

Teens who decided to help the world

By Pamela S. Turner
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For Shawn Henry, it was hearing a teacher read a book on community gardens. For Erin Rosen-Watson, it was learning that many foster children have only the clothes on their back. For Katharine Kendrick, it was watching a film on the 1994 killings in Rwanda. For Annalise Blum, it was hearing Guatemalans talk about surviving civil war horrors. For Matthew Rich, it was seeing bare dirt where a forest had stood. For each of them, it was the moment they decided to act.

'Angels' at an urban park

The park in Shawn Henry's neighborhood in East Flatbush, N.Y., was not much of a park. It was filled with car tires, rusted washing machines, and gang members. But when a teacher read "Seedfolks," a novel by Paul Fleischman, to Shawn's 10th-grade class, Shawn was inspired by the story of volunteers creating urban gardens. He wondered if he could do the same thing in his own neighborhood. He imagined that sad local park transformed into a place where people could relax, read a book, and play chess.

"We decided to take the park back and clean it up," says Shawn. He recruited other young people to join him in a group they called the Garden Angels. Some were high schoolers. Others came from the junior high next to the park. Shawn applied for grants to help pay for the park's transformation. The kids also held book sales and bake sales to raise money.

The garbage dumped in the park was gathered up and hauled away. Overgrown plants were dug up or trimmed. Broken benches were repaired or replaced. After nine months, the blighted park was a different place.

The Garden Angels continue to take care of the park. They have begun other community projects, too. The Angels started a chess program and a hip-hop group at the local library. They also do library fundraising. Eventually, they hope to help open a local community center.

Shawn is now 18. He studies business management at a community college in Manhattan. His work with Garden Angels won him a Barron Prize, which honors outstanding young leaders around the country. Shawn says his experiences have taught him a lot about the

power of youths. "If you give young people a voice, and they feel passion," Shawn says, "they can do what it takes to bring about change."

Helping foster kids feel at home

Erin Rosen-Watson was just 13 when she started her community- service organization, Erin's Helping Hands. Erin had learned that children often enter foster care without any belongings at all. When she began her project, the teenager from Natick, Mass., hoped to collect 200 afghans for foster children. She soon added an "essential care packet" project. Erin donates bags filled with books, stuffed animals, underwear and socks, and toiletries like toothpaste and shampoo. At last count, Erin had given away 6,390 handmade afghans and blankets and more than 6,500 care packages!

Erin's Helping Hands actually has 1,000 hands. In the past four years, 500 people have helped by donating goods as well as sewing, crocheting, and packaging. Social workers distribute the blankets, afghans, and packages to foster kids. "My mother is my biggest volunteer," says Erin.

Erin's dad helps, too. When a local business offered to donate leftover blanket fleece, he rented a truck and filled the family basement with bags of remnants. It took all summer for Erin, her parents, and 100 volunteers to cut and sew the fabric into blankets. Donated stuffed animals and books were added. Erin donated 1,618 "care packets" to children at 52 homeless shelters.

Seventeen-year-old Erin is now a college freshman. "I want to do the projects as long as possible," Erin says, noting that about 25 children enter or re-enter foster care in Massachusetts every day. "What I learned is that it is amazing how many people you can reach - and not just with those who get the donation. Many elderly people who sew and crochet for me tell me how much it helps them, by giving meaning to their lives."

Making a difference in Darfur

At the beginning of their senior year of high school, Annalise Blum and Katharine Kendrick began talking about the terrible things going on in the Darfur region of Sudan in Africa. Newspapers told of innocent men, women, and children being beaten or killed simply because they were black. Katharine thought it sounded a lot like what had happened in Rwanda in 1994. Annalise had recently visited Guatemala and talked to people who had suffered terribly during that country's long civil war (1954-95). The Sudanese refugees were gathered into camps with little food. How to help?

Annalise and Katharine decided to sell ribbons to raise money and let people know about events in Darfur. A small loop of green ribbon on a safety pin would mean hope for Sudan.

But where to send the money? "It was sort of overwhelming at first," Katharine says. But with the help of Youth Philanthropy Worldwide, which matches young fundraisers with

aid groups, Annalise and Katharine chose Relief International. "With our money, they are buying chickens to give to refugees," says Annalise. "People can eat the eggs, but they can also sell eggs or raise more chickens and sell them." Some of the money raised will also buy school supplies for refugee children.

The two began by selling ribbons to their high school classmates in Oakland, Calif. "We got our friends to wear them," Katharine says. "Then people came to us and said, 'Oh, I need my ribbon.' "

The girls sold ribbons at an on-campus showing of a film about the crisis in Sudan. Other students sold them at sporting events and their parents' workplaces. Friends at other schools got involved. Teens at eight other San Francisco Bay Area high schools are now raising money to help Sudanese refugees.

"Our project has ballooned outward," says Katharine. "It was really exciting to see how much momentum we caused. And it feels really good to know we are doing something concrete." They have raised more than \$2,000 so far.

The girls are considering making "chicken pins" (\$5 buys a chicken) in addition to the green ribbons. They also hope to organize a fundraising concert and start a letter-writing campaign to urge the United States government to take action.

"Sometimes, it seems too hard to get involved," says Annalise. "But once you get people going ... it takes off."

Tree by tree, forests re-grow



Every child loves to play in a forest, and Matthew Rich of Concord, N.C., was happy to grow up next to one. But when he was 16, the forest was leveled to make room for more houses. "It really bothered me," says Matthew. It was too late to save Matthew's neighborhood woodland, so the high school junior decided to plant a new forest elsewhere. He started a group called the Woodland and Wildlife Restoration Committee with \$60 of his own money and \$101 earned from a garage sale. He bought eight saplings and planted them at a care center for the elderly.

Eight trees, however, is not a forest. Matthew's goal was to plant 1,000 trees. A garden writer at a local newspaper helped get the word out. Matthew received a grant from the state forestry department. To his surprise, several big companies offered to help. International Paper donated trees, and Lowe's, a home-improvement store, donated equipment. "I learned that businesses can be very caring about the environment and the community," says Matthew.

Matthew mobilized more than 200 students from two high schools and an elementary school to help with planting. So far his group has planted more than 1,300 trees on public and private land - a real forest. Like Shawn Henry, Matthew won a Barron Prize.

Matthew, 18, is now a college freshman. He hopes to go to law school. But creating new forests is still a big part of his life. "After all the support I've gotten," he says, "I want to keep planting as long as I can."

For more information

You can read about Erin Rosen-Watson's projects on her website at: www.massyouthinaction.org.

Youth Philanthropy Worldwide works with young people to help them become involved in the global community: www.yeworldwide.org.

Relief International brings aid to Sudan. www.ri.org . Learn more about Sudan's problems at www.savedarfur.org.

You can learn more about Matthew Rich's tree planting projects on his website at: www.onetreeatime.org.