Little

How one girl is speaking out—and helping her city.

Interview by Allison Friedman

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan, left thousands of people without drinkable tap water—including a girl named Mari Copeny and her family. To raise awareness about the crisis, Mari sent a letter to then-President Barack Obama. He not only wrote back, but he also came to Flint to see how he could help. Since then, Mari has become famous for continuing to fight for clean water in her city. Here, “Little Miss Flint,” as she has been nicknamed, explains why and how she took action.

How did you and your family realize your tap water was unsafe?
The water started giving my family terrible rashes, especially my baby sister. Her rashes would get so bad, she would need special medicine and plastic wrapped around her skin to make her feel better.

How do you and your family get clean water?
We drive to a distribution site to pick up water, and we have a water cooler that uses 5-gallon jugs. For showering, we have a filter that allows us to shower for a few minutes—any longer and the water burns our skin and eyes, and we get rashes.

Why did you decide to take action to help resolve the water crisis in Flint?
I couldn't sit back and watch my family suffer anymore. Nobody was listening to the adults, so I decided to use my voice and speak out for the kids here, especially my younger brother and baby sister.
I wanted things to be fixed. I wanted to be able to take a bubble bath, play in the sprinkler and swimming pool, and make Kool-Aid and lemonade using tap water.

What actions did you take to help?
I started going to marches and protests. I wrote letters and spoke to anyone who would listen to me. I also started volunteering to help pass out water and other supplies people needed, like diapers and baby wipes. When I see a need, I always make sure to do what I can to find a solution.

How did you feel when President Obama came to Flint to meet with you?
It was surreal. I was in disbelief that he responded to my letter, let alone that he came to Flint to meet me and see firsthand what was going on. He gives the best hugs, and he is really nice. I am still extremely proud that I was able to bring him to Flint.

What have you learned from the experience of working to resolve the crisis?
Once something like water infrastructure is broken, it takes a lot of time and money to make it right. It takes a lot of people working together to get the attention of people in the government.

You have also raised money to buy backpacks and school supplies. What made you decide to do that?
Kids in Flint are often forgotten. When people are so focused on making sure we have clean water to drink, they forget about other needs. The majority of people here live below the poverty line. I started #PackYourBackChallenge in 2016 after meeting the president of the nonprofit organization Pack Your Back. The first year, I donated 100 backpacks. This year, I raised $10,000, and we gave out 1,000 backpacks stuffed with school supplies for kids. For Christmas, we did a Stuff Your Stocking event. We helped 500 kids, sent 100 toys to local shelters, and took the leftover toys to the children’s hospital. I want Flint kids to know they are not forgotten and they are loved.

What advice would you give to other kids who see problems they want to help solve?
Never give up, even if people don’t take you seriously at first. Keep pushing, keep fighting. Use your voice for what you believe. Make friends with all kinds of people because they can help you. Write letters and use social media with your parents’ help. You can do anything you set your mind to, and you can change the world now—as a kid—just like I am.

Writing Contest
How does Mari Copeny show that one person can make a difference, even when facing an enormous problem? Answer this question in a well-organized essay. Use text evidence. Send your essay to Flint Contest. Five winners will get Flush by Carl Hiaasen. See page 2 for details.
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