

Newsela celebrates kids who made a difference in 2018

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Image 1: Meet some amazing kids featured on Newsela in the past year.

Kids did some amazing things in 2018.

The year saw a surge in youth activism, with kids taking a stand on a number of issues, including gun violence and global warming.

As we start the New Year, we also celebrate the many kids who show you're never too young to pursue your passion, live your dreams and make a difference.

Abhimanyu Mishra

At 9 years old, Abhimanyu Mishra from New Jersey became the youngest U.S. chess master during an April tournament.

Abhimanyu has been playing chess since he was just 2 years old. Now, he wants to become the youngest international master. The current record-holder is Indian grandmaster Praggnanandhaa Rameshbabu, who took the crown in 2016 at 10 years and 10 months old.

Aidan Puffer

When Aidan Puffer was 10 years old, his father was training for a 5,000-meter race, also known as a 5K. He asked his son to join him. Little did the family know, Aidan was about to be a world-record-breaking runner.

His first world record was in the 5,000 meters on the track for 11-year-olds. Two years later, he broke another one, the 5K road world record for 13-year-olds.

Aidan runs 30 to 40 miles a week.

"The more you improve, the more you want to get better," Aidan says.

Alyssa Carson

Alyssa Carson started dreaming of Mars at 3 years old. If everything goes according to plan, the Louisiana teen will be among the first astronauts to journey to Mars. This trip is estimated to happen around 2033.

Alyssa runs the Blueberry Foundation.

It is helping other kids pursue their interests in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math).

Children Who Filed Lawsuit About Climate

Twenty-one young people have put a warming planet on trial in Eugene, Oregon. The group, ranging in age from 11 to 22 years old, filed a lawsuit that aims to force a change in federal environmental policy.

The lawsuit, which began in 2015, is trying to get a "climate system capable of sustaining human life" legally recognized as a civil right.

The children would like the government to account for how much total greenhouse gas emissions are put out by the country. They want the country to think of ways to repair past and future carbon emissions, which cause global warming.

Claire Tietgen

Kansas 15-year-old Claire Tietgen has dealt with bullying for years. Claire is also a suicide survivor.

Claire and her family have used her experiences to help them build E3, a family-run fitness, martial arts and yoga facility. Doing the martial art Jiu-Jitsu and now teaching it to others has brought Claire joy. She wants to make the facility a safe space for kids who are being bullied.

Claire also hosts a YouTube show, "Bullied But Not Broken." She interviews celebrities such as Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson who were also bullied as children.

Delton Myers

South Carolina fifth-grader Delton Myers is working to educate other kids about mental health. He published a book called "The Invisible Injury" about childhood depression.

Depression is more than occasional sadness. It is a mental illness which has symptoms that last for a long time. Sometimes depression can be caused by situations such as a bad relationship or stress from school. Often, though, depression is the result of an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. It can be treated with therapy and medication.

"We need to let kids know it's OK to talk about their feelings and they can get help," Delton said.

Jamaria Crump

Baltimore, Maryland, sixth-grader Jamaria Crump has taken the lemonade stand to the next level. The 11-year-old spent a year perfecting her top-secret lemonade recipe.

Her special lemonade has helped make her all-things-lemon business, LemonTopia, a hit.

Jamaria is taking what started out as a hobby and turning it into a business.

Kaylee Foster

Mississippi high-schooler Kaylee Foster is helping to change ideas of what girls can do.

At her high school's homecoming game she played on the field as part of the varsity football team. During the halftime, she was also crowned homecoming queen.

Kaylee even kicked the game-winning extra point. In doing so, she did what perhaps no other high school football player had accomplished, maybe ever.

Karthik Nemmani

This year, the Scripps Spelling Bee made a new program. Any speller who won a school-level bee could request a wild-card invitation to the national bee.

Karthik Nemmani, one of the wild-card entries, was this year's top speller.

The eighth-grader from McKinney, Texas, correctly spelled "koinonia" to win the competition. He beat out a number of veteran contenders. One was 12-year-old Naysa Modi, also from Texas.

Kusa Xiong

Ten-year-old Kusa Xiong is always looking out for his big sister, 12-year-old Pahnuly.

One night, when the family was playing ping-pong, Kusa noticed that Pahnuly, who has autism, was struggling with the game. Kusa wanted to find a way to make ping-pong work for her.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a wide range of symptoms, skills and levels of difficulty. Some people with autism can talk and others cannot. Many of them are sensitive to noise. Some have trouble keeping eye contact. People with autism are often artistically gifted.

Before long, Kusa had come up with a ping-pong game for his sister. He called it Aeropong.

The ping-pong ball is connected to a string, which hangs from a rectangular frame. Players hit the ball back and forth through the frame. If the ball misses the frame, the other player gets a point.

Kusa's idea attracted national attention. It is even being manufactured for sale by a toy company.

Liza Goldberg

Liza Goldberg is high-schooler in Columbia, Maryland.

At age 14, she convinced NASA scientists to give her work. She began researching at Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland.

She studied satellite images to see where mangrove trees had been damaged or lost. The more Liza learned about mangrove ecosystems, the more inspired she felt to take action to save them. They appear near shorelines.

She learned about how to get information on land cover from satellite data. She also studied computer programming languages.

Her work earned her an invitation to speak at one of the world's largest science meetings.

Parkland Students

On February 14, 2018, a gunman opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. He killed 17 people and injured 17 others.

In the days after, students who survived the shooting emerged as a unified voice in the gun control debate.

In a speech, Parkland student Emma Gonzalez declared, "We are going to be the kids you read about in textbooks."

The teens organized the March for Our Lives event in Washington, D.C., on March 24, 2018. More than 880 sibling events happened throughout the United States and around the world.

