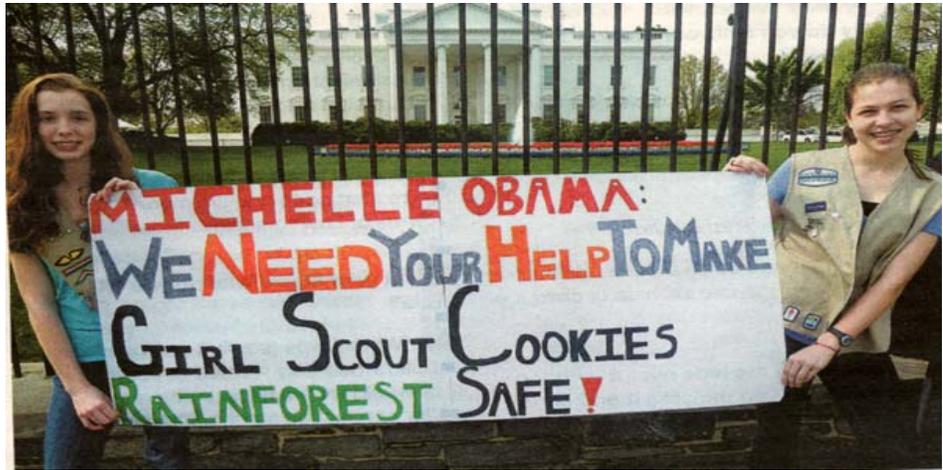


Friendship, Persistence—The Mix for a Cookie Crusade

Michigan K.I.D.S. by Janis Campbell
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When Madison Vorva and Rhiannon Tomtishen first met on the basketball court in sixth grade at the Greenhills School in Ann Arbor, they had no idea what a winning team they would become. “We met on our school’s



basketball team and we both found out we were Girl Scouts, and we both wanted to earn our Girl Scout Bronze Award,” explained Madison, who goes by Madi. The award requires Scouts to develop a community awareness project about an important issue, and then to educate and advocate for that issue.

“We were inspired by Dr. Jane Goodall’s (a famous primatologist) work with chimpanzees so we started researching other great apes and we came across the orangutan,” shared Madi. “We discovered that their habitat in Indonesia and Malaysia, which is the rain forest, is being cleared for palm oil plantations.”

“We started out really small—we had a poster board and we went to other Girl Scout Troops, and youth groups and made presentations,” says Madi. The girls also shared their concern for the orangutans at school with their sixth grade classmates.

While the girls were researching the impact of palm oil plantations on the orangutans, they began checking food labels to see which products contained palm oil. Around that same time, Girl Scout Cookie season rolled around. “That’s when we made the connection that palm oil was an ingredient in the cookies,” says Madi.

On their blog at projectorang.org, the girls share: “While in the midst of Girl Scout Cookie season we flipped over a box of cookies and discovered that palm oil was an ingredient in Girl Scout Cookies. We were shocked, but as Girl Scouts ourselves felt it was absolutely necessary to bring this issue to the attention of the Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) and convince them to make their cookies rain forest safe.”

From that moment, five years ago, their project changed in scope from being an educational campaign to teach young people in Ann Arbor about threats to orangutans, to lobbying the Girl Scouts of America to stop using palm oil and make cookies that are rain forest safe.

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

Each year, the girls have taken additional steps to meet their goal. In sixth grade, they made presentations on the issue and started petition drives to remove palm oil from Girl Scout Cookies. They later had the petition signed by Dr. Jane Goodall, says Madi.

In seventh grade, the girls organized another letter-writing drive at school. They also started National Orangutan Week at school, even organizing a dance to help the effort. The girls have teamed up with the Rainforest Action Network to create online campaigns as well.

After five years of hard work, the girls landed a meeting in New York City last May with a group of Girl Scout executives in charge of the cookie program. This fall, the organization made a major policy change in response to the girls' campaign and will be working to modify how much palm oil is used and what type is used. The pledge to use sustainable, or environmentally friendly, palm oil will be shown on the 2012-2013 boxes.

And while the girls are happy their efforts led to this huge change, they believe the only acceptable outcome still is for the Girl Scouts to change the cookie recipe. Rhiannon says they understand the next step would be a bigger deal because more than 200 million cookies are baked every year for the major fund-raising effort. "When people think of Girl Scouts, this is one of the first things they think of—Girl Scout Cookies are definitely a huge part of the organization, as well as a symbol of Girl Scouts, especially here in America," says Rhiannon.

Rhiannon says they have already talked with food scientists about potential alternative oils and ingredients, but because the cookie recipes are top secret, and they don't have access to them, "it's hard to come up with an exact solution." The bottom line: "If the Girl Scouts are willing to make the changes, there is definitely an alternative that can be used," says Rhiannon.

Both girls have been involved in scouting for 10 years and have each earned the Girl Scout Bronze Award and Girl Scout Silver Award. "We started as first graders, but in different troops, because we went to different schools," says Madi. As high schoolers, the girls are Juliette Girl Scouts, which means the best friends have formed their little own group, independent of a formal troop. Since 2009, they have worked with a mentor who provides support and guidance. Their mentor also nominated the girls for a special award, the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. Madi and Rhiannon were among the 11 winners. Usually there are 10 winners but Madi and Rhiannon were nominated as a team and will share the \$2,500 prize.

"We were thrilled," says Rhiannon of winning the award. "We haven't been honored at this level," she added. Both girls plan to use the prize money for college.

As part of their prize, Madi and Rhiannon were invited to New York City to meet children's author T. A. Barron, the founder of the award.

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“It’s a great opportunity to set an example for other young people. If you have a passion, and you care about something and you work hard, then you can achieve whatever goals you set for yourself,” says Madi. “And start small, don’t get overwhelmed,” adds Rhiannon. “It’s really overwhelming to look out into the world and see something that is wrong and you’re not sure what to do about it.

Madi and I started with a hand-made poster board, going around our community ... If you start small, you can grow your project to a larger scale.”

And that’s certainly a recipe for success.