McKinney teen's brush with hunger inspired him to start a nonprofit

Frisco ISD student Mihit Sai Garlanka puts his STEM talents to good use.



Mihit Sai Garlanka, 17, founded the nonprofit Kids Within the Reach, which offers STEM-related camps and raises money and awareness to fight child hunger.(Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Mihit Sai Garlanka, 17, was in middle school when a family trip to India changed his life.

"I was exhausted after a long day," recalls Garlanka of McKinney, now a senior at Independence High School in the Frisco school district. "When it

came time for dinner, I was looking forward to seeing the big feast my aunt had prepared, and to my surprise, it was just a super small plate of two idlis (traditional Indian rice cakes)."

The experience was jarring, says Garlanka, who had always had plenty to eat at home. "When I went to sleep that night, I could feel my stomach ache because my appetite hadn't been fully satisfied, and it seemed to weaken my body and mind."

Back home, that feeling of going to bed hungry stuck with Garlanka as he researched the impact of global malnutrition on children for a science assignment. When he learned that some 150 million children lacked basic food and drink needs to survive and thrive — factors that contribute to roughly 45 percent of deaths in children under 5 — he decided to do his part to change those statistics.

"In the beginning, I wasn't sure how I could help. I mean, I was only a seventh-grader," says Garlanka, who didn't take long to brainstorm the creation of Kids Within the Reach, based on his deftness for Lego, robotics and all things STEM. Proceeds from its STEM-related camps raise money and awareness to fight child hunger.

The "kids helping kids" student-led initiative has grown from handing out flyers to neighborhood kids into a nonprofit organization with international reach via virtual camps launched during the pandemic. Over the past five years, Kids Within the Reach has hosted engineering, math and science camps for more than 300 elementary and middle school students. Many of the nonprofit group's 50 student volunteers started as campers.

Mihit Sai Garlanka (from left) assists 13-year-old Samriddhi Garlanka, 11-year-old Santhosh Kavula and 12-year-old Jai Muppalla as they build a LEGO robot at his home in McKinney.(Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

"It's really a twofold kind of benefit because we are increasing STEM awareness in younger children and the community and raising funds to address malnutrition in children," Garlanka says.

In the past year, Kids Within the Reach has collaborated with the Libraries of Love and the Gram Swaraj Seva Trust to provide milk to children in underserved populations in Uganda, Kenya and India. More than $15,000 in donations has supplied over 20,000 glasses of milk for children in need, Garlanka estimates. It has been an eye-opening experience for the teen, inspiring him to pursue a career in medicine and public health.

"That small glass of milk can have such a profound impact on another child's

life," he says. "When I was doing my initial research, I was shocked to find out that milk is such a privilege to the majority of the world. It really changed my viewpoint on how I view milk and food in general. There are so many children that would love to have the opportunity to receive what I've been given, and I shouldn't waste it."

Every $10 raised by Kids Within the Reach provides 40 glasses of milk to children in need, notes Garlanka, who takes the time with campers to explain the power of a small dollar amount to support efforts to combat global hunger.

McKinney mom Suneetha Lingineni says it's a message that has hit home for her children, 11-year-old son Santhosh Kavula and 15-year-old daughter Sanjana Kavula, who have attended camps and contributed their own money to Kids Within the Reach. Sanjana serves on the leadership team that Garlanka created for the organization.

"My son even came to me to ask about sharing some of his birthday money. I was so happy," Lingineni says. "It's been inspiring to see these young kids have such good thoughts about helping society in such a positive way."

As Garlanka readies for a senior year filled with college applications and end-of-high-school festivities, he knows one thing for sure: He wants to keep Kids Within the Reach going.

"Malnutrition by itself is such a large issue globally, but we believe that kids and children our age can still have an impact," Garlanka says. "And that's what we've kind of been proving through our experiences."

Details

To get involved, visit kidswithinthereach.org.