

Why is it important to have someone in your corner, whether in a courtroom, an educational environment, or your community? Have you ever helped a friend through a tough situation or relied on someone else's support to reach a goal or overcome an obstacle? Alternatively, have you ever been in or recognized a difficult situation where an advocate could have helped? Maybe this included fundraising for a team, running for student government, standing up to a bully, or fighting for access to important resources like medical care.

Describe a time when you advocated for someone else, had someone else advocate for you, or believed an advocate could have helped resolve a difficult situation involving yourself or someone you know. How does your experience highlight why having an advocate is vital to creating a more just and equitable society?

Advocacy and quality mentorship have the power to change lives. It ensures that everyday teens are seen, heard, and supported when they are unable to succeed independently. To me, it is a duty to give back to others. I was raised with the mindset that *"To whom much is given, much is required."* As a younger student, I was guided, encouraged, and motivated by teachers, coaches, and aunts/uncles who consistently reminded me of my potential. However, it was not until I stepped into the role of advocate myself that I appreciated its transformative potential and realized that advocacy is more than about offering support, it's about helping others meet their full potential.

In eighth grade, I joined CRAM, a peer-mentoring program, targeting students of strong academic performance as mentors. Initially, I was not sure what I could offer younger students. I was still in middle school myself, but by committing an hour each week to tutoring others, I quickly learned that simply showing up is the first step to making a difference. During this experience, I noticed one student who always sat alone. He looked older than his peers and appeared distant, carrying himself as if he did not belong. Most of the school community dismissed him, saying he was not interested, but there was something about that conclusion that did not sit right with me.

The opportunity to establish a connection arose unexpectedly. After Hurricane Ian in 2022, I overheard his parents speaking in Spanish. As I grew up in a Hispanic home, I knew enough of the language to understand why he seemed so disconnected. His family did not speak English, and he had been struggling in silence, misunderstood by teachers and classmates. What seemed to be indifference was, in reality, the frustration of not being able to communicate effectively in English.

That moment was a turning point. I started supporting him, not by speaking on his behalf, but by gently encouraging him to try. I translated where necessary, bridging language gaps, to ensure his needs were communicated. With school supplies, extra tutoring, and gift cards for food after the hurricane, he began to thrive. He completed his homework on time and participated more in group activities. I realized that advocacy is not about imposing our assumptions of what others need;

rather, it is about listening, meeting others where they are, and removing the barriers that prevent them from being heard. Ultimately, it's about helping them grow more into themselves.

This lesson profoundly changed the way I viewed my role within the community. Even modest acts of advocacy can significantly impact a student's future. Inspired by this insight, I launched AACE: *Athletes Activating Champions and Empowerment*. At its core, AACE is founded on the belief that everyone deserves a champion who advocates on their behalf. True empowerment arises when we acknowledge that mentorship is necessary for all students, not just those privileged and lucky enough to have it naturally. Strong mentors often do not originate in the classroom; rather, they emerge in after school clubs, on sports fields, and in the workplace.

As I got AACE off the ground, I realized that young men especially need more positive role models. One experience that still stands out in my mind: a student who had been part of our after school sports program suddenly stopped attending. I knew he looked forward to playing pickup basketball, it was a release for him so his absence worried me. Later, I learned he had been sent to a juvenile detention center after being caught stealing food from a convenience store.

His actions were not justifiable, but they did reveal a new insight: he did not have food at home. His act of theft was not merely an error of judgment but a desperate attempt by someone trying to satisfy a basic need. More importantly, it constituted a failure in support by the adults entrusted to care for him. While this realization was distressing, it also led to a change in my approach. Now, at every event, we offer snacks on-site and "to-go" bags so students do not leave empty-handed. Addressing fundamental needs is essential; without it, expecting students to focus on studying or participate actively is unrealistic.

Having assumed leadership roles with both AACE and CRAM, my role is to create spaces where individuals can find their voices while utilizing my own voice responsibly. CRAM focuses on building confidence within the classroom by providing academic support and tutoring to students, while AACE emphasizes leadership and resilience through participation in sports after school. Collectively, these programs form a well-rounded initiative that supports students holistically, both inside and outside the classroom. Maintaining consistency is a form of advocacy, as it communicates to students that they are valued, not forgotten, and that there is always someone committed to supporting them.

Regardless of who we are or where we come from, one universal truth remains: we cannot succeed on our own—it's always taken the collective "village". We all need someone to support us, lift us up when we're down, and show us a pathway. True advocacy for a more just and equitable society is also about providing access to information that cannot easily be found online. Through my work with AACE and CRAM, I've realized simply how lucky I've been because of my own mentors and advocates. They've been open with their knowledge, and in turn, I've done my best to be open with mine.

My experiences have taught me that even small moments have significant impacts. They ripple outward, slowly changing the lives of those around us. I regard advocacy not merely as an opportunity but as a responsibility, one that I am committed to pursuing throughout my career as a lawyer. By choosing this path, I hope to honor the mentors and advocates who have influenced me and to extend that same gift of justice and respect to others.

*To learn more about AACE and CRAM, please feel free to visit the websites below:

<https://aacetoempower.org/>

<https://www.crammentor.org/>