



Starting small and  
moving to bigger  
things: Sophie  
Weenink Smith

# CLEAN-UP Teen

*The New Zealand teenager on a mission to save her part of the planet, clearing the rubbish from beaches and rivers*

BY *Diane Godley*

“I am a vegan because I love animals and marine life,” wrote 13-year-old Sophie Weenink Smith in her submission to the 2019 New Zealand Vegetarian Society’s ‘Think Kind’ competition for school students. “I held a beach clean-up in Nelson in the school holidays because it really bothers me that

marine life is hurt by thoughtless decisions made by humans.”

It was while snorkelling at Cable Bay, at the tip of New Zealand’s South Island and not far from her home, that Sophie saw garbage on the sea floor. “Usually it is clean there, but that day I saw a lot of plastic,” she says. “It was the first time I’d seen a sea cucumber, and it was next to a chip packet! I also

PHOTOS: THE NELSON MAIL



## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

saw a starfish. It was a bit sad I had to see them among plastic."

It was also the trigger which made her act. "I thought we weren't taking enough action and that could change. Everyone needs to do their part, otherwise we're going to let down our planet."

Sophie took to social media and the local news media to get her message out and to ask for volunteers at the clean-up she had planned at Tahunanui Beach in July last year.

To Sophie's surprise, more than 200 people turned up to help. "I was expecting about ten people, so it was a pretty good turnout," she says. Among the 200 kilograms of rubbish collected were cigarette butts, plastic and Styrofoam packaging, and plastic straws. "It was quite horrible. I knew rubbish was there but I didn't realise how much until we started looking."

She may have only been 13 at the time, but young Sophie ran her first event like a pro, contacting companies that produce ethical products and vegan-friendly sausages and food for the barbecue afterwards to thank the helpers.

Once the eco bug had hit Sophie, it hit hard. For her 14th birthday, she decided to celebrate with a 'reverse'

birthday party – instead of holding a party that would create waste, she decided to do something that would reduce it: she held a clean-up of the Maitai River.

"I live quite close to the river and I've seen the water go from clear to dark green. I thought it needed to change, even if it was just for a day." So, her 'party' picked up the rubbish that accumulates along the river bank when the tide comes in so it could be disposed of properly before being swept back out to sea. About 70 people turned up on the Wednesday morning to help, and managed to fill an entire skip bin of rubbish that included beer bottles and cigarette butts.

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If there is one thing everyone could do to help keep the environment clean it is to "pick up after yourself," says Sophie. "I'm walking home from school at this very moment and right where I'm standing I can see seven cigarette butts and five zip-lock ties just thrown on the ground.

"It can be hard for families to afford some of the plastic alternatives, I know me and my mum can't, but just not buying things wrapped in plastic will help." She suggests buying 'nude' fruit and vegetables, and using metal straws, reusable containers and

## READER'S DIGEST

shopping bags, shampoo and conditioner bars and bamboo toothbrushes. "When there are more options on the market it will be even easier for individuals to make a change."

When the Think Kind People's Choice award was announced in November last year, Sophie's clean-up campaign was the winner among a competitive field of songs, posters and poems. Sophie's school was

presented with a cheque for \$1000, which Sophie asked to be donated to animal-based charities in the region. She has also been invited to be a youth leader by the charity, the Ministry of Inspiration. **R**

**Keep an eye out for Ecogirl NZ on Facebook for future clean-up and tree planting events, and to be inspired by Sophie's quest to clean up her part of the planet.**

# SPREADING HOPE, One Stitch at a Time

*A former teacher has set up a charity to help disadvantaged children to play and learn, and to connect volunteers*

BY *Diane Godley*



**Project KIN's Maryann Webb**

In 2016, Maryann Webb was soothing her child when she asked herself a question: if a child from a loving family, surrounded with toys and books, can still feel anxious, how must a child living in poverty, or a victim of domestic violence, cope?

The former primary school teacher, mother and keen seamstress knew the impact that literacy and social skills can have on a child's wellbeing. After a little research, she discovered that three million Australians were living below the poverty line in 2017, and over 700,000 of these were children.

"As a parent, I was shocked by that statistic and how many disadvantaged children live across Australia," says Webb. "The more I learnt, the more I was inspired to do something."

Her bright idea was to create Play and Learn Packs. The result is carefully crafted handmade dolls and books for kids in need that promote healthy bonds in the home and break the cycle of disadvantage.

What followed was Project KIN (Kids in Need): a registered, community-centred charity that not only helps underprivileged kids, but provides social pathways to women who feel socially isolated.

Today, after two years, Project KIN has more than 600 volunteers who

sew, knit and crochet male and female dolls of every skin and hair colour.

The 'Play and Learn' packs each come with a handmade doll, the book *Imagine If You Had a Friend*, which also offers advice to parents and carers about bonding with children over reading, and an activity book.

The packs are gifted to children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and kids experiencing disadvantage, trauma and vulnerability.

But the good deeds don't stop with the children: Project KIN is also inspiring a movement of change in the lives of its volunteers.

"Our goal is fostering human connections that contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing of our volunteers and the communities they live in," says Webb.

The charity brings together volunteers across Australia who share their creations, patterns, tips and stories through the Project KIN's portal or social media group, which in turn provides volunteers with a sense of connectedness and purpose.

"We know our Play and Learn packs won't solve the problem of disadvantage, but we believe they're a powerful and tangible piece of the 'change' puzzle," says Webb. **R**

**For more information about Project KIN, go to [www.projectkin.org](http://www.projectkin.org)**

### HANDMADE DOLLS AND BOOKS HELP PROMOTE HEALTHY BONDS

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