

Andrew Willis

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Inspire Award Essay

Success is often seen as elusive, or as something one may ascertain after years of hard work and dedication on their own. However, success is never achieved independently, and we are influenced and guided along our paths subtly by people we may never directly interact with. Without the supportive network at Inspire or my amazing partner Madison Settle, I truly believe we would not have been as successful in our voter registration efforts as we were. Teamwork does not only entail problem solving, creative thinking, and humility; it requires one to step back and acknowledge all of the subtle gifts we are given by our mentors and peers. Additionally, our voter registration drives were successful due to our own personal passions. I knew going into this program that without staying driven, I would not be a productive partner or reach my goals. My motivating factors were not the Jennings Randolph Award, recognition, or material gain; rather, if I was feeling discouraged, I would think of the ninety-eight students to which I had given assistance in making their voices heard. In my mind, I had equipped nearly one hundred people (some I agreed with, some I did not) with tools and resources they could utilize to become more civically engaged and conscious of impact politics has on their daily lives. The final key to success was patience. With something like voter registration, there is no instant gratification; you do not immediately see the results of your hard work and dedication. Staying patient allows you to calmly work towards your goal, and later realize the massive impact you have made.

During voter registration, I was fortunate to encounter very few problems. I worked with an amazing partner, a supportive administration, and an encouraging student body. The biggest challenge, for me, was internal. I often felt that I was not making that much of a difference. I

would tell myself that most of these people would have registered themselves at some point, and that what I was doing was not that worthwhile. Whenever I had these thoughts, I would remind myself that exposing my peers to the importance of civic engagement in high school makes them exponentially more likely to stay engaged throughout their lives. This experience taught me how to motivate myself in the absence of instant gratification and tangible results, an invaluable skill that I will take with me throughout higher education and the workplace. Some of the lowest voter participation rates come from West Virginia, and specifically West Virginian youth. As an Inspired Leader, the most important thing I can do is to encourage conversation. If just a handful of the people my partner and I were able to register talks to some of their peers and/or parents, maybe those individuals will do the same with their peers/parents, until the message has expanded and spread like ripples in a pond. Simply talking about the impact that politics has on individuals in West Virginia (hot topics include the effects of coal mining on the environment, education reform, and healthcare) is enough to motivate people to register, show up at the polls, and then hold their elected officials accountable for campaign promises. For example, I felt comfortable having a debate with Secretary of State Mac Warner because of the training I have received from Inspire. If I could convey that sense of calm confidence to just one other person, maybe they would feel comfortable enough to, say, call or write their representative. West Virginian youth need to make their voices heard so that the issues they care about can be addressed; indirect contact will not work. A senator being told by a lobbyist or staff member that young people have issues they care about may compartmentalize that as something they do not need to worry about, but a call or letter directly from a high school student who is worried about the cost of higher education will jar them into action. The best lesson that I can pass on from Inspire is this: in taking action and standing up for my beliefs, I can influence others to do the

same; this is the foundation for grassroots change, and the only to make West Virginia--and the nation as a whole--a better place to live.