

Philanthro-teen Shannon McNamara: Educating Girls in Tanzania

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In 2008 Shannon McNamara founded SHARE, Shannon's After-school Reading Exchange, a non-profit organization whose original mission was to collect books to help educate girls in Tanzania. McNamara, a senior at Ridge High School in Basking Ridge, N.J., has won top recognition for her successful organization (she was asked to give a speech at the White House in March), which has shipped more than 23,000 books to Africa, opened libraries and started SHARE Scholars — a scholarship to help young Tanzanian girls continue their education beyond elementary school. McNamara traveled to Tanzania with her family in the summers of 2009 and 2010. Another trip is planned in 2011.

McNamara, 17, talked with Knowledge@Wharton High School about the growing “philanthro-teen” movement motivating high school students to give back to society, and how SHARE has changed her life.

The following is an edited transcript of the conversation.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: Why are high school students more focused these days on making a meaningful social impact?

Shannon McNamara: I get what's called “the helper's high” when I give back. It might seem like you're giving up your time to help someone else, but really the joy and gratitude that you get from that person helps you so much more. The secret of the helper's high is out.

KWHS: It seems like even more than that. Is the idea of giving back a family value?

McNamara: My parents always told me and my brother and sister when we were growing up that we won the birth lottery in life because we were born in America. I don't have to worry about education being taken away from me. We traveled down to Africa and saw girls walking for miles in bare feet or tattered shoes to school and then sitting three

students to one desk. You give them a pencil and they will break it into three pieces to share with their friends because school supplies are so limited. Here are some people so willing to get an education. It just breaks your heart that some of them will be married at age 14 and won't be able to continue it. After being in Africa for a long time, I can't wait to get home to my bed and my warm shower and not have to sleep with a mosquito net around me. And then I realize that these girls don't have a home to get back to. This is their life.

KWHS: Not every teen can create a non-profit on the scale of SHARE. Do you think other teens should all be making this grand a commitment to social change?

McNamara: There's a great Mother Teresa quote that I love: 'If you can't feed 100 hungry children, then feed just one.' When I start to feel like the problems in Africa are so huge, I remind myself that I'm not going to be able to change the course of Africa or send every girl in Tanzania to school, but I can make a small difference. Even though it's small doesn't mean I shouldn't make it.

KWHS: How has SHARE changed you?

McNamara: For one, it has helped me with my public speaking skills. I can go up in front of a crowd and talk about SHARE, whereas a lot of kids my age worry about presenting something in class. Those skills are going to come in handy later. The biggest thing is my appreciation for everything — seeing what it is really like for a girl my age who is living halfway around the world. I'm walking around my room right now and looking at all my necklaces hanging up. I don't even wear half of them and should probably bring them on my next trip and give them away to some of the girls. We have so much and we need to be grateful for it and appreciate it.

KWHS: What is SHARE's scholarship program?

McNamara: We stopped shipping books because we already have 23,000 down there. Also, it's too expensive to ship, and the ports are corrupt. It's horrible if a girl works so hard in school and then can't continue her education because her parents don't have the money. SHARE Scholars makes sure that girls, [regardless of] how much they can or can't pay, are able to go through with their education. It's about \$1,000 to support a girl for a year, which includes room, board, clothing and food. We send them to a secondary school, an all-girls boarding school that is run by nuns. We have three girls in the program and we're going to add more.

KWHS: Have you figured out your next chapter?

McNamara: I will be attending Rice University in the fall. Right now I'm thinking about [studying] sociology, anthropology or philosophy. I'm very interested in people and how they work with other people in a culture. SHARE is either going to be a job or a hobby and will always be a part of my life. My dream job is to be a photojournalist with [journalist] Nicholas Kristof and travel the world. [I want to] report and take pictures and write about what I see there — and make sure everybody else gets the chance to see it, too.

Related Links

- [SHARE](#)
- [Girl Up!](#)
- [International Women's Day](#)
- [Crains New York Business: Philanthro-teens Delving into Nonprofit World](#)
- [PBS: The New Heroes: What Is Social Entrepreneurship?](#)
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