

Teen wins cash prize for Nepal book push

News&Guide columnist Coburn is recognized for helping youth in Himalayan country.

By Kelsey Dayton
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A Jackson Hole High School student and *News&Guide* columnist has won a national prize for young heroes.

Phoebe Coburn, 15, of Wilson was one of 10 students nationally to receive a \$2,500 Gloria Barron Prize.

The prize committee gets about 300 nominations each year, said Barbara Ann Richman, executive director of the organization. Winners are selected for “heroic qualities, courage and taking on something that is bigger than one’s self,” Richman said. The committee looks for compassion, kindness and efforts to make a difference in the world that will continue, she said.

Coburn started the Magic Yeti Libraries in Nepal. She opened the first library in April 2007 with 1,000 pounds of books she collected from a book drive.

She recently opened the second library and has two more in the works.

Lisa Samford nominated Coburn for the award. She saw the nomination description, which said prize winners are focused on helping their fellow beings, and thought of Coburn.

The Barron Prize doesn’t recognize one particular action, but a pattern, Samford said.

Coburn “has really made a point of committing to making a difference in the world in any small way you can imagine,” she said.

Samford first started working with Coburn when she was in fourth grade. Coburn started a Roots and Shoots Club to celebrate nature and connect kids to the environment.

Coburn asked Samford to screen nature films and help enlist speakers for the club. Coburn learned about owls being killed on Fall Creek Road by cars and started a campaign to save them.

Posters and postcards distributed locally alerted drivers to the fact that the birds are often on or near the road feasting on rodents. The club also made road signs to remind drivers to slow down.

“She walks her talk,” Samford said. “She puts the time in and she really does make a difference.”

Coburn hadn’t heard of the Barron Prize until she learned she had been nominated. She plans to use her money to continue the Magic Yeti Libraries initiative. She hopes to return to Nepal next spring.

Phoebe lived in Nepal for a few years before starting elementary school. Both her parents have worked and met there. She has always loved the country and wanted to find a way to help its residents, she said.

A library seemed a practical way to help.

“I’m just sort of an average kid,” she said. “I wish I could say I started this because I loved books so much, but it just made sense.”

Many of the kids who use the library had only seen black-and-white text books before it was established, she said. The bright, colorful children’s books were a chance to bring new ideas and glimpses of the world to them, as well as to ignite an excitement for reading.

Coburn continues to make classroom presentations, sharing stories about the kids who use the library with students in Jackson.

“She has inspired more than simply generosity – she puts a personal face to the experience of giving, helping to create ties that span culture and geography,” Samford wrote in Coburn’s nomination letter. “On every level, she is a citizen diplomat, on a quest to develop children’s education and literacy.”

Coburn writes the “Teen to Teen” column in the *News&Guide*.