

10 Ways to Spark Change in Your Community

Creating a positive ripple effect is easier than you think.

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Jan 4, 2022



ADRIAN & GIDI

The opposite of hopelessness? It's helpfulness. These 10 ideas will inspire you to start a chain reaction of change in your community.

Serve up some leftovers.

Just about 11 percent of American families don't have enough to eat, but 30 to 40 percent of the food in this country ends up in the trash. That math didn't add up for Robert Lee, the son of Korean immigrants, who was raised in a food-insecure household in Queens, New York. He launched Rescuing Leftover Cuisine, which crowdsources volunteers to ferry extra food from restaurants, shops, and schools to homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and other charitable organizations. And those extras add up—in 2020, the organization redirected 1.5 million pounds of food, or roughly 17 tons per week. The group operates in 16 cities, from the South to the Midwest, with volunteers signing up online to staff pickup and drop-off events near them—cutting waste and feeding the hungry, in an hour or less per session.

Get creative!

“When my son, Leo, joined his school sustainability club in second grade, we traded plastic straws for metal ones, got a composting bin (and battled fruit flies each time we tossed in banana peels), and thought deeply about litter. Our efforts were not enough. ‘Mama,’ said Leo, now 8, ‘I want to find my own way to help the Earth.’

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He decided to think outside the...socks. Needle and thread in hand, he launched Those Darn Socks, a service through which the 60 or so residents of our building could leave their threadbare socks (and a 25-cent fee) in an envelope at our door and get them back the next day, carefully fixed by Leo. 'If you can recycle bottles,' he says, 'you can reuse socks.' We all know socks aren't enough. But it got our neighbors to consider whether new life could be breathed into something else they might toss out. Or so said Leo's best customer, the retired geologist in apartment 311." —*Cathy Alter*

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Enjoy VIP status.

That stands for Volunteers-In- Parks, and it's what the National Park Service calls the almost 250,000 folks who pitch in at our 423 national parks and monuments each year. At [Volunteer.gov](https://www.volunteer.gov), you'll find opportunities to use your skills to do things like remove nonnative plant species from Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (allowing local flora to grow), or translate and transcribe recordings of immigrants who arrived in the U.S. from the 1890s to the 1930s for the Ellis Island Discography Project at the Statue of Liberty National Monument.

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Hang with the OG crew.

Why not get to know some of the longest-standing members of your community? In Portland, Store to Door of Oregon organizes participants to pick up and deliver groceries to seniors who can't easily shop on their own. In New York City, you can visit seniors in hospitals or at their homes through Encore Community Services. Nationwide, if you register

on [Elderhelpers.org](https://www.elderhelpers.org), you can volunteer to give a ride to, clean house for, or just keep company with a new old friend.

Share your passion.

“As an author, I believe in buying new books. But the co-inhabitant of our 400-square-foot duplex, my husband, believes my hardcover habit creates an obstacle course and a fire hazard that could land us on *Hoarders*.

When the stacks of books rising from our floors make it feel like the walls are closing in, I load up my backpack, hop on my bike, and head from one Little Free Library in my neighborhood to the next.

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Dumping a bin at Goodwill would be more efficient but a lot less fun. I imagine each book as a gift to my neighbors and try to tailor the present to their tastes. I leave my hippie reads—volumes on magic and advanced vegetarian cooking I failed to master—at the Little Free Library outside the Boise Co-op natural grocery store, where I once spotted a shopper nabbing my old cookbook; we got to talking, and she gave me a great recipe for sautéed beets. The Little Free Library by the pâtisserie is often stuffed with children’s books, so I add breezy rom-coms to amuse tired parents. And because the one near Camel’s Back Park has the highest foot traffic, I drop off buzzy new releases there to up the chance that a passerby will spot a novel that’s on her to-be-read list.

The best part of my route isn’t the fresh air, the exercise, or returning home to cleared floor space (that part’s for you, honey). It’s biking back a month later to discover which gems have disappeared. *I see My Brilliant Friend found a new home!* I think, wondering which of my neighbors is turning Elena Ferrante’s pages, enthralled as I once was.” —*Mary Pauline Lowry*

Be a dog's best friend.

...at least until they meet their forever human. Foster-based rescue organizations help keep animals out of high-kill shelters by finding them temporary homes until they’re adopted. Muddy Paws Rescue in New York City organizes volunteers to not only foster pups but also take them to

the vet and stage adoption events. Lucky Dog Animal Rescue does the same for canines and cats in the D.C. area. And in the Twin Cities, volunteers as young as 12 can help host a “puppy party” for pet seekers and dog lovers through Secondhand Hounds. If you’re ready for a longer relationship, volunteer puppy raisers bring up dogs until they’re old enough to be trained as service animals for people who are visually impaired; the Guide Dog Foundation has programs in 10 states plus Washington, D.C.

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Turn on the water.

When she heard that the city of Detroit was cutting off the water supply to 100,000 residents who owed money on their water bill, Tiffani Ashley Bell started the Human Utility, which lets you donate money toward unpaid balances to get the service turned back on—a move that can be life-changing for the sick, the elderly, and families with kids, because children are often removed from homes without running water. Since launching, the organization has expanded to helping people in Baltimore, too.

Run for their lives.

After becoming the first amputee to complete the New York City Marathon in 1976, Dick Traum founded the then-named Achilles Track Club, a nonprofit devoted to helping people with disabilities gain strength and confidence through running. Nearly 40 years later, Achilles International trains volunteers worldwide to work out with and provide running guidance to disabled children and adults—as well as wounded veterans—who want to train for a marathon or just jog around the park.

Take out the trash.

“I’d heard that food scraps and yard waste make up roughly a third of what we throw away—and that composting keeps organic matter out of landfills (where it releases methane, a potent greenhouse gas). That

sounds great for people who can toss their fruit peels in a corner of their sprawling backyard and, months later, use the resulting new soil to feed their lush peony garden.

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But I live in a New York City apartment. So I bought a countertop bin, ordered compostable bags, and started hoarding the sacks full of fruit rinds and molding bread in my freezer. Twice a week, I haul them to the compost drop-off down my street. Even though I studied up on how to compost in a big city (yes to eggshells and coffee grounds; no to oils and meats), I seem to be doing it wrong half the time. Once, when the hot bearded guy in overalls stationed at the bins reminded me to check my fruit peels for stickers, I had to remove three from one sack. The next week, a fellow composter tried to school me, snarling, ‘You have to take

everything out of the bag!’ But when I told her mine were compostable, she morphed from judgy green police to friendly Earth lover, gushing, ‘I didn’t know about those. Thanks for the tip!’

Composting isn’t bucolic or even easy for me, but it reminds me that we’re all in this together, and not one of us is perfect...although the hot bearded guy in overalls comes close.” —*Julie Vadnal*

Engage in a little monkey business.

Here’s motivation to smile at a stranger: “We’re hardwired to pay kindness forward,” says Laurie Santos, PhD, a psychology professor at Yale and host of the *Happiness Lab* podcast. Santos and her team performed the same study on capuchin monkeys and 4-year-old kids and found that when both were handed a tasty treat or an unappealing food item, then asked to choose what to give the next subject, they usually handed over what they had received. “We have a tendency to give as good as we get,” Santos says. All the more reason to make it something positive.