

INDIA WEST

Two Indian American Teens Among Gloria Barron ‘Young Heroes’

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Sonali Ranaweera, 14, of California, created Recycling4Smiles and has helped fund dozens of cleft lip surgeries. She was awarded a Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. (BarronPrize.org photos)



Deepika Kurup, a Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes recipient, has helped create a water purification system. The 17-year-old New Hampshire resident was inspired after a trip to India.

Two Indian American teens were among those awarded the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes for 2015. Now in its 15th year, the Barron Prize, established by author T.A. Barron in 2001, annually recognizes young leaders between the ages of 8 and 18 in the U.S. and Canada who have made a significant positive impact on people, their communities and the environment.

Indian Americans Sonali Ranaweera, 14, of California, and Deepika Kurup, 17, of New Hampshire, were among the 17 leaders across the United States selected as this year's winners.

Ranaweera created Recycling4Smiles and has raised more than \$40,000 by redeeming recyclable cans and bottles to fund dozens of cleft lip surgeries. She has also funded dental care for roughly 1,000 rural children in Sri Lanka and has provided school supplies, clothing and lunches for hundreds of children in need around the world.

The Indian American teen launched her project at the young age of 11, when her parents gifted her \$100 with the stipulation she use it to make a difference. She then raised another \$150 to fund one cleft lip surgery through Smile Train, by collecting and redeeming recyclables, which she was learning about in her sixth grade science class.

After easily meeting her first goal, Ranaweera set another goal at \$2,000. Fast forward three years and she has collected upwards of 500,000 recyclables.

With the help of her brother and friends, she collects, sorts and redeems 2,000 cans and bottles in order to raise \$100 each, and regularly collects recyclables from a number of businesses and receives numerous bags of bottles and cans on her doorstep.

"I've learned that you can make a difference in the lives of others and help our earth without needing to have a lot of money or power," the teen leader said in the Barron Prize statement. "Nothing is impossible if you are dedicated to a cause."

Kurup has invented a practical, low cost and sustainable method to purify contaminated water.

Her solar-powered device destroys bacteria in wastewater within 15 minutes of filtration and exposure to sunlight. And because the device is solar-powered, its materials do not deplete, and it can be used in developing countries. It can also be scaled up for larger purification systems.

Kurup, the 2012 America's Top Young Scientist and the winner of the Discovery Education 3M Young Scientist Challenge, has two patents pending. She was inspired to begin her work in 2012 after visiting her grandparents in India, where she saw children collecting and drinking polluted water from nearby streams. She learned that many children globally spend more time collecting water than attending school and that about 4,000 children die each day from water-related diseases.

The young teen then began conducting research at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell, where an engineering professor supervised her work, which combines materials science, photochemistry and biology. Kurup is committed to educating children about the importance of clean water and has spoken to groups and schools around the world.

"My work has taught me to be persistent and not give up, and I feel it's made me a more enlightened and humble person," she said in a statement.

Each of the Barron Prize winners receive \$5,000 to support their service work or higher education.

Since its inception, the Barron Prize has awarded more than \$500,000 to hundreds of young leaders and has gained the support of the National Geographic Education Foundation, Girl Scouts of the USA and the National Youth Leadership Council, among others.