



*Teen Guide to*  
**STUDENT  
ACTIVISM**

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# CHAPTER 1

## Can Students Make a Difference?

“If you just use the little bit of courage you have, to speak up for something you believe in, you’ll be amazed at what a difference you can make. You don’t have to be some great hero, some really great courageous person. . . . Just use the little bit of determination that you have.”

—Mary Beth Tinker, thirteen-year-old antiwar activist

Quoted in American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee, “Stand Up/Speak Up: A Guide for Youth Activists,” 2015. [www.aclu-tn.org](http://www.aclu-tn.org).

At age eleven Marley Dias was already an avid reader, but she was frustrated by the book assignments at her West Orange, New Jersey, school. Her 2015 reading list required students to read classics like *Shiloh*, *Old Yeller*, and *Where the Red Fern Grows*—all stories about boys and their dogs. Dias appreciated these books, but as an African American girl, she was disappointed that her reading list did not include a single book with a black, female character. Dias jumped on her computer to look into this a bit further. What she discovered was that less than 10 percent of all children’s books published in 2015 featured a main character who was black. She explains why this bothered her: “If there are no black girl books as part of the school curriculum, then how are we expected to believe all that stuff that teachers and parents are constantly telling us about how we’re ‘all equal’? . . . If black girls’ stories are missing, then the implication is that they don’t matter. I didn’t like it so I had to do something.”<sup>6</sup>

Although only in fifth grade, Dias came up with a plan. As a fan of online cat videos—which often attract millions of “likes”—Dias

was aware of the power of social media. This led her to launch the #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign in November 2015. The goal was to inspire users of social media to donate one thousand copies of books that featured black female characters. She planned to give the books away to schools and libraries. As Dias puts it, “Soon everybody would be reading about awesome us.”<sup>7</sup> Dias was too young to have social media accounts, but with her mother’s help, the hashtag was posted to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

## Power in Numbers

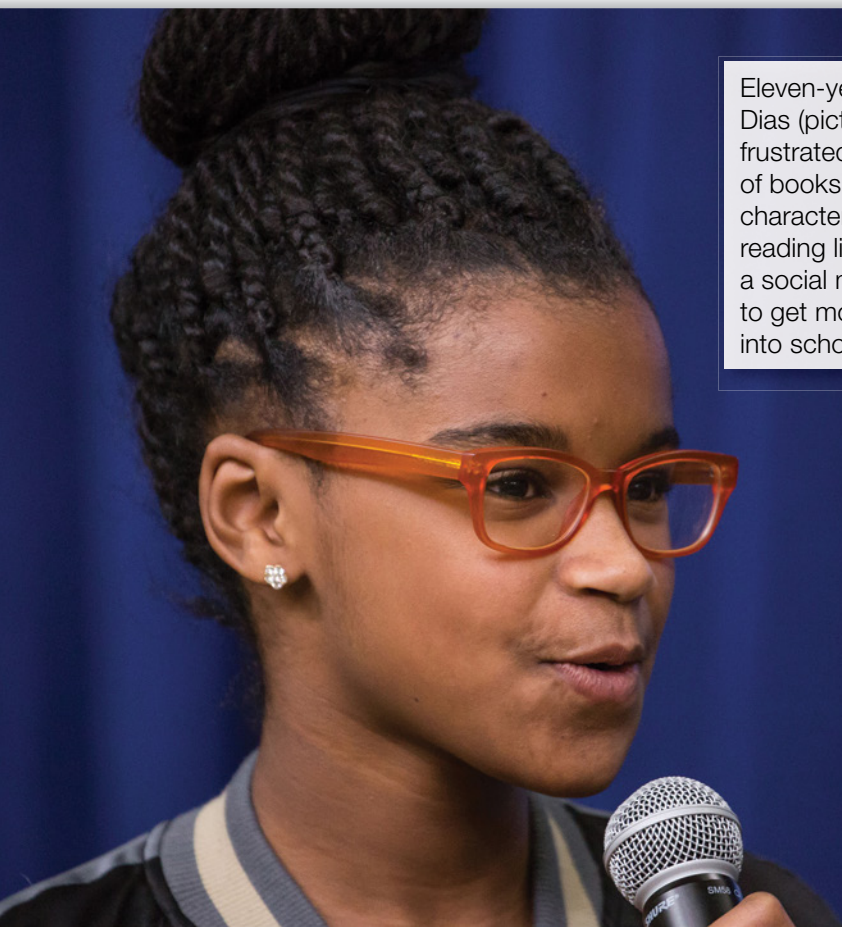
Like many young activists, Dias knew that there is power in numbers. She understood that her chance for success would increase if she could recruit people to help make her idea reality. She needed help from other students who shared her passion, patience, persistence, and organizational skills. Dias quickly connected with around twenty girls at her school; they call themselves the Super-Girls Society, or SGS. One SGS member, Amina Anekwe, was a math honors student who had worked on a campaign to get more girls interested in math and science. Anekwe tried to make these subjects fun by creating games and hosting a math tournament with a disc jockey and dancing. Another member of the SGS, Tori Fergus, had created a program called Room for Change to decorate rooms for homeless teens who stay at the Newark, New Jersey, YMCA. Fergus convinced IKEA and Home Depot to donate bath and body products, furniture, and other products so that the teens could feel compassion from the local community even though they were experiencing tough times. The SGS did more than bring experience to the cause, as Dias explains: “Working with friends who are committed to social justice and doing good can help make activism fun, even though it is also challenging. Activism is hard and fun.”<sup>8</sup>

