

The New York Cares offices are closed until Tuesday, January 2 at 9:00 a.m. If you have project questions, be sure to reach out to your Team Leader directly. For all other inquiries, email info@newyorkcares.org. Happy holidays!

Creating Connection: Equity Defies Boundaries



To maintain connection during the 2020 lockdown, New York Cares brought thousands of volunteers together with COVID-safe projects, including remote options for a “volunteer from home” experience. While our city may be living a new normal, our mission is the same; to mobilize caring New Yorkers in volunteer service. One of our most successful pandemic-era programs is [Story Anytime](#), an out-loud reading series of some of our community’s favorite children’s books, saved for posterity online.



[Davin Turkewitz](#)

Friday, March 18, 2022 - 4:08pm

By bringing insightful, educational, and informed readings into the homes of NYC’s most vulnerable children, we provide equity of opportunity in a way that captures the hearts of everyone involved. We believe that the best way for individuals to make a tangible difference on the issues they care about is through direct service. With Story Anytime, New York Cares bridges the gap between the physical and virtual to provide a new volunteer experience for the new normal.

We all remember the beginning of the pandemic: the confusion, the fear, and the sudden shift in priorities. Our staff spread across the city and even the country, but a distinct need became apparent for the communities we serve, many of whom sheltered in place in the five boroughs.

Enter Rebecca Carton, a Program Design Lead with New York Cares. Like so many others, Rebecca had relocated from the city to the forests of Pennsylvania. Eager to continue making a difference, she worked tirelessly with our community partners to find ways our volunteer force could help thousands of families experiencing acute needs across the city.

“NAC, [New Alternatives for Children](#), was one of my portfolio nonprofits. They work with children who have a medical or developmental issue in the foster care and adoption community. Those communities were hit very, very hard.”

Founded in 1982, NAC believes that every child deserves a safe, nurturing home and a bright future. They provide extraordinary services to birth, foster, and adoptive families caring for medically complex children. This population often includes children with severe physical, emotional, or behavioral challenges, and developmental disabilities. NAC strives to help these children maintain residency with their family, or integrate them into new, loving environments.

According to Rebecca, “Everyone had different reactions to the pandemic. Mine was to problem solve.” Her opportunity came sooner than expected, with a persuasive email from Bobbi Nathanson, the Director of Volunteers, Student Internships, and Community for NAC. She suggested, “Maybe you could get your

volunteers to record themselves reading their favorite children's book." This suggestion marked the beginning of a dynamic new program.

The partnership with NAC presented the perfect opportunity to create a project which gave our community a resource that would live online in perpetuity, and our volunteers a chance to bring their passions to the forefront, while reaching out to children who face isolation and substantial barriers to education.

Many of the children NAC serves live in our [Communities First](#) neighborhoods, the South Bronx, East Brooklyn, and Central Queens. These communities have faced [structural barriers](#) for generations. As a result, they face housing and food insecurity, racial disparities in income and employment, and barriers to education.

The COVID-19 virus has disproportionately impacted communities in these neighborhoods, resulting in the lowest rates of attendance in the NYC public schools. Furthermore, [over-policing](#) of black and brown communities has seen the confiscation of property needed for remote learning, including cell phones.

The benefits of reading are real and substantial. According to the [JAMA Network of Pediatricians](#), reading aloud to children "helps develop the mental processes of motivation, curiosity, and memory." Reading time can form the building blocks of language learning, and the one-on-one time and attention cue a life-long love for reading and learning. Most importantly, it "helps children cope during times of stress and tragedy."

Many in NAC's community have parents who are essential workers and cannot afford to take time away from their work or have employment incompatible with a work-from-home setting. By having volunteers step in and create hundreds of hours of reading aloud content, these children receive an educational, formative, and entertaining resource.

Rebecca recalls, "I received an email from Bobbi saying, 'Everything is in flux and chaotic. These are the most vulnerable communities you can imagine. They are super under-resourced with difficult family relationships, so the idea of them stuck at home is very frightening.'"

Story Anytime was conceived to create connection when it was crucial to bridge the gap between the physical and virtual. Most readings last eight minutes, and are tailored for readers from 5 to 10 years old. The project was an immediate success.

According to Rebecca, "[Story Anytime] blew up, becoming a viral virtual program. Volunteers were on waitlists, and many returned." By utilizing Google Classroom, NAC could save readings in a vast library of content. Volunteer access to reading materials was solved by resources like [Open Library](#), [International Children's Digital Library](#), [New York Public Library](#), and [The Storytime Family](#), which virtually provided complementary educational children's books.

Multi-lingual volunteers could read stories in any language, most frequently Spanish, providing an equitable opportunity for NAC's community to participate. Family members and pets participated, too, and produced some exceptional co-stars, including horses, superheroes, and some very talented singers and performers.

Rebecca built the Story Anytime community by creating what she calls the pre-reading huddle.

"I came up with a virtual Zoom meet-up beforehand, where we met with volunteers for a half an hour, forming a nice, heartwarming, nostalgic time when we would introduce ourselves, tell each other where we were, and then everyone would have their book to show what they've chosen," she explained.

The team behind Story Anytime made wonderful connections and an immediate impact, but the families NAC serves had another pressing need - financial support for household essentials.

“We care about the partner more than anything.” Rebecca said, and she spotted an opportunity for Story Anytime to contribute to a holistic picture of what NAC families could receive. Next, Rebecca brought this successful project to the attention of some of our corporate partners.

“I pitched Story Anytime to our corporate team, and they thought it was great. I asked if the corporate partners, in addition to participating in the program, would be willing to donate a certain amount of money through gift cards. They agreed. Over the next several months, it became very popular.”

The time and resources that companies offer are critical to meeting pressing community needs like hunger, lack of educational resources, and community revitalization. According to the Cone Cause Evolution Study, 73% of employees wish their companies would do more to support a social or environmental cause. These findings are a perfect fit for Story Anytime because companies could continue to contribute to a cause they cared about, if even remotely.

Employee engaged volunteerism is good for both the community and the company. When employees have workplace volunteer opportunities, morale and fulfillment both go up. By integrating companies into the Story Anytime program, we sent NAC clients thousands of dollars in gift cards for food and essential needs.

This project is still going strong into an elongated pandemic. Every week, volunteers learn how to record themselves reading and contributing to an already massive library of stories. Rebecca notes, “This project is a great example of [project success] when all hands are on deck, and everyone has a great attitude. Everyone is determined to meet the immediate need and solve the problem. For example, families really needed food and home items, but that wasn’t something we could directly provide. But by being creative, we were able to meet that need.”

Everyone has value, but not everyone has opportunity. The best way for individuals to make a tangible difference on the issues they care about is through direct service. This is how we work toward fulfilling our vision of a more equitable NYC.

Want to address equity of opportunity in your community? Visit Volunteering Made Easy or donate.