



SHE COULD BE ANY GOOD-LOOKING COLLEGE KID, strolling along the Arizona State University campus in Tempe. At five feet, eight inches, former varsity cheerleader and state hula champion Kory Arvizu-Johnson could even be model material. Yet this 20-year-old has dedicated half of her life to forcing major corporations and powerful politicians to face the ugly side of industry: toxic waste. And last April, for her determination, the grassroots organizer became the youngest person ever to win the \$100,000 Goldman Environmental Prize, a prestigious international honor.

This dramatic turn in Kory's life began almost a decade ago, when she was nine and a half years old. Her sister, Amy, had been born with a congenital heart disease, spending most of her life in and out of hospitals. Despite her illness, Amy always kept an optimistic attitude and was usually in good spirits. Perhaps because of her condition, she was especially drawn to heart-shaped things. She even told Kory that if she had to die, she'd like it to be on Valentine's Day. It was. Amy passed away on February 14, 1988, at age 16.

BRAVE HEART

A young woman
dedicates her life to
fighting the pollution
that may have
killed her sister

Kory says she felt as though she'd never recover from the loss of her closest friend. "Whatever I did, she was so proud of me," Kory says. Amy's death left Kory and her mother, Teri, devastated, struggling to adjust to life without her.

Months later, however, when Teri realized that her daughter's death might have been preventable, her grief turned to rage. A friend told her that three other 16-year-olds in their West Phoenix neighborhood had died from the same rare disease, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was holding a public meeting about it.

At the meeting, Teri learned that the water she'd been drinking her whole life might have been contaminated with toxic industrial chemicals. She dedicated herself to a personal crusade to learn all she could about environmental causes. And every meeting or forum she attended, she took Kory with her.

"We didn't want to cry all the time," says Teri. "We wanted to do something."

While adults discussed strategies for ridding neighborhoods of harmful pollutants, Kory did her homework. But she didn't miss a

word. She listened to the EPA declaring the level of contaminants 'normal' for their water supply, and she heard her mother answer back: "You say three blue babies isn't enough to prove a contaminant existed—how many is enough?"

Those early rallies spurred Kory and four of her friends to form an organization called Children for a Safe Environment, modestly beginning a nationwide movement to end pollution. They started by making T-shirts, cleaning up their neighborhoods, and signing contracts with teachers to not use Styrofoam at classroom parties. Then, in 1989, a year after its formation, the group drew national attention for opposing a hazardous waste incinerator planned for a community southwest of Phoenix.

"The media goes straight to kids at rallies, and that's when you have to know what you're talking about," Kory says. "One of the main things we do is make sure that we, and kids around the country, are armed with the facts and strategies to make them notice us."

strong) continues to inspire ever wider participation by kids, though she's about to hand over the reins to her 13-year-old successor. After an article about her appeared in *Teen People* last October, she received an average of 100 letters a week from kids wanting to join.

Next, Kory says, she'll focus on the cause closest to her heart: environmental racism. According to her, companies seek out poor or underdeveloped neighborhoods when planning to place hazardous waste dumps or chemical-emitting plants, assuming that these communities lack the political and economic power to keep them out. But if Kory Arvizu-Johnson's track record is any indication, there may be another kind of clout that these companies haven't factored in: the power of family feeling.

Kory hasn't lost the familial devotion she felt for Amy. Recently, she's made time to care for her mother, who's been diagnosed with colon cancer and is undergoing treatment. And her deep commitment extends beyond her nuclear family.

Half-Mexican. half-Native American/Anglo, Kory

We didn't want to Cry all the time, says Kory's mother. 'We wanted to do something.'

At 12, Kory stood on the steps of Glendale, Arizona's city hall, holding a sign that addressed the mayor: Kids and Sewage Don't Mix. At a slumber party, she and her friends giggled and gossiped all night—while they made huge signs condemning the incinerator. Later, they sneaked out and covered a billboard with the posters.

The next morning Kory begged her mother to take a different route to school so when passing the billboard she could exclaim, "Look, Mom, we did that!"

Together with Greenpeace Action and other environmentalists, Kory's kid group held a candlelight vigil on the steps of the state capital building, succeeding in stopping the incinerator's construction in 1991. What did Governor Fife Symington say prompted him to finally give in? Incessant pressure from his young son.

"When kids get active, it gets adults' attention," says Kory. "It's like when a kid says, 'Mom, your teeth aren't getting any cleaner while you're leaving that water running.' When adults hear what kids have to say, it makes them want to get involved."

