Fresh Faces of Philanthropy

A Fla. Boy, 11, Helps Fight Homelessness Through Walk To D.C., Part Of a Growing Trend of Youths Who Reach Out

By Susan Kinzie
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Camera crews swiveled their lenses and a crowd of a few hundred teenagers cheered when they saw Zach Bonner stride toward the White House, the final steps of a 650-mile fundraising walk to help homeless children.

There was a pause, though, before the hero's welcome, and a brief detour: He had to use the bathroom.

Zach Bonner, an 11-year-old who started a charity, talks with youths from Sasha Bruce Youthwork in Washington who came to support his efforts. (By Jahi Chikwendiu -- TheWashington Post)

Zach is, after all, just a kid. At 11, he's one of cadre of child philanthropists who seem to be growing in number and visibility as corporations and colleges reward their efforts to help others.

Above, Zach Bonner, 11, sits on the Capitol steps Thursday following a news conference after finishing a walk from Atlanta to the District to raise awareness about homelessness. (Photos By Jahi Chikwendiu -- The Washington Post)

Sens. Mel Martinez, below left, Johnny Isakson and Saxby Chambliss join Zach during a news conference at the Capitol. Zach's three walks, totaling 1,200 miles, raised about $50,000. (Jahi Chikwendiu - The Washington Post)

Zach Bonner, an 11-year-old who started a charity, talks with youths from Sasha Bruce Youthwork in Washington who came to support his efforts. (By Jahi Chikwendiu -- TheWashington Post)

Zach started his own nonprofit organization four years ago after a hurricane hit Florida. He asked his mother if they could donate their water bottles, and he gathered more from neighbors, an earnest little redhead boy pulling his red wagon behind him. By the end, they had 27 truckloads of aid.

It was such a simple, innocent symbol of kindness that lots of people wanted to help. The Little Red Wagon Foundation kept growing.

And it got less simple. Somewhere along the road, Zach's little red wagon turned into an 18-wheeler.

Now a Los Angeles publicist with Prada glasses promotes Zach's walks to the media. Camera crews and photographers run backward when Zach approaches, scrambling to film his small steps. Zach has met three presidents and was invited to President George W. Bush's farewell address this winter. Last night, he was scheduled to visit Elton John at his concert at Nationals Park and accept a $25,000 check. And an Emmy-award winning journalist, Michael Guillen, is making a $5 million film about the Little Red Wagon.

When Guillen told him that the Philanthropy Project was going to make a movie about him, Zach dropped his head and cried a little, Guillen said. "He said, 'But I'm so small.' "

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Not anymore.

Children's faces have long been used to promote fundraising campaigns for March of Dimes, muscular dystrophy and other causes. But now they aren't just poster children anymore; some -- although no one tracks how many -- have become high-profile CEOs of their own nonprofit groups.

Timothy Hwang and Minsoo Han, rising seniors at Thomas S. Wootton High School in Rockville, started their organization, Operation Fly, when they were 14. They raise money through tutoring -- charging much less than the market rate -- and use the money to distribute blankets, clothing and soap to Washington's homeless people. Operation Fly has spread to five cities, with 800 volunteers, and is entirely student-run.

What they are doing goes far beyond the kind of volunteering that an increasing number of young people engage in. Young philanthropists devote hundreds of hours to their causes, making appeals many donors find irresistible even in tough economic times.

"When you see a kid, it seems more trustworthy, less jaundiced," said Andrew Hahn, a professor and director of the Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy at Brandeis University.

Corporations, politicians and nonprofit groups can be drawn to them, wanting to ally with something inspirational. Some companies give out awards, such as Build-A-Bear Workshop, which honors a dozen child philanthropists every year with $2,500 for their charity and $7,500 for their college fund.

Brittany and Robbie Bergquist were 13 and 12 when they heard about a soldier overseas who couldn't pay the phone bill for his calls home. They quickly found that they could help, raising money by selling back old cellphones to be recycled. Since then, the Massachusetts siblings have sent more than 600,000 phone cards to troops and raised more than $5 million.

Brittany has been awarded so many community-service scholarships for her work that she has enough to cover the entire cost of Stonehill College, where she'll be a freshman this fall. Actually, she has enough to cover graduate school, too: $250,000 in scholarships, including $100,000 from AT&T.

"It's still kind of a number I twist my tongue on," she said, laughing.

Bill Conley, dean of enrollment and academic services at Johns Hopkins University, said college admissions officials are seeing ever-more impressive philanthropic efforts from students trying to get into elite colleges. That is definitely a strong plus on an application, he said.

Zach spent the past two months trudging 10 or 13 miles a day along sweltering back roads in his red-and-black sneakers, his eyebrows and eyelashes bleached blond from the sun.

The hardest part of the walk came last month. "My grandma died this afternoon," he wrote on Twitter June 30. "She was my best friend besides my Mom. She believed in me and my walk. I will finish my walk in her honor."

"It was hard," Laurie Bonner said last week as Zach's 21-year-old sister, Kelley, who has been helping with the walk, teared up. "We had to choose between going to the funeral or staying here" in Washington, where the events around Zach's walk had long been planned.

The walk has raised about $50,000, Zach's mother says, some of which will go to a playground at an emergency foster-care shelter in Tampa and for bedding, computers and other supplies at Sasha Bruce Youthwork, which helps runaways and homeless youths in the District. Some of it they spent along the way, on projects at homeless shelters. Zach hosted parties, did chores and gave out soccer balls.

Zach is soft-spoken, polite and preternaturally serious. He addresses police officers and senators alike with hands clasped behind his back, big blue eyes steady, telling them that 1.3 million children are homeless in this country: "It's sad that these kids have to stay in a shelter and that they can't have a home of their own with their parents."

The back of his walk T-shirt is covered with logos of sponsors, including Sasha Bruce, Outback Steakhouse, McDonald's, the Philanthropy Project and AOL.com. Last week, the Office Depot Foundation gave 1,225 backpacks to the Little Red Wagon, one for each mile he walked with his mother on three fundraising treks. The first took Zach from Tampa, near his home, to Tallahassee, and the second, from Tallahassee to Atlanta.

Zach said he's grateful for the support and attention the walk received.

"I'm glad that it has gotten this big," he said, "because the bigger it gets, the more awareness it raises. That's the point -- so I'm happy."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.