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STUDENT LEADERS

CHANGING THE WORLD

WITH UNICEF USA

To honor 100 years of excellence, NHS has partnered with UNICEF USA to bring education to vulnerable populations across the world

BY ERI OKUMA

In celebration of NHS' 100th anniversary in 2021, NHS has partnered with UNICEF USA to empower chapters to raise money to build classrooms in West Africa's Côte d'Ivoire using recycled plastic bricks. This project not only funds the actual construction of buildings but also provides desks and chairs, school supplies, teacher trainings, latrines, solar panels, water points, community engagement opportunities, and implementation of the Green School Project. It also offers students the opportunity to connect with peers from around the world and to learn about what it's like to be a student in another country. We had a chance to talk with two student leaders who are both making an impact in their local communities and in the world. Here are their stories.

STUDENT LEADER SPOTLIGHT 1: JIVANA SHUKLA-FRISCO, TX



Jivana is a senior at Wakeland High School in Frisco, TX, and an active member of NHS. She's also the founder of her school's UNICEF Club, and currently serves on the National Council for UNICEF, where she strives to ignite change in the lives of the less fortunate while inspiring her peers to do the same.

Jivana, you are a superstar in both the NHS and the UNICEF communities. How did you get involved with UNICEF USA?

My dad was a child refugee from Uganda, so I grew up hearing stories about him and his family, what they had to go through,

living without any resources, and how organizations such as UNICEF supported them during this tough time. So, when I started doing more research into UNICEF and all the amazing work that this organization does, I wanted to join because I never wanted another child to have to go through what my dad and his family experienced. My high school didn't have a UNICEF club, so when I was a freshman, I decided to found one, and now I've been the president of my club for four years!

What was a challenge that you had to overcome?

Recruitment was really difficult, especially in the first year. It seemed like people just wanted to join for volunteer hours, rather than because they cared about the organization or the mission. A lot of people know the name UNICEF, but they don't really know about the work that UNICEF does. So, I focused on explaining the direct impact that UNICEF makes on children's lives, and that was usually enough of an incentive to get people to care and want to join. And now the club has grown exponentially!

What are you most proud of achieving with your UNICEF club?

A lot of students in my school come from privileged backgrounds, so many of them aren't aware of everything that's happening in the world. The members of the UNICEF club have been able to go out and educate other students on global issues and UNICEF's work, and that's gotten people interested in joining our club. I think that's led to an increase in awareness of the diversity in my school. So that's been something really special.

Tell me about your role as a youth representative for the UNICEF UNITE Dallas Council last year.

As a youth rep, I acted as a resource for all the other club leaders in the area and connected everyone to each other. One of the biggest things we did was we planned and hosted a mini student summit. It was a gathering for all UNICEF clubs in the Dallas area, helping new clubs register and giving them resources and information. We did a presentation and a bunch of activities on the sustainable development goals—I think we did about 12 different stations on them! It was a really

ABOUT UNICEF

Over eight decades, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has built an unprecedented global support system for the world's children. UNICEF relentlessly works day in and day out to deliver the essentials that give every child an equitable chance in life: health care and immunizations, safe water and sanitation, nutrition, education, emergency relief, and more. UNICEF USA advances the global mission of UNICEF by rallying the American public to support the world's most vulnerable children. Together, we have helped save more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization. For more information, visit www.unicefusa.org.

educational resource for everyone, and it helped me learn more about the topic, too.

Then, in the middle of our term, COVID-19 happened, and so we had to switch everything over to a virtual platform. We hosted a panel discussion for incoming clubs, and we also did events for International Women's Day, and of course, World Children's Day.

Now that you're on the UNICEF National Council, what's the biggest thing that you want to accomplish?

We started training in June or July, and so far it's been great. I'm on the recruitment team with two other girls and it's a great team—I know we're going to do great things this year. Our biggest goal is to increase diversity within the clubs program. I know it's going to be tough, but it's really important, especially this year, and I think we can do it.

We're planning to hold a series of webinars on diversity—and we mean racial diversity as well as LGBTQ. We'll also use our social media platforms to highlight representation of different communities throughout the clubs program.

You're the UNICEF Club president at your school, you're on the National Council, and you're also in NHS, all while taking classes. How do you juggle everything?

Time management is a really big priority for me. It's actually been a bit of a struggle this year, just because we have a lot of work online and in person, as well as applying to colleges. I really focus on planning out everything that I'm going to do and not leave things for the last minute, because then they'll just never get done.

You had the chance to speak with UNICEF USA's president and CEO as well as the chief engagement, advocacy, and global programs officer last summer. How was that?

That was a really empowering event. UNICEF puts such emphasis on youth-led movements. UNICEF is an organization for children, and who is a better representative to talk about the things happening to children than us, children and youth? So, I thought it was really important to speak up and let the senior leadership know what we are thinking. UNICEF is such a great organization that actually makes youth voices heard, when usually in the world we're kind of pushed to the side or not really heard. That was a great opportunity for them to hear our thoughts, and I really felt like they were taking it into consideration.

