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Woman's World

THE WOMAN WEEKLY

Courage

As she strolls through a park in Phoenix on a sunny winter's day, 20-year-old Kory Johnson's heart swells with pride. From the monkey bars, the giggles of children fill the air. And sitting on a bench, a mother cradles a chubby baby girl.

And as Kory walks, these sights make her thoughts turn to her sister Amy.

You'd be 28 now, she thinks with a pang. Then she looks Heavenward and

It's not fair! Kory Johnson cried when she learned that pollution had made her big sister sick. And she wasn't going to let that happen to anyone else's family



"I think Amy would be proud of me," says Kory.

"We can't let them build it!" Kory rallied her troops. "Grown-ups need to hear how we feel too!"

Kory spread the word, and soon kids from Children for a Safe Environment started showing up at town hearings. And later, Kory went on a local radio program.

"My sister Amy died because of pollution," she said. "And if we don't stop this incinerator, more kids will die."

Then, month after month, Kory followed each step as the battle raged on.

I can't give up, she told herself. If Amy were here, she'd be doing this too. So while other kids played or watched

How Kory's saving the world

reflects, I think you'd be pleased with what I've done.

Kory couldn't remember a time when Amy, born with a congenital heart defect, wasn't sick. But that didn't keep Amy from being a devoted big sister. Even when she grew so weak that she could only get around in a wheelchair, she found the strength to visit Kory's make-believe grocery store, play checkers and read to her.

When eight-year-old Kory told her big sister, "You're my best friend," 16-year-old Amy beamed with pride.

"You're my best friend too," she replied.

"Mom! Look! We're on TV!" Kory shouted as she watched the news

Then one day while the two were playing, Amy grew serious. "If anything happens to me," she said, "I want you to have my doll collection."

"Wow! You mean it?" Kory chirped.

Kory didn't understand the meaning behind Amy's words until one Sunday morning a few weeks later,

Often, her mother would find her crying in Amy's room. When Teri heard about a bereavement group for children, she signed Kory up in hopes it would help.

Then one day a few weeks later, Teri ran into Melody, a friend from high school.

"I'm so sorry," Melody said when she heard about Amy. But she had bad news too—her daughter had leukemia.

How tragic, Teri thought.

Then Melody said something that almost took Teri's breath away. "This isn't a coincidence. I've kept in touch with our old classmates—and the same thing

is happening to all of us."

"How can that be?" Teri gasped.

"There's a meeting tonight," she said, jotting down an address. "It'll explain everything..."

That night, Kory sat next to her mom in the meeting hall, listening to grown-ups talk about how industrial wastes had contaminated the local water supply. And when a woman described how tainted drinking water had given their children can-

water while I was pregnant with your sister," she choked. "We didn't move until after she was born."

Kory's hands made tiny fists. It's not fair! she wept.

The next day, Kory told her bereavement group what she'd learned. "Polluted water killed my sister," she wept.

And Amy wasn't the only one. "My mom says my little sister got leukemia because of pollution too," one girl confided.

Kory's face flushed with anger. "We have to do something!" she cried. So that night, she decided to start a club to help the environment—and a week later, she and some friends held the first meeting of Children for a Safe Environment. Together, they attended Earth Day rallies and joined a community recycling effort.

Then one day, Kory heard that the city was planning to spray raw sewage in a local park to fertilize the grass. "It's safe, and it saves money," city officials claimed.

But others said that it could make children sick.

Like Amy, Kory thought. Right away, she began calling her friends. "We have to stop them!" she cried.

As word of Kory's efforts spread, kids at school asked if they could help. That weekend, more than 100 students turned out for a protest at the park.

"Mom! Look! We're on TV!" Kory shouted that night as she watched the news.

"Thanks to the kids' protest," the reporter said, "the city is abandoning its plans to treat the park."

"We did it!" Kory cheered.

Then she closed her eyes for a moment, her thoughts once more on her big sister. And we're not stopping yet, Amy, she thought.

Indeed, two years later, when Kory was 11, state officials announced plans to build a hazardous waste incinerator just outside a nearby neighborhood that was filled with children.

What if chemicals leak into the air or the water? Kory asked herself. Kids could get sick.

TV, Kory made posters, spoke to community groups and marched in rallies.

Then one morning after two years of fighting, 13-year-old Kory picked up the paper. *Incinerator defeated!* the headline read. State officials had with-

They can't do this, Kory thought. Kids could get sick—just like Amy

drawn funding for the project! "We did it!" Kory cried.

"You're a hero," everyone told her. When she was 19, she even won the Goldman Environmental Prize—and a \$100,000 cash award—which she plans to use to complete her education.

But in her heart, Kory, now 20 and a college sophomore, shares the credit for what she's accomplished. And in a quiet moment, as she traces a finger over the tiny rosebud lips of one of Amy's dolls, a smile crosses her face. "I couldn't have done any of it without you, Amy," Kory whispers. "You're my hero."

—Heather B.