

## **Girls Inc. interviews Tara DePorte**

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# **A green thumb, an important message, and a helping hand.**

Tara has been helping the environment since she was in third grade. This Columbia University graduate is working with kids to teach them about the world around them and how they can make a difference through education and activism.

### **What is your job title? Describe a typical day at work.**

I am the Program Director for a New York City-based environmental organization called the Lower East Side Ecology Center. I spend a lot of my time working to develop and run environmental education opportunities--hands-on experiences like teaching 7th graders about pollution while in the East river, classes and trainings--for youth and adults throughout New York City. In addition to this, I am the United Nations Liaison and Regional Coordinator for an international group called Women's Global Green Action Network. I often see myself as a "facilitator", where I help to facilitate dialogues between different groups, such as scientists and politicians or the general public. For me, there is no such thing as a typical day at work. One day, I might be in the East River in Manhattan, teaching 7th graders about water pollution, fish and waterfront development, the next I might be lecturing at Columbia University about climate change and "what you can do," and even the next I might be presenting at the United Nations!

### **What does being an "activist" mean to you?**

For me, activism and serving as a grassroots leader has meant many things, including:

- Not taking NO for an answer
- Learning the systems and choosing to work within them, or not!
- Realizing opportunities and grabbing them
- Being comfortable with being "uncomfortable" and taking risks
- Being open, yet not being afraid to have a strong opinion
- Knowing that there is ALWAYS more to learn
- Recognizing great value and knowledge in everyone
- Being CREATIVE
- Embracing your VOICE

### **What are some eco-friendly tips and tricks girls can use daily?**

In order to be "eco-friendly" it is key to first be aware of the impacts you are having on your local and global environment. One way to do this is to find out your "ecological footprint", which is a way of saying the amount of natural resources you consume and your overall impact on the earth. There are many options for girls to become more eco-friendly, including:

1) The Three “Rs”: Reduce, Reuse and Recycle This is called “conscious consumerism—basically, think before you buy!

2) Get active! Letters go a long way! Writing a personalized note about your environmental concerns to your representative, whether it be your mayor, senator or others, really can make a difference. (Hint: Try having a letter writing party where you can brainstorm with your friends and be sure to have a trusted adult check out all of your letters before you mail them.)

To contact your local representative, open a new browser window and copy and paste the link below! <http://www.house.gov/writerep/>

3) Cut down on rides Cars, buses, and trucks are big contributors to climate change! Why not walk or ride your bike? Or, if you have to get a ride, organize a carpool with your friends and their parents.

### **What made you want to become an activist for the environment?**

Environmental issues have always been very important to me. I was lucky to spend a lot of time camping, hiking, and having many outdoor adventures growing up. Additionally, having grown up near Washington, DC, I became aware of our political processes and some of the actions that people take to be involved in them—such as protests, letter writing campaigns, and other actions—at an early age.

I started my school environmental club in 3rd grade and wrote to our State Senator about the importance of the environment to us all. That positive response [I got] definitely encouraged me to keep working!!

### **What’s it like being a woman in your field?**

I have spent a lot of time with research scientists, policy makers, and people of all ages and backgrounds. As a young woman, I have often found that I am in the minority and often feel that I want to “prove myself.” Instead of taking this as a negative thing, however, it’s more valuable for me to see it as a challenge. That really allows me to push myself, my ideas, and my opinions to levels that I might not have otherwise. No matter whom I am working with, once they see that I take myself seriously and am willing to both listen and to share—then they are as well.

### **How would you recommend girls prepare for a career in your field?**

1) Love what you do and who you are

I am a strong believer in “loving what you do“ by following your dreams, and always being honest with yourself about the places where you “shine”.

2) Education is a must if you want to do anything in science or policy. Choosing programs and subjects that you are passionate about are a must!

3) Always keep a lookout for new & creative opportunities!

I have managed to travel throughout the world—Haiti, Barbados, Bahamas, Colombia, Brazil, Europe—by searching out opportunities, scholarships, research programs and other interesting opportunities.

**The environment is such a huge issue. How do you stay focused and prevent yourself from feeling overwhelmed?**

I choose my battles and realize that I alone can't take on EVERY environmental issue or solve them by myself. It's amazing what you can do as one person and how much inspiration you can pass on to other people when you show that you really care and are passionate about something. Climate change, water, sustainable development and women's leadership---all of which are BIG topics too—have been a major focus of mine. What I've realized through my studies and work experience is that [each issue] impacts every aspect of our lives. A community's access to clean water, for example, impacts the quality of education, women's equality, children's health, the levels of poverty, and so much more.

**You recently organized the first Women in the Natural Sciences Weekend in New York City. Why did you choose to focus on women for this event?**

I wanted to create a space where girls could meet with women who are leading in the environmental movement here in New York City. In addition to this, women have historically been less supported in the scientific world, so it was my way of furthering the potential for a topic and a community I love.

**What is your favorite thing about the work you do with kids? What are some differences between kids' and adults' responses to environmental awareness and education?**

I love the creativity [kids] have and seeing the amazing strengths that shine through each student that I work with. Kids are so wonderful in many ways: in their excitement for trying new things and their curiosity and their willingness to experiment and ask questions. Adults are often afraid that they need to know everything—even though they never do---so they either don't try or refuse to ask questions!

Once, I asked students who were about 7 years old to take their shoes and socks off to feel the grass between their toes (one of my favorite things to do!). A lot of kids didn't want to because they were afraid of bugs, didn't want to get dirty, or just because they hadn't done it before. Within ten minutes, I was surrounded by an entire class of kids running barefoot in the grass, squishing mud between their toes, and appreciating their local park more than they ever had before.

**You have said your motto is, “keep one foot in the local and one foot elsewhere.” Can you explain what this motto means to you? Why is this so important to environmental awareness?**

I believe in being a part of and contributing to my community, whether that is the block I live in, my city, or my world. What's important for me is that I really balance between taking small actions that get my hands dirty and where I can see the results with actions on a larger scale like helping to

form environmental policy. This helps me to realize that I do make a difference, while reminding me that there is always more to work for.

**You keep yourself very busy, what do you do for fun?**

This IS fun!!! Well, outside of my environmental work, I'm an artist---painting, sculpture, photography, and installations. I love sports and play on two basketball teams year round, do a lot of yoga, play capoeira (a Brazilian martial arts), love to cook and eat good food, listen to music and go dancing, and find inspiration in being with the people I love!

The above interview was conducted in 2007 and originally published at:

<https://www.girlsinc-online.org/members/ExploreSucceed/Imaginetology/Imaginetology/Interviews/FeaturedGuest.vm>