

Teen People

LOCAL HERO

clean living

Environmental activist Kory Johnson is seeing green in more ways than one

BY MICHAEL HAEDERLE

Nobody becomes an environmentalist for the money. But that's what Kory Johnson got—and plenty of it—when she won the Goldman Environmental Prize. Last spring, Kory, then a student at Arizona State University, received a telephone call while studying at a friend's house notifying her that she'd won the \$100,000 prize. "I was shocked," she says. "They said, 'You can't tell anybody.'" And amazingly, she didn't—until April, when she was officially honored for 10 years of environmental work (at 19, she's the youngest of this year's six winners).

Kory's eco-crusade was spurred by a tragedy: In 1988, her sister Amy, then 16, died of a congenital heart defect.

The family discovered that Amy's heart trouble could have been caused by the contaminated well water her mom, Teri, drank during pregnancy. "That's when we decided to turn something bad into something good," says Kory.

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Even though she was only nine at the time, Kory recruited some of her school friends and founded Children for a Safe Environment, a nationwide movement against pollution that now boasts 350 members. Kory has since spearheaded several projects with the group, and she received a presidential Environmental Youth Award in 1993 for her efforts.

Not everyone has been so supportive, however. A teacher once called Kory a "radical," issuing this warning: "If you

keep this up, no college is going to accept you." And in 1996, Kory was arrested for trying to block trucks hauling soil laced with the pesticide DDT, which has been linked to cancer, to a rural Arizona town.

But Kory won't be kept down. While she ponders what to do with her prize, she's hard at work on her latest issue, environmental discrimination (which occurs when polluting industries muscle their way into poor or minority communities whose members don't have the political power to fight back). Each time she tackles a new cause, she's reminded of how it all started. "I try to hold on to the memories I have of Amy," Kory says. "I know she would be proud of me." ♣

how you can help

To join Kory's organization, write to: Children for a Safe Environment, 517 East Roanoke, Suite A, Phoenix, AZ 85004.

"There's still so much more I want to do," says Kory, who plans to donate \$10,000 of her prize to an environmental cause.



JON GUIPE