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Young philanthropist breaks out of shell

By **KAREN NITKIN**
 SPECIAL TO THE SUN

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Meghan Taschenberger has raised thousands of dollars for her pet cause, saving the leatherback sea turtle from extinction. She has given lectures, organized educational events and even written books about the turtles.

And she's not yet 8 years old.

"I love leatherbacks," Meghan said during an interview in her Crofton home. "I don't want them to become extinct."

Her blond hair was held back with a turtle-decorated barrette, and she wore a turtle T-shirt. The dining room table held stuffed animals (mostly turtles), framed certificates for the two turtles she had adopted, books she had written and bookmarks she had made. Behind her, a three-sided poster, made with her mother's help, detailed the plight of endangered animals around the world and in Maryland.

"I couldn't do what she does," said her father, Brian Taschenberger.

On Nov. 8, Meghan, a third-grader at Crofton Elementary School, was honored for her efforts at a Baltimore luncheon organized by the Maryland chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals. Three high school students also won prizes at the event, celebrating Maryland's National Philanthropic Day, but Meghan was by far the youngest one there.

Joyce O'Brien, vice president of communications and marketing for the Association of Fundraising Professionals, based in Alexandria, Va., said it's not unheard of for children as young as Meghan to win recognition for their fundraising skills.

"A lot of parents are educating their children even at a young age," she said. "And then, when they get to school, they're learning about it there, too."

But she noted that 7-year-olds like Meghan, who go to great lengths for a particular cause, are "not that common."

Meghan first got interested in sea turtles when she was in kindergarten, said her mother, Tammy Taschenberger.

"It's a funny story," she said. "When she was in kindergarten, she told me she wanted to save an endangered animal. I thought, 'Well, she's in kindergarten, and surely this is a passing phase.'"

Tammy forgot about the conversation, but Meghan didn't. A couple of months later, the little girl brought up the subject again. Her mother said saving an endangered animal seemed like a good project for the summer.

"The first day of summer break, she came home and said, 'OK, it's summer. Now I need to save an endangered animal,'" her mother said. "We went online and we did some research on what was endangered, and she found the sea turtle."

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Leatherback sea turtles, the largest turtles, with shell lengths as large as 5 1/2 feet, are endangered worldwide, according to the Web site for the Leatherback Trust, a conservation organization. The creatures are losing their habitats to development and are endangered by egg poachers, shrimp nets and more.

"A lot of the reason of it being on the endangered list is because of people," Meghan said.

Meghan's goal for the summer was to raise \$100 because if she donated that sum to the Caribbean Conservation Corp., she would get a T-shirt. She wrote and illustrated a book about sea turtles, then set up a stand in her yard to sell lemonade and the books, which her mother had copied and stapled. The books cost \$2, but Taschenberger said most customers took a glass of lemonade and a book and gave \$10. By the time she started first grade, Meghan had raised \$312, her mother said.

"We thought, surely she's done and we can move on," she said. "But about wintertime in the first grade, she said, 'I want to do that again.'"

This time, Meghan chose the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle to save.

"She did the same thing," Tammy Taschenberger said. "She studied it, she wrote a book about it, had another lemonade stand."

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A short while later, the family decided to visit the **National Aquarium** in Baltimore, where James Spotila, head of the Leatherback Trust, was appearing. Spotila, a professor of bioscience at Drexel University in Philadelphia, was giving a lecture and introducing his book, *Sea Turtles: A Complete Guide to Their Biology, Behavior and Conservation*, published by Johns Hopkins Press in 2004.

Meghan met Spotila and some of his graduate students, her mother said, "and they were just beside themselves at this little girl who knew all this information." As the Taschenbergers were walking to their car, "Meghan turned to me and said, 'I know what I have to do,'" her mother said. "And I thought, 'What more could you possibly do? You're 6 years old!'"

"And she said, 'I have to give lectures.'"

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So Meghan, with the help of her family, put together a 20-minute lecture and slide show. So far, she has given the presentation to local high schools, to the Bowie Lions Club and to a group in Pennsylvania, which contacted her through her Web site. She's scheduled to speak at Wheaton High School on Tuesday.

"The first lecture, I was nervous," Meghan said. "But then I got used to it."

Meghan, who says she wants to be a marine biologist when she grows up, corresponds regularly with Spotila, who was not available for comment.

"Since meeting Dr. Spotila a year ago, this thing has taken off for Meghan," Brian Taschenberger said.

This past April, Meghan, with the help of her family, organized an Earth Day event at her church, the Community United Methodist Church in Crofton. Spotila attended, representatives from the aquarium gave a presentation, and a pet store in **Annapolis** brought reptiles.

Meghan also went around to local businesses, asking for donations for a raffle and silent auction, and she organized a poster contest at her school.

"She was the program manager, and I was the project manager," her mother said. "I kind of managed it all, but she basically came up with all the ideas."

The event raised nearly \$2,000, Taschenberger said.

"She's a very outgoing little girl, very articulate, very bright," said Wayne Bark, her principal at Crofton Elementary School. Bark and Meghan's second-grade teacher, Melissa Edgar, were the ones who submitted her name for the philanthropy day recognition, Bark said.

Next year, Meghan's little brother, Justin, will be a kindergartner at Crofton. Already, he is following in his sister's philanthropic footsteps. He's decided he wants to save

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endangered elephants, Tammy Taschenberger said.

In September, with no parental prompting, he cleaned out his room and staged a yard sale for the items he no longer wanted. (Of course, his parents had veto power over what he sold.) He raised \$212.

Both Brian and Tammy Taschenberger say they have no idea why their children are so interested in saving endangered species.

"We are not liberal activists," Brian Taschenberger said. His background is in graphic design, and his wife's is in marketing.

But they are doing their part to encourage their children. In January, they are taking a family trip to Costa Rica, so Meghan can observe leatherback habitats, and maybe even see some eggs hatch.

"It's neat," Tammy Taschenberger said. "I had no idea my life would ever come to this, but here I am."

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