

We Giving Back

The Bay Area is known not just as a center of technology but for its spirit of philanthropy. Read on to learn about some amazing nonprofit organizations that were started by or are run by local youth. You are sure to be impressed.

CollegeSpring

CollegeSpring was founded by two Stanford University students who discovered that students with low-income backgrounds tend to score lower on the SAT and ACT. In 2008, Garrett Neiman and Jessica Perez were tutoring kids who were preparing for the SATs and saw how some kids don't have this extra help.

"I was struck by how there wasn't equal access to college," says Neiman.

After his younger brother died in an accident,



Neiman decided life is too short and he wanted to find ways to give back to the community.

With some donations and volunteers, CollegeSpring had its first pilot program in 2008, providing free test preparation to lower income students in the Bay Area. Since its first class of 55 students, it has grown to serve more than 5,000 students annually in the Bay Area, Los Angeles and New York.

The Grey Water Project

Four years ago, Shreya Ramachandran traveled to Tulare County for an archery tournament and was struck by the effects of the drought on people's lives and livelihoods. Soon after, while visiting her grandparents in India, she met people who had to leave their agricultural land and move to cities due to drought.

"Water scarcity is a global issue, and I wanted to try to contribute to the solution," says Ramachandran, now a sophomore at American High School in Fremont.



Ramachandran, 15, began researching water conservation and was intrigued by grey water, especially the reuse of laundry water for landscape irrigation.

She started a nonprofit, The Grey Water Project, to promote water conservation and to teach people how to install "laundry-to-lawn" systems. Because not all laundry detergents are safe for soil and plants, she promotes the use of soap nuts, a natural berry shell that releases soap when placed in water. Some organic laundry detergents also can be used for grey water landscaping.

Ramachandran runs water conservation challenges on her website and gives workshops and presentations. She is also crafting a water conservation curriculum for elementary and middle school students. Recently, she co-sponsored a webinar with the United Nations Global Wastewater Initiative that drew more than 100 participants from around the world.

Her work has been recognized with a President's Environmental Youth Award and the 2018 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, among other honors, and she was a winner of the National Middle School Science Competition for her grey water research.

While her main focus has been advocacy, Ramachandran hopes to move toward implementation by raising money to install grey water systems, and she is exploring whether local water districts can provide rebates to homeowners who install such systems.

She encourages other young people to pursue their passions.

"Don't be afraid to speak out. You might think that maybe you're too young to make a difference or that people won't listen to your ideas," Ramachandran says. But "it's never too early to start. If you're passionate about something, go out and make that change."

For more information, visit thegreywaterproject.org.

— Janine DeFao

"It's been amazing to see it grow and become a national program," says Neiman, who no longer runs the nonprofit but is still on its Board of Directors. He is currently pursuing his Master's degree at Harvard University.

It has been a great learning experience for him. "I learned a lot about the community. There's a lot of students who are really driven but they have a lot of obstacles."

Currently, CollegeSpring focuses primarily on training teachers at public schools where there are a lot of underserved students. The nonprofit provides SAT and ACT prep lesson plans for teachers, on-going assistance and support, says CollegeSpring CEO Yoon S. Choi.

CollegeSpring has grown immensely since it started. It's now funded by leading-edge foundations, such as The Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and The Kresge Foundation. It was recognized by President Barack Obama in 2014.

Choi says the non-profit continues to raise money, with its current goal being \$11 million.

"We want this organization to continue to grow, and we want it to be built to last," she says.

For information, go to collegespring.org.

— Teresa Mills-Farauto

Small Hands With Helping Hearts

Small Hands With Helping Hearts, based in Hayward, gives elementary-school children the opportunity to volunteer for causes that are important to them. Projects have included raising money to help the homeless and animal shelters; street and beach clean-ups; working in a community garden and assisting foster children and the terminally ill.

This group was born in 2015 when Ashley Sinn, then 6, wondered why she couldn't join her mother, Michelle, on a volunteer project at a food bank. Michelle encouraged her daughter to come up with her own volunteer project.

Ashley soon opened her Hot Choklit for the Homeless stand to buy care packages for the homeless. That first year, the hot chocolate stand raised \$264, which she used to buy 18 care packages stocked with socks, scarves, beanies, toiletries and food. The following year, her stand made \$700, enough for 80 care packages.

Last year, her project was featured by gofundme.com and she raised a whopping \$8,000, which has helped her officially found Small Hands With Helping Hearts and fund all of its projects, not just the hot chocolate stand.

"I feel really sad for the people that live on the street and are not able to get into a shelter at night," says Ashley, now 9. "I feel bad for animals that don't get a home. Animals are one of my favorite things in life."

