

Leading through reading

New Jersey Countryside
a visit with by Marian H. Mundy
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A visit with Shannon McNamara, a teen creating fresh starts for girls with her SHARE program



Shannon McNamara of Basking Ridge is the kind of teenager who makes you slap your forehead and say, “Wow!” For her many community service projects, McNamara, 17, a senior at Ridge High School, has collected a bundle of prestigious awards, including the worldwide Youth Achievement Recognition at the United Nations in New York City. Her latest is the nationwide Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, awarded to McNamara for starting SHARE, an

after-school girls’ reading program in Tanzania. Petite and soft spoken with a ready smile, McNamara is a young lady who is quietly determined. There’s something about her that makes you just know she’ll continue to make a difference.

I think we need a world map to keep up with you. Travel seems to be your middle name.

My whole family is like that – my mom, dad, older sister and brother. We all love adventure and new places. When I was little we lived in Ireland and New Zealand. We all go on volunteer service trips together. When I was 12 we went to Peru to teach English to kindergarten children, at 13 I worked in an elementary school in Costa Rica, and now we’re involved with my SHARE program in Tanzania.

This is embarrassing, but I’m not exactly sure where Tanzania is located. It’s a country on the east coast of Africa, just south of Kenya, just north of Mozambique. It used to be called Rhodesia.

What does SHARE stand for, and what’s it all about?

SHARE stands for Shannon’s After-School Reading Exchange. It’s a program just for girls, where they can enjoy reading, get reading help, do word games and puzzles, borrow books and generally improve their English.

How did you happen to start SHARE?

My parents always told me that we won the “birth lottery,” that we were privileged and lucky to live in a country where we have so much freedom, where I’m free to use my own voice. And because of that we have an obligation to do what we can to help others improve their situation.

So you’re part of a family tradition of community service. But why Tanzania?

In 2008 I needed a significant service project for my Girl Scout Gold Award. That’s the Girl Scout equivalent of Eagle Scout. As it happened, my family was going to Tanzania through a program called Global Citizens Network, so I began collecting children’s books and school supplies. I wanted to start a reading program for girls and create a library. And we did. My family and other volunteers helped me. In Bukoba they gave us a dilapidated schoolroom. We painted it, rehabbed it, made bookshelves. I had to convince the Girl Scouts that working in Africa would count as community service.

Since then the project has expanded a lot. We started with 23 girls and the motto, “Today a reader, tomorrow a leader.” We eventually collected about 24,000 donated books and we now have four libraries at four difference schools and four reading programs for girls. My friends came over to help sort books. We had books all over our house at one point.

We pay local teachers to stay after school and on weekends so the girls can practice their reading skills. And our libraries are open to the community.

I bet working in Africa was an eye-opener for an American teenager. But why was your program just for girls?

It’s hard for Americans to understand how girls are treated in some poor countries like Tanzania.

I couldn’t believe the gender inequality. Girls are not valued, respected or educated. And we discovered the book famine. Most of the girls we worked with had never owned a book. Some had never held a book in their hands. In Tanzania both boys and girls go to primary school, meaning they get the basics of reading and math, but girls rarely go beyond that.

Girls have a hard life. They get married at 14. They’re expected to spend their lives having babies, doing housework with no appliances, preparing food and being servants to their men. They don’t have a voice. I wanted to help give them a voice.

Obviously your program has been a great success. Have you been back to see how it’s going?

Yes, I’ve made two trips there since. I’m so happy to see the huge progress the girls are making in reading and English. These girls really crave and value education, something kids here take for granted.

Now the girls are starting to see that they too can be teachers, doctors, nurses, whatever. One girl told me, “I want to be president.”

But we found that not all the girls take part in SHARE. Some families won't allow it. They still want their girls at home doing housework. They're not convinced studying is a worthwhile activity.

Are you going back to Tanzania this year?

Of course.

Are you still collecting books?

Not any more, because shipping costs have become so expensive. SHARE is a 501-C3 charitable organization and we have to do fundraising. We were able to raise \$20,000 to install regular electricity in two libraries and solar power in a third one. It gets pretty dark there during the rainy season.

Where is SHARE's focus right now?

I'm concentrating on the next educational level. Our libraries are in elementary schools, but we're concerned about what happens to the girls after that.

We discovered that for girls to make progress their best bet is boarding school. It offers a structured learning environment where they can be safe. Attacks on teenage girls by men and boys are quite common, and males are never punished for crimes against women. So we're sponsoring SHARE Scholars, our new program for girls age 11 to 18 to attend Hekima Girls Secondary School, a good boarding school run by nuns. Girls there are so proud of having their own beds. They're just primitive wooden bunks, but at home they have to share with siblings. We established a library there too.

What do you envision as the future role of your program?

I want every girl to have the chance to achieve. Ultimately, my dream would be to establish SHARE in India, or maybe China. But that is definitely still in the dream stage.

For more information about Shannon's SHARE program or to give a girl a fresh start via SHARE Scholars, visit www.shareinafrica.org. Click on the button, Donate Now. **NJC**

Marian H. Mundy is a freelance writer and award-winning contributor to New Jersey Countryside.

Note about the Barron Prize:

This nationwide prize was founded by children's author T. A. Barron who wrote the legendary Merlin series. Each year since 1999 it has honored 10 youths, between the ages of 8 to 18, who have planned and executed significant projects to improve the lives of others and/or to protect the planet. Each winner gets \$2,500 toward their project. A survey of winners showed that in every case early exposure to books, reading, writing, music, games and the arts made an important difference in their ability to achieve.