Thank you for speaking up and helping shape the world! What are your dreams for the future?

I'm going to study international relations or political science in college and I'm hoping to be an international human rights lawyer in the future. That's my hope. That's my goal.

Do you have any advice for students who want to take on leadership roles within their communities, but may be a little scared or unsure if they're the right person for the role?

You really just have to trust in yourself! I know it's a little cliché, but if you're really passionate about the work that you're doing, you'll get over that fear easily. One of the biggest things I struggled with was, I would always tell myself, "Oh, I'll start the club tomorrow, I'll apply for the National Council tomorrow." But I realized that even though it's a lot of work at the moment, it's better to do it then rather than to push it off. It'll pay off, and it'll make you feel better that you've done it, too.

Another thing I'd like to say is that people are scared in this political climate to say anything. Stating your opinion can be scary! But I would tell everyone to not be scared to say what you think, because it really doesn't matter what anyone else thinks at the end of the day. What matters is what you care about.

STUDENT LEADER SPOTLIGHT 2: JEANNETTE KOTOKLUI-ABIDJAN, CÔTE D'IVOIRE



Jeannette is a recent high school graduate in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and a founder of her school's Green Club. She hopes to inspire her peers to

be more involved in their communities, and to make a positive impact in the world.

Jeannette, tell me about yourself.

I just graduated from high school and I am now applying to some universities. I love education and I love my school. In fact, my school is the first entrepreneurship-oriented community school in Côte d'Ivoire. They instill us with an entrepreneurial mindset.

Outside of class, I like to be involved in my school community. I am the founder of our Green Club, which works on recycling programs, community cleanup operations, and school garden and tree planting. Now that I have graduated, I mentor the next generation of students.

What was a challenge that you had to overcome? What are you most proud of achieving with your Green Club?

Students have the habit of throwing packages and other forms of trash on the floor or on the ground. Changing this habit was the most difficult thing that I did as part of the Green Club. Students first complained about sanctions taken for anyone who violated the rules of hygiene. But thanks to our determination, we conducted interesting activities such as recycling paper into drawing paper and plastic bottles into pencil cases and flowerpots, which I sold at school and in the surrounding area. The income was then used to buy medicine for our medical education center. I was also happy to notice that some students proposed new recycling ideas.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you?

COVID-19 has negatively affected my life, especially for my studies. I have applied to American universities, but due to the pandemic, getting a scholarship proved difficult.

What are your dreams for the future?

My biggest dream is to see a united Africa with a strong cultural identity and shared values and ethics. My goal is to belong to a new generation of committed leaders who are ready to take up sustainable development challenges.

Do you have any advice for younger future leaders?

Dear future leaders, there is no age [too young] to be involved in one's community, and I believe that personal actions are more valuable than words. I encourage you to take action on topics important to you and thus contribute to a better world.

MAKING THE WORLD BETTER, BRICK BY BRICK

More than 27 million tons of plastic are thrown away each year, polluting our planet. And globally, more than 250 million children



Children at the playground of their school, made out of recycled plastic bricks, in Yopougon, a suburb of Abidjan, in the south of Côte d'Ivoire.

lack access to education. UNICEF has taken an innovative approach to combating these two problems in Côte d'Ivoire. Partnering with Colombian social enterprise Conceptos Plásticos in a recycling initiative using the first plastic bricks factory of its kind in Africa, plastic that would otherwise be disposed of is turned into safe and durable low-cost bricks to build schools.

Although education is mandatory in Côte d'Ivoire, more than 2 million children are unable to attend school due to overcrowding, unsanitary learning spaces, and a lack of accessible classrooms. But as beneficiaries of the plastic bricks project, children are now able to learn in clean and functional environments. Anne, an 8-year-old student attending one of the newly built schools, shares her excitement: "I am very impressed by the big blackboard and the cleanliness. There is even electricity and we now have toilets. It is such an improvement from before, when we had to go in the bush." These schools will also implement the Green Schools Project with students to teach them about conservation and environmentalism.

The project is also efficient. "With this new construction material, we can build classrooms in a few weeks rather than a few months, which is normally the time it takes to build traditional classrooms with concrete blocks," says construction supervisor Sylviane Zika in Gouékolo, on the West of Côte d'Ivoire. UNICEF has committed to building 528 classrooms and hopes to raise additional funds to build even more.

In addition to fighting pollution and creating quality learning environments for children, the women-led initiative creates jobs for women and combats diseases that are exacerbated by pollution, such as malaria, pneumonia, and diarrhea. And since researchers have predicted that the world will increase plastic production fourfold over the next 30 years, this kind of problem-solving is more important than ever before.

To participate in this program or to learn more, visit www.nhs.us/unicef or www.unicefusa.org/nhs. •

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