

# elderly case study

MAKING  
CARING  
COMMON  
PROJECT



## GRADES

6–12

## IMPLEMENTED BY

Teachers and/or counselors; facilitated with students in a classroom or in a small group setting

## TIME & RESOURCE INTENSITY



45-60 minutes

## CAPACITIES PROMOTED

Empathy, Perspective taking, Compassion, Respect for others (especially the elderly)

## Overview

Too often the elderly are invisible to others, and perhaps especially to teenagers. As adults, we can teach students to show respect and to demonstrate compassion towards the elderly by giving students opportunities to better understand the impact of discrimination or apathy toward the elderly. We can also help students develop empathy and practice compassion and respect for the elderly in their day-to-day lives.

The following reading exercise includes a short story from multiple viewpoints and a set of questions designed to (1) facilitate discussion about respecting and caring for the elderly, (2) facilitate discussion about the importance of maintaining commitments and volunteering for selfless reasons. Have students read the case study and then use the included questions to facilitate a follow-up discussion.

Please note that there are two versions of the same case study available:

- Version A: short and simple; ideal for schools serving younger students or schools in which reading version B would take too long.
- Version B: more detailed and nuanced; specifically written for high school students.

## **BEN CASE STUDY: VERSION A**

### **BEN**

Ben was offered extra credit in his social studies class if he signed up to volunteer in the community. Since he was getting a “C” in the class, he figured he should probably find somewhere to help out. His mom thought there might be some volunteer openings at the local hospital, so he stopped by one day after school to check it out. They had an opening on the rehab unit where he’d get to work directly with patients and their families. However, Ben was disappointed when he got to the rehab unit and saw that most of the patients were older than his grandparents. “Old people are boring,” he complained to his best friend the next day at school. “I have to push them around in their wheelchairs and they tell me weird stories. Sometimes they even drool—it’s gross!” There was one patient, Martin, who really liked Ben and told him a lot of stories. One week, Martin told Ben that he had some pictures to show him. “I’ll have my brother send them. I’ll show you next week. You’ll love the story I have to tell you.” But, then, Ben got invited to go out to dinner and the movies with his friends on the day he was supposed to volunteer at the hospital. He already didn’t like going to the rehab unit and he really wanted to spend time with his friends instead. Ben called Eileen, the volunteer coordinator at the hospital, to tell her he wouldn’t be coming back. She said, “That’s too bad, one of the nurses told me that Martin was really looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.” Ben said, “Well, he won’t mind. It’s not like I’m his grandson or something—I’m sure he’ll find someone else to show the pictures to.”

### **EILEEN**

Eileen was the volunteer coordinator at the hospital. A lot of the volunteers were teenagers like Ben who came to volunteer for a requirement, like extra credit for a class, or just to put something on their college application. Eileen thought Ben might not be very interested in actually helping the patients, but she gave him a shot and let him come in to help for a few hours every week. She was excited to see that Ben seemed to have made a connection with Martin, one of the patients who usually didn’t like talking to anyone. When Ben called after a month to tell Eileen that he wouldn’t be coming back, she was disappointed and worried about Martin. She agreed to sign Ben’s form that would allow him to get credit for his class, but she just wished he had stuck with the commitment he had made as a volunteer at the hospital.

### **MATTIE**

Mattie loved being a nurse on the rehab floor at the hospital because she liked getting to see the sick patients get better. Martin was one of the patients who had been there the longest. Martin never had any visitors, he usually didn’t talk to the other patients, and he barely even responded to Mattie when she checked in on him. But Martin was more talkative when that high school boy Ben was around. He would tell him stories, ask questions, and even try to joke around. One afternoon, Mattie heard Martin tell Ben that he had some pictures he wanted to share. “I’ll have my brother send them. I’ll show you next week. You’ll love the story I have to tell you,” Martin said. She had never seen him so excited. The next week Martin was in a great mood the whole day waiting for Ben to come in. Mattie didn’t want to have to tell Martin that Ben wouldn’t be coming back because she knew how disappointed he would be. “Ben won’t be coming back, but there should be a new boy helping out today,” Mattie told Martin as he started to look distressed. Martin went back to his bed, refused to take his medicine, and didn’t talk to anyone else for the rest of the day.

