

Youth voice - MAD Marine graduate Gauri Prabhakar

I always begin by going back to why I'm so passionate about the environment in the first place. I was in six years old and we had just finished an environmental/sustainability unit at school. And during the break, I was playing Truth or Dare with my friends – as you do. I picked 'Dare' and they asked me to kick a tree. That doesn't sound significant at all and yet, I felt this inherent sense that what I was about to do was wrong – but I still kicked the tree. And I didn't know that a teacher had been watching this whole interaction and had seen me kick this tree that I really did not want to kick.

So she came around and I was terrified because I felt like this inexplicable sense of guilt like I had just committed a crime – the worst crime a six year old could commit – and she said "Now I want you to hug this tree." And I did it, with everyone watching, and this is going to sound really, really weird, but I felt something in that moment and I can honestly say that that was the catalyst I needed for what I do today.

Because on that day, eleven years ago, I realized that my actions had an impact; they mattered. It could be a positive or a negative impact, but an impact nonetheless. I realized that my actions, no matter how big or small, could make a world of difference, not only to my life but to the lives of those around me. And that's where I believe the 'heart' comes in. The compassion. The ability to see this world for all its interconnectedness and intricacies. To see ourselves as a part of the environment instead of apart from the environment.

That's my driving force behind joining programs like MAD. Because I always like to tell myself "Your goal in life is to leave this world in a better place than when you found it." And MAD is just one of the things I do that allows me to fulfill that goal. I'm also the Chairperson of the Human and Environmental Rights Group at Lynfield College and that's been the primary medium through which I've approached and tackled environmental problems.

For example, one of the major events we run is a beach clean-up and this year, we managed to extract that much rubbish in the surrounding beaches. Picking up rubbish on a Saturday morning isn't exactly everybody's idea of fun but it's always great to see a whole bunch of students come along to help out. And I actually noticed that more students came along when we held lunchtimes in school detailing the adverse effects of marine litter.

There was a video that popped up a while ago of a turtle who had a plastic straw stuck up its nostril and I think, when we show things like that to our students, we come down to Earth in a way. It's easy to hear about all that's wrong in the world and all that's wrong in the environment, but I think we have this tendency as human beings to desensitize ourselves and turn a blind eye to the problem. We do sometimes forget that our actions have consequences.

Something as simple and seemingly irrelevant as throwing a straw on the ground could actually end up being washed down the drain and enter into our oceans. Or in that turtle's case, up its nostril, where its life will forever be hindered by this alien object. I think, once we highlighted that link and showed students that "Hey, you can be the one to prevent this," the whole dynamic of our group changed.

We started seeing higher numbers, more enthusiasm, and that in turn, lead to more opportunities for us to raise more awareness of the marine environment. We held a waste-free Cultural Day where all the

plates and cutlery was compostable, a group of friends and I got together and ran a workshop where we transformed old t-shirts into tote bags, and we're currently in the final stages of painting our drains with the catch phrase "Bins Save Fins" to reinforce that connection between ourselves and the world around us.

Because leaving this world in a better place than when we found it is what it comes down to. So I challenge you to challenge yourselves: build on that compassion; on that shared understanding that we can be the ones to educate, engage, and empower the next generation.

Thank you.