

## Little By Little

I've always had a lot of goals. Some of them I achieved, and some will remain forever in the dark. But there's one goal I can't fail on—stop the negativity surrounding substance abuse.

It's been on the top of my goals list for years, but I can't figure out how to kick that plan into motion yet. I've tried everything—starting a club, adding a section to the newspaper, and trying to get the principal to make a presentation about it, but nothing's worked. All because I'm apparently too young to be taken seriously and that the topic is too sensitive.

I tapped the eraser of my pencil on my notebook. What else could I try? I brainstormed for any ideas but nothing popped out at me.

"Alora! It's dinnertime!" my mom called from downstairs.

"5 more minutes!" I answered.

"You said that half an hour ago," my mom pointed out. "Come down, you can work on your project later."

I huffed and closed my notebook, putting it on top of my stack of notebooks (approximately 50—because notebooks are my true love) and headed downstairs. Three bowls of steaming tomato soup sat on the table, my parents sitting in front of two of them. I sat down beside them.

"So, how'd your brainstorming go, Alora?" my dad asked.

"My brain has officially been stretched to maximum creativity and I still can't think of anything," I said.

"You needed a break. Sitting cooped up in a room for hours together can't be healthy for you," my mom added.

"I guess," I mumbled.

My dad started to talk about something that happened at work and my mind drifted back to my brainstorming notebook, which had zero ideas so far. What was a reasonable idea that could work? And why couldn't I think of anything?

I swished my spoon around the soup, watching it make tiny waves. I want to make waves too. I want to make waves of change. And I won't stop until I do.

...

Sunshine filtered through the curtains of Carmen's house and dappled onto the hardwood floor, illuminating the spot where we sat in light. Tomorrow was Carmen's birthday, and she'd invited me over to help her decorate.

We were crafting a 'Happy Birthday' sign by making papel picado. Papel picado was basically designs hand-cut into colorful paper. We were cutting letters onto it—right now I was cutting the A in birthday, and Carmen was cutting the last Y.

I finished cutting the A and laid it down next to all the other letters. Carmen snipped a bit of the paper, then set it down next to mine.

"All done! Now we just need to string them together!" Carmen exclaimed. "Can you hand me the black string?"

The black string was right beside me. I grabbed it and handed it to Carmen, who cut a reasonable amount of string and laid it under the letters. She grabbed a bit of tape and we started to tape the papel picado to the string.

As we taped it, an idea started forming in my mind. I could almost see it. Colorful papel picado with letters, hanging on windows and a big, intricate papel picado poster—all about my goal to stop the stigma surrounding substance abuse.

It was brilliant. Beautiful. Creative. It was the idea I'd spent hours together trying to think of.

"Hey, Carmen, do you have any more papel picado paper?" I asked.

"Yeah, I have tons in the basement," Carmen said. "Why?"

"I need it for something," I said.

"Okay. You know where it is, right?" Carmen asked.

"Yeah," I replied.

I went down the stairs and headed into a storage closet. Dusty items lined the shelves and my eye focused on the back corner where the extra papel picado paper lay. I picked up a Ziploc filled with colorful paper and brushed off the dust, then went upstairs.

"Uh, Carm, I need to go home now—stuff to do," I said. "Bye!"

"Okay, bye! See ya later!" Carmen exclaimed.

I walked out the door and into the blazing heat of the sun and I stuck to the shade as I walked home. A few minutes later, I was inside and away from the death rays, ready to put my plan into action.

...

The plan was simple enough—make signs to stop the negativity surrounding substance abuse using papel picado and hanging it up on windows. It would attract attention, and it would be fun to make.

I snipped and cut papers for what felt like days before it was ready. Now all I needed to do was hang it up on the streets. Specifically, downtown—there were usually a lot of people there, so more people would see it.

I gathered everything in my arms and headed downstairs. My mom was watching TV, so I tapped her on the shoulder.

“Hi, Alora,” my mom said. “Do you need anything?”

“Can you help me hang these up?” I asked, showing her the papel picado posters. “It’s for my project.”

“Hang them up where?” my mom asked, furrowing her brow.

“Like, on the windows of shops downtown,” I said.

“I’m too busy to come with you, and so is Dad. It’s illegal to hang up posters without permission as well,” my mom replied. “And they won’t listen to a 12-year-old.”

