During a fifth-grade trip to a nearby school, Riley Joy Gant was shocked to hear that a kindergartener’s family couldn’t afford a pack of crayons.

“I had more crayons than I could ever need or use,” Riley, now 17, says. “To think there was someone so young who didn’t have something as basic as crayons really broke my heart.”

After talking with her school’s outreach staff, Riley learned that most public schools in her Los Angeles community were underprivileged and without basic supplies at home, which often meant students couldn’t do homework.

Determined to help, the then 10-year-old set out to give backpacks filled with school supplies to one kindergarten class in her community. She raised funds and surpassed her goal, delivering 360 stuffed backpacks. Seeing the difference the supplies made, Riley founded the nonprofit Rainbow Pack (rainbowpack.org), which uses donations and local and national grants to buy wholesale supplies. The youth-led group has donated more than 14,600 homework packs to schools throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District.

“Getting an education is the way they’re going to be able to not only change their life, but their family’s lives as well,” she says. “If they can get out of that cycle of poverty, they can go on to high school and college, and it will make a big difference in their lives.”

Riley, who won the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes in 2016, also hosts back-to-school pep rallies at elementary schools, including a “homework pledge” where students promise to try to complete their homework.

“We’ve heard from the principals and teachers that the kids are all talking about it for days after,” Riley says. “They’re so excited from that first day, which is really what we want.”

“Anyone has the power to do what I did,” the rising high school senior says. “Once you realize you have the power to create a substantial impact and change another person’s life, it’s really empowering.”

—Lauren Harris