**The Giving Generation**

**By Liza Lauter**

“The Dying City.” “Bankrupt.” “Is All Hope Lost?” These are just a few of the headlines that pepper Detroit newspapers today. The nation looks on as this once thriving city seems to be falling apart. Yet if you look a little closer, you may see that within the city limits and surrounding communities, there are hundreds of people who are committed to building up this seemingly lost city. They want to see Detroit green, safe, united. And it’s not just adults with deep pockets; younger generations are stepping up to the challenge of evoking change.

The common conception of “The Millennial Generation” is a culture of kids too “plugged in” to put down the phone and notice the world around them. They have been accused of having a sense of entitlement, expecting *The Giving Tree* of this world to just keep providing whatever they want with no consequences. However, there are small acts of humanity, kindness and community service by *this* generation throughout Metro Detroit every day.

Carly Sugar is one example. Raised in affluent Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, Sugar’s upbringing would not make her a likely candidate for the story that follows; however, surprises happen all the time. Sugar devotes her time to seeing a resurgence in Detroit through her work with Project Healthy Community. Two years ago, she took on the daunting task of creating a thriving community garden at the Northwest Activity Center, where local residents can garden, take fresh food home, and help in beautifying Detroit. PHC started with field of grass in a struggling community center. Carly and a few others built raised garden boxes, prepared the dirt for planting, planted seeds and began tending to the garden. It seemed to be going well at first, but one early morning, Sugar arrived at the garden and was shocked at what she found. As she approached the garden in the fog, she began to notice the disarray. Plants were crushed under what must have been boots. Green-beans that had once been climbing their way up a post were drooping toward the ground. The small wooden entry-door was laying haphazardly in the dirt. This would seem like a moment where the defeat would overtake any hope, and Carly might have turned her back on this project. Instead, she turned to another volunteer and said “We have to get the community more involved. If they believe in what we are doing, and if they are invested, then they will care for and protect our growing garden.” That’s just what they did. They reached out to community members, asking them to help replant and build a protective fence around the garden. They also set up a system for local residents to help care for the garden. Before long, bountiful baskets of fresh vegetables were available to residents on a daily basis. Through Project Healthy Community, Sugar also runs an after-school program, which offers enrichment activities and homework help to a group of elementary school students in an Art Room that is no longer used.  Some of the enrichment activities include gardening, nutrition, and cooking.  Sugar’s work doesn’t just end with her involvement; she also inspires and involves other young students throughout Metro Detroit. In a recent interview, Sugar described her passion for young kids getting involved; “Many of our best volunteers are from the local high school—Renaissance. The high school volunteers at Renaissance really are some of our best.  Our students admire them as role models, look forward to seeing them, and even talk about them when they aren't there.  The relationships that develop between these two groups of students offers connection and learning on both sides.  These high schoolers support and relate to our students in ways that don't come as naturally to adults.” What began as a small garden, led to much more “blooming” throughout the community.

Is Carly an anomaly? Are there more “Millennials” caring about the world around them? Turn a few corners down some worrisome Detroit streets, and you might come across another group of young inspirations who are transforming the city with the organization Summer in the City. According to its website, “Summer in the City is a dynamic Detroit nonprofit organization that’s transforming the impact volunteers have on Detroit and Detroit has on volunteers” (“Summer in the City”). Young people enter the city daily from the months of May-August to help beautify a city in desperate need. Whatever the reason they might be volunteering, they leave changed as well. Students participate in activities like cleaning up vacant lots, painting murals on abandoned buildings, removing dangerous fences or running youth enrichment programs. Shayda Soraya is a Lake Orion High School graduate, who completed her Service Learning hours through Summer in the City. But once her hours were complete, Soraya was motivated to continue volunteering. Once or twice a week, she would drive to one of the nearby carpool stops and be shuttled downtown. She continued this work through all four years of high school, right up until she left to attend Michigan State University. Soraya says that volunteer work has taught her “…The value of hard work, of seeing a project through and the amazing reward that comes at the finish. I’ve learned that the world is a big place and sometimes my personal problems are small compared to what others are facing. What’s most important is that even one person, through one small act, can make a difference.” Soraya’s voice is one of many young people who have been impacted by and helped make a change in a city that many adults have “left for dead.” Why are these young people going above and beyond to do things for others? In her article “Service Projects Provide a Path Through Probation,” author Elizabeth Deffner explains that service learning brings home “…The importance of empathy for other people, of considering how their actions will affect other people, of thinking before acting” (Deffner). What is revealed here is that acts of service teach valuable life lessons that the classroom cannot. As Deffner explains, volunteers learn about how one small action can lead into greater changes. They learn about other people’s stories and struggles, which makes them more empathetic and helps them grow as well. Once students learn these important life lessons and see how their actions affect others, they are hooked. They like feeling like *Batman*, restoring Gotham City to its glory.

What, you may ask, can you do? Find ways to get involved! There are so many organizations that already exist, where you can volunteer your time, both in Detroit and in your own community. Invite friends and family members to join you as well because the more people are excited about their experiences, the more contagious giving-back will become. Try to pick a couple hours each month to devote to service—this could be helping people in your neighborhood, tutoring younger students, or building your own organization. These actions could lead to others wanting to give back, and creating their own ways of building a stronger and more promising world for future generations. This is a generation of dreamers. Of game changers. Of passionate people who, when they see they can make a change, want to do more. Perhaps with a growing league of young volunteers, headlines of the future will read: “Rebirth.” “A City Reinvented.” “Detroit: Top 10 Places to Live.” Sure, these young people might pick up their iPhones and tweet a “selfie” when they’re done. But maybe that means more followers will come downtown next time. After all, giving is contagious. All we need to do is spread the word.

**TO GET INVOLVED:**

***Visit one of these websites to find out more information about volunteer opportunities:***

[***www.summerinthecity.com***](http://www.summerinthecity.com)

[***www.projecthealthycommunity.org***](http://www.projecthealthycommunity.org)

***Or you can contact Carly Sugar:*** [***carlybsugar@gmail.com***](mailto:carlybsugar@gmail.com)

**Works Cited**

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