**“Working with friends who are committed to social justice and doing good can help make activism fun, even though it is also challenging.”<sup>8</sup>**

— Marley Dias, founder of the #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign

The #1000BlackGirlBooks hashtag went viral, and within four months Dias had collected more than four thousand books. The campaign attracted the attention of mainstream media personalities. Dias was asked to appear on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, where the host gave her a \$10,000 donation. Dias even obtained a book deal of her own; her memoir, *Marley Dias Gets It Done: And So Can You!*, was published in 2018. As Dias explained, she wrote the book “so other kids can learn how they can use their gifts, talents and passions to make a change in the world. I also wanted adults to know what they could do to help kids change the world.”<sup>9</sup> The book provides how-to information for student activists, with a strong focus on ways students can use online platforms to advance the causes they believe in.

When Dias launched #1000BlackGirlBooks, she thought one thousand seemed like a suitably large number to set as a goal. But the campaign far exceeded her expectations. By 2018 Dias



Eleven-year-old Marley Dias (pictured) was frustrated by the absence of books with black, female characters on her school reading list. She launched a social media campaign to get more diverse books into schools and libraries.

## Start a Campaign

When eleven-year-old Marley Dias launched the #1000BlackGirlBooks in 2015, she was frustrated that her school's reading list did not feature a single book with a black, female character. In 2017 Dias told *Forbes* that she had three options about how she might address the problem (she went with option 3):

Option 1: focus on me, get myself more books; have my dad take me to Barnes and Noble [bookstore] and just be done, live my perfect life in suburban New Jersey. Option 2: find some authors, beg them to write more black girl books so I'd have some of my own, special editions, treat myself a bit. Or, option 3: start a campaign that collects books with black girls as the main characters, donate them to communities, develop a resource guide to find those books, talk to educators and legislators about how to increase the pipeline of diverse books, and lastly, write my own book, so that I can see black girl books collected and I can see my story reflected in the books I have to read.

Quoted in Maggie McGrath, "From Activist to Author: How 12-Year-Old Marley Dias Is Changing the Face of Children's Literature," *Forbes*, June 13, 2017. [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).

was planning to collect and distribute 1 million books featuring black female characters to libraries, schools, and community organizations throughout the world.

## Reducing Plastic Pollution

Like many other young activists, Dias was amazed by how quickly her dream became reality. High school student Jackson Hinkle had a similar experience at San Clemente High School in San Clemente, California. In 2016 Hinkle, an avid outdoor enthusiast, used Instagram to invite his classmates to join an adventure club that would host hikes, bike rides, and other activities. Hinkle expected around thirty people to respond, but nearly three hundred students showed up for the first meeting. Hinkle says, "At that moment I knew something big could come of it and I didn't want to waste that energy."<sup>10</sup>

The previous year Hinkle had taken part in a volunteer beach cleanup effort and had seen firsthand the mounds of plastic trash

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# RESOURCES FOR STUDENT ACTIVISTS

## **Advice on Leading Change from Experienced Youth Activists and Allies**

[www.youthinfront.org](http://www.youthinfront.org)

Youth in Front, a community-created online learning resource for student activists, developed this resource. Through a mix of YouTube videos and other types of presentations, teen and adult activists address questions such as: Will I get in trouble? How do I organize a protest? How do I get adults on my side? How does a march become a movement?

## **March For Our Lives Toolkit**

<https://everytown.org/documents/2018/03/march-for-our-lives-toolkit.pdf>

This detailed how-to guide was created to assist students planning March For Our Lives events nationwide. Other teen activists may find this guide useful for organizing and publicizing events of various types.

## **Stand Up/Speak Up: A Guide for Youth Activists**

[www.aclu-tn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Youth-Activism-Manual-2015.pdf](http://www.aclu-tn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Youth-Activism-Manual-2015.pdf)

Created by the Tennessee chapter of the ACLU, this online step-by-step handbook explains how students can create their own social movements by developing action plans, building coalitions, and working with media.

## **WalkWoke**

[www.walkwoke.com](http://www.walkwoke.com)

This free, downloadable app can be a valuable tool for creating artwork and printable posters from over one thousand customizable templates created by artists. Posters cover dozens of activist causes.



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