

A Hero's Trail

An Interview with T. A. Barron about the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes

Jana Fine

A few months ago, I received an e-mail advertising the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. I was intrigued. Young Heroes? An award? I wanted to find out more and so began my exploration into this award. I found that it was created by author T. A. Barron. In an effort to understand what began this honor, I thought there was no better place to start than to interview the noted author himself. And so, the following is a conversation with award-winning best-selling author, outspoken conservationist, education activist, and philanthropist T. A. Barron.

Editor: You're a well-received fantasy author. Why fantasy?

Barron: Dreams are sometimes the best ways to talk about reality. Fantasy novels—or, as I prefer to call them, mythic quests—give me the chance to bend the rules of our everyday reality in order to highlight some big ideas: about the human condition, how we can grow into wisdom, how we can affect the world around us. Fantasy, you see, is like a bent mirror: we can see ourselves, but with certain qualities enhanced and others diminished. And, in the process, we can explore some of the great questions of life.

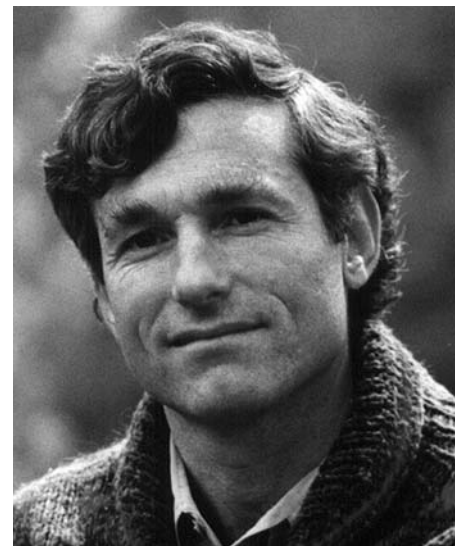
Editor: When you began your writing career, did you ever imagine how your work would impact readers? How do you feel about that today?

Barron: All I knew when I began writing full time was that stories really do matter. Books can change a person's life; they certainly have done that for me. And I also knew that unless I left my comfortable career in business, which seemed quite successful to the people around me but which really left a deep part of me unfulfilled, a part of my soul would wither up and die. So I just had to go for it, to follow my dream. Whether or not anyone

ever bothered to read a page of what I might write, the greater risk was not losing my job and a steady paycheck, but rather losing an important part of myself. Now, fifteen years later, I can hardly believe all the wonderful things that have come my way. If someone had told me that there would be all these lovely editions, books in several languages, awards, and movie deals, I would have said he or she was stark raving mad! But what strikes me most of all is this: I am still awed by the simple power of stories. Sure, I've learned a little bit about the craft of writing during these years. Mainly, though, I know how much there is still to learn. And how much there is to explore. Writing is the most humbling, agonizing labor I've ever done . . . but it's also the most joyous, inspiring labor of all.

Editor: What gives you inspiration in your life and your writing?

Barron: My two greatest sources of inspiration are my children and nature. Our five kids, who range in age from seven-teen down to eight, are full of energy, vitality, and a fresh sense of wonder. Their humor, rambunctiousness, and beautiful inner selves are a constant adventure—and also inspiration. They are welcome to join me in my writing room at home, but the rule is that if Dad



T. A. Barron

is working on a creative project, they too must do something creative. So they're often reading books, writing poems, or drawing pictures while I'm working away. Nature has always been my grandest cathedral, a way to be close to things eternal. I have often felt the natural world's quiet power to make a person feel both very big and very small at once. When you look up at the stars, the expanse of a mountain ridge, or the boughs of an ancient redwood tree, you feel humbled by the enormous scale and time and beauty, and at the same time, uplifted and enriched by the fact that you are part of it all.

Editor: A number of your protagonists portray heroic characteristics. Is that deliberate and if it is, can you speak about why you do that?

