

It is 10:30 in the evening, and my schoolwork is done. I find a vacant corner in the school library, pull out my laptop, and log onto the Crisis Text Line. Joining a new conversation, I introduce myself. “Hi, I’m Yosef, thanks for reaching out. Would you like to tell me a little about what’s going on?” I brace myself for her response; even after so many times, hearing the raw pain of a fellow human never gets easy. Hysterically, she tells me about her abuse by her stepdad and how nobody believes her. To calm her down a bit, I chat with her about her interests, and we find some common ground over our shared love of Stephen King novels. When she’s relaxed I dig a bit deeper for the necessary facts.

Throughout our chat I actively listen and empathize to convey how I care for her in a world where she feels completely abandoned. Feeling heard and believed is crucial, and in this case likely a new experience for her. After gathering all the details, I formulate a plan to help her out. We’ll file a complaint for her and get child services to investigate, and she can move in with her other parent once the facts come to light. I’m confident she can be helped, but I’m most satisfied that she now knows there is someone who believes her. Before we close out, she says “You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you. Just thank you.” I blush and give a silent prayer of gratitude that I can do this. “You’re very welcome.”

As a child, I had never thought much about reaching out and influencing other people’s lives. I grew up in New York. The concrete jungle of businesspeople and bright lights has unspoken rules that people follow religiously: no paying attention to what others are doing; no meddling in things that don’t concern you. Taking the train as a teen, I once saw a man enter as a giant banana. Not a yellow suit; an entire banana costume, complete with a little basket full of the real fruit. He pulled out a speaker and began to dance, chomping on a banana between moves. I remember being struck by the absurdity of it, but looking around I saw no one who was in the least bit perturbed. In fact, he was being studiously ignored. Turning to the person next to me, I asked whether he thought it was funny. “Who cares?” was his response. That was my first encounter with “who cares”, but slowly “who cares” became a part of

me. Over the years, the more I saw, the less I noticed. My life involved the people I loved and cared for, and strangers did not fit into that. The New York attitude dictates that if you don't notice other people around you, they aren't there.

Three years ago, certain events, and how I acted on them, drastically changed my way of thinking. Alex, a close friend of mine, fell into a depression. Alex and I had been partners in crime since childhood. Every memory of schoolboy antics and frantic studying has Alex in it. He was that "brother" to me that Kodakline sang of. The next few months of helping Alex taught me some of the most important lessons of my life. I became more attentive. When he couldn't see a purpose in life, I relived old memories with him and helped him imagine a better future. When he perked up, I would convince him to go out a little, and I counted each outing as a success. When he was at his absolute worst, out came my arsenal of AC/DC and donuts and we would pretend we were at the beach without a care in the world.

I became more compassionate. Tests, outings, baseball games; all things I had thought to be of such importance took second stage to my best friend who desperately needed me. After school I would rush over to his house, a notebook filled with jokes or stories I had thought of throughout the day. As time went on and Alex slowly improved, I started to notice how much caring for Alex had affected me. I realized that I should care about those around me, even those I did not know. Taking the train now, I began to look around at the people, all with their own lives and struggles. I delighted in my newfound curiosity and caring, and in my interest in what people were going through. When a homeless man passed me on the train collecting money, I could not help but think of Alex as I reached into my pocket and gave the man whatever I could, along with an encouraging smile.

With Alex on the way to recovery, I decided to join the Crisis Text Line. I switched from caring for Alex to being there for random strangers. A rape victim that no one believed, a disabled man unjustly

fired, a teenager battling depression. Listening to their stories and offering the help I could brought a sense of fulfillment that I'd never had before.

Those struggling are often bereft of a voice, although they are the ones most desperate to be heard. Society has come a long way in how we view people with mental health issues, but so much more can be done. I want to be a voice for the unheard members of society; the inarticulate, dis-believed and disenfranchised. I pursue this with a passion I would never have believed as a little kid in a city that won't look at strangers; now, when New York asks me who cares, I can firmly and proudly reply "I do".