Her nonprofit now has 15 regular volunteers and about 35 to 40 who occasionally jump in. Most projects are in Hayward. Michelle likes that kids can see the impact of their efforts. For instance, when the kids clean up streets near Ashley's school Southgate Elementary, they can enjoy the results.

Projects are child-initiated, Michelle says. The young participants decide what cause is important to them. "We're trying to foster the volunteerism aspect, but also activism and being able to plan any kind of event."

The nonprofit wants to recruit more elementary-school children who think like Ashley and would like to volunteer. Michelle says it's critical that the kids want to help out and aren't just joining the group because they are forced by their parents.

The group could also use more adults or high school students to help mentor the children and expand the organization to other parts of the Bay Area. Small Hands is trying to raise \$5,000 on its GoFundMe page.

For more information, email smallhandshelpinghearts@gmail.com or go to [facebook.com/smallhandshelpinghearts](https://www.facebook.com/smallhandshelpinghearts). The group's GoFundMe page is [bit.ly/2sifhAH](https://www.gofundme.com/bit.ly/2sifhAH).

— Lisa Renner



Students Partner With Veterans

Students Partner With Veterans, based in Palo Alto, introduces middle and high school students to military personnel. Students interview veterans about their experiences and volunteer to host events with veterans organizations. Students also invite veterans to speak at schools.

More than 400 students throughout the Bay Area are involved with the program. There are now also chapters in Maryland, New Jersey and Texas and in Canada in Vancouver and Toronto.

Audrey Li, now a senior at Gunn High School, founded the group as a freshman because she and her peers knew little about veterans. Their knowledge was limited to what they read in history books and nothing more.

By interviewing veterans, the students gain a greater appreciation of their contributions. "The courage, responsibility and perseverance shines through those stories," she says.



Li says that by meeting with veterans, students gain greater resilience to face the stresses and challenges in their lives.

She started by getting students involved at her own school and then gradually expanded to other campuses in the Bay Area. Many people reached out to her and asked if they could participate after reading a November 2017 article about her group in *The Mercury News* or finding the group's website.

The nonprofit has partnered with many veterans' organizations including the National Association of American Veterans, the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the American Military Retirees Association and Women's Army Corps Veterans Association. The groups have been supportive and excited about the project, Li says.

On Memorial Day, Li attended the observance at Arlington National Cemetery as the guest of honor of former U.S. Defense Secretary James N. Mattis.

Li plans to continue working with the nonprofit after she graduates from high school this spring. She isn't sure yet what she will study but is considering computer science and psychology as well as other subjects. She hopes to set up a chapter of Students Partner With Veterans at whatever college she ends up attending and hopes her classmates will do the same at their colleges.

Students Partner With Veterans is always looking for more veterans to share their stories with the younger generation, and more middle and high school students to participate. Li can give guidance to

students who want to start their own chapters and help with reaching out to veterans. "We have a system we developed for that," she says.

For information, contact info@students-veterans.com or visit students-veterans.org.

— Lisa Renner ■

Stories for a Future

Can you imagine your life without books? Unfortunately, books can be considered a luxury for families that are struggling to make ends meet. But one Bay Area teen has made it her mission to keep underprivileged kids reading. Fatima Yousuf started Stories for a Future at the age of 14, and the Milpitas-based organization has already given away more than \$10,000 in books.

The Bay Area is a place of great wealth, but also economic disparity. Families that are struggling financially don't always have the resources they need to help children succeed academically. Yousuf understands that having books at home is one of the greatest indicators of academic success.

"Recognizing that education is the most meaningful and effective means of socioeconomic

advancement, I started Stories for a Future to provide literacy and educational materials in an effort to help improve the potential academic and career pathways for many of these children," says Yousuf.

Stories for a Future has run summer literacy programs in two local libraries to help combat summer reading loss, with more than 50 participants. The organization has also provided more than 250 foster children with new backpacks and school supplies.

Stories for a Future has also set up "Little Libraries" in three foster care centers, so that children in the system will have more books to choose from.

In addition to Yousuf's literacy work, she also volunteers on GenerationOn's National Youth Advisory Council, which is set up to help promote youth community service across the nation. She also serves as the Financial Literacy and Money Smarts editor for *Amazing Kids! Magazine*, where she runs a column teaching young children financial literacy. In addition, she volunteers for GiveLight Foundation, a nonprofit that provides homes and support for the underprivileged around the world.

Yousuf's organization does not have a website. She says the best way for people to help is by promoting its mission and donating books to foster children organizations across the Bay Area.

— Amy Ettinger

