

Lighting the Way: A local teen is recognized for his work to bring clean light to kids across the world.

NYMetroParents by Kaitlin Ahern
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When Ben Hirschfeld was a freshman in high school, his neighbor Pam Allyn told him about the work her literacy organization, LitWorld, was doing for students in Kenya. Hirschfeld was awed, but also concerned: Without any electricity, he learned, the students had to use dim kerosene lamps that caused burns, released toxic fumes that were linked to pneumonia and lung cancer, and contributed to air pollution. “I had had a lot of health issues myself and knew how hard it is to learn when not feeling well,” Hirschfeld says, “I had to help.” He started small, replacing kerosene lamps with solar lanterns in one Kenyan school, and the Lit! project was born.



Now a freshman at Columbia University, the 18-year-old from Hastings-on-Hudson has distributed lanterns to more than 11,000 people across the developing world, and his goal is to increase that number to 100,000 in the coming year. “I certainly feel proud of this work,” Hirschfeld says, “and when I get up in the morning knowing that there are kids out there who are healthier or reading better because of this project, I am really happy.”

Hirschfeld is one of 25 recipients of the 2012 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, which honors young people who have planned and carried out a significant service project to help others and/or the environment. The annual prize was created about a decade ago by children’s author T. A. Barron, in memory of his mother. Each winner receives \$2,500 to be applied to their service project or higher education.

“I was absolutely elated,” Hirschfeld says of winning the award. “The prize will help us give over 1,000 more people in the developing world access to clean, healthy light. I was excited too that the Barron Prize would allow us to raise awareness of how helping people in developing countries and stopping global warming are related.”

Hirschfeld says he’ll continue working to bring clean light to children throughout the world who need it. And he hopes that other teens who hear about his project will come up with their own ways to contribute to the world. “You are never too young to start making a difference—in fact, youth is a powerful ally!” he says. “By starting a project to help others, you connect with other people who are also caring. And when young people who care come together it really can change the world.”

For more information on the Lit! project or to get involved, visit www.litsolar.org. “We are always looking for more leaders to bring the cause to their schools,” Hirschfeld says.

For more information on the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, including a complete list of this year’s winners and instructions on how to nominate a young hero in your community, visit www.barronprize.org.