

The Power of Young People to Change the World

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Dream of a Nation Anthology
2011

If I could give today's young people three wishes, they would be:

More hugs.

More time outside in nature.

More belief in their own power to change the world.

While most people understand the importance of the first two wishes, the third one leaves some folks scratching their heads, wondering why young people's belief in their own power is so essential.

Let's start with the notion that all of us—especially young people—need heroes. We need them to be our guides on the twisting, sometimes difficult trail we call life. To show us just how far we can go, to help us know just how high we can climb.

And we need heroes today more than ever. Our modern society is terribly confused about *the difference between a hero and a celebrity*. And the difference is crucial.

A celebrity is all about fame—temporary, superficial fame, usually for qualities that are easy to see: a pretty face, a good hook shot, a great dance move. A hero, by contrast, is about character—qualities beneath the surface that aren't visible until they prompt action. Qualities like courage, hope, compassion, and perseverance.

Heroes, real heroes, are all around us. They truly hold our world together, through their unselfish devotion to helping others, supporting families, teaching children, protecting the environment. They don't want fame, or glory, or even credit; they just want to help. In so many ways, these unsung heroes steer the boat in which all of us sail.

Yet ... young people hear a lot more about celebrities than about heroes, in every form of media. Worse yet, young people are treated too often as just another target market by advertisers. The underlying message they get from all this is that their self-worth comes from what they buy—which drink, which shoes, which cell phone—not *who they are down inside*.

What gets lost in this? Young people's sense of their own potential for heroic qualities—their own power to make a positive difference in the world.

Truth is, there is a potential hero, a future difference maker, in every young person. Each of them, from whatever background, is a bundle of untapped energy—a positive force who can do something to steer that communal boat that carries us all.

All it takes for that to be true ... is belief. For if young people believe in their own power, they will use it. And they will discover that any person—regardless of gender, age, race, cultural background, or economic circumstance—can make a genuine, lasting impact.

How do we help skeptical young people believe in their own power? The best way by far is simply to share examples of other young people who have made a difference. Those stories, whether fictional or true, carry real inspiration. And they speak for themselves.

If you want to find heroes in fiction, there are countless examples from every culture and era. My own books always focus on characters who must dig deep to triumph over some huge challenge—characters like young Merlin, who starts out as a half-drowned boy and ultimately becomes the greatest wizard of all times; or like Kate, who must conquer her greatest fears to save the people and places she loves.

And, of course, there are many such stories from history. Think of extraordinary people like Wilma Rudolph, who triumphed over childhood polio, poverty, and racism to become the fastest woman sprinter in the world. Or Abe Lincoln, who had the wisdom and grace to put the nation's good above his own. Or Anne Frank, who showed such courage in the Holocaust that her diary has inspired millions of people. And the list goes on, including people from every culture and continent.

The most compelling stories of all, though, are those about real people in our midst today. Especially young people—those who have used courage, creativity, and commitment to improve the lives of others.

To turn the spotlight on such amazing young people—to share their stories—I founded a national award, the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. Named after my mom, who was a quiet hero in my own life, this award, now in its tenth year, honors 25 young people each year. They come from every background, and they are as diverse as the youth of America. The one thing they all have in common is a belief in their own power to make a difference—and the dedication to make it happen.

This prize is really just a small thing, but its winners are shining examples of what young people can achieve. And I hope that those examples might inspire other young people to discover their own power to make a difference.

Here are a few of the winners from recent years:

Katie, age 10, has rallied hundreds of people in her town in South Carolina to help her create vegetable gardens to feed the hungry. How did she begin? As a third grader, she raised a tiny seedling into a huge 40-pound cabbage. When she saw how many people that cabbage fed at a local soup kitchen, she decided that she could do more. So far, she has donated more than 1,000 pounds of fresh produce to people in need.

Ryan, age 11, has worked tirelessly to raise money to provide clean drinking water to African villages. When he first heard about the plight of African children who died from impure water, Ryan was only six years old. He decided to do something about it. In the next five years, he raised over \$500,000—enough to build over 70 water wells.

Barbara, age 17, grew up on a farm in Texas. When she realized that local farmers were pouring their used motor oil into rivers and on the ground, causing pollution, she organized the creation of a recycling center for crude oil. Her project, called “Don’t Be Crude,” has grown to include 18 recycling centers in Texas.

Shifra, age 16, realized that many people in New York City weren’t able to repair their own clothes, and that this hampered every aspect of their lives. She also realized that she could use her passion for sewing to help. So she volunteered for several years at a local soup kitchen, repairing pants, mending coats, fixing tote bags, and sewing buttons on clothes. Now people in the neighborhood call her the Sewing Lady.

Anthony, age 12, created “Heavenly Hats” which has provided over 10,000 new hats to people who have lost their hair due to chemotherapy and other medical treatments. He started this project when his grandmother was diagnosed with cancer and lost her hair, motivating him to make her a hat to lift her spirits. Now, from his home in Wisconsin, he distributes hats donated from people around the world.

Ellie, age 17, was volunteering at a center for Hispanic children in the Los Angeles area when she realized that many young people had difficulty speaking English clearly enough to succeed in school and find jobs. So she organized dozens of volunteers to create a website, RepeatAfterUs.com, to provide audio clips of over 5,000 texts to help anyone learn English as a second language.

Shawn, age 18, founded Garden Angels at his crime-ridden high school in Brooklyn, New York to transform an abandoned, trash-filled lot into a community garden. The hardest part of this task was to convince his peers that they could do better than hanging out with local gangs, that they could really change their community. His success leads Shawn to declare: “Every person, no matter how small, can make a difference.”

Chloe, age 17, founded the Climate Action Club at her school in Maine to help local residents do something to combat climate change. Overcoming resistance and skepticism, she persevered. Recently, the reusable bag campaign she initiated was adopted as the model for a statewide program to reduce waste.

Jaclyn, age 16, survived a bout with brain cancer as a child—and was encouraged by her friends on the University of Maryland Women’s Lacrosse team. She decided to help other kids with cancer by creating an organization to pair those kids with college athletic teams whose support could aid the healing process. To date, more than 200 young people have been adopted by teams around the country.

Otana, age 15, discovered that the air purifier used by her asthmatic mother might actually be producing harmful levels of toxic ozone. She did her own scientific research after school, then began to share her findings with local and state officials. This culminated in her presentation to the California Air Resources Board, which then developed new regulations and became the first state to ban the sale of ozone-emitting air purifiers.

Sujay, age 16, was so passionate about creating clean, alternative forms of energy that he began conducting his own experiments during the summer. As a result, he invented a new energy-producing technique that uses bacteria to convert cellulose into ethanol at a fraction of the current cost. He has taken his idea to a corporate partner who is trying to develop his process into commercial production.

Ashley, age 16, visited Africa with her family and was deeply upset by the lack of educational opportunities for girls. When she returned home to Colorado, she started AfricAid, a non-profit organization to help provide schools for girls in Tanzania. In the years since its founding, AfricAid has helped educate over 40,000 young Africans.

The list could go on and on. These are but a few examples of young people who have discovered that they can build on their own energy and ideals to do something truly great.

And yet ... maybe “great” isn’t the right word. As Mother Teresa once said, “I have done no great deeds. But I have done many *small* deeds ... with great love.”

Let’s all share such stories of empowered young people. The more we do that, the more those young people will steer our world’s boat ... and fill its sails with love.

T. A. Barron, author of more than 20 books for young people and founder of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, lives in Colorado. For more information, visit www.tabarron.com.