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Saving the Ocean One Cup at a Time

During my time at Brown's Environmental Leadership Lab in Rhode Island and Brown's Pre-College Program in the Florida Keys, I became very passionate about plastic pollution and its impact on our oceans. In the U.S., we use 410,000 disposable hot beverage containers every fifteen minutes. When we go to a local coffee shop in the morning, we often don't think about how our actions contribute to the enormous amount of waste produced in our country. Our consumption habits require a lot of resources, such as fossil fuels to produce and transport products. They also produce a lot of waste, with some estimates of up to 4.8 million metric tons of plastic ending up in our oceans each year. Tackling this huge global issue with one small action plan seemed daunting at first but I reassured myself that I have to start somewhere in order to make a difference in the world.

When I got back to school last fall, I immediately told some of my teachers about my plans for this project. Luckily my teacher, Ms. McCabe, who was not only my teacher at BELL but my teacher at Beaver Country Day School (Beaver), was completely on board and eager to help me out. In order to pursue my goal to promote reusable plastic coffee cups, we had to initiate the movement for an environmental club at Beaver. Fortunately, I had two peers that already had a vision to start a club and we did it together, calling our new club Beaver

Environmental Action Team (BEAT). After a few meetings we had 30 kids involved in the club wanting to make Beaver more environmentally friendly. The club is a place for students to brainstorm together about ways we can make a difference in and around Beaver. After we solidified the ideas that we were going to pursue, we split the group up into smaller interest groups and got to work. Despite the fact that BEAT only met once a month we were able to accomplish all of our goals by maximizing the time we had and giving people specific roles and responsibilities.

We came up with ideas for a garden for our school, chargers for electric vehicles, solar panels, recycling bins, composting, water bottle refill stations, celebrating earth day with the whole school and reusable cups. Indicating that there was a natural excitement for being green in our school and we just needed a space for students to pursue these ideas.

The BEAT club allowed me to pursue my action plan that I had outlined at BELL. I wanted to eliminate single use plastic cups in my school by providing a reusable plastic cup that was trendy and good for the environment. My school embraced the program. I had multiple meetings with the marketing team to include the Beaver logo and spread the word. They had me write a proposal in order to receive funds to order the reusable cups. This allowed me to think about how I was going to use these cups to educate people about the wastefulness of single use plastic in general.

After getting my proposal confirmed by the assistant head of the school, I was able to start my action plan. First, I gave a presentation to the entire school about what our project was, the purpose behind it, and what got me interested in the first place. This enabled me to educate students on what plastic pollution is and why it is so important to limit our contribution to it. My

presentation was followed up with an email to the students including how to sign up for the cup program. In the email I attempted to get students more interested in the program by broadcasting that they would get a free reusable cup. As part of the program's requirements, students would have to log how much money they were saving, because you get around ten cents back if you bring your own cup to common coffee shops such as Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts. This created a fun yet competitive environment for students and faculty to see how many times they could reduce their use of plastic.

With all of the success that this plastic cup program had, we decided to repeat the campaign again during the spring term. This time we sold the cups to each student, making a profit of four dollars per cup. The Beaver Environmental Action Team decided that we should donate our money to a non-profit organization called The 5 Gyres Institute, an organization that helps reduce plastic pollution in the ocean by hosting coastal clean ups and conducting new research. I was grateful that we could make a small contribution to an organization that had the power to make a greater impact that corresponded to our mission.

I'm eager to see what our BEAT club can achieve in the 2018-2019 school year. This year a good friend of mine, Abby Burgess, and I will be running the BEAT club that now meets once a week. We hope to not only continue this amazing program but help it grow by getting more students involved and pursuing new projects. The highlight of my action plan from BELL, even writing this report for me, is reconnecting with the people that helped make this possible. When I first received my reusable cups at Beaver, I immediately sent one to my instructor at Brown, Erik Donofrio. I was so excited to show him my first signs of success. He has been such

a massive influence in my studies and my pursuit of an education. He's helped raised my self confidence in life and is a loyal supporter to my lofty and seemingly impossible dreams.