongside Ruby Chang. When asked to speak today, I found the hardest part trying to capture all my experiences of service and convey it to you, while still giving across the sense of fulfilment and excitement I have towards these opportunities. I hope in the next couple of minutes I can really give you an insight into how my involvement in community service has benefited me and shaped my future, and how Girls Grammar has played such an important role in this.

My involvement in service started at a young age with small steps. I loved participating in the 40-hour famine and have done so since about the age of 13. I never really saw this as “service”, just something I could do that would help someone who needed it. That was probably one of my first exposures to service, which I undertook myself without the help or instigation of others. I was nervous, I didn’t know if would be able to finish the famine, and I was so worried no one would want to sponsor me! I memorised the statistics in my little booklet to tell people in order to convince them to sponsor me. In doing this, the realisation that maybe I could really help make the lives of those living in poverty stricken countries slightly better, started to sink in and motivated me more. After successfully completing the 40-hour famine, I never second-guessed myself. Since that age however, I always believed service was only to do with fundraising and giving money to charities. While this is a major and commendable part of service; as it is the generosity from individuals that helps purchase the food for meals on wheels, or build shelters for women’s refuge; coming to Grammar made me realise there is more to giving back than just donating money.

Grammar really instilled a value of also giving up your time and skills to help those in need. Service groups at Grammar, like the Ecumenical Coffee Brigade, or ECB, saw 5 or 6 girls making sandwiches before and after school, for the vans which would go out and provide this food and hot beverages to the homeless and marginalised people of Brisbane. This didn’t require any money as all the materials for the sandwiches were already there; it just required the time and effort of the volunteers to make the food. This was a rewarding experience knowing that what we were making could possibly stop someone from going hungry that day. Similarly, our Wonderfactory group saw girls going to Wonderfactory at the Royal Children’s Hospital to entertain the kids there. This was such a fulfilling opportunity the girls could participate in, and every single one of them wanted to go back to do it again. Helping at Wonderfactory didn’t feel like service at all, it was again, just something the girls could do after school, which would hopefully brighten some children’s day. I’m sure the other girls would agree with me in saying that we ourselves learned so much from the strength and positivity of the children there. The numerous service groups available at Grammar provide a diverse variety of opportunities for girls to give back to their community, whether that is helping out people, animals or the environment. There is essential a service group at Girls Grammar to suit every individual person.
In my first year at grammar, which was grade 11, I can still remember sitting in my first school assembly listening to the 2009 service captains talk about all the different groups and opportunities you could be part of. I knew then and there, I really wanted to be service captain and join as many groups as I could. Thankfully, both these desires came true. I was one of the 4 girls who got to attend the World Vision Youth Global Health Convention. This saw 4 students from schools across the Brisbane to Gold Coast region learn about the food crisis experienced by developing nations and what we could do to help combat this. We came back and organising the 40-hour challenge along with ‘Orange Day’ at BGGS, and that year we were the high school, which raised the largest amount of money to help fight hunger problems in these types of nations. I also got to join a number of other groups like Interact, Save the Children and the Kirsten Jack Memorial Leukaemia Foundation, which helped raised money, and awareness of important issues like the abuse of child soldiers, sex trafficking of children, cancer research, indigenous Australian health awareness, and many others. The best part of the groups you join during Girls Grammar is that they have many opportunities for you to continue your service with them after school finishes. Grammar holds a service expo during lunchtime in the library, which is a fantastic opportunity for girls to get the numbers and other important information about these organisations and how they can help after life at school. This is so important, because once you leave school, you no longer have the convenience of having everything given to you in a nice and straightforward way. Some people will go to university and have to work around their timetables; others will have to fit it around work schedules. If you want to continue working with Wonderfactory for example, the school is no longer going to provide you with transport to get there, you’ll have to organise that yourself. You have to organise to get a blue card as you are volunteering as an individual and not on behalf of the school. There are a number of things to consider, and it could seem daunting at first, but thanks to this expo students will have this prior information and know exactly what they need to do to continue they’re contribution.

I currently study Medicine at Bond University on the Gold Coast, and due to living there most of the semester, it has been difficult for me to continue my service contribution to the groups I started with here at Grammar. I have however joined the Bond Student Philanthropy Council or SPC, which aims to help students give back to their community by organising various service opportunities that fit around our very different trisemester year. These service activities include but are not limited to; tutoring the students at the local high school close by to the university, organising groups to participate in National Clean Up Australia day, and teams to participate in or help conduct Relay For Life. Because I live close to Bond University, and have lots of contact hours at university, I found the SPC a good way for me to continue my community service commitments. I would have loved to continue working with Wonderfactory or the ECB, but unfortunately this wasn’t possibly as I live on the Gold Coast. Also studying Medicine has allowed me to join Make A Difference, or MAD, which is an organisation that raises money and awareness about medical issues happening in Australia or around the world. They had a day dedicated to raising awareness about female genital mutilation which is unfortunately still common practice in some countries around the world, and what we could do to help stop this. I learnt a lot about this issue, and what I could do as an individual and
what my responsibilities will be once working as a doctor. There was also a Blue Day held for awareness of diabetes and its effects on people living with it. It also explored what family members and future health professionals can do to prevent and manage this world wide growing disease. Shave for a Cure was the last event held by the Bond University Medical Students Society, where we raised money for cancer research by auctioning off different lecturers to get their heads shaved and through a BBQ. While I haven’t been able to provide the time that I use to during school, or I would really like to, the SPC, MAD and Bond University Medical Students Society have helped me continue my community service commitments and allowed me to feel the same sense of achievement I did during school after holding fundraisers like Pink Day and such.

My aspirations for the future with regards to community service are to continue being involved with it in some way or another. It is hard to continue as many commitments as I had during school now that I’m so much busier, but I think it’s important to always give back to your community, even if it is just something small. In the near future, I am looking to participate in Bond Aid, which is very similar to the Antipodeans trip held at Girls Grammar, but being a medical student, I will be able to provide some hands on help in hospitals as well as general help within the community. Once I am further along in my degree and actually have some skills, I would love to volunteer at hospitals in indigenous areas in Australia where they have a lack of health professionals and resources and could use the extra help. After completing my degree I really want to volunteer for Doctors Without Borders and be able to travel around the world to developing nations and help in medical centres that have even more limited resources and staff. There are still a number of years before I can do either of these things, but it’s certainly something I’m looking forward to!

Thank you