

## *Chit Chatting with Shannon McNamara*

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Recently I had the honor of interviewing one of the amazing teenagers who won a Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes Award—Shannon McNamara. Continue to read on about her about her organization SHARE.

R: Tell us a little bit about yourself?

S: I'm 17 years old. I am a senior in high school but next year I will be attending Rice University. I run cross-country and track and I am also deeply obsessed with Taylor Swift.

R: Tell us about SHARE

S: SHARE is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that empowers girls in Africa through education. Our motto is "Today a Reader, Tomorrow a Leader"

R: How did you come up with the idea?

S: I have a passion for two things: Women's rights, and reading. I've been a girl scout since I was 5 years old, and I have loved books since before that age!

My family and I have a tradition of taking international volunteer trips each summer. Before we went to Africa in 2008, we had worked in Peru and Costa Rica. We taught children English and helped out in orphanages, but I never really felt like I was doing work to my full potential. Then, when we had planned our trip in 2008 to work in Africa, I did some research on the program. I found out about two things: the "book famine" in Africa, and the gender inequality that exists there. I came up with SHARE (**SH**annon's **A**fter-school **R**eadin**G** **E**xchange), a way I could solve both. SHARE would be an after-school reading program for **GIRLS ONLY**, helping them get on the same level as boys while trying to help the book famine.

R: What did your family think when you told them about your idea?

**S:** My family is my biggest support base, no doubt about it! SHARE is also mainly a family effort. I created the idea, but my family was very instrumental in helping me achieve it. My brother takes videos and makes documentaries for SHARE. My sister takes photos for SHARE. My Dad is the treasurer of SHARE on our Board of Directors, and my mom is the Executive Director. My family has encouraged me to do this since Day 1, and I am very appreciative of that!



**R:** Tell us about your trip to Tanzania. How long did you stay there the first time you went?

**S:** All of the trips we have taken (from 2008 to 2010 and continuing) have been 2 weeks long.

**R:** Tell us about Hekima Girls' Secondary School. How are things going?

**S:** The Hekima Girls' Secondary School is incredible! It is an all-girls boarding school run by nuns which is wonderful for two reasons.

The first reason is that it is an all girls boarding school. This way, we don't have boys coming up to us and complaining that they aren't in the SHARE program. Also, the fact that it is a boarding school means that the girls can focus on only their studies since they stay at the school. Usually girls have to come home from school, and then they spend all of their time caring for their siblings, cooking, cleaning, fetching firewood, etc. When the girls stay over at this boarding school, they can focus on just their education, which is much more effective for their learning.



Secondly, the nuns at this school (especially Sister Esther, who runs the school) are amazing! They are so transparent and accountable, and follow through with all the directions we give them. They also e-mail us frequently so we have an idea of what is going on at the school. In Tanzania, people run on "African time", which means everything is always delayed about 3 hours! However, the nuns at Hekima stick to the real clock which helps us work together so nicely.

**R:** What can people do if they are interested in helping out with the Share program?

**S:** Right now we are focusing on our SHARE Scholars program – providing SHARE girls in primary schools with scholarships to the Hekima Girls' Secondary School. We are collecting donations for that program and focusing greatly on it because all of the research shows the importance of scholarships. If a girl stays in school longer, she is more likely to marry later, and have fewer children. You can donate on our website, [www.shareinafrica.org](http://www.shareinafrica.org).

We are also taking steps to create a Kindle, or E-reader program. Shipping books is extremely expensive, and we have already shipped over 23,000 books. Instead, we are trying to get more “bang for our buck” by sending Kindles or E-readers to the girls, so those and laptops, are also welcome as donations!

R: You got to meet Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan. What was that like?

S: Incredible! Queen Rania is a true presence, meeting her made me awe-struck. I admire all that she has done so greatly. My mom and I bought her book “The Sandwich Shop” and I absolutely loved it! It’s so great to see someone using their fame to benefit others in the world. You rarely see any of that today.

R: Tell us about who else you have met?

S: Monique Coleman, Condoleezza Rice, Miley Cyrus, Tiffany Thornton, Landon Donovan, Juan Pablo, Senator Robert Menendez, and Steve Adubato.

I am also an enormous fan of Condoleezza Rica, so I was thrilled to meet her!

R: How did you get nominated for the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes?

S: I applied for this Prize online, and my guidance counselor nominated me.

R: How did you find out that you were one of the winners?

S: I got a phone call! It was very unexpected and very exciting.

R: How does it feel to make a difference in the world?

S: (laughs) well the world is a big place – it would be incredible if I could one day say that I’ve made a difference in it! But that’s the goal I’m trying to achieve, and if I ever do...I could say that I’ve done what I wanted to in life!

R: What are your future goals?

S: I would love to someday down the road be able to set up SHARE branches in India and China.



R: What is the best advice you have ever gotten and by who?

S: Conan O’Brian has a quote that says, “If you work hard, and you’re kind, amazing things will happen”. It’s simple, and I find that it’s also very true. I try to work and live by this advice.

R: What advice would you give someone who wanted to help out the environment or help out the words in someway?

S: Find something that you are passionate about. Make sure it's something that you will stay passionate about, because passion is very important. Working hard is tiring for anyone, but the drive that you have to work hard (your passion), is very important.

R: Does Share have a website? What is the address? Is it on any social networking sites? If so, what is the address?

S: YES!! The website is [www.shareinafrica.org](http://www.shareinafrica.org). We have a facebook page at [www.facebook.com/shareinafrica](http://www.facebook.com/shareinafrica) and we would love it if people could "like" us on facebook!

R: Is there anything else you would like to add?

S: Just that we love it when people visit our website, spread awareness about the girls in Africa, and also "like" us on Facebook!

R: Shannon, thank you for the interview. Have a great day.