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## SERVICE STARS: TEACHERS INSPIRING STUDENTS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

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# SERVICE STARS: TEACHERS INSPIRING STUDENTS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

By Hillel Bromberg

*We would like to thank  
Commonwealth Real Estate for  
bringing you this month's cover story.*

This is the story of three friends – all teachers – who have been inspired by life and politics and their kids (biological and classroom). Their goal is to inspire kids (all of them) to make real change in the world.

Let's start with introductions. Kelly and Andy Comings live in West Newton with their daughters Tessa (4 years old) and Eliza (1 year old). Kelly grew up on Long Island and came to this area to attend Boston College where she earned a bachelor's in elementary education and a master's in moderate special needs. She teaches first grade at Placentino Elementary School in Holliston. Andy grew up in Newton and went to Williams, Day, and Newton North. He went to Wesleyan for a bachelor's in history then to Boston College for his master's in secondary education. After a year living in San Francisco, Andy came home to teach social studies at Day Middle School, which he has been happily doing for the 14 years since. Kelly and Andy met through mutual Boston College and teaching friends and married in August 2013. Two years ago, the family moved from Oak Hill Park to West Newton.

Samantha Genier also lives in West Newton with her wife Sue of ten years and their two children, Ella (9) and Leo (2). The family settled here in 2011 after stints in Waltham, Ashland, Jamaica Plain, and Somerville. She holds a BA in biology from Simmons College and an MA in education from Harvard. After several years of teaching in Reading, MA, and Charlotte, NC, Sam now teaches sixth grade science at Day Middle School.

Now that you know a bit about who these teachers are, we need to tell you about what they have created: Service Stars. These dedicated teachers – “we are all passionate about teaching social justice,” says Kelly – work with children every day and see how they respond to ideas presented in class. She had the idea for Service Stars when she started weaving service learning into her teaching and saw how inspired the students became. Also, Andy and Sam help run a Global Goals project with the sixth grade team at Day every year. So Kelly, Andy and Samantha are all about helping children understand real issues in the world and having a positive influence.

But when the Comings and Geniers had children of their own, they realized how difficult it is to find service projects that youngsters can participate in. “Children are naturally inclined to want to help others from a very young age,” Kelly says. But there are very few opportunities for young children to be involved in community service work because most



Image courtesy of Cara Pratt Photography

organizations have an age requirement. The trio believe that the younger children are when they start helping others, the more it will become an important part of their life. Service Stars helps young children develop empathy for those in need and engages children in the benefits of helping others, all while having fun and learning teamwork.

“Our program has a strong teaching component,” Andy explains. “We use books, video clips and speakers from different organizations to teach the children about difficult issues in an age-appropriate way. We have covered topics like homelessness, poverty, aging, illness, animal shelters and the environment. We send parents web links, book suggestions and conversation topics so the kids can continue learning about and discussing these issues with their family. We also suggest ways that they can continue to be involved in each area.”

Service Stars got under way this year, with a two-week camp in August. Here is an abbreviated schedule of the first week to give you an idea of how intensive (and fun) the program is.

**Monday:** Put together toy boxes for children in the hospital, cooperative games and team-building

**Tuesday:** Hear from a Cradles to Crayons volunteer about their collection drive, hand out fliers for the Service Stars' food pantry/Cradles to Crayons Drive, make well-wish notes to put in the hospital boxes

**Wednesday:** Make superhero capes, masks and bracelets for children in homeless shelters, cooperative games and team-building

**Thursday:** Do an art project with seniors at the Paint Bar, make thank you notes for Friday's donations

**Friday:** Collect donations for Cradles to Crayons and the food pantry, make dog toys for animals in shelters

The children also sold dog treats to support the animal shelter, learned about invasive plant removal from Newton



Image courtesy of Christine O'Brien Photography

Conservators, toured the farmer's market, made kindness rocks to leave in the park, made birthday bags for children in homeless shelters, and, well, you get the idea. After all that hard work, the children were rewarded with a pizza lunch and bowling, followed by a tour of the new Warrior Ice Arena.

Several companies around town were happy to participate. Judy Dore works for Newton Parks and Recreation and runs the Lower Falls Community Center. She encouraged the Stars from the beginning, helped them figure out space rental and other details and gave the kids a tour of the Farmer's Market. Hip Stitch in West Newton donated the fabric for the superhero capes, Village Bank sponsored the Paint Bar project and Coney Island Café donated the giving boxes that the

kids decorated. Several nonprofits – the Newton Food Pantry, the Newton Senior Center, Birthday Wishes and Cradles to Crayons - welcomed the kids for a service visit as well. "We loved partnering with other organizations in the community," Andy enthused. "Everyone was so excited about our program and were very generous in partnering with us."

The biggest motivator is the children themselves. Sam says that they "love seeing kids get inspired to help others and seeing them become passionate about an issue and continue their service work after they leave our program. We also love the group bonding that happens between older and younger kids over the course of a few projects together."

Service Stars is starting with children in grades K-5 and they plan to expand by creating a program for middle schoolers. They will run an April vacation camp and are aiming for one weekend service project each month. If you want to get involved, you can get more information at the Service Stars Facebook page or website at [sites.google.com/view/service-stars](https://sites.google.com/view/service-stars).

Says Kelly, "Our students and our own kids have been our biggest inspiration. We have also been inspired by the changes happening in our country. Service Stars seems like an effective way to help." ■

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