## **BEN CASE STUDY: VERSION B (HIGH SCHOOL)**

### **BEN**

By spring of his junior year, Ben already knew which colleges he wanted to apply to. Like all his friends, he was nervous about getting in; he had only average grades, he ran track but he wasn't the star or team captain, and he only had average SAT scores, even after months of doing practice tests from test prep books he had checked out from the library. When Ben went to visit his top choice schools over spring vacation, he realized there was a gaping hole in his applications: he had no community service experience, and the admissions officers kept saying they wanted to see evidence that applicants were "giving back to their communities." When his parents asked how the college visits went, Ben told them, "I better do some community service, and fast." He didn't know where to start or what he was interested in, so his mother suggested he volunteer at the hospital located not too far from his school. They would have lots of openings, she thought, and it would be good experience to see if he might want to be a doctor and go the pre-med track in college.

When Ben stopped by the volunteer office at the hospital, the supervisor, Eileen, matched him up with a rehab unit on the third floor. He would spend four hours a week helping with patient transport and other simple duties like helping family members find their way around the unit. It sounded like an interesting enough job, but Ben was disappointed when he got to the third floor and realized most of the patients were elderly. "Old people are gross and boring," he complained to his best friend. "When I'm wheeling them around, they try to tell me stupid stories and most of the time they don't make any sense. Plus, they drool."

One man in particular took a liking to Ben. Martin was in his 80's and never had any visitors, according to the nurses. When he'd see Ben coming every Tuesday afternoon, he'd call out to him and ask how he was doing in school. He liked to tell a few stories over and over again, like how he had wanted to be a doctor when he was Ben's age but couldn't afford to go to college so he became a mechanic instead. "Now look at me," Martin would say. "All those years of good strong labor and now I'm frail as can be."

One week, Martin excitedly told Ben that he had some pictures to show him. "I'll have my brother send them just for you. I'll show you next week. You'll love the story I have to tell you." Ben groaned silently. He was exhausted from homework, track practice, and SAT prep. "I just want this guy to leave me alone so I can study at the info desk," he thought.

When the following Monday rolled around, the captain of the track team announced that they were all going out for a team dinner on Tuesday night before Wednesday's meet. Ben sighed, pointing out that he had his volunteer hours to do. "Just skip it," the team captain said. "What's the big deal?" Ben shrugged and decided he was right. What was the big deal, after all? All he did was push people around in wheelchairs. In fact, he thought, the job was pretty lame. He was starting to think about looking for another way to fill his community service requirement, like running for student council, which would at least allow him to hang out with some of his friends and be in a leadership role.

On Monday night, Ben called Eileen to tell her that he wouldn't be coming in the next day, or probably the next week either. "That's too bad," Eileen said. "One of the nurses told me that Martin was really looking forward to seeing you tomorrow." Martin. Ben paused for a minute and then shrugged again. "Well, he won't mind. It's not like I'm his grandson or something," he told Eileen. "I'm sure he'll find someone else to show the pictures to."

### **EILEEN**

After two years as the volunteer coordinator at Community Hospital, Eileen had seen all types of volunteers. There were the reliable retired ladies, the serious pre-med students, the children of doctors looking for something to do over the summer, and there were the teenagers like Ben who were looking to fulfill some sort of requirement. When Ben had first sat down at her desk, she gave him the benefit of the doubt, hoping that he had a serious desire to help. But when she asked him why he was there and what he was interested in doing, he mostly shrugged. Plus, he only wanted to work four hours a week because,

he explained, he was very busy with other commitments at school. Eileen knew the drill. Kids like Ben asked her for light-duty volunteer jobs all the time, hoping to check off a box on their college applications. Sometimes it worked out for everyone involved – the kid would realize he liked hearing about the medical diagnoses or connect with the patients, and go on to pick a career in medicine. But often it was a waste of everyone's time – including Eileen's. It took time to match the volunteers up with positions and train them. She had to set them up with background checks and fill out a pile of paperwork to get their hospital ID cards.

When Ben called after a month to tell Eileen that he couldn't come in the next day, she had a hunch it was about more than the schedule conflict he mentioned. "We'll see you next week?" she asked hopefully, but she wasn't surprised when Ben said, "Uh, actually, I don't think I'll be coming back next week. But can I come in on Friday to have you sign a form showing how many hours I worked?" Eileen sighed. Of course she would sign the form. At least this time she wouldn't have to write a recommendation letter.

### **MATTIE**

Mattie loved being a nurse on the rehab floor, because she liked getting to see the patients improve. She really got to know the patients before they went home, since some of them stayed awhile, like Martin. He had been undergoing extensive physical therapy since his stroke, and he still had a ways to go, especially because he didn't have anyone to help him at home. In fact, home might not even be an option for him anymore since he lived alone. Martin was charming, but not an easy patient. It was clear that he was lonely. Sometimes he refused to get out of bed for the physical therapist. She didn't blame him; she would have been depressed too if she didn't have anyone to come visit her.

