

THINGS TO DO / FAMILY

Long Island girls win \$10,000 awards for environmental projects

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Gia Providente, 9, of Massapequa, and Cynthia Zhang, 17, of Great Neck, won \$10,000 each for their environmental projects. Credit: Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca; Winnie Chen

By Beth Whitehouse

Special to Newsday [X BethWhitehouse1](#)

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When two girls from Long Island worked to protect monarch butterflies and terrapin turtles, they weren't expecting to catch the attention of a small nonprofit in the mountains of Colorado that would award them \$10,000 each.



Cynthia Zhang, of Great Neck, raises monarch butterflies and teaches other young people about the need to protect them. Credit: Monarchs Matter

But Cynthia Zhang, 17, a senior at Great Neck South High School, and Gia Providente, 9, in fourth grade at Unqua Elementary School in Massapequa, were each awarded a 2025 [Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes](#) after they entered the competition. They were two of 15 young people from about 400 entries across the United States and Canada to win the recognition, says Barbara Ann Richman, executive director of the Boulder, Colorado-based Gloria Barron Prize.

The prize was established in 2001 by T.A. Barron, a middle-grade fantasy author who penned a 13-book fictional series about a boy who grew to be the wizard Merlin during the days of King Arthur’s court. While writing about fictional young heroes in his novels, he thought kids could be inspired by also hearing about real-life heroes, Richman says. Barron named the prize for his late mother. Entrants must be between the age of 8 and 18 and be working on issues such as homelessness, literacy or environmentalism, she says.

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"They both happen to be doing environmental work and protecting creatures they love," Richman says of Zhang and Gia. Their prizes can be used for their continuing education or to further their projects, Richman says. Here are Zhang’s and Gia’s stories:

CYNTHIA ZHANG

During the summer of 2022, Zhang attended a community gardening summer program run by [ReWild Long Island](#), a Port Washington-based nonprofit dedicated to sustainable landscaping.

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A guest talked to the participants about raising monarch butterflies, whose population has declined due to climate change, pesticide use and habitat loss. She brought butterflies she had raised in her home and released them into the sky. It was "breathtaking," Zhang says.



Zhang took an interest in raising monarch butterflies during a community gardening summer program run by ReWild Long Island, a Port Washington-based nonprofit. Credit: Winnie Chen

"I was inspired to see how much wonder it evoked in me and the other students. I wanted to try it myself," Zhang says. The next summer she raised butterflies in her family's living room, using monarch eggs she found under milkweed leaves in the ReWild garden. After the eggs hatched into caterpillars and then morphed to chrysalis and the butterfly, she tagged a hind wing on each with a circular sticker she got from an organization called Monarch Watch. Each sticker has a code to allow the organization to gather migration data as the butterflies head toward their winter habitat in Mexico.

"It's not really to raise the number of monarchs. It's to support research," she says of the endeavor.



Zhang created a program called Monarchs Matter to help other young people raise and release monarch butterflies. Credit: Monarchs Matter

She didn't stop at raising butterflies. She formed a nonprofit called [Monarchs Matter](#) and worked with ReWild to give lessons in that same community garden to other young people during the summers of 2024 and 2025, helping them to raise and tag monarchs as well using kits from Monarch Watch. "It was kind of like a full circle moment," she says.

Raju Rajan, president of ReWild Long Island, called Zhang "amazing. As a young person, she has shown an enormous amount of passion for the environment," he says.

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Zhang says she plans to use some of the money to fund more activities around monarchs, and the rest for college. She says she may study environmental science.

GIA PROVIDENTE

This is not Gia Providente's first foray into science — she is a three-time winner of her school district's annual science fair for elementary school students, which she's participated in since she was in first grade.



Gia Providente, of Massapequa, stands in front of a new sign she advocated for that warns boaters to watch for terrapin turtles at Bayfront Park in Massapequa. Credit: Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca

"Every year, I do the science fair because it's really fun to look at your friends' projects, and they can look at your project," Gia says. In fact, her diamondback terrapin turtle venture began as a science fair activity. She'd seen signs on the North Shore of Long Island urging people to be careful around the turtles, which are an endangered species, and wondered why there weren't any signs on the South Shore, where she lives.

Cue Mom, Layla Providente, 41, a psychologist, who helped Gia craft emails to request interviews with organizations such as Friends of the Bay in Oyster Bay and the Seatuck Environmental Association. Gia admits she was nervous about meeting with the adults. "But when I did it, I thought, 'This really isn't so bad.' I asked them ... what are some things that could really help?" Gia says. "You don't want to accidentally run them over with a boat or anything."

She says she thought, "Why don't I design a sign and talk to someone who could help me put this sign up?" She got to work. "Should it be a rectangle? A diamond? What should it say?" she thought. She drew a turtle and the rhyme, "Go Slow Terrapins Below."

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Gia Providence is joined by Oyster Bay Town Supervisor Joseph Saladino at the installation of the sign in Bayfront Park in July. Credit: Sara Soroka

Then she wrote a letter.

"Gia had sent a wonderful letter to our town board and supervisor," says Sara Soroka, an environmental specialist with the town of Oyster Bay's Department of Environmental Resources. "She reached out asking if there was any awareness activity on the South Shore where she lives to support the recovery of the terrapin population. We endorsed her project and made the signs a reality."

The signs were installed this summer at Bayfront Park in Massapequa and at John J. Burns Park in Massapequa Park.

As for her award, "I'm going to use it to go to fashion college. I don't know if it's enough," Gia says.



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