



Girls: Our Time Is Now

by Shelby O'Neil

(NAPS)—No Straw November was officially recognized by the California State Legislature largely because of me, a teenage girl who stood up for what I believe in. Here's how Girl Scouts helped me get to where I am today.

Girl Scouts do much more than sell cookies: We're the future innovators, rocket scientists, CEOs, hedge fund managers, race car drivers, congresswomen, environmental advocates and presidents.

From as young as five years old, Girl Scouts do awesome things for ourselves, our communities, and the world. That includes earning the organization's most prestigious award for making sustainable and positive change: the Girl Scout Gold Award.

For my Gold Award project, I decided to help eliminate unnecessary plastic straws, which pollute our oceans. I launched No Straw November, a campaign challenging people who don't medically need a straw to say "No straw, please" during the month. Due to my advocacy, the California State Assembly now officially recognizes No Straw November in the state. Additionally, through a letter-writing campaign to sustainability-minded corporations such as Alaska Airlines, I received voluntary commitments to eliminate over 27 million unnecessary single-use plastic straws, stirrers and citrus picks.

I also teach children around the country about how their actions can directly affect the ocean by establishing a nonprofit called Jr Ocean Guardians. And, Girl Scouts recently introduced 30 new badges, including Environmental Stewardship badges for all Girl Scout grade levels, so now girls in kindergarten through 12th grade have even more chances to learn about how to advocate for the environment.

People are shocked to learn I'm only 17 years old. But I don't think it's strange that I've accomplished all of this, because I'm a Girl Scout—it's what we do. As a Girl Scout, I've channeled my creative side while making cards for the residents of nursing homes. I've learned how to create a great pitch through cookie sales. I've even talked about environmental responsibility with the CEOs of large companies. And I've gained tons of confidence from all of it.

Girl Scouts is about girls champi-



Gold Award Girl Scouts like Shelby O'Neil are making real change on today's pressing issues.

oning their inner explorer and change maker. It motivated me to pursue my interests and to take on new adventures, from kayaking to speaking in front of thousands of people. Over the years, Girl Scouts has both encouraged me to explore the natural world and empowered me to protect it.

There's something about being in an all-girl environment, where the pressure to be perfect is off the table. The replacement for this pressure? A close-knit community of girls and women in which girls are encouraged to be themselves; to speak up for what they believe in; and to help others, even when it means facing failures and setbacks along the way. When I started to educate people on single-use plastic, it wasn't something that was in the news as much as it is now, and many people weren't receptive to my message. Girl Scouts has given me the confidence and courage to speak up. When girls have this kind of support system, there's no limit to what we can achieve.

Although Girl Scouts is known for its iconic cookies, the organization is also where many amazing leaders got their start. In fact, 55 percent of women in the 115th Congress are Girl Scout alums; every female Secretary of State in U.S. history was a Girl Scout; and there are more than 50 million Girl Scout alums. With over 10 million Girl Scouts and Girl Guides worldwide today from 150 countries, Girl Scouts are an international family.

So if your only direct interaction with Girl Scouts is buying cookies, never forget that you might be buying from a future CEO. We have so much to offer the world.

• *Shelby O'Neil is a member of Girl Scouts of California's Central Coast. To join or volunteer, visit www.girlscouts.org/join.*