

John A. Garner, Jr. Civic Engagement Scholarship

Volunteering has always been a vital part of my life. Some of my favorite memories with my friends and family have come from volunteering. Through every event or organization I've been involved with, I've learned that civic engagement isn't just about showing up. It's about caring for the people around you and believing in the work you're doing. I've helped with Meals on Wheels in Pittston, Pittston's Farmers Markets, Duryea's Day Downtown, the Pittston Tomato Festival, and Nativity of Our Lord Summer Picnic. Each experience has taught me something different, but they've all shown me how important it is to be involved in my community.

My favorite volunteer work is delivering Meals on Wheels with my mom every Thanksgiving morning. We've done it together for years, and it's become our own tradition. When my sisters are home getting ready for Thanksgiving dinner, my mom and I are bonding. I didn't realize how many people don't have anyone to spend the holiday with. The feeling I get when I hand someone a meal, have a little small talk, and see their face light up with happiness is something that you can never forget. It shows how a simple task can brighten someone's whole day. I always walk away feeling sad yet grateful. I have grown to know the people we deliver to and am happy to make their day a little brighter. Knowing that feeling has stuck with me and is a big reason why I continue to love this tradition we have.

At the Pittston Farmers Market, I help with setup, clean up, and greet visitors. It's a simple event, but it brings people together and supports small businesses. The farmer's market supports local farmers and vendors and gives people a reason to go downtown and enjoy their community. It's fun being part of something that makes Pittston feel like a true community. My mom is the Main Street Manager and always tells me how important the community is.

The Pittston Tomato Festival is the biggest event I am involved in. I've volunteered every year for seven years, helping with the merchandise booth. The festival is four days long and a lot of hard work and long hours, but it's worth seeing, as over a hundred thousand people come out to celebrate their town. My favorite part is reconnecting with old friends that I haven't seen since last year's festival. I also get to work the stand with my friends, which makes the entire experience more enjoyable and memorable. The long, hot hours seem to go by fast when we're laughing, working together, and sharing the moment. The festival is always a great time and it's amazing how many people enjoy the festival. It would not be possible without all the volunteers who help to make it special.

Since I attended Holy Rosary School and belong to Nativity of Our Lord Parish, I also help every summer with the church picnic. This event is especially meaningful to me because I get to reconnect with childhood friends who I have not seen since 8th grade. I usually help run games, serve food, and assist with cleanup. Even though these tasks seem simple, they make the event run smoothly. I've learned that no job is too small when it comes to community service. Everyone's effort adds up to something much bigger.

Another major service experience I have had is being part of Holy Redeemer's Student Leadership Council. Through this group, we have organized fun days for kids at the feeder schools, hosted leadership workshops, volunteered at soup kitchens, even cleaned cemeteries. Not only did I meet some of my closest friends, but I learned that volunteering can be both meaningful and fun. The Student Leadership Council also taught me the importance of being a leader. I served as secretary of the council this past year and it taught me that leadership isn't just about having a title. It's about being dependable, communicating, and helping others succeed. I learned how to listen to my peers and step up when something needed to get done.

All these experiences connect to what I've learned through *Civics and You: Your Key to PA Local Government*. That guidebook explains how local government depends on citizen involvement, and it shows that real change starts at the community level. From organizing festivals to serving on volunteer boards, it's everyday people who keep our communities going. Volunteering has helped me realize that I don't need a title or a special role to make a difference. I just need to care and get involved.

These experiences have shaped how I view my future. While I'm not sure what I want to major in yet, I do know I want to study something that allows me to help people and improve the community around me. I plan to play on the basketball team at Catholic University, and I hope to continue being involved in community service wherever I go. Whether it's volunteering with local nonprofits, organizing events, or creating clubs, I want to stay active in making a positive difference.

As *Civics and You* explains, one of the biggest responsibilities of being a good citizen is contributing to the well-being of your community. That can mean voting, attending public meetings, or simply volunteering your time. I'm proud to be someone who takes those responsibilities seriously. These experiences in civic engagement have shaped my values and will continue to influence my goals.

Overall, I believe we all have a role to play in making our communities better. I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had to give back to my community and I look forward to continuing this journey wherever it leads me.