But Martin seemed to be a little bit more motivated on Tuesdays, when that high school boy Ben was around. Mattie didn't know why, but for some reason Martin would light up when he saw Ben. He would tell stories and ask questions, and it even seemed like he put in a little more effort with his exercises. One afternoon, Mattie heard Martin tell Ben that he had some pictures he wanted to share. "I'll have my brother send them just for you. I'll show you next week. You'll love the story I have to tell you," Martin said. She had never seen him so excited.

The next Tuesday, Martin was in a great mood all morning. He even whistled on his way to breakfast. But when afternoon arrived and a new boy came down the hall with a wheelchair, Martin grew concerned. "Where's Ben?" he asked. The other boy didn't know; neither did Mattie. Martin's face fell. He turned and went back to his bed, refusing to do any exercises for the rest of the day.

## DISCUSSION

Once students have read the case study, use the following questions to facilitate a discussion about the importance of respecting and being compassionate towards the elderly. This case is also an opportunity to explore topics including the importance of sticking with commitments and the consequences of pursuing community service only for personal gain. In your discussion, encourage students to think about each character's perspective and to understand and appreciate their feelings (empathy). Understanding others' feelings is just the beginning, though—it is important to encourage students to act upon those feelings of empathy and to reach out to those who, like the elderly, are often hurt or mistreated. Ask your students to read the case and answer the questions, encourage them to think about what their best or “ideal” selves would do in this case, as opposed to what they would actually do. Ask them to think about why there is a gap between their “ideal” selves and their actual behavior. What gets in the way of them doing the right thing? Ask them to consider how they might close this gap.

### Potential Obstacles and Tips:

- Students don't take the case seriously or don't show empathy to Martin or Eileen: Remind students that everyone has felt disappointed or let down by another person at one point or another. It may be helpful to have students engage in a reflective exercise where they think or write about a time when they have felt this way. Ask students how they would have liked to have been treated in their own situation. It may also be helpful to have students think about an elderly person that has played a big role in their own lives. How would they want this person to be treated?
- Students seem to care about the elderly, but they don't know how to help: Try opening up a class brainstorm session about other ways they could support the elderly in this story or in real life. For example, students can support the elderly by spending time with them and showing them that they care, helping them with everyday tasks like food shopping or cleaning, and by focusing on all of the positive things that the elderly have to offer.
- Students' responses suggest that they care about Martin and Eileen, but their everyday actions suggest that they don't care about actual elderly people's feelings in real life: Try asking students to reflect silently on instances in their own lives where they have seen people disrespect the elderly. Ask students to reflect on what they could have done to improve the situation.
- Students start sharing personal stories aloud: From the beginning of the discussion, encourage students to focus on the case and questions, rather than sharing personal stories aloud. The sharing of some personal stories, especially negative personal stories, can be emotionally triggering for some students and can be difficult to manage in a classroom setting. If students attempt to tell personal stories that are disruptive or very negative, or the conversation becomes too heated or emotional, re-direct the conversation to focus on the case. If very personal or emotional content is brought up and re-directed, make sure to follow up with individual students after the class period, as needed. It is important that students know that you care about their concerns and experiences.

### Discussion Questions

1. How did Ben's perceptions of elderly people affect his attitude and behavior?
2. What would you have done if you were Ben? What do you wish you would have done or what would your best self have done? What might help Ben do the right thing?
3. Even if Ben decided to go out with his friends, are there ways that he could have better handled this situation so Martin wasn't hurt?
4. Did Ben have any responsibility to Martin? Why or why not? Did Ben realize how his actions affected Martin? Why or why not?
5. Did Ben have any responsibility to Eileen? Why or why not? Did Ben realize how his actions affected Eileen? Why or why not?

6. Was it ok for Ben to leave the volunteer job when he realized he didn't like it? Why is it important to stick with commitments? Are there times when it's ok to break commitments?
7. Did Ben miss out on anything by quitting his volunteer job?
8. How can you make community service experiences meaningful and lasting?
9. How can you support the elderly in your community? What can you say when you hear people making rude comments about the elderly?



**Making Caring Common Project**  
Harvard Graduate School of Education  
14 Appian Way  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
Phone: 617-385-9544  
[www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org)