

starting small: Lessons from kid activists

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Christina and Eric Bear were finalists for the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes in 2011.

Maybe they can't run for office or even vote, but there's no question that kids can make a positive difference in their communities. If your child wants to take on a do-good project, help him get started with advice straight from the experts—kids who didn't let their age get in the way of a good cause.

PICK SOMETHING YOU'RE PASSIONATE ABOUT. Community activist Victoria Pannell, 12, didn't have to look far to find a cause; she saw plenty of problems growing up in New York City with her mom, a former NYPD officer. "Everything I speak about is close to my heart—things I see in my neighborhood, like drugs, fatherlessness, and gang violence," says the seventh grader, who was recently named Regional Director of Youth Move, a branch of the Harlem-based civil rights group National Action Network. Youth Move connects young people via Facebook and Twitter, and Victoria leads marches and speaks at events about a wide variety of issues that affect kids. "Kids will listen to other kids, because we see things more simply than adults," she says. "Believing in what you're doing is the most important part."



Will Lourcey was a finalist for the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes in 2011.

FIND A GROUP DEVOTED TO YOUR CAUSE—OR CREATE ONE YOURSELF. For most issues, there is an organization that welcomes kids, says Victoria. Best places to start: your school, church, or local community center. Or, do what Will Lourcey of Fort Worth, Texas, did and take a DIY approach. The 9-year-old was inspired to form FROGS (Friends Reaching Our Goals) with 10 Little League teammates. "Every week on the way home from practice, we would pass a homeless man who looked really hungry," he says. "I asked some of my friends to help me with an idea I had, and they were really happy to do it." With garage sales, lemonade stands, softball hit-a-thons, and soccer kick-a-thons, the kids raised over \$12,000 and collected more than 1,000 cans of food for the local food bank last summer. "Doing this with a bunch of friends was a big help," says Will. "I learned that no matter how small or tall you are,

together you can make a big difference."

ASK GROWN-UPS FOR GUIDANCE. Once you come up with an idea, ask some trusted adults for help, says Will. You may need a grown-up to assist in setting up meetings, making phone calls, or sending e-mails. (Don't worry: That doesn't mean your parents are doing the project for you, Will says.) "My dad knew someone at the food bank, and so I was able to have a meeting with her," says Will. "I explained all my ideas and she was really excited." Other people to

consider approaching: grandparents, teachers, youth pastors, Scout leaders, and friends' parents.

GET THE WORD OUT. When siblings Eric and Christina Bear, 12 and 14, of Golden, Colorado, participated in an environmental poster contest, they did research and learned that radon causes about 21,000 U.S. deaths each year. "Colorado has really high radon levels," says Eric. "We were worried about that because everyone deserves clean air." This inspired them to launch the Radon Awareness Project to educate the public about the radioactive gas. The kids handed out surveys and brochures at the library and at local events, and did presentations for their city council. Later, they even spoke to Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, the EPA, and the American Lung Association. Don't be bashful about contacting the media to help get the word out, Christina says. "We went on the TV news, and local newspapers gave us stories," says Eric. "Adults were enthusiastic; they liked to see kids were doing this."

HAVE FUN! The warm feeling you get from helping others can be the best part, says Victoria. "One time after I spoke about what it's like to grow up without a father, a man came up to me and told me that if he'd heard me earlier, he would have made better decisions," Victoria says. "When someone tells you you've made a difference like that, it's the absolute best feeling in the world!"

More information is available at www.barronprize.org.