

• Parenting's 2011 •

KIDS OF THE YEAR!



A 10-year-old singer who serenades the elderly. A 12-year-old triathlete who raises money for cancer research—just your average, run-of-the-mill kids, right? Not exactly, hence why we couldn't help designating the following eight children our 2011 Kids of the Year. (If we had the power, we'd make them goodwill ambassadors to the United Nations, to say the least!) From each of their brilliant minds came ideas that are original, creative, and hard-to-believe-it's-possible—and, to add that extra bit of wow, they make other people's lives better. Get ready to be amazed and inspired!

By Andrea Cooper



Racing Against Cancer

WINTER VINECKI

Age 12, Salem, OR

Everybody in Winter's family likes to race, so it's no surprise that by age 8, she'd run a 10K. More eye-opening: She raised \$1,100 in donations for cancer research. Soon after, she had a brainstorm: She and other athletes could raise even more money for health causes by competing in races and triathlons together. So she decided to form a nonprofit, Team Winter. But her early interest in cancer research would soon hit terribly close to home. In 2008 her dad, Michael, was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Only 9 years old then, she swam, cycled, and ran her way through a triathlon and, with other Team Winter athletes, helped raise more than \$100,000 for prostate cancer awareness and research.

Her website, Facebook, and Twitter pages helped Winter spread the word, and today Team Winter counts some 200 athletes, who have brought in more than \$250,000. "I'm determined to make Team Winter synonymous with prostate cancer," says Winter, now 12. "We'll have blue ribbons instead of pink." Sadly, Winter's dad did not live to see all that his daughter has accomplished. He died less than a year after his diagnosis, at age 40. But Winter believes her father is proud of her. "I know he's watching me," she says.

i Team Winter (teamwinter.org). You don't need to be a triathlete to support Winter's cause. Log on and check out the store!

A Special Thanks! Each of our Kids of the Year—along with eight children in Africa—will receive a new XO laptop courtesy of The Betty Crocker Fruit Flavored Snacks' Win & Give campaign. Now through May, the company plans to give away thousands of laptops to kids in the U.S. (just look for specially marked packages for your chance to score). Even better, for every child who wins, the company will donate a computer to a student in Africa. What's more, for every coupon downloaded from Winonegiveone.com, they'll donate \$1 to the nonprofit One Laptop per Child. The campaign's other goal: to show kids how easy it can be to help others. When you visit the site, they can play "Be a Hero" to help donate computers to kids in need.



WHY KIDS NEED LAPTOPS

To learn more about One Laptop per Child's mission and the difference it's making in kids' lives, check out their website, Laptop.org.



Packing Brighter Futures

JACKSON KELLEY Age 11, TRISTAN KELLEY Age 9, West Roxbury, MA

How many boys get excited about school supplies on sale? These two. When Jackson and Tristan were researching local charities for their annual Christmas donations, they learned that many kids in the area needed backpacks. So when they noticed a huge sale on school supplies, they begged their parents to let them buy things for kids who couldn't afford them. "We thought that to get good jobs and have a good life, you need a good education," says Tristan. They each used \$50 of their own money, and their parents offered a match. That was the beginning of Backpacks for New Beginnings. Since 2009, the nonprofit has donated more than 400 new backpacks stuffed with school supplies to local social-service agencies. Their goal this year: 300.

i Backpacks for New Beginnings (facebook.com/backpacksfornewbeginnings). Contributions cover the costs of backpacks, school supplies, and clothing basics.



Connecting Through Music

ABIGAIL LUPI Age 10, Stockholm, NJ

Lots of children like to put on shows. Few are as enterprising as Abigail. She performed her first musical revue three years ago at an assisted-living center, in honor of her great-grandmother's 100th birthday. "That's when I discovered many of the elderly didn't have visitors," she says. Abigail figured she could remedy that by inviting friends to perform with her at assisted-living residences, nursing homes, and children's hospitals throughout the state. Today, CareGirlz, Abigail's ensemble of 13 girls ages 6 to 13, has a repertoire of more than 90 Broadway and pop songs, and they've performed in 20 different locales so far. "I like to brighten up people's days and help them have a fun time," says Abigail. "If I do my best, they'll have a smile on their faces by the end."

i CareGirlz (caregirlz.org). Donations pay for travel costs, costumes, and other performance needs. The group is also looking for a sponsor to cover printing.

