



THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE

Service and the Role of Young People

A Guide for Discussion

During the American Revolution, many of the Founders were remarkably young, demonstrating that age does not necessarily determine the capacity for leadership and impactful change. Figures such as James Monroe, who was only 16 when the war began, and Aaron Burr, 19 in April 1775, would play crucial roles in shaping the nascent nation. Alexander Hamilton was 20, while James Madison was 24, and Thomas Jefferson, a more seasoned 32, would soon be actively engaged in drafting foundational documents that would define American governance. When he joined the army soon after Lexington and Concord, John Greenwood was only 15.

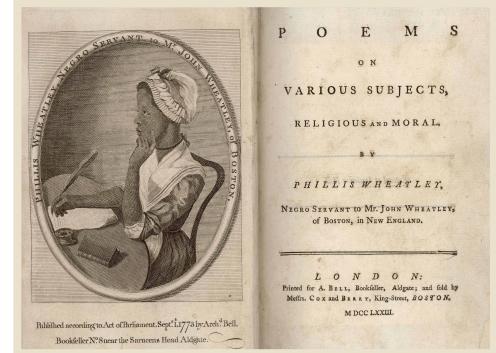
Phillis Wheatley, the African-American poet who won fame on both sides of the Atlantic, was only 14 in 1767 when her first poem was published. She was still in her early twenties during the war when George Washington wrote her to personally praise her work. And Betsy Ambler's experiences as a child during the Revolutionary War would inspire her to postwar advocacy and service, founding the Female Humane Association in Richmond, Virginia—now known as the Memorial Foundation for Children.

This youthful cohort collectively challenged British rule and advocated for ideals of liberty and self-determination, reflecting a vibrant spirit of activism and a willingness to disrupt the status quo. Their contributions profoundly influenced the course of American history, reminding us that throughout time, young voices have been pivotal in the quest for justice and the establishment of democratic principles.

This guide is designed to facilitate discussion surrounding the themes of service inspired by **THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**, a film by Ken Burns, Sarah Botstein, and David Schmidt. This guide focuses on the evolution of service, the significant role of youth throughout history, and calls to action for community involvement. Participants are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences and consider the impact of service within their communities.

Objectives

1. To understand the historical context of youth involvement in service.
2. To explore what service means in various communities today.
3. To inspire action and involvement in local service opportunities.



Phillis Wheatley. Attributed to Scipio Moorhead, 1773.

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THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

A FILM BY KEN BURNS, SARAH BOTSTEIN & DAVID SCHMIDT



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Discussion questions

Historical context of service

- **Youth involvement in the revolution:** How did the youth of the American Revolution (like James Monroe, John Greenwood, and Alexander Hamilton) define their service? What can we learn from their actions today?
- **Definitions of Liberty:** How did young revolutionaries define liberty and service? In what ways can we apply their definitions to our understanding of service and freedom today?
- **Rallying cries for justice:** Discuss the idea of a “rallying cry” for justice. What were the rallying cries of the American Revolution, and how do those compare to contemporary calls for justice?
- **Impact of youth in history:** How have young people historically contributed to American social movements? Can you think of examples beyond those mentioned in the film?
- **Defining moments:** What do you think are the most significant moments in history where youth-led movements made a difference?
- **Rebellions and revolutions:** Discuss how youth activism is viewed differently now compared to previous generations. What role does social media play?

Service today

- **Historical parallels:** In what ways do you see parallels between the activism of young people during the American Revolution and current youth movements? Are the motivations similar or different?
- **Personal experiences:** What does service look like in your community? Can you share a personal experience of engaging in service?
- **Barriers to involvement:** What might hold young people back from getting involved in service projects in your community?
- **Unconventional approaches:** What are some innovative or unconventional ways you have seen or can think of to serve in your community?
- **Inclusion in service:** The disability justice community has a slogan, “nothing about us without us.” What are some ways to ensure service initiatives are designed in partnership with the communities they are intending to help?
- **Service is everywhere:** There are many ways that individuals and groups engage in service. Some are organized and publicly recognized. Some are not. What are some untold stories of service in your community?

Exploring youth engagement

- **Motivation:** What motivates young people to be of service in your community?” What are some stories about young people making a positive difference that deserve more attention?
- **Encouragement for action:** What are some ways we can encourage more young people to get involved in their community?

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- **Role models:** Who are some young role models in your community that exemplify the spirit of service? How do they take action?
- **Learning from each other:** How can older generations mentor young people in service initiatives? What can older generations who want to make a difference today learn from young people?

Our future

- **Developing initiatives:** What issues are occurring in your community? How can young people get involved in addressing those issues?
- **Online and offline activism:** Discuss the balance between online activism and in-person service. How can they complement each other?

Reflective questions

- **Service as a Lifelong Journey:** How do you envision your personal path in service over the next 5-10 years? What steps will you take?
- **Service during crisis:** How do you think the role of service changes during times of national or local crises?
- **Your voice matters:** How can young people ensure their voices are heard in community service initiatives? What platforms do you think are effective?

Encouraging participants to share ideas and experiences will foster an engaging dialogue. Each question aims to inspire critical thinking and promote a genuine commitment to community service among youth. Consider wrapping up the discussion by inviting participants to commit to a specific action they will take in service within their community. Create a group commitment to service, documenting the actions on a shared pledge.

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This resource was created in partnerships with the National Museum and Center for Service (NMCFS).
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