As she turned back to TV, I wanted to say that wasn’t true, but deep down, I knew it was. Would there ever be a way to achieve it? I couldn’t cover so many shops, and to be honest, I was kind of scared of what they’d say. Maybe they’d laugh at me, because I’m just a kid. Maybe I should just give up...

But I couldn’t. I had to achieve this. I was just looking at this the wrong way. I’d been trying to do this by myself all this time. I needed to work with someone else. But would anyone else care about this the way I did?

My friends, maybe? But then I remembered the way they avoided the topic whenever I tried to bring it up, like they were scared of it. They wouldn’t want to help me, and my parents were always occupied with work.

But I had to do this—I owed it to Arabella. She was my best friend. She had been pressured into using substances, and it was so toxic and harmful. And now...now Arabella wasn't here anymore.

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes and I swiped it away furiously. I was going to do this. I was going to find someone who cared.

Suddenly, I remembered something someone had said once in the past—'*The best way to find someone like you is through the internet.*' Of course! The internet! There had to be someone else who cared!

I went upstairs, turned on my laptop, and got to searching.

...

Half an hour later, I'd found who I needed.

There weren't any substance abuse organizations near me, as I'd been hoping, but there was someone really passionate about it—sammy\_\_lovescake\_\_5star. She never gave out her real name for safety purposes, but she had a phone number that she gave out (she has a lot of followers and apparently likes talking to them—me, I could never), and lived just the next town over!

The only thing was, she's not part of a respected organization, so it'll be hard to convince my parents to let me talk to her. But I know if I ask them right, they'll let me!

I headed downstairs and looked around for my parents. Immediately, I spotted Dad sitting at the couch watching a football game on TV. I didn't see Mom anywhere. Shoot. I know when it comes to important decisions, both my parents have to make a decision together.

"Hey, Dad, where's Mom?" I asked him.

"She went outside for groceries," he replied. "Why?"

Well, we could always call her and ask for her opinion, right?

"So, for my project, I made these papel picado posters—the ones I showed to you—and I want to put it up in the city, but Mom said it was illegal to do that without permission, so I went online and found this sort of famous vlogger online who's really passionate about substance abuse, so we can go and ask a lot of store owners to ask if we can put up the flyers, she's older, so people will listen to her more, and she's really good with people! It's perfect!" I gushed.

"Well...you don't know this vlogger. It's not safe to be talking to strangers," my dad said.

“Come on, really? It’s not like a 16-year-old who adores baby chicks is dangerous,” I pointed out.

“Fine...but I’ll have to ask your mom about this,” my dad said, as if he knew I wouldn’t budge no matter what he said.

“Yay! Okay, call quick, call quick!” I urged.

My dad called my mom as I fidgeted with the hem of my shirt with excitement, a wide, uncontrollable grin on my face. And then, my mom picked up.

“Hi, why’re you calling?” my mom asked. “Do you want me to get something?”

“No, it’s just that Alora has an idea for her project and it involves calling a stranger who’s passionate about the same thing as her to help her ask owners to put up the flyers,” my dad said.

“A stranger?! Online?!” my mom exclaimed.

This was going bad, so I took the phone from my dad’s hands and pressed it to my ear.

“Mom, it’s not like she’s dangerous. She’s a 16-year-old who adores baby chicks,” I said. “And besides, we’re working towards the same goal. And she lives just in the next town over!”

I heard a long beat of silence. Then, I heard my mom sigh.

“Okay. Just remember, don’t give away your personal information, okay?” my mom replied.

I felt a bloom of victory and I squeaked in happiness. This thing was officially on! I took my phone out of my pocket and checked the number.

“Wait, you’re doing it right now?” my dad asked.

“Of course! I’m not going to wait for you to change your mind,” I said.

I went upstairs—calls out of town didn’t work downstairs—and called sammy\_\_lovescake\_\_5star. The phone rang for a bit before she picked up.

“Heeeeey! This is sammy\_\_lovescake\_\_5star!” she chirped.

“Hi, um, I noticed you were really passionate about stopping substance abuse, especially all the hate around it,” I said nervously. “And, uh, I had an idea. And I needed some help from someone like you!”

“Ooh, finally, someone who isn’t scared of the topic!” sammy\_\_lovescake\_\_5star exclaimed. “Of course I’d love to help! I’ve been trying to think of an idea to promote the idea outside of the digital world, but none of them’ve worked out! So, whatcha’ thinkin’ of?”

“I made a ton of posters and banners! I have a lot,” I said. “I was thinking you could help me ask the owners if we could put them up, and you live close to me too.”

