

One World, Many Voices: Sharing Belonging Forward

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I will never forget my first weeks at Emory. Having come a long way – both physically and metaphorically – I tried with every fiber of my being to prove that I belonged. I went to every social event, joined as many clubs as I could, and spoke more than I ever had before. But no matter how much effort I poured in, I often felt unheard. Even trivial things like missed references to American pop culture or misunderstood social cues can sting, when they were sharp reminders that my voice can be so small in an unfamiliar world.

When will this place feel like home? This question lingered, until I stumbled upon Emory Impact Day. The phrase “community engagement” caught my eye, and I signed up for a shift of invasive species removal with faint hope - as an Environmental Science major, I decided to start with something safe and familiar.

That afternoon, I found myself kneeling in the middle of Baker Woodland, pulling ivy from the ground along with upperclassmen from Emory Ecological Society. As I was immersed in the thick warmth of late summer air, breathing in the fresh scent of forest, for the first time, everything became so quiet. All that was left was the soothing chatter full of fun facts about the nature. For the first time, when I spoke up, sharing my own knowledge, the undercurrent of alienation that always accompanied me was gone -- I was truly heard. That day, I left with a body heavy from labor and a mind a thousand times lighter. I had a sprouting thought that, maybe, Emory could be a world I could share.

That one-time experience grew into many. Volunteering became my bridge to the

world around me. Whether it was discovering peer mentorship from Peavine Creek cleanup, connecting with Atlanta citizens during trail maintenance at Clyde Shepherd Nature Preserve, or working at LifeLine Animal Shelter -- where service went beyond environmental conservation and extended to caring for all living beings -- each moment brought me something invaluable. I came to the realization that my world is not confined to the Emory campus: with shared love uniting people, my voice can be heard anywhere.

Now a sophomore at Emory, no longer timid about not being accepted, I decided to take a step further into leadership. I trained as a trip leader with Outdoor Emory and began leading hiking, tubing, and horseback riding trips. On the trails, by leading conversations, I encouraged the exchange of diverse backgrounds and fostered a welcoming space. As we exchanged stories during hikes, I witnessed strangers becoming companions over echoing laughter, shared meals, and natural beauty. Among all the trips I've led, I found myself especially connected with fellow international students -- I looked into their eyes and saw the same uncertainties that I once carried. To see the fears of being "out of place" dissolve as a result from my efforts, and to feel our distinct worlds merge into one, was a joy beyond words to describe.

This experience developed to a new level during my service in SOAR 2025, a pre-orientation program in which I led a group of ten freshmen into the outdoors for a week of various activities. I suddenly found myself being part of someone's very first college experience, and that realization carried weight. When we hiked across mountains and waded through water, I heard people voice their homesickness, their eagerness to fit in,

and their ambitions – reflections of feelings that I knew too well. Yet this time, I was the one offering reassurance instead of seeking it. With every effort to appear confident, every word of kindness, and every spark of acknowledgement, I was helping my peers navigate an important transition in life, and building a world where every individual from any culture could feel welcomed, safe, and valued.

Today, I no longer hesitate to express my voice. I use it to speak for the environment, to navigate people across trails, and to assure that everyone's voice deserves to be heard. Its true strength lies in empowering others to find a home in this community. Different cultural backgrounds do not silence voices; instead, they weave into a harmony of love and acceptance.