

THUMBS UP OCTOBER 26, 2014

Casey Sokolovic is saving sea turtles with cookies, coffee and kayaks

HIGHLIGHTS

Casey Sokolovic has raised more than \$500,000 for a sea turtle hospital and started a camp that has introduced hundreds of disadvantaged youths to beaches, turtles and science.

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After **Casey Sokolovic** visited The Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center on Topsail Island, she knew she wanted to help the turtles.

“It was just being in this pretty much small garage of a hospital with these sick and injured turtles in these tubs,” said Casey, of Winterville, which is near Greenville. The volunteers’ passion was contagious, she said, as they explained that sometimes turtles had to be sent to N.C. State University for surgery.

“Looking at the sea turtles, I just knew that I really wanted to do something to help these efforts out and truly make a difference,” she said.

As a then third-grader, there is only so much she could do, she said. So Casey and her mother started baking and selling turtle-shaped sugar cookies.

More than nine years and 10, ookies later,

Casey started and runs nonprofit organization Love A Sea Turtle, which has raised about \$500,000 for the sea turtle hospital and spearheaded various efforts to monitor and improve water quality in bodies of water across the state.

Fundraising efforts include Casey partnering with Joe Van Gogh coffee roaster in Hillsborough to create a “Sea Turtle” blend, which is now sold in more than 120 The Fresh Markets across the U.S.

In an effort to spread her curiosity for nature and science, Casey founded Upstream Downstream Connection, a 5-year-old summer camp that mixes science and adventure with trips to the beach, river kayaking and underwater scuba expeditions for disadvantaged youth.

Last year, the free camp served 525 kids from Boys & Girls Clubs and other organizations. Casey relies on volunteers and covers the cost of the camp through fundraising, grant writing, and her annual Love A Sea Turtle 5K Trail Run and Nature Walk, which is scheduled for March 28.

For those and other accomplishments, Casey was named earlier this year a national winner of the 2014 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, an annual award that recognizes 25 young people who are making a positive difference. Casey and 14 others received \$5,000 to support their work.

Wanting to do more

While selling cookies at community and science-related events, Casey, now 17 and a senior at D.H. Conley High School in Greenville, decided she wanted to do more.

Her parents loved drinking coffee, so she approached Joe Van Gogh. She worked with company officials to select the type of beans that would be go into a coffee blend, in which 10 percent of the net profits go to the sea turtle hospital.

Last year, Casey spearheaded River Quest, a 10-day, 100-mile kayak trip on the Neuse River from Goldsboro to New Bern. The student led expedition included eight days of paddling, water testing and other events. At Casey's request, Mayor B.J. Murphy of Kinston declared June 12 River Awareness Day.

Casey built on the event by creating the Neuse River Guardians, a year-round water testing and stream monitoring program with the assistance of students in five schools in five counties.

Love A Sea Turtle provides water testing equipment, supplies and support along with the River Guardian Foundation to engage more than 1,000 students in water conservation and river awareness.

Casey is also the North Carolina coordinator for or fishing line recycling program called Stow It-Don't Throw.

Creating a camp

Casey started camp Upstream Downstream

Connection camp after she visited a Boys & Girls Club and talked to kids who had never made sugar cookies from scratch or gone to the beach.

When Leah Connell, camp director for Upstream Downstream Connection and science director for Love A Sea Turtle, applied for the job, she was surprised to learn that her boss was 13.

“She was really young, but at the same time, very smart and very driven,” said Connell, 36, of Ayden. Casey knew exactly what she wanted, a camp where kids could learn science and have fun at the same time.

Connell, who teaches environmental and general biology at Wayne Community College, helped Casey establish the curriculum and trained volunteers, who have come back year after year.

The first year, a total of 28 students attended two, one-week camps, and last summer, there were nine one-day camps and two week-long camps.

Connell described camp scenes of children screaming with delight after learning about bugs in the water that will become dragon flies. At the camp, they move their muscles and work their brains as they learn about the upstream-downstream connection.

“They just glow, by the end of a week with us, a day with us,” Connell said. “They are tired, but they are happy.”

Misty Marston, president and chief executive officer for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Pitt County, which serves children from Pitt, Beaufort, Lenoir and Greene Counties, said nearly 500 of its students participated in the program over the summer.

The camp allows the kids to play in safe surroundings and exposes them to an environmental education piece that they likely aren't finding in school. The camp also pushes them out of their comfort zone, builds their confidence and self-esteem, she said.

"They all want to know when they get to go again," Marston said.

Next year, Casey is heading to college, and she has recruited other teenagers to take on more of a leadership role.

"I will be involved in it whenever I can be," she said.