

Kendall Ciesemier, kidscaring4kids.org

Life Changers, ChicagoParent.com by Hilary Gowins
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Kendall Ciesemier's passion for helping her peers in Africa began when she was only 11.

It all started with an Oprah Winfrey Christmas special, says Ciesemier, now 18. For the show, Winfrey traveled to South Africa, visiting the homes of children living without parents.

"Those kids were my age," Ciesemier says. "They were taking care of their younger siblings because both of their parents had died of AIDS. I was shocked that this could be happening and there was no awareness. I thought it was unacceptable and wanted to do something."

So that night she Googled "AIDS orphans in Africa" and found World Vision, a child sponsorship program, and decided that she would fund an AIDS orphan with her Christmas money.

"I tried to send \$360 in cash in the mail," she says, laughing.

That was her first step. The child she sponsored was an 8-year-old girl named Benite from a village in Zambia.

But Ciesemier's journey didn't end there—not long afterward she connected with World Vision to start working on a larger project.

As things were developing, however, Ciesemier had to prepare for another life-altering experience: A liver transplant.

As she prepared for, went through and recovered from her surgery, Ciesemier posted blog updates on her condition to a webpage she built on carepages.com. In lieu of gifts, cards and flowers, she asked people to donate to her project in Africa. Later that year, she had a second liver transplant. By then, she had raised \$15,000.

She decided to organize as a nonprofit, Kids Caring 4 Kids, to inspire young people from the United States to raise money to help children in Africa.



From: The Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes Official Website: www.barronprize.org

So far, she has inspired 7,000 U.S. kids to raise almost \$900,000 that has gone toward schools, food, water and health clinics. This effort earned the Wheaton teen the 2011 Barron Prize for Young Heroes.

“I think being a kid and being really naïve helps when you’re trying to conquer such seemingly insurmountable problems,” she says. “Kids don’t see barricades like you do when you’re older.”

That attitude certainly carried over into Ciesemier’s personal life, as well.

“The (liver trouble) was always part of my life, but I never wanted that to be my life,” she says. “Having Kids Caring 4 Kids was really a blessing to have when going through a transplant and gave me such a purpose for my life. I wasn’t the girl who was sick, I was the girl who was helping others.”