Barron: Each of us, I believe, has surprising gifts down inside ourselves: heroic

qualities that we may not even know are there. And each of us can rise to heroic heights in times of severe struggle and hardship. But we all need stories of people who have shown great courage, compassion, and perseverance—to remind us of our own potential. And if those stories are told in a truly believable, highly realistic fashion, they can convey inspirational ideas without interfering at all with a rip-roaring good adventure.

Editor: Your book, *The Hero's Trail*, has an

interesting correlation between life and hiking. How did you come upon this comparison?

Barron: That's just the way it is: life is a journey through uncharted terrain. Often arduous, often wondrous, and full of surprises, life is much like the long hikes I've taken in the Rocky Mountains, the Himalayas, Patagonia, and other places around the world. And the older I get, with more creases in my hiking boots as well as my brow, the more potent this

analogy seems to me.

Editor: In this particular book, you have many different kinds of heroes. How did you choose them, especially the adolescents and teenagers?

Barron: In writing *The Hero's Trail*, I focused on seven key qualities of heroes. These include courage, perseverance, compassion, and humor. Part of my point was to distinguish heroes from celebrities: heroes are all about character; celebrities

2004 Winners of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes

The Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes honors outstanding young leaders who have made a significant positive difference to people and our planet. Their leadership and courage make them true heroes—and inspirations to us all.

Each year, the Barron Prize selects ten winners nationwide. Half of the winners have focused on helping their communities and fellow beings; half have focused on protecting the health and sustainability of the environment. Listed below are the recipients of the award for 2004.

Need image

Gina Gallant, age seventeen, of Prince George, British Columbia, has invented a new type of road-paving material made largely from recycled plastic bottles. An avid inventor and scientist, Gina conceived of the idea while driving with her family along Cash Creek (known locally as Trash Creek), where she noticed hundreds of plastic bottles littering the stream. She took her idea of using the bottles to pave roads to businesses such as LaFarge and Husky Oil, where she worked for several summers learning how to blend oil for asphalt and experimenting with adding plastic to the mix. She finally landed on a winning formula that she named PAR (PolyAggreRoad) and recently convinced local officials to pave a quarter-mile section of road with her material. It is proving to be more stable and to crack less than conventional asphalt, and to reduce noise pollution by 5 percent. "A wise woman once said, 'No dream is too small to become a reality and no effort goes unnoticed,'" says Gina. "I hope I can inspire others to see that their ideas and dreams can become realities."



Ellie Wen, age seventeen, of Beverly Hills, California, is the founder of www.RepeatAfterUs.com, a Web site that provides copyright-free literature with accompanying audio clips for people learning English as a second language. Her Web site features more than 5,000 texts, running the gamut from Mother Goose to Hamlet to Martin Luther King's speeches. Ellie conceived of

her Web site idea while running a poetry workshop and tutoring program for Hispanic children in the Los Angeles area. Realizing the need for English-language learners to hear a wide range of material read out loud, Ellie got busy typing thousands of texts and recording them read aloud by classmates, teachers, community members, and young children. To date, more than 70,000 visitors have used RepeatAfterUs.com, including teachers, Peace Corps volunteers, and students in literacy programs throughout the world. "I've learned that the world is full of opportunities and helping hands for those who dare," says Ellie. "I've realized that people *do* care about others, and they *do* want to help." (*Editor's note: Ellie was featured in YALS fall 2003 issue.*)

Kevin Kalra, age eighteen, of Houston, Texas, founded the

QY: Which is Kevin?



Sustainable Development Committee at his high school to study ways the campus could reduce energy costs and demonstrate the importance of sustainability. Kevin and his committee of forty students have installed SnackMiser motion detectors on school vending machines in order to regulate their electrical usage, started a recycling program, planted shade trees, and will soon have the school's roof resurfaced in energy-saving reflective material. They have also developed a Web site for teachers and students, helped rewrite the Texas state curriculum on sustainable development, and organized an Energy Carnival for local elementary students. Additionally, Kevin has recently launched a new project, called The Global Teaching Network, which will work to build "green" schools around the world. These schools will teach the importance of sustainability and will prepare students to address social and economic issues in their countries. "This work has helped me to see the world as a place of hope and grand possibilities," says Kevin.