“Cool, let’s do this! Wait, I need your phone number if we’re going to text,” said sammy\_\_lovescake\_\_5star. “Oh, and your name.”

I gave her my phone number and name, and she gave hers back. Turns out her real name was Samira not Sammy. And after that, we texted.

Samira: So, what day are we doing this?

Alora: I don’t know, any day is fine by me.

Samira: Let’s do it tmrw

Alora: Ok :)

Samira: What time?

Alora: After lunchtime, maybe?

Samira: Sure

Samira: Meet up spot?

Alora: Um...

Alora: Do u know Sweet Tooth Bakery

Samira: Ya I love it

Alora: ok let’s meet up there

Alora: c ya

Samira: c ya

I set down the phone and flopped onto the bed with a happy sigh, sinking into it. Everything was going well. This was good.

...

The next day, I couldn't shake the nervous butterflies from me. Soon, I was in the car ready to go. I rested my chin beside the window and watched the scenery slowly change from trees and suburbia to skyscrapers and crowds of shoppers.

My mom parked beside Sweet Tooth Bakery and I got out of the car, looking for Samira. My eye caught a teen girl in a silver hijab standing awkwardly in the parking lot and checking her phone. I started walking over to her. It was definitely Samira.

"Samira!" I exclaimed. "Hi! It's me! Alora!"

Samira looked up and glanced at me with surprise. I guess she didn't know I was 12. Would she think that this was a mistake now that she knew how old I was?

But instead she smiled and waved at me.

"Hi, Alora!" Samira exclaimed, then glanced at my arms. "Wow, you have a lot of posters. I'll take half."

I gave her some of my posters. "Thanks! Should we ask the owner of this shop if we can put up the posters?"

"Of course!" she replied.

We entered the shop and to our delight, no one was in the shop yet, so we had some time to speak with the owner. A pretty brunette girl about Samira's age with green eyes was behind the counter, scrolling through her phone.

"You wanna ask or should I?" Samira asked.

I didn't really know what to say—I just had a vague idea. I'd probably end up sounding unconvincing and mumble a lot. Samira would probably make the girl want to be her best friend.

"Definitely you. I wouldn't know what to say," I admitted.

"Well, good thing I'm here," Samira said.

She walked up to the girl and flashed her a bright smile.

“Hi there!” Samira exclaimed.

The brunette quickly put her phone away and plastered a customer grin on her face.

“Hello! My name is Eden. What would you like today?” Eden asked.

“Me and Alora—the girl over there—are going to put up these posters and banners around the city,” Samira said, handing one to her. “We just need permission from the owner of this place to hang it up.”

Eden scanned it over, then tilted her head. “I dunno...I mean, this is an ice cream store. It’s meant for ice cream. And this seems a little heavy, don’t ya think?”

“Well...you can call the owner of this place, right?” Samira asked. “You know, just to make sure.”

“Uh...fine, okay,” Eden decided.

She took out a phone and called the owner, who picked up almost immediately. I couldn’t hear what the owner was saying, but he sounded irritated.

“Uh, sir, these two girls want to hang up these posters on the window. It’s about...uh, stopping the negativity around substance abuse? Yeah,” Eden said.

Eden paused while the owner answered back.

“Seriously? Are you sure?” she asked incredulously. “I mean, I feel like it might scare customers.”

She waited a while before she ended the call and sighed.

“Well, Mr. Lin said you could, so feel free to, but once customers start pouring in, you gotta take off, alright? And don’t put too many,” Eden instructed.

“Thank you!” Samira exclaimed, then turned to me. “Come on, let’s go hang it up!”

We rushed outside to hang it up. I pulled out a bit of cute washi tape I got from home and started sticking a poster up. We put up a poster and a banner—I was certain people would notice, and some might care.

“So, where should we go next?” Samira asked.

“Um...what about that big Starbucks place?” I suggested. “A lot of people go there!”

“Sure, let’s do that,” Samira said. “You wanna talk or should I?”

“I think I got this one covered,” I said.

...

Two hours later, I stuck the last poster onto the glass.

“Oh my god. We’re done,” I panted. “I finally did it.”

“Yeah,” Samira added with a smile.

As we parted ways and I walked back to the car, I noticed someone stop by our posters and read it. And it felt like a million fireworks were exploding in my chest.

Sure, it wasn’t like everyone would read it. But I knew some people would care. And that was all I really needed. Because, little by little, we can make a difference. And that’s enough.