Naomi Wadler

Naomi Wadler knew she wanted to do something on the one-month anniversary of the Parkland shooting.

Students across the country were planning walkouts. She and classmate Carter Anderson wondered why elementary students couldn't participate, too. The pair organized a walkout at Alexandria's George Mason Elementary School in Virginia.

The walkouts were planned to last 17 minutes in honor of the 17 Parkland victims. Naomi and Carter decided to add an extra minute in memory of Courtlin Arrington. She was a 17-year-old black girl who was shot at her Alabama high school weeks after the Parkland shooting.

The organizers of the March for Our Lives event took notice. They invited Naomi to speak there. She said she spoke for "the African-American girls whose stories don't make the front page of every national newspaper."

Riley Morrison

Nine-year-old basketball player Riley Morrison is a huge fan of the Golden State Warriors basketball team. She is also a major fan of Stephen Curry, the team's star point guard.

Riley went online with her dad to buy a pair of Curry's new shoes. She was disappointed to find that the only kids' versions were for boys.

She wrote Curry a letter asking if he would work with athletic clothing company Under Armour to provide the shoes for girls as well. The letter soon went viral on social media.

Curry responded to Riley with a letter of his own. He said he was working with Under Armour to make sure the shoes were available for boys and girls.

Ruhani Ahluwalia

Fourteen-year-old Ruhani Ahluwalia loves to paint and she loves Harry Potter, like other teens. Meanwhile, she's also working to find a compassionate cure for cancer.

Since she was 11 years old, the Texas teenager has been working summers in a lab at the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth.

Chemotherapy, a cancer treatment, can kill cancer cells but also often hurts healthy cells. She is testing drugs that can kill cancer cells while limiting the side effects to healthy cells. Her inspiration was her great aunt, who died of the cancer leukemia when Ruhani was in sixth grade.

Shelby O'Neil

Seventeen-year-old Girl Scout Shelby O'Neil is on a mission to keep plastic out of the oceans.

Plastic straws and cup lids are too small to be recycled. They are made to break down more quickly than other plastics. Pieces of these plastics end up getting eaten by fish and other undersea life.

Shelby decided to take up the issue with adults at companies that help produce this plastic waste. They included San Francisco-based Dignity Health, Alaska Airlines and Farmer Brothers coffee.

Some of them promised to reduce or eliminate the plastic they help produce.

"I was never really scared of reaching out to companies, because someone needed to do it. If no one else is doing it, then I'll do it," she told the Washington Post.

Student Activists From Pearl And Richland, Mississippi

A group of six teens from Pearl and Richland, Mississippi, held a 50-mile walk in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The walk honored the civil rights leader on the 50th anniversary of his assassination.

The students decided to walk 50 miles. Each mile represented one year since King was shot at the old Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.

The teens discussed issues related to race and civil rights during their trek to Memphis.

"It's a way to show people that you can have friendships with different people of different backgrounds," Damonte Steele, a Mississippi high-schooler, told the Associated Press.

Zyahna Bryant

Zyahna Bryant is a 16-year-old from Virginia. She had no idea how an online petition she started would erupt on the national level.

The petition demanded the removal of the statue of Confederate Civil War general Robert E. Lee. It was in a park in downtown Charlottesville, Virginia.

Her petition would lead to a deadly clash between white supremacists and counterprotesters in 2017 at the very park where the Lee statue stood. White supremacists have the wrong and hateful belief that white people are better than people of other races.

Zyahna wants to bring to light the long history of white supremacy and racism in the city. She says such clashes just inspire her to stay focused.

"White supremacy [in Charlottesville] existed way before August 12," Zyahna told the Christian Science Monitor, mentioning the date of the deadly clash. "It's not at all anything compared to the racial violence that black people have been dealing with since the beginning of this country."

Quiz

- 1 One conclusion a reader could make after reading the text is that children understand difficult social issues better than adults might imagine.

Which of the following statements accurately paraphrases evidence from the text to support the conclusion?

- (A) Twenty-one young people are putting the planet on trial in Eugene, Oregon.
 - (B) The students at Parkland High School knew that their protests would become big news.
 - (C) Shelby O'Neil knows a great deal about science and which companies make plastic.
 - (D) Zyahna Bryant is confronting the deeply rooted impact of racism in America.
- 2 Which selection from the article shows Riley Morrison's MAIN inspiration?
- (A) She is also a major fan of Stephen Curry, the team's star point guard.
 - (B) Riley went online with her dad to buy a pair of Curry's new shoes.
 - (C) She was disappointed to find that the only kids' versions were for boys.
 - (D) The letter soon went viral on social media.

3 Read the list of sentences from the article.

1. *Claire and her family have used her experiences to help them build E3, a family-run fitness, martial arts and yoga facility.*
2. *In the days after, students who survived the shooting emerged as a unified voice in the gun control debate.*
3. *Her inspiration was her great aunt, who died of the cancer leukemia when Ruhani was in sixth grade.*
4. *"It's not at all anything compared to the racial violence that black people have been dealing with since the beginning of this country."*

What central idea does this evidence support?

- (A) Kids are finding inspiration from difficult topics that have personally affected them.
- (B) Race and racism have become important issues among youth activists.
- (C) Kids tend to be braver than adults when taking on topics that many people disagree on.
- (D) Many of the issues kids are confronting are problems that should already have been solved.

4 Which statement is a central idea of the article?

- (A) The year saw a surge in youth activism, with kids taking a stand on a number of issues, including gun violence and global warming.
- (B) "We need to let kids know it's OK to talk about their feelings and they can get help," Delton said.
- (C) "If no one else is doing it, then I'll do it," she told the Washington Post.
- (D) The teens discussed issues related to race and civil rights during their trek to Memphis.