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Children who lend a helping hand show they can make a difference and change the world

We highlight five kids and teens who are making a difference through volunteer opportunities, proving that helping hands can be child-sized too.



Wyatt Workman, a second-grader from Glendale, Calif., is a budding environmentalist, clay sculptor, book author, blogger, and auteur. His colorful, six-minute clay-animation movie ("Save the Sea from the Trash Monster!") is attracting hits on YouTube and at his website, wyattsworks.com.

(Courtesy of Timathea Workman)

By Gregory M. Lamb, Staff writer

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Parents want their kids and teens to care about others – whether at school, in their community, or in need a continent away.

The good news is that children "are sort of hard-wired" to want to help others, says Michael Ungar, author of "The We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids." "They want to take on responsibility."

While adults do wonderful things to help others, even more amazing is the number of children and teens who are "making a difference," too.

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"Childhood projects are a great time to sort of step back and let the child develop those skills, from time management to seeing the impact on others if they don't fulfill their obligations," says Dr. Ungar, a family counselor and professor of social work at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The bottom line: Support, but don't shove. "Our kids are really watching us," he says. "If we're showing empathy to others, if we're cooking a casserole for a neighbor who's fallen down and broken her hip, if we're doing those small things in our community," kids will notice, he says.

Below, we highlight five outstanding young difference-makers – children and teens who have turned their care for others into impressive actions.

They show that there's no age barrier to becoming a force for good.

Wyatt: Making clay wiggle to save the oceans

Wyatt Workman was conducting his phone interview from a closet in his house.

It apparently was the 7-year-old's private office, a place to speak with an inquiring reporter in some confidentiality.

The second-grader from Glendale, Calif., is a budding environmentalist, clay sculptor, book author, blogger, and auteur. His colorful, six-minute clay-animation movie ("Save the Sea from the Trash Monster!") is attracting hits on YouTube and at his website, wyattworks.com.

Next spring he'll show his film at the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach, Calif., and speak on his favorite topic: cleaning up the world's oceans.

"They want me to talk about the ocean," Wyatt says. "It's going to be a big process!"

He's contributing the proceeds from all his various artistic ventures to Oceana, a nonprofit ocean advocacy group (oceana.org).

Wyatt attends Wesley School in North Hollywood, Calif., which emphasizes community service.

As a 6-year old, he came home with an idea.

"I said 'I want to make a movie,' and my mom, like, freaked out," he says.

"He knew exactly what he wanted to do," says his mother, Timathea Workman. "He had me sit down for about 3-1/2 hours one evening while he dictated to me.

"He wanted me to write down all the things the characters would say and what would happen. Then he would work on the clay."

When Wyatt was ready, he'd call her in to take a photo with a camera, since his hands were covered with clay. The photos then were pieced together to create a stop-motion movie. (His cats – Chewie, Toulouse, and Marie – "helped out" by jumping up and making holes in the clay with their paws.)

Recently, his parents turned down a request from a TV show that wanted to profile Wyatt. "It seemed to focus on him rather than on what he's doing, or the whole issue that he wanted to address," Ms. Workman says.

Wyatt's clay modeling (he's made more than 70 sculptures of animals that he hopes to sell to fund ocean cleanup efforts) and moviemaking have led to additional ideas.

"I said, 'we need one more thing to be cool,' " Wyatt tells his interviewer. "And my mom said, 'What's that?' And I thought and I thought and I thought.... [Finally] I said, 'I want to have a book.' "

True to his word, still images from the movie will be published in book form, too.

Is there more ahead?

"If I was very smart, I'd say 'Don't do anything again like this because it was so hard to do,' " Wyatt confides from his closet office.

But his website tells another story.

"I want to keep doing things to save the ocean," his entry page proclaims.

"I want to be like Martin Luther King Jr. and do something to make the world a better place."

Alexa: Building schools for the disaster-struck

Alexa Peters loves drawing – and her dog, Cooper.

Now she's turned that into a way to help others. The 12-year-old from Andover, Mass., has illustrated a picture book for children called "Cooper and Me," the story of a young girl very much like Alexa who longs to take her dog with her to her first day of school (cooperandme.com).

Three dollars from the sale of each book goes to the Happy Hearts Fund (happyheartfund.org), created by fashion model Petra Nemcova to improve the lives of children in countries hit by natural disasters. (Ms. Nemcova herself barely survived the tsunami that struck Indonesia in 2004. Her fiancé was swept away by the floodwaters and perished.)

Alexa hopes to raise \$10,000 to help build three schools in Haiti through Happy Hearts. "We came upon the Happy Hearts Fund through a friend," says Monique Peters, her mother, who wrote the story for "Cooper and Me." Last February, they contacted Nemcova, and she eventually visited Alexa's home. Nemcova was so impressed that she made Alexa the youngest "ambassador" for her program.

In June, Alexa and her mom went to Peru to visit three schools supported by Happy Hearts. The children "love going to school. It's their safe haven," Ms. Peters says. Homes often have no running water, refrigeration, or indoor plumbing. "They appreciate everything. They have so little," she says.

Alexa is planning to illustrate a new book, with the story set in Peru. It may center on a 12-year-old boy they met named José, who walks for an hour each day to a larger city to sell candy to support his family.

