

JCHS student Evan Barnard named Eco-Hero

His work developing Braille nature trails earns him national recognition

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Evan Barnard has worked to make Whispering Woods Nature Trail accessible to the visually impaired. It was built by volunteers specifically for the enjoyment of the visually impaired.

Hatcher Hurd

JOHNS CREEK, Ga. — When Evan Barnard was 15 years old in 2013, he had an idea to help the vision-impaired enjoy the outdoors more. Well, he had more than just an idea, and now his actions related to that idea have paid off in a big way.

Barnard, a student at Johns Creek High School, is the third-place winner of Action for Nature's 2015 International Young Eco-Hero Award. He was honored for his project, titled Bringing Nature to the Visually Impaired, at a reception Oct. 24 in San Francisco.

Barnard also received the Prudential Spirit of Community Award honoring him as Georgia's top volunteer.



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EVAN BARNARD
INTERNATIONAL
ECO-HERO AND A
GLORIA BARRON
YOUNG HERO

Finally, Barnard has been named a national winner of the 2015 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes.

Each year, the Barron Prize celebrates 25 inspiring, public-spirited young people from across North America who have made a significant positive difference to people and the planet. The top 15 winners each receive a \$5,000 cash award to support their service work or higher education.

Barnard, who is not visually impaired himself, has always loved the great outdoors and made it his mission to make nature trails more accessible to the visually impaired.

“I’m very honored to receive these awards,” Barnard said. “It’s my goal to make the outdoors accessible to everyone. A physical disability such as being visually impaired should not be a barrier to that person from going outdoors and experiencing the natural world around them.”

Barnard first had the idea in 2013 to create a Braille nature trail when he was volunteering for the Nature Conservancy in Rome at the Marshall Forest Preserve’s Big Pine Nature Trail, the state’s first nature trail for the sight impaired.

The trail had been vandalized and its Braille signs stolen, so Barnard wanted to help install new signs and repair the trail. He began working with the Georgia Council of the Blind, where he learned how much the visually impaired loved the opportunity to have a place where they could go and safely enjoy nature in the outdoors.

A Braille nature trail is an outdoor nature trail with special features that allow the trail to be used by the visually impaired. The trails have guide ropes and posts so visitors can use their hands to follow the trail.

There are informative Braille signs at various stops that tell about the trail’s natural features. These trails give someone who is visually impaired the opportunity to walk unassisted along the trail and experience nature.

Barnard has also become an advocate for opening up the outdoors to the impaired, taking on the role as advocate. He appeared on the Georgia Radio Reading Service program, “Giving Voice to the Blind,” and spoke on the American Council for the Blind radio program, “Speaking Out for the Blind.”

“I’m always in contact with people around the state and the country to talk about this issue. I recently spoke at the Georgia Council for the Blind state convention,” he said.

The contacts he made with the local chapter of the Georgia Council for the Blind helped him follow up working on the Big Pine Nature Trail with a project of his own.

Barnard wanted to create a new Braille nature trail at the Gwinnett Environmental and Heritage Center in Buford and recruited people to help him.

The new Braille trail was designed and built by volunteers from his high school, Home Depot and other corporations as well as members of the Georgia Council of the Blind.

To complete the trail, he led two Global Youth Service Day fundraisers and organized other volunteer days. Barnard also obtained grants from Disney Friends for Change, Radio Disney Heroes for Change, and Summer of Service.

Including sight-impaired individuals throughout the process taught Barnard a lot.

“Having the vision-impaired involved and out on the trail gave me a greater perception of their world as well. The entire experience has been a learning experience for me,” Barnard said.

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