Hugs for Haiti

BLARE GOOCH Age 13, Grand Rapids, MI

Two days after the devastating January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Blare saw a little boy crying in a pile of rubble on a newscast. The story brought him to tears. The next day, still thinking about what he'd seen, Blare remembered the teddy bear that always comforted him. "Then I thought, 'We could start a drive for Haiti,'" says Blare. At school, his teachers let him announce his plan over the PA system and ask other kids to donate bears. Soon a local TV and radio station got wind, and, via Facebook, other schools joined in. The result? Blare's Bears for Haiti gave 25,000 teddy bears to the island nation and about 22,000 more to nonprofits. This year Blare's group will collect toys and school supplies, too. Blare's advice to other kids is simple. "It doesn't really matter how small or old you are," he says. "If you're young and think you can't make a big difference in the world, well, you actually can."

i Blare's Bears for Haiti (find it on Facebook). Blare needs new bears, balls, dominoes, and school supplies.



Protecting Canine Cops

KAYLEIGH CRIMMINS Age 8, Chesapeake, VA

Kayleigh loved watching the police dogs train when she visited her police officer dad at work. So when the then 6-year-old saw photos of the dogs and noticed that only some wore bulletproof vests—at \$700 apiece, many departments can't afford them—she decided to raise the money herself by selling some of her toys. A local businessman learned about her plan and donated enough money for her to buy her first vest, in 2009. Since then, Kayleigh's organization, Kids for K9s, has raised enough money to buy five more. At the ripe old age of 8, Kayleigh says she plans to stick with her project "until I'm forty, probably."

i Kids for K9s (kidsfork9s.com). Donations cover the cost of bulletproof vests for dogs.



Growing Healthier Kids—and a Healthier World

KOA HALPERN Age 12, Denver, CO

When Koa's family hosted a Korean exchange student, one of the first "American" things their guest wanted to do was eat at a fast-food restaurant. The request amazed Koa, a vegetarian, who wondered why it was so appealing. He began researching fast food and learned "some very bad stuff about it," he says. Not only does it tend to be unhealthy, he says, but he found it can also hurt the environment: Rain forests are often cut to make room for pasture-grazing cattle. In 2008 Koa founded Fast Food Free, whose mission is to reduce its consumption. He makes regular presentations to local schools, community groups, and churches, and so far, more than 1,100 people have signed his online pledge to skip fast food for two weeks. Says his mom, Marilyn: "Some have said that after they've tried this, they won't eat fast food again."

i Fast Food Free (fastfoodfree.org). Contributions go toward printing costs, website updates, and community presentations. Koa is also looking for organizations, schools and universities, and restaurants that might like to partner with the group.

Spreading World Peace, One Blanket at a Time

CHARLIE COONS Age 13, Simi Valley, CA

In 2008 Charlie Coons's big brother volunteered at an orphanage in Jordan, and he returned with stories about dirt floors, children who had no shoes, and cold, cold nights. Charlie, 11 at the time, was so affected by this, she immediately decided to send them fleece blankets, creating one from a kit and inviting friends to make some, too. Soon the sixth-graders and other volunteers in her town had crafted 50 blankets to ship. The orphanage sent back a photo of a child with one of the gifts. "I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I made that blanket and now it's helping someone,'" Charlie says.

Still, she was pumped to do more. Her dad, Ron, a Rotary Club mem-

ber, lined up speaking engagements in their area for Charlie so she could raise money for her new group, which she called HELP (Hope Encouragement Love Peace). Her goal: to send blankets to orphanages around the world. Ambitious, yes, but just a few years later, HELP has sent some 700 blankets to nine nations with the help of several international children's groups. Her next goal: to establish HELP chapters in all 50 states (Oklahoma, North Carolina, and California are already members). Want to get your state on board? All you have to do is drop Charlie a note at blanketswithlove@yahoo.com.★

i HELP (blanketswithlove.ewebsite.com). Volunteer, open a local chapter, donate money, or suggest an orphanage in need.

Andrea Cooper has written for Time, Newsweek, and NPR. Her "Kids of the Year" are Laurel, 16, and Noah, 11.