Alexa's advice for others who want to make a difference: "Keep going. And if it's something you're passionate about, really follow that dream, and you can be successful."

Dylan: 'One Starts Many' to clean up the Gulf

Dylan Stock was in first grade when the Gulf oil spill began last April.

His class at The Principia School in St. Louis studied the spill's effect on birds. He even went to a hair salon to gather human hair to be used on booms to capture the spreading oil in the Gulf of Mexico.

But Dylan wanted to do more. He created a website, onestartsmany.com, with help from his mother, Carrie Silver-Stock. "I was really worried about the sea creatures," Dylan says. "My mom asked me if I wanted to make a website, and I said 'sure'. And I came up with the name One Starts Many."

The website includes Dylan's ideas on how to protect the oceans.

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At a November fundraiser he collected \$1,145 to send to two Gulf charities, Kids in Need During Disaster (kindd.org), which buys clothing for children in a fishing town hit by the oil spill, and the Audubon Institute in New Orleans (auduboninstitute.org), which treats stranded and injured marine wildlife.

With support from WitKids (witkids.org), a program that supports kid-based projects (its motto is "whatever it takes to make the world a better place"), Dylan traveled to the Gulf last summer on his own "fact-finding" mission, which included meeting New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu.

In September, the 7-year-old spoke to first-graders through fifth-graders at his school to tell them about his trip. He also invited them to become members of his new Ocean Club, which he established at the school.

The club already has helped to clean up a local creek.

"It's inspiring for us that he felt like he could make a difference," says Mrs. Silver-Stock. She and her husband, Steven Stock, wanted "to nurture that in any way that we can," she says. And Dylan says he isn't done.

"I think I'll stay interested in the ocean for a while," he says.

Danielle: A kid-run network spreads peace

Danielle Gram spent her childhood in Maryland in the years following the 9/11 attacks.

"I really didn't understand why people from different cultures wanted to kill each other," says Ms. Gram, now 21 years old and a senior at Harvard University.

After her family moved to Carlsbad, Calif., she continued to think about the concept of peace and how to achieve it. She read the nonviolent philosophy of Mohandas Gandhi and studied what Buddhism and Christianity had to say on the subject.

In 2006, together with Jill McManigal, a mother of two young children, Gram, then 16, founded Kids for Peace (kidsforpeaceglobal.org), a nonprofit, child-led group that inspires kids to work together toward a more peaceful world.

Today Kids for Peace has more than 75 chapters in several countries. In August, its Great Kindness Challenge, where children try to see how many acts of kindness they can perform in a single day, drew thousands of participants in 50 countries.

Members also sign a six-line "peace pledge" in which they promise to "speak in a kind way," "help others," "care for our earth," "respect people," and work together.

Beyond that, kids in each chapter design their own projects.

"We really want the kids to be the leaders," Gram says.

In November, she was named a winner of the World of Children award (worldofchildren.org) for her work, and Kids for Peace was given a \$20,000 grant.

"The passion to create a less violent world has really followed me throughout my life," Gram says. But a family tragedy last year brought it closer to home. Her only brother was murdered while on vacation.

"The police still have no idea what happened," she says. "He was found stabbed to death on the side of a road.... It's certainly been a struggle for all of us. But every single one of my immediate family members has a deeper conviction that nonviolence is the way to respond. We see my brother's death as just more of an inspiration to make sure that no other family has to experience this."

After graduation next spring, Gram hopes to work on peace issues in Bangladesh or at a refugee camp in Africa. Either way, she'll carry on with Kids for Peace, too.

"It grows with me, and I grow with it," she says.

Jordyn: Removing dangerous drugs from homes

Jordyn Schara was shocked "to see the insane amount of medication people have in their homes that have been lying around waiting to be abused or stolen."

Unused drugs create two huge problems: They are abused by teens trying to get high, who then can become sick or even die. Or they are flushed down the drain and creep into drinking water. "It means men are taking birth control [pills] and children are taking heart medications," she says. "It's definitely not a good thing."

But when the 14-year-old in Reedsburg, Wis., asked state officials what she could do to help, they told her she was too young.

That didn't stop Jordyn. She founded a Wisconsin branch of Prescription Pill Drug Disposal (p2d2program.org). She organized a drug drop-off day for her town, and recruited pharmacists and police officers to supervise the event.

The drug return day was "extremely successful," she says. "People lined up around the block to get in. That was just a really great feeling to know that people were willing to participate."

Hauling away and incinerating the drugs costs about \$2 per pound.

"I had to get a lot of donations and grants to support the cost of this program," says Jordyn, who is now a 16-year-old high school

sophomore. "I was the youngest person [at 14] to apply for and receive a state grant in Wisconsin" to help fund her project, she says.

The Save a Star Foundation (saveastar.org) in Highland Park, Ill., donated a prescription drug drop-off box, the size of a street-corner mailbox, that's been installed at the police station. Her project has now become an ongoing part of the community.

"Sometimes it's hard as a teenager. You think that people don't listen to you or don't pay attention to you," Jordyn says. "But, honestly, if you do a service project, people will start listening."

Her friends have been big supporters. One even wore a "Phil the Pill Bottle" costume to help publicize the drug drop-off event.

"It's tough at first," Jordyn concedes. But her family has helped, too. "My parents were very supportive and my brother was very supportive."

- To read more stories about people making a difference, go [here](#).

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