

## SCHOOLS

### Los Altos Student wins Young Heroes award

Published on Wednesday, 04 December 2013 00:04

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Courtesy of Sruthi Ramaswami

Los Altos student Sruthi Ramaswami, fourth from right, works with students to lobby legislators in Sacramento.

Former Archbishop Mitty High School student Sruthi Ramaswami of Los Altos recently received the national Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. Ramaswami now attends the University of Chicago.

The Barron Prize annually celebrates 25 inspiring, public-spirited young leaders from across America who have made a significant positive difference. The top 10 to 15 winners receive a \$5,000 cash award to support their service work or higher education.

While in high school, Ramaswami founded the Mitty Advocacy Project (MAP) to empower young people to make a difference in their communities via political advocacy. She created a legislative network of more than 1,000 students nationally who represent social-justice issues and interface

directly with state and federal legislators.

Teams of students research topics such as poverty, education, immigration and criminal justice and then identify bills designed to address the issues. They lobby state legislators in Sacramento and have traveled to Washington, D.C., to advocate at the national level. Five of the six bills they have lobbied for have been signed into law.

#### Inspiration and Empowerment

Ramaswami began her work as a high school freshman, when a teacher inspired her to prepare for and participate in Catholic Lobby Day, an advocacy event designed to mobilize California Catholics to lobby state legislators.

"Mitty students were the only students who took part in the Catholic Lobby Day," Ramaswami said. "I found that surprising and weird. I just had a fantastic experience and I felt others should have the opportunity so that they know students can be involved in politics."

Inspired and empowered by that experience, she instituted MAP in her sophomore year to form a community of youth lobbyists to represent the interests of the less fortunate.

As the cornerstone of MAP, Ramaswami founded California Youth Advocacy Day, an annual event to promote civic engagement. For the past three years, more than 600 high school students have participated in the event, attending issue-specific workshops led by MAP students and then lobbying their legislators at the state capitol.

"As a young person, I felt empowered to work with politicians," she said. "Legislators are pretty open to hearing from students. As intimidating as it might be to advocate, the legislators completely take us seriously. It feels good to have someone in power to listening to you."

While working with MAP, Ramaswami became involved in promoting improvements to the state's food-stamp program and helping those opposed to human trafficking. While volunteering for Sunnyvale Community Services, she learned that many who need services like food donations don't know enough about the food programs, so she supported better dispersal of food-stamp program information.

MAP has grown to include 100 students at Ramaswami's school and has expanded to more than 50 schools nationwide.

"I've learned that mobilizing people to believe in and work toward a common goal is not the purview of adulthood," she said. "Motivation and self-belief trump age."

Ramaswami is majoring in economics and continues to be involved in politics at the University of Chicago.

"I would encourage high school students to get involved in their community," she said. "It doesn't have to be talking to legislators – it can start small. It all starts with that belief that you can make a difference if you try."

Author T.A. Barron established The Gloria Barron Prize in 2001 and named the award for his mother. Each year the award honors 25 young leaders as diverse as their service projects. They are female and male, urban and rural, and from many races and backgrounds. Half of the honorees have focused on helping their communities and fellow human beings and half have focused on protecting the environment.

For more information, visit [barronprize.org](http://barronprize.org).

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