

# Volunteers Make a Difference

## She Volunteers to Help People with their Taxes; Volunteers Help her Learn English

Tweety Hsiao

### BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Share a time you volunteered in the community or received help from volunteers.
2. Study these vocabulary words: *looming*, *hibernation*, *reminisce*, *humble*, *tenacious*, *beacons*, *tumultuous*, *benevolence*, *dim*, and *illuminate*.
3. As you read, notice what strategies the writer uses to tell her story. Underline sentences or phrases that capture your attention.

### A Looming Threat Suspends Volunteer Work

“Thank you all for the assistance you have given during this tax season,” said the email. It came

from the coordinator of the volunteer program I work with that provides free tax help to people who need it. It was late April, and we were

close to the end of the 2021 tax season. With some satisfaction, I *reminisced* about how bittersweet the last 15 months had been!

In 2020, I was ready to start my work as an IRS tax volunteer. I had finished my training and my exams, and I was excited to use my skills. Just as I began making new friends and helping people in need, my volunteering journey, which was less than a month old at that time, was suspended. Our governor announced a shelter-at-home order on March 16, 2020, and our tax site closed. My feelings were mixed. I hated to see my volunteer work cut short, but I also worried about the *looming* threat of Covid-19. No one knew exactly how serious it could be. While spring was just waking up, I entered *hibernation*.

### Volunteers Contribute, Connect, and Feel Alive!

Seven months later, another email came from the coordinator. “Happy November! I hope you and your family are staying safe. Believe it or not, I have been working on plans for the next tax season since August. While we hope for the best, we are planning to help our community file their tax returns remotely in 2021. This email is designed to invite you all to return for the 2021 Tax Season.”

Work remotely? This exciting news woke me up. I immediately replied, saying I was interested in participating. As winter began, all the tax volunteers were poised to contribute, to connect with people, and to feel alive.

The 2021 tax season was indeed a big challenge: all the in-person services were replaced by a new online platform, and communications were done by phone, email, or text. Even so, all of us volunteers tried our best to help taxpayers navigate the complicated tax world. We assisted people to get refunds or to understand why they might owe taxes. Although I couldn’t see the smiles of the taxpayers, whenever they said “thank you” on the phone, I felt warmth in my heart.



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*"If the medical staff were beacons on the ocean...*



*...then the volunteers were stars in the sky."*

## Receiving Help from ESL Tutors

After *reminiscing* about my work as a tax volunteer, I clicked out of that email and clicked on a Zoom link. I waited for the host to start our weekly English conversation club. This time, I

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tors in their Zoom squares, my heart was overflowing with gratefulness. At the end of the class, I wrote "Thank you!" in the chat box as usual, even though these two words were not enough to

was no longer a volunteer but a *humble* student who received generosity from other volunteers at the library. Looking at the energetic ESL tu-

express my gratitude.

During Covid-19, while essential workers were fighting with a *tenacious* virus, volunteers in all fields around the world were contributing silently to get life back on track. If the medical staff were *beacons* on the ocean, then the volunteers were stars in the sky. Living in *tumultuous* times, everyone is likely to receive kindness from others. No matter which field we're good at, we always can give back to the community. We can receive *benevolence* and then extend it to others. After all, beacons only *illuminate* a certain area, yet a sky full of *dim* stars can light up the entire night.

*Tweety Hsiao is a student at Project Read in San Mateo, CA. She was born in Taiwan and has a Master's degree in Taxation. She is a tax volunteer under the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. She loves reading and writing, as she believes that reading can take her everywhere, and writing can unlock her imagination.*

## Study the Writing

1. Revisit the sentences you underlined as you were reading. Share them with others and discuss why they stood out to you.
2. Notice the sequencing of the story. She starts her story at the end. Then she rewinds to tell what led up to that moment. What do you think of this approach?
3. Find the places in the text where Tweety uses figurative language. Some of her metaphors extend across paragraphs. For example, in the second paragraph, she talks about hibernating, and then in the fourth paragraph, she says the "news woke me up."
4. In the last paragraph, she uses the metaphor of beacons and stars. What is her point? Write your own sentences about what has helped you through these tumultuous times.
5. Read more about volunteers. Go to [Issue #53](#) of *The Change Agent* and click on "Extras." Then write about your own experience with or interest in volunteering.