New Year, New You: Making Resolutions Matter
by Felicia D’Ambrosio

Every December 31st we latch onto the chance for a fresh start, marked by give-ups -- cigarettes, Oreos, drinking six nights a week. New Year’s resolutions to remake ourselves as better people: lighter, cleaner, less prone to swearing or reality TV marathons. Though we could all undoubtedly use a little sprucing up, enough with the self-absorption, already!

Turn your annual motivation outward instead, and resolve to improve the lives of others with the website Resolution12.org. Founded in November 2010 as Resolution ’11, the site facilitates public declarations to care for others, and incorporates social media to help participants stick with their promise.

“Resolution ’11 emerged out of a conversation with friends,” says Chaz Howard, chaplain at the University of Pennsylvania and organizer of Resolution ’12. “We had just finished a big project, and were looking for a new way to not only raise awareness, but go deeper. The idea of New Year’s resolutions emerged, and sparked the inspiration to create this public campaign to challenge people to make outwardly-focused resolutions to care for others, instead of inwardly-focused resolutions for self-improvement.”

With the help of friends, including web designer Rachel Estrada Ryan and marketing account director Len Matty, Howard and company launched the first Resolution 11 site in November of 2010. By Thanksgiving they had almost 2000 resolutions posted, from tutoring to donating.

“The beauty of this initiative is its simplicity,” says Matty. “This isn’t about one organization, or one way to be involved. It’s about connecting a whole community of people all willing to think about someone other than themselves.”

As a site, Resolution12.org is indeed simple. Visit, and read the resolutions of others who have committed to carrying out caring acts for others – everything from promising to pray or meditate for the sick or poor, to something as simple as committing to compliment someone every day – before choosing a resolution to publicly declare on the site.

“There is an element of seriousness to this matter,” says Matty, whose 2011 resolution was to volunteer with Good Works, a service providing home repair to low-income families in Chester, Pa. “You are publicly saying you will do something that will positively impact another. Accountability helps people think it through and really resolve to do something they can feel good about, but can follow through in the coming year.”
For those considering joining Resolution 12 this year, Howard offers the following advice:
“Take the time to discern your resolution. Don’t rush to post something because it’s the first thing that comes to mind. Make a resolution that is not too big – and doable. What is the little imprint you can make on the world?”

Here, four individuals who came through on their resolutions last year share their experiences for others wishing to do the same.

Anna Aegenes

Location: Philadelphia
Day job: HIV research with adolescents at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia
Resolution ’11: to volunteer at a homeless shelter
Outcome: volunteered doing fitness activities with children at a homeless shelter

“I started out doing Thursday nights at St. John’s Hospice, serving food. The group of guys at the shelter were great, but I wanted to do more. I found another volunteer position through CHOP, where I work, in July. I’m basically doing activities with kids at the Jane Adams shelter for women and children – it incorporates my passions for fitness and health education into my volunteer experience.

My challenge was finding a place to volunteer where I was most useful—my experiences at the shelter at first were important, but it wasn’t where I was most useful. My background in fitness education is more useful at the shelter I’m at now, even though it wasn’t my original resolution. You have to be able to adjust your goals, while staying true to what you intend to do.

There were definitely moments when I wanted to stop or give up, but I have learned over time that there are always things we don’t "feel like doing". In those dark moments I try to keep the bigger picture in mind. Will I look back and regret skipping out on what I said I would do? It also helps me to remember others may be looking to you or even depending on you to stick to your resolution.

Giver Girl and Giver Boy, 52times52.com (the couple have committed to remaining anonymous)
Location: the greater New York area
Day jobs: Her, freelance writer, him, teacher
Resolution ’11: To donate $52 a week to 52 different causes in a year
Outcome: Maintained their weekly donations, documenting their actions on website 52times52.com

“One clue I have revealed before is that I’m friends with Chaz. He discussed [Resolution ’11] with me and I was encouraging him to do it, and then he was like, ‘What’s your resolution?’

Knowing I’m a writer, he suggested that I blog, but I’d started and stopped blogging so many times before, I’d never been successful in sticking with it. It was really the giving piece that was on my heart – we have three young children, and have gone through every phase of financial solvency. We’ve been broke, flush, in the middle, stuck with a house we couldn’t sell when the economy tanked, and there were times when we could give generously, and then dry periods when we couldn’t really give at all.
The sort of encouragement to get going on this resolution coincided with a time when things were starting to look up, financially; we could afford to be more generous. I thought if we could give every week, that would drive the content for the blog.

At first I thought it was crazy--$52 a week seemed like too much—but there’s 52 weeks in a year, and the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like it might be just enough to be a worthy challenge. It’s just enough that it’s gonna pinch, it’s going to require us to think about our money more carefully, and it might not be easy every week, but it felt like we were giving ourselves a real sturdy challenge.

Another thing that absolutely kept us going was the amazing way our finances improved as the year progressed. There’s a commonly held belief in the Christian faith, that the more you give away, the more God will entrust you with; it seems too good to be true, but in our case it did bear out. The giving never seemed like a burden, and it never left us feeling like we had any less afterward. As a freelancer, my income can vary drastically from year to year, or even month to month. But I’ve had jobs pouring in this year—and when it’s all said and done, I’ll have made as much in 2011 as I made in all of 2008, 2009 and 2010 combined. There was no way I could have forecast that when we embarked on this resolution journey, and, indeed, 2010 was a very lean year for our family. Truly, the whole experience has just been one beautiful surprise after another.

Justin Reilly, 52reasonstobreathe.com

Location: Philadelphia
Day job: spoken word artist, web entrepreneur
Resolution ’11: to write a poem a week raising awareness of causes
Outcome: Posted poems on 52reasonstobreathe.com; one poem went viral

“I was going to write a poem a week for an entire year, since I’m a spoken word artist... so that starts out as writing a poem a week. Then I thought, well, I’ll buy a web domain and maybe I’ll post the poems up there and share them. We started putting poems up, bought 52reasonstobreathe.com, and adding links to the nonprofits related to the subject of the poem.

I wrote this poem called Shooting Straight, about LGBT rights. It spawned out of me being this straight hypermasculine college athlete, but having this poetry side... and it ended up taking off. I think part of the reason it resonated with people is because a lot of poems advocating LGBT rights are by gay men and women and straight women. There’s not a lot of straight men advocating, because there is this fear of being called gay.

The site became a place where everyone was going to see the poem, and I ended up invited to the GLAAD Awards in June, sitting at a table with Kirsten Dunst, Collin Farrell and the cast of Modern Family. I’m now working on a PSA campaign with the poem.

I think for me what kept me going was the feedback. From the first post to the last, I received a lot of "Never Stop Writing" and "Thank you I needed that" emails to the site. I think the fact that it felt like it was impacting people, even if just a little bit, kept me going.