

By Bikash Bogati

## Driving for a difference

I was in the second year of my Ph.D. program when a colleague asked what I would do if I had an extra hour every day. Without much deliberation, I said I would use it to help others. The question haunted me. Like many graduate students, I was overwhelmed with research, teaching, coursework, and some attempt at a personal life. Still, I asked myself, “Do I really need a 25th hour to help other people—or do I need to make better use of the 24 hours I have?” A short time later, I started to volunteer for an organization that provides transportation for senior citizens and people with disabilities. To my surprise, adding this activity to my busy life was just what I needed to calm the chaos I was feeling as a first-generation international graduate student.

I had thought I was ready for the challenges of graduate school. But when I left Nepal to pursue my Ph.D. in the United States, I felt as if I had been taken out of a small pond where I was happy and thriving and dropped into an enormous, enigmatic ocean where every fish swam faster than I could. Even the rules of engagement were unfamiliar. Should I speak out or be quiet? How should I show respect for my professors? How could I connect to my colleagues? Instead of the productive, optimistic, outgoing person I knew myself to be, I was suddenly and uncharacteristically shy. To make matters worse, my research was not progressing at the pace I had anticipated, leading me to put in even more long, mostly fruitless hours—draining my energy with little reward.

I needed something to help me return to my old self. After that conversation with my colleague, I googled “volunteer opportunities near me.” A local organization that drives people to stores, appointments, and religious services was looking for volunteers. Having grown up in a bucolic village where everyone knew one another and my grandparents were always close by, I thought serving senior citizens in my new hometown might be just what I needed.

I was a bit anxious before my first ride, as I had not interacted much with people outside school. But my nerves quickly calmed when I picked up my passenger: an older woman on her way to church. She was bemused to see a young international driver and was full of questions about my background. She shared with me how thankful she was to attend worship and get some fresh air. She gave me her blessings, as my own grandparents might have done. Connections like these and the smiles on my riders’ faces motivated me to continue driving.

I started to volunteer about 3 hours every weekend—time



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experience working in a country with a huge burden of infectious disease would be invaluable. I started to reconsider my feelings of inadequacy. As my confidence grew, I began opening up to my fellow graduate students about the ups and downs in my research and was surprised to discover that we were all in the same boat—even my American colleagues who I had perceived as on top of everything. As I developed these connections, my natural personality began to reappear.

I’m now close to completing my degree but still facing some challenges. My adviser moved to a different university and I had to find a new mentor. I am working to publish my research while also applying for jobs. But these hurdles now seem surmountable. I’m proud of who I have become, and I continue to reflect on how I’m using the most valuable thing in life: my time. ■

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I otherwise would have squandered oversleeping or scrolling through social media. Sharing stories with my riders was much more rewarding. What they told me about their lives helped me realize that in every corner of the world, humans are connected with the language of emotions. And seeing how eager my riders were to spend time out and about spurred me to think about how to spend my time, which used to slip away. My previously overwhelming schedule began to feel manageable.

When I shared with one of my riders that I felt mediocre compared with my colleagues who had worked in advanced research facilities, he described how his work abroad had helped him, and he assured me that for my specialty, microbiology, my

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