

LETTERS

Are Young Social Activists Too Idealistic?

APRIL 16, 2012

To the Editor:

Re “[Sam Spade at Starbucks](#)” (column, April 13):

David Brooks injects a salutary jolt of realism into the idealism of contemporary young people. But I think he sells them far short. As someone who has dealt with several generations of students in my years of university teaching, I can say with some modest authority that these are among the most realistic and most idealistic young people I’ve ever taught.

Yes, many have traveled to parts of the world where they have encountered the reality of people living in abject poverty, but that is precisely why they are choosing avenues of change that the established political parties do not seem to be addressing.

They often have a global outlook that catapults them, through instant communication with their peers elsewhere, into a world that Mr. Brooks (or I, for that matter) could scarcely have imagined when he was their age. I think that we should give this generation the benefit of the doubt.

(Rev.) PAUL CROWLEY

Santa Clara, Calif., April 13, 2012

The writer, a Jesuit priest, is a professor of religious studies at Santa Clara University.

To the Editor:

Although I agree with David Brooks that many young adults’ social entrepreneurship projects provide only temporary relief and do not address the core issues of a community, he doesn’t give these projects the credit they deserve.

Some projects may provide only a month, one day or 15 minutes of relief, but those 15 minutes could be the saving moments that keep someone from the breaking point.

Entrepreneur activists need money, power and government support, three things most recent college grads don’t have. Instead, these young professionals do what they know best, get creative and do what they can to make a difference, even as small and obsolete as their efforts might seem.

It is a feat in itself that these projects exist and that to-



Matthew Forsythe

day’s young adults want to choose a career path that is not based on self-profit.

MADDIE JONES

Chicago, April 14, 2012

To the Editor:

David Brooks laments a lack of hardheadedness among today’s idealistic social entrepreneurs. If Mr. Brooks is saying we need more good people running for office or to work in government, I say bravo. But let’s not conflate political and social entrepreneurship: one works in an existing system; the other rejects the prevailing system to create something new and more effective.

What makes the best of today’s social entrepreneurs inspiring is their relentless purpose and optimism, their refusal to accept the status quo, and their willingness to take risks to tackle underlying issues like market failures,

information asymmetries, public ignorance or misaligned stakeholders that government cannot effectively address alone.

What today's idealists typically need is not more moral realism, but simply more focus and a better support system to help them lead effectively. Unlike Sam Spade, who wanted to put the bad guys in jail, today's new generation of social entrepreneurs feel an urgent need to build a more entrepreneurial, more empathetic world, with fewer bad guys. That's not doe-eyed idealism; it's a critical success factor for the future of our planet.

BEN POWELL

Washington, April 13, 2012

The writer, a social entrepreneur, is founder and chief executive of Agora Partnerships.

To the Editor:

As a graduate student at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, I strongly disagree with David Brooks. Come spend a day at our school, and you will find dozens of students who, yes, have traveled extensively in developing countries and are entrepreneurial, bright and good-willed. But many of us are also painfully cynical and not idealistic at all about the important work ahead of us.

We understand the political contexts within the fields we aim to work, and we spend days discussing remedies to social ills and the economics and politics behind them. We do not ignore the political progress that needs to be achieved to carry out sustainable changes; in fact, that consumes most of our conversations, and many solutions are proposed only if they tackle this front as well.

Yes, the proliferation of "do gooders" can be overwhelming at times, and it is easy to question whether or not they truly grasp the crux of the issue at hand. But don't look for us at Starbucks — we're too busy solving real issues to hang out in coffee shops.

JESSICA BARRINEAU

New York, April 13, 2012 ■