Renee Hagerty, age twelve, of Elyria, Ohio, started a battery-recycling initiative in her elementary school that has grown to serve as the model for Lorain County's battery-recycling program. After learning how discarded batteries contribute to pollution and wildlife destruction in nearby Lake Erie, Renee decided she had to act.

are just about fame. By getting myself as the author out of the way and simply telling stories about these amazing young people from every background, these heroic kids really speak for themselves. Better than any adult such as me, they demonstrate the power of heroic qualities that reside in us all.

Editor: Can you speak about the Barron Prize for Young Heroes? (Why it was started, how long it has been in existence, how it is funded, how the youth are

selected, what they receive.)

Barron: I founded the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes in 2001 for the same reason that I write about heroes in my books: everyone, even children, can make a difference. And I believe that young people need real, heroic role models who have made a meaningful difference in the world.

Each year, the Barron Prize selects ten winners, ages eight to eighteen, nationwide who have made a significant

positive difference to people and our planet. Half of the winners have focused on helping their communities and fellow beings; half have focused on protecting the health and sustainability of the environment. Winners are selected by a panel of judges who look for qualities such as leadership, personal initiative, compassion, courage, generosity, and high moral purpose.

I have received tremendous support from the following organizations: National Geographic Society Education

She contacted the Board of Education and asked to speak at one of its meetings, where she was granted permission to place battery collection boxes in each of the district's sixteen elementary schools. With funding from the county's Solid Waste Management group, she then produced an informative video and created recycling bins for each school. She also enlisted students in each building to serve as "Battery Buddies," spokespeople who would make posters, distribute flyers, and read announcements on each school's PA system. By the end of the school year, Renee had collected more than 3,000 pounds of batteries and drawn the attention of county officials, who had been researching the possibility of a battery-recycling program but had made little progress. Lorain County is now in the process of placing battery-recycling bins in all of the county's government buildings, libraries, nonprofit groups, and churches. "I've learned that you don't have to be rich or well known to make a difference," says Renee. "You just have to have a dream and the guts to see things through."

Laurel Barchas, age seventeen, of Truckee, California, is the founder of the Truckee Youth Music Program, an after-school program for elementary children whose families cannot afford private music lessons. A talented pianist, Laurel was inspired to start her program when she learned of the severely limited funding available for public school music programs in California. She took her music program idea to local service clubs and businesses, asking for donations, and wrote a grant proposal to the local community foundation. Her efforts have yielded \$20,000 to pay for instruments and materials. Laurel developed contracts, applications, and brochures for her program and translated the materials into Spanish for the Latino community she serves. In her first year, she recruited three high school peers who, along with Laurel, volunteered to teach weekly lessons in piano, flute, and clarinet to twenty young students. In its second year, the program grew to eight volunteer teachers instructing thirty-five students, with the addition of lessons in trumpet, violin, and percussion. The program is now in its third year. "It saddened me to think that some kids simply can't afford to learn music when music is such an important part of my life," says



Laurel. "Knowing there was no other music program like this in my community, I decided to start my own."

Emily Hallet, age eighteen, of Bainbridge Island,



Washington, has designed a renewable energy system to replace the gasoline-powered one at a global warming research station located outside of Juneau, Alaska. While helping scientists at the station document global warming by measuring glacial retreat, Emily noticed the researchers' reliance on gasoline for heat and electricity, and wondered if their system could be reconfigured to run on wind and solar energy. After much data collection and cost/benefit analysis, Emily designed a wind and solar system that will save the research station more than 3,000 gallons of gasoline and \$4,000 over its lifetime. Her system will be installed over the next two years. Emily's renewable energy system is just one example of her commitment to protecting the environment. She is president of the Earth Service Corps at her high school, a group of thirty students who manage the school's large-scale recycling program, organize monthly bike-to-school events, install oil filters on storm drains, and work to protect and improve salmon habitat.



