



# The Power of Young People to Change the World

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*Dream of a Nation* Anthology

**I**f I could give today's young people three wishes, they would be:

More hugs.

More time outside in nature.

More belief in their own power to change the world.

While most people understand the importance of the first two wishes, the third one leaves some folks scratching their heads, wondering why young people's belief in their own power is so essential.

Let's start with the notion that all of us—especially young people—need heroes. We need them to be our guides on the twisting, sometimes difficult trail we call life. To show us just how far we can go, to help us know just how high we can climb.

**Truth is, there is a potential hero, a future difference maker, in every young person. Each of them, from whatever background, is a bundle of untapped energy.**

And we need heroes today more than ever. Our modern society is terribly confused about the difference between a hero and a celebrity. And the difference is crucial.

A celebrity is all about fame—temporary, superficial fame, usually for qualities that are easy to see: a pretty face, a good hook shot, a great dance move. A hero, by contrast, is about character—qualities beneath the surface that aren't visible until they prompt action. Qualities like courage, hope, compassion and perseverance.

Heroes, real heroes, are all around us. They truly hold our world together, through their unselfish devotion to helping others, supporting families, teaching children, protecting the environment. They don't want fame, or glory, or even credit; they just want to help. In so many ways, these unsung heroes steer the boat in which all of us sail.

Yet young people hear a lot more about celebrities than about heroes, in every form of media. Worse yet, young people are treated too often as just another target market by advertisers. The underlying message they get from all this is that their self-worth comes from what they buy—which drink, which shoes, which cellphone—not who they are down inside.

What gets lost in this? Young people's sense of their own potential for heroic qualities—their own power to make a positive difference in the world.

Truth is, there is a potential hero, a future difference maker, in every young person. Each of them, from

whatever background, is a bundle of untapped energy—a positive force who can do something to steer that communal boat that carries us all.

All it takes for that to be true is belief. For if young people believe in their own power, they will use it. And they will discover that any person—regardless of gender, age, race, cultural background or economic circumstance—can make a genuine, lasting impact.

How do we help skeptical young people believe in their own power?

The best way by far is simply to share examples of other young people who have made a difference. Those stories carry real inspiration, and they speak for themselves.

To turn the spotlight on such amazing young people and share their stories, I founded a national award, the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. Named after my mom, who was a quiet hero in my own life, this award, now in its tenth year, honors 25 young people annually. They come from every background, and they are as diverse as the youth of America. The one thing they all have in common is a belief in their own power to make a difference—and the dedication to make it happen.

This prize is really just a small thing, but its winners are shining examples of what young people can achieve. And I hope that those examples might inspire other young people to discover their own power to make a difference.