In Hindi, “Didi” translates to “older sister.” The archetypal older sister is someone who always models good behavior and does the right thing; she is someone who is placed on a pedestal and is someone people strive to be like. Because of this, it comes naturally to me that living a life of service means to act like an older sister to people who need it — or if you do not have an older sister — to yourself.

In 2013, my friend Soniya Pateriya and I created an illegitimate — as in not formally registered with the state — non-profit called Dede Mauka, which means “give me a chance” in Hindi. Taking advantage of Soniya’s family vacation to India that summer, we decided that our first project would be distributing backpacks that contained a full set of school supplies to students at an impoverished school in North India.

As I watched over Skype, Soniya and I were warmly welcomed by the Hindi words “Namaste, Didi.” Afterwards, we were thanked by the students and teacher. However, the true reward was seeing the children’s faces light up, creating an atmosphere of joy and humility that was palpable — even through a computer screen. These children did not have proper desks to work at; they sat cross-legged on top of blankets, and their classroom was decorated by only a couple of windows and posters.

To me, a pencil is something that gets lost and tossed around mindlessly. To them, a pencil and proper supplies could make all the difference in their education. Until that day, I did not understand the value of a pencil and education because poverty “is something one can only feel in comparison to others” (Greitens, 2011, p. 92). I have always had the opportunity and resources to strive in school, but I did not realize how privileged I was until meeting children who did not even have the opportunity — the chance. These children are dedicated to their
education and to making a person out of themselves. Some of them just needed the supplies and others needed the love and encouragement from a Didi. Children prove that there is always something to work and strive towards; to serve is to foster that drive to improve our community and ourselves.

Humans have the ability to rationalize, to love, and therefore to help one another. Service is imbedded in our genes. All of my decisions and actions are based off of the simple question; “Will this make me a better person?” Whether it is volunteering, smiling at a stranger, or giving someone advice, I am striving to be like my older sister — I am serving.