Shawn Henry, age eighteen, of Brooklyn, New York, created Garden Angels, a nonprofit organization that has transformed an abandoned, trash-filled vacant lot into a park and community garden. Shawn, who has volunteered at the Brooklyn Public Library for nearly six years, was inspired to start his project after reading the book *Seedfolks*, which chronicles volunteers' efforts to create community gardens in a number of urban settings. Realizing that more young people in his community were involved in gangs than were volunteering, Shawn began the hard work of convincing his peers that they *could* make a difference, and succeeded in rallying fifty of them to join his initiative. Shawn applied for and received a \$1,000 start-up grant from Youth Venture, and worked diligently to obtain permission from the city to begin cleanup of the vacant lot. Shawn's Garden Angels also paints murals throughout the community,

continued on following page

Foundation, Girl Scouts of the USA, Roots & Shoots, Student Conservation Association, Earth Force, Girls for Planet Earth, Kids for Saving Earth, National Youth Leadership Council, and Youth Service America. Links to these groups can be found on the National Partners page of the Barron Prize Web site (www.barronprize.org).

Editor: *How has this award influenced the winners' lives?*

Barron: Each winner receives a \$2,000 cash award, which I ask be put toward their service project or furthering their schooling. This enables many of them to continue their project or pay for higher

education. In addition, the winners' inspiring service achievements are widely publicized which helps them garner more interest and support for their projects. Here are a few examples. Ashley, who founded AfricAid to support girls' education in Africa, credits the Barron Prize with infusing critical life into her project at a time when she was struggling to get it off the ground. And her prize money made it possible for five Maasai girls to attend secondary school for one year. Winner Micaela used her prize money to ensure that her project, the Exceptional Rodeo for kids with disabilities, would continue each year as a key part of the Colorado State Fair. Winner Anders applied his prize money to the nonprofit

group he started, Teens for Technology, using it to buy additional computers and software for an elementary school in Jamaica.

Editor: *What do you hope this award will do for young people around the country?*

Barron: The goal of the Barron Prize is to celebrate such heroic young people—and to inspire others to do their part. These young people demonstrate the power of one person to make a difference to the world.

The new Barron Prize winners have just been announced. I encourage parents, teachers, librarians, students, and everyone else to go to my Web site

continued from preceding page organizes poetry readings and chess tournaments, and works to increase multicultural awareness. "There is so much we can do to make this world, if not perfect, at least safer, healthier, and cleaner," says Shawn. "It may sound like an illusory dream, but we have it in us to live that way. We do."

Micaela Connery, age seventeen, of West Hartford, Connecticut, created Unified Theater, a nonprofit program that gives students with disabilities the chance to participate in theater. Micaela's project combines her love of theater with her compassion for disabled students such as her cousin Kelsey, just a few years younger than Micaela and born with numerous developmental and physical disabilities. Micaela serves as director of Unified Theater, leading students with and without special needs in daily rehearsals to create, practice, and perform musical productions based on different decades in American history. Building on the success of Unified Theater at her own high school, Micaela has recently begun offering start-up assistance to other high schools via a Web site that provides information on Unified Theater and her experience with it. "Unified Theater has shown me that though being in the limelight is exciting," says Micaela, "it's not nearly as fulfilling as giving someone else that opportunity."

Matthew Rich, age eighteen, of Concord, North Carolina, founded a nonprofit organization called the Woodland and Wildlife Restoration Committee to address the problem of deforestation in the greater Charlotte area. Matthew was inspired to start his organization two years ago, when a favorite forest in his neighborhood was cleared to make way for a housing development. With \$60 of his own money and \$101 earned from a garage

sale, Matthew purchased and planted his first group of hardwood trees. The media took note, word spread of his work, and soon Matthew had launched his "One Tree at a Time" project with the goal of planting 1,000 trees. An initial grant from the local Parks and Recreation Department led to a grant of \$15,000 from the North Carolina Forestry Department, as well as the donation of 1,000 seedlings from International Paper. Matthew and more than 200 volunteers have planted over 1,200 trees in public spaces, and are working toward planting even more. "The day I saw my neighborhood forest leveled to make room for more houses, I realized that society isn't changed by idle words but by action," explains Matthew. "I knew I had to do something."

