

Young Hero of Today

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A 16-year-old Irvine resident endeavors to help save the planet through her video work at the Environmental Nature Center.

Emma Zebrowski is passionate about two things: filmmaking and the environment.

So when the 16-year-old Irvine resident heard about a video internship with the Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach, she was delighted.

"It was the perfect combination of the two things I love most," says Zebrowski.

And combining her two favorite things has earned her recognition from Youth Service America as an Everyday Young Hero Award recipient.

"The first video I created for ENC was a video that played at ENC's preschool education ceremony," says Zebrowski.

Founded in 1972, the Environmental Nature Center, is a combination of 15 California native plant communities, wildlife habitats, trails and a learning center, and serves over 28,000 students and thousands of visitors each year.

For her first video, she interviewed Sue Bierlinch, the ENC Nature Preschool director, and Bo Glover, the ENC's executive director. The video also included photos and footage of the preschool. Zebrowski says the editing process wasn't always easy.

"At the beginning of my internship, I was not as familiar with Adobe Premiere Pro as I am now," she says. "Editing my videos takes me hours and is sometimes frustrating."

But she isn't easily discouraged.

"With every new video I make, I learn new things that allow me to grow and produce better videos for the ENC," she says.

She began developing her videography skills in seventh grade at Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic School in Newport Beach in an elective vlogging class. The following summer she attended Orange County School of the Arts' (OCSA) summer camps for filming and television production, which gave her hands-on studio experience with sophisticated equipment and script writing. As a freshman and sophomore, she worked on the morning show at Mater Dei High School.



"I am continuing to develop my video skills at Santa Margarita High School in my Broadcast Journalism class," she says.

Other videos she filmed for the ENC include one on the importance of native plants and a video to help the ENC's Nature Campers be "zero waste" when they come to camp.

Zebrowski's interest in helping the planet began at the age of 13, when she attended the Climate Reality Project leadership training program in Seattle in June 2017.

"For three days, I listened to climate experts, including Al Gore, explain the climate crisis and identify ways that we can help save our planet by reducing our carbon emissions," Zebrowski says. "The conference helped me to realize the severity of the world's environmental problems."

The conference also inspired Zebrowski to live a more sustainable life.

"Now, I consciously try to reduce my carbon footprint in order to limit the harm I cause to our planet," she says. "I became a vegetarian because Al Gore taught us the impact that meat products have on our environment."

Zebrowski says she also avoids using plastic sandwich bags, single-use water bottles and plastic bags.

"This transition was a major milestone for my family because we used to drink about 10 to 12 plastic water bottles a day and use plastic bags daily," she says. "Now, we subscribe to Sparkletts water service and I use Tupperware to pack my snacks."

Her family also shops at the farmers' market at Mariners Church parking lot on weekends to shop local, and drives an energy-efficient vehicle.

Her films with the ENC are another way Zebrowski is pushing for change.

"Emma's work motivates people to be less wasteful and damaging to the environment," says ENC's Assistant Director Lori Whalen. "She hopes that by creating awareness, she will inspire others to live more sustainably."

Whalen nominated Zebrowski for the Everyday Young Hero Award with Youth Service America, which she won in November 2020.

"When I received the award, I was shocked and honored. I immediately told everyone in my family and I am so thankful to Lori for the nomination," says Zebrowski.



Youth Service America supports a global culture of engaged children and youth committed to a lifetime of meaningful service, learning and leadership. Their Everyday Young Heroes are young people, ages 5 to 25, who are improving their communities through service to others and making significant progress in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

"We know that young people are uniquely suited to help solve problems — if given the opportunity," says YSA President Steven A. Culbertson. "Today's social and environmental problems are immense; we need youth in this country to be leaders and problem-solvers today, not just the leaders of a distant tomorrow."

Armed with the new camera she received as a Christmas gift, Zebrowski is ready to problem-solve.

"My goal is to learn how to use the camera and to take better footage and photos," she says. "I am excited to expand my equipment and create better videos for the ENC.

"I hope to have a career in business/marketing. Whatever I end up doing professionally, I will try to work for a company that is green and sustainable."

Zebrowski hopes others will be inspired to follow her example.

"Once we become conscious of the environmental damage that our consumption causes, it is hard not to worry about the impact we are making on this planet," she says.

The ENC staff has curated a list of dozens of easy things everyone can do to help save the planet, here: encenter.org/blog/ways-to-save-the-earth

By Sarah Mosqueda

(Photos Courtesy of Emma Zebrowski)