

The Importance of Heroes

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Penguin Youth Voices Interview

April, 2009

What does it take for a young person to realize that he or she can be a force for positive change in the world?

Discovering the wisdom and magic they have inside themselves. Every young person is a force—a package of positive energy that could help the world in some way. They may not believe that. They may think it's the craziest idea ever. But it's true. Deeply true.

How do young people make that discovery? Not by lectures or sermons. No, the very best way is by sharing examples—stories about young people who faced difficult challenges and somehow triumphed. Nothing is more powerful than stories of heroic people, whether they are fiction (like the ones I've written about Merlin, Kate, and other characters) or nonfiction (as you'll find in *The Hero's Trail*).

The whole purpose of the Barron Prize is to turn the spotlight on these amazing kids from all sorts of diverse backgrounds—to tell their stories. My highest hope is that other kids will hear them. And maybe feel inspired to do something positive, as well.

You write about anyone becoming a hero – what exactly does that mean for a young person?

All of us have an amazing power—the power to make choices. What we do with our time, what we care about, how we treat others ... all these are choices we make daily. And every choice we make says something about who we are. In this way, our choices become our footsteps on the trail of life, and our footsteps become our journey. And who knows? Maybe the trail we walk will become ... a hero's trail.

So I always ask young people: What choices will you make? What qualities will you try to live by? In *The Hero's Trail*, there are seven key qualities that I identify with heroism: courage, perseverance, faith, adaptability, moral direction, hope, and humor. You might add others. The choice is yours!

How do images of “heroes” in fiction or on TV or in the movies help or hurt when young people think about becoming a hero themselves?

Our society is horribly confused about the difference between a hero and a celebrity. We often mistake the celebrity of someone we know from television, movies, or sports as heroism. But true heroism is about character, not fame and glory. This distinction is crucial—especially for young people.

We need our heroes. Today more than ever. They give us an idea of our own potential. They show us just how far we can go, just how high we can climb.

Every hero faces a great challenge. Whether it's something within themselves or something from the world outside, they must reach deep into their hearts to survive—and to triumph. That's when they find extraordinary courage, wisdom, or inspiration.

Heroes may never be famous, but they clearly make a difference to our lives. Partly because their actions directly touch other people, and often make the world a better place. And partly because their examples have great power to inspire. By celebrating the everyday heroes in our midst, we are celebrating our own potential to make a difference to the world.

The Barron Prize is named after your mother – can you tell us what was inspiring about her?

Gloria Barron, the woman I was lucky enough to know as my mother, never sought fame. She simply lived the life of a teacher who cared deeply about her children and her community. She was always learning: The day before she died, at age ninety-two, she was delighted to discover a new word origin! (The word, by the way, was “spittoon”.) This great old gal never lost her childlike sense of wonder.

My mother believed in the importance of good communication. She encouraged us to write in journals, stories, and letters. Her rule was that a good letter should contain "something funny, something beautiful, and something true." Beyond that, she continually urged her children to make a positive difference to the world, in whatever ways we chose. She didn't sermonize; she just lived her own life that way—and hoped that we would, as well.

Her love of children and nature combined to create a remarkable project. For over twenty years, she worked hard to create a unique nature museum at the Colorado School for the Blind—a museum where everything can be touched. Blind kids can experience the grandeur of an eagle by touching its wide wings, just as they can feel a hummingbird's delicate nest or a polar bear's rich, soft fur. She never sought any credit for this accomplishment, and the only reward she wanted was the satisfaction of knowing that these kids could now experience some of the wonder and beauty of the natural world. That's the sort of quiet heroism that countless teachers, parents, and kids show every day. And those people truly hold our world together.

That's why, when the time came to choose a name for my prize for young heroes, I knew exactly who to name it for—a quiet hero who made a real difference in my life. Someone who never stopped believing in the power of every person to make the world a better place. Someone I loved and admired very much.

What stories of other real-life heroes or leaders inspired you when you were young?

I've always admired Abraham Lincoln, Anne Frank, Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Albert Einstein, Wilma Rudolph, and Jane Goodall. Add to that list Ben Franklin, Helen Keller, Leonardo daVinci, Beethoven, Stephen Hawking, Rachel Carson, John Muir, and the Dalai Lama. And let's not forget that wonderful writer and wise woman, Madeleine L'Engle.

Why did I list Lincoln first? Besides my mother, he was my first hero—I couldn't get over his courage, faith, humor, and humility. As well as his gracious spirit—which enabled him to urge a war-torn nation to remake itself “with malice toward none, with charity for all.”

Often young people have been at the forefront of movements for change, in the civil rights movement or the environmental movement, for example. Why do you think this is so?

They believe! Young people combine the energy and idealism of childhood and the realistic awareness of adulthood. (Believe me, I know about their endless energy—having five busy kids at home!) What's more, young people want the truth and nothing but the truth. They are honest enough to ask life's toughest questions. And they still have the courage to hope. To them, anything is possible.

Do you think young people today are becoming more interested in service work or helping others? Why?

Yes, I do. Young people are discovering their own power! Just take a look at the amazing kids who have won my little prize. Go to www.barronprize.org and click on “winners”—and you will meet young people from every background, gender, race, and description. Each of them, in his or her way, is doing something to help the world they live in. And each of them—I promise—will renew your hope.