Anna Rose, age thirteen, of Elizabeth, Colorado, founded a non-profit organization called Sight Angels to provide free eyeglasses to those in need. Anna conceived of her project after noticing how many of the homeless in downtown Denver had broken glasses, or none at all. Knowing how much her own glasses help her in school and with daily life, Anna felt compelled to get glasses to those who needed them. She established her nonprofit group and obtained funding for it, and then visited several shelters and free eye clinics in Denver, where she learned of the great demand for reading glasses. She figured out how to buy bulk lots of reading glasses, solicited for donations of used ones, and recruited dozens of volunteers to help sort and deliver the glasses to shelters and clinics. To date, Sight Angels has donated more than 5,000 pairs of eyeglasses to those in need within the United States, Honduras, Mexico, and West Africa. "I figure if you can help, you should," says Anna. "So I have!"

For more information about the Barron Prize and T. A. Barron's books, visit www.tabarron.com.



(www.tabarron.com) and read the incredible stories of the amazing young people we have chosen to honor.

Editor: *Can you say a few words about promoting the idea that anyone can be a hero?*

Barron: Just like the young boy Merlin who washes ashore on page one of the first book in *The Lost Years of Merlin*, each of us harbors amazing gifts down inside. Even though, just like Merlin, we may feel lost, confused, and so weak we're barely alive, we still have those gifts. We still have the potential to remake our own selves and our own lives. And, ultimately, our own world.

Editor: *You once stated, "The world around us is full of wonder, mystery, and surprise. It is ours to protect—and also to explore." What does that statement mean to you in regard to your life, your novels, and your audience of readers?*

Barron: I believe that life is a gift. An amazing opportunity to find out what sort of wings we might have, and then to spread them and fly. It's also very brief. We don't have much time as mortal beings to explore who we really are and to be everything we could possibly be. So the journey of life requires courage and determination, along with a humble sense

of the mystery and wonder of the world around us. To be sure, our world is also full of horror, suffering, and human arrogance. But at its core, it is still glowingly beautiful, a marvelous place to explore for whatever time we are given. And if, in that exploring, we can help protect this fragile planet that supports us, and also give something back to the people who have loved us, then the journey will be even more worthwhile.

Editor: *Any other thoughts you wish to share with professionals who work with adolescents and teenagers in libraries?*

Barron: Just this: today's librarians and teachers are, to my mind, genuine heroes. The work they are doing is not always appreciated or even understood . . . but it is absolutely crucial to the young people who will soon inherit our world.

My own high school librarian from Colorado Springs, a grand woman named Lucile Wilson, made an enormous impact on my own life. Her positive influence has lasted many decades now, and I'm sure it will always be with me. That's a constant reminder to me of the power of a dedicated librarian who works with young adults. Now, I know that her job was never easy, and that she constantly had to battle budgets, bureaucracy, and sometimes people in the wider community. But in her heart, all she cared about

Books by T. A. Barron

- Heartlight*, Philomel Books, 1990
- The Ancient One*, Philomel Books, 1992
- The Merlin Effect*, Philomel Books, 1994
- Rocky Mountain National Park: A 100 Year Perspective*, Westcliffe, 1995
- The Lost Years of Merlin*, Philomel Books, 1996
- The Seven Songs of Merlin*, Philomel Books, 1997
- The Fires of Merlin*, Philomel Books, 1998
- The Mirror of Merlin*, Philomel Books, 1999
- The Wings of Merlin*, Philomel Books, 2000
- Where is Grandpa?* Philomel Books, 2000
- Tree Girl*, Philomel Books, 2001
- The Hero's Trail: A Guide for a Heroic Life*, Philomel Books, 2002
- High as a Hawk*, Illustrator Ted Lewin, Philomel Books, 2004
- The Great Tree of Avalon, Book One: Child of the Dark Prophecy*, Philomel Books, October 2004

was expanding the minds and supporting the growth of us students. And she can measure her success in the lives, including mine, which she profoundly touched. ●