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Environment Great Neck

Great Neck teen honored as global leader in environmental activism in National Geographic competition

By Cameryn Oakes Posted on June 9, 2025



Cynthia Zhang, 17, was one of 15 recipients of National Geographic's Slingshot Challenge for her nonprofit Monarchs Matter. Courtesy of National Geographic



Great Neck's Cynthia Zhang, 17, was always interested in nature, but it was a moment witnessing the metamorphosis of a monarch butterfly that led to her pursuing her own environmental action.



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"It's really a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Zhang said of observing the butterfly's metamorphosis with the help of a local volunteer. "It shows you how delicate yet persistent nature is in surviving, but because of human activities, we're destroying that metamorphosis."

Now she has been recognized as a global youth leader for environmental activism by National Geographic.

Zhang, a junior at Great Neck South High School, was named one of 15 recipients in [National Geographic's Slingshot Challenge](#), which honors youth across the globe who promote environmental conservation.

She garnered the highest designation alongside five other recipients for her nonprofit [Monarchs Matter](#).

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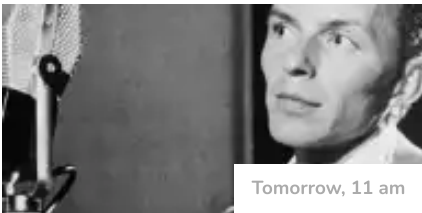
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Winning the award came as a surprise to Zhang.



Great Neck’s Cynthia Zhang was inspired to start her nonprofit after a fellow volunteer taught her about monarch butterflies.

Courtesy of Cynthia Zhang

“I didn’t really think about getting the award, I just wanted to do my best and focus on making the video the best it could be,” Zhang said.

Zhang founded [Monarchs Matter](#), a youth-led nonprofit that raises awareness on pollinators like monarchs, promotes their preservation and advocates for the reversal of biodiversity loss. Engrained in the purpose of the nonprofit is also promoting youth involvement in environmental action.

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Biodiversity loss addresses the loss of species as part of an entire ecosystem and how disruptions can occur when the natural balance is upset.

While monarchs are in the name of Zhang’s nonprofit, they are not the sole focus of their environmental mission. Rather, their mission is to promote and protect local biodiversities and the species which make them possible, such as monarchs who are critical pollinators.

Monarch butterfly populations have diminished over the past two decades, [according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#).

Reasons for the monarch butterfly loss have been attributed to climate change, habitat loss and pollution, Zhang said.

Zhang said she was inspired to start her own nonprofit after volunteering with ReWild Long Island, a Port Washington-based nonprofit that promotes local biodiversity. While volunteering, she met a fellow volunteer who was raising monarchs and taught Zhang the processes of cultivating them.

Witnessing a fellow Long Islander raising these monarchs, Zhang said she was inspired to take her efforts one step forward by sharing this information with a broader – and younger – audience.

Tomorrow, 1 pm

Aging in Place at Home

[Riverhead Free Library](#)

June 28, 4 pm

Springs Garden Party – benefiting Springs Food Pantry

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BOLI SPOTLIGHT

-
- Long Island Children’s Museum: Inside the 2025 Best Theatre Arts Center
-
- Looney Tunes: Inside the 2025 Best Record Store on Long Island
-
- Karver’s Grille: Inside the 2025 Best Onion Rings on Long Island
-
- Who’s the best mascot on Long Island?
-
- You voted, they won: Top music pros on Long Island

ENTERTAINMENT

Zhang said when she first got involved in environmental advocacy, she didn't find many other high schoolers joining in on the effort. But she said it's important that they do.

“We’re the future generation to take care of our planet,” Zhang said.

Monarch Matters hosts webinars to engage with youth across the globe to educate them on biodiversity loss and environmental preservation efforts.

A focus point for Zhang and her nonprofit is storytelling and utilizing the art form as a way of empowering teenagers to take action into their own hands.

“No matter your age or background, you can still make a change in your community,” Zhang said.

She said Monarchs Matter has bolstered her own confidence and helped her become the environmental leader she is today.

Zhang is also a member of the Bow Seat Future Blue Youth Council, a youth leader in the EarthEcho International and chair of the ReWild Long Island Social Media Committee. Through all her roles she seeks to empower other teenagers like herself to take action.

Monarchs Matter now has chapters across the globe, in Pakistan and Nigeria, but is seeking to expand and share their message even further.

“We aim to support new chapters across the world no matter what their mission is as long as they are advocating for the environment in their own community,” Zhang said.



Monarchs Matter was founded in Great Neck, but has since expanded globally through chapters in Pakistan and Nigeria.



Cameryn Oakes

Cameryn Oakes is The Long Island Press’ reporter covering the communities of Great Neck, Manhasset and the Town of North Hempstead. Born and raised in California’s capitol, Cameryn now resides in Brooklyn. She began her journalism career with Blank Slate Media in February of 2023, which has since merged with The Long Island Press. Her prior work included a summer internship at The Stockton Record where she covered a national murder trial and as managing editor at her college newspaper, The Mustang News, at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.



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