

As a child, I tried to limit how often I slept in my parents' bed. Not because I feared them being mad but out of a recurring struggle I had once there. I would start cuddling with my mom, but quickly, I would start feeling the pressure of my dad all alone on the other side of the bed. Not wanting to exclude him, I would roll over and cuddle with him, all the while fearing for my now-stranded mom. After a few back and forths, I came up with a solution: The Starfish. I would wrap one arm and leg around my mom and extend my other arm and leg to reach my dad, forming a loose resemblance to a starfish.

I grew up as the middle child and heavily embraced the stereotypes. I was often placed in the role of observer, sitting quietly in the corner of the table at dinner or squished between my siblings on long car rides, watching my family interact. Our Israeli roots manifested in their loud and passionate voices. I internalized my parents' communication skills, the overconfidence of my brother, and the tantrums from my sister. These traits helped me develop my own voice—quieter but just as impassioned.

Last summer, I flew to Israel to volunteer as a counselor at a two-week sleepaway camp. I was in charge of a group of 28 11-year-olds, mostly boys. Whatever understanding you think you have about the human condition quickly dissipates when 12 half-naked boys begin throwing hard-boiled eggs at you. A week into the camp, my advisor was fired for being "extremely underqualified." The full burden of her responsibilities fell to me, a large part of which involved camper morale. I felt deeply responsible for each of my camper's experiences, and as they began to come to me with issues or complaints, I couldn't stop feeling like I was letting them down. I called my mom to vent/sob/complain. My mom, a psychotherapist, wisely explained: "The campers are coming to you with their problems because they trust you. They know you'll be there to listen and that they can be vulnerable around you." Something inside me clicked. Her advice got me through camp and has been guiding me ever since.

Connecting with others began to feel more like a passion than a trait. In high school, I gravitated toward programs that let me work directly with other students, whether through our Special Needs programs or the National Honors Society, where I could make meaningful contributions. My involvement eventually helped me get nominated and elected to our school's TedX board, where my role was to help speakers prepare and gain confidence in their speeches. I formed supportive and meaningful connections with our TedX speakers by offering encouraging feedback rather than blunt corrections.

My junior year, I joined an integrated art and communication program at my school, an accelerated project-based program called Freestyle Academy that pushed students to think creatively and work on projects in multidisciplinary mediums. I learned that I enjoy the creative aspect of the work as well as supporting my peers through challenges and obstacles. I may not always know how to fix a first draft, but I seem to know how to push someone to try harder on their second.

In a world that can benefit from more than just my cuddles, I am eager to pursue psychology at a higher and deeper level, channeling the little girl in her parents' bed into a woman with the strength and tools to develop meaningful connections and programs that can change my communities. I don't know where exactly I will end up, but I know that I will always try to make sure that, if my arms reach, someone out there won't feel alone.