Kory's own involvement (as president of Children for a Safe Environment, already more than 300

speaks a little Spanish, mostly with her paternal grandmother. "In junior high, I realized how important my father's side of the family is to me, even though he's not really a part of my life," she says.

"On the Mexican side, you can feel a respect for elders, a true commitment to family. Everybody shows up to every event. You're the important priority to each other."

In a way, what Kory has done in giving the environment priority, is to extend her sense of family to embrace everyone. And so it does, even as her life gets hectic with its daily calls for media interview?: with requests to speak around the country; with her obligation to gracefully receive praise from the likes of Jesse Jackson and Whoopi Goldberg and to meet with Al Gore and Bill Clinton at the White House.

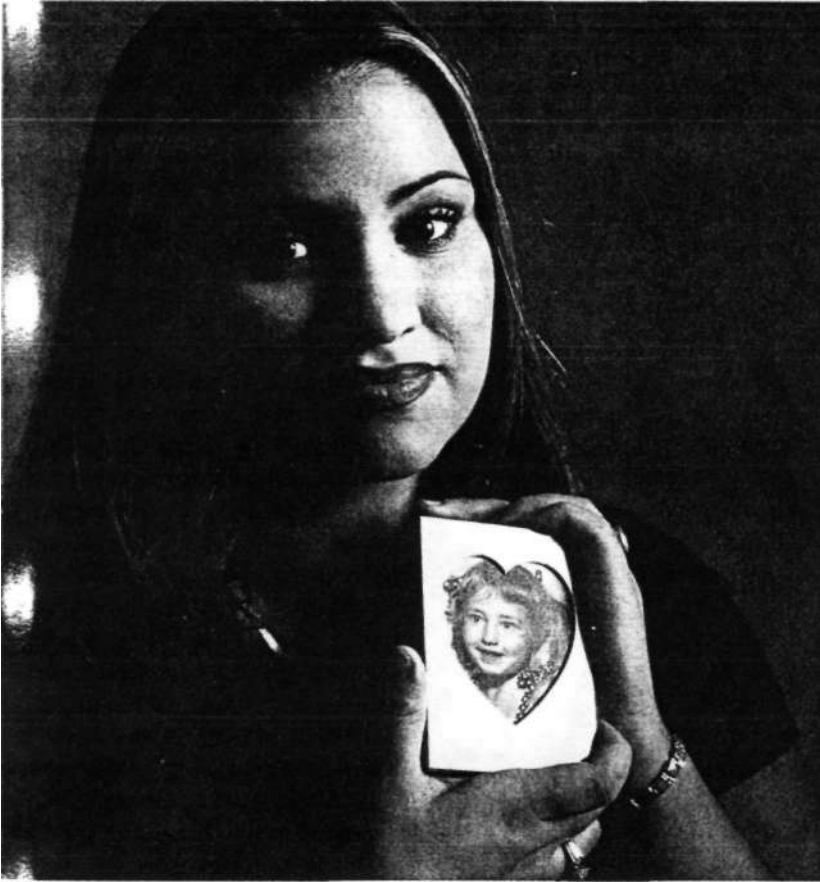
Last spring, Kory volunteered even more of her time—to teach cheerleading and some traditional Mexican dance moves to disadvantaged children for a Cinco de Mayo recital. She instructed each of the kids to curl their hair and bring in the same pink *moho*, and then she styled the children before the show.

Kory's mother recalls the moment when the kids parents caught sight of them onstage. "For many, it

was the first time they ever saw their kids dressed up." Teri says. "Some of the parents even cried."

Clearly, this child psychology major does a lot of *serious good*—plus she still knows how to play. Not a fan of wild college parties, she prefers visiting friends or riding a Jet Ski on the lake with her boyfriend, part of what makes her such a charismatic adult is that she hasn't lost a childlike quality. She still frantically calls Mom to ask how the washing machine works, for example. And she still has her sights on a variety of things for the future.

"I want to take the modeling offers that have been



coming," Kory says. "I like to wear makeup and dye my hair. I guess I'm not your typical environmentalist."

Sometimes she even loses heart.

"I get tired and feel like just giving up," Kory says. "But then I'll get this call from across the country: 'Kory. I need help, they're building an incinerator,' and I'll try to motivate them to action, getting them—and myself—excited. It's like this adrenaline rush. It never fails. After the calls. I just want to get out there all over again."

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