

INSPIRED LIKE YOU

Meet teens just like you who are doing amazing things. Read their stories and be inspired to change the world and achieve *your* dreams!



Check out my desk!

Sophie Is Helping Orphans

After being adopted from China and having her birth defects repaired, Sophie, 17, was determined to help another girl just like her.

My family has two rescue dogs. This is Dolce, our bichon-poodle!

BY SOPHIE JOHNSON, AS TOLD TO JANE BIANCHI

Until the age of 5, I lived in Shenzhen, China, at an orphanage—that’s a group home for kids whose parents pass away or are unable to care for them. I had fun there, but I always had to deal with two birth defects.

More specifically, I was born with medical conditions called “cleft lip” and “cleft palate,” which means that some tissues in my body didn’t completely join together when I was a fetus. So for a while, there was an opening in my lip and in my palate (the roof of my mouth). The orphanage was able to pay doctors to repair my lip when I was 3, but I needed many more surgeries as I grew—and there was little chance the orphanage could afford them.



I’ve had about a dozen surgeries so far.

Then, at age 5, I was adopted by two Americans from Los Angeles—people I’m now proud to call Mom and Dad. Within two weeks of arriving in the U.S., I had my first palate surgery. Since then, I’ve had about a dozen more surgeries.

Being “cleft-affected” can make life difficult, because when there’s a gap in the roof of your

mouth, it’s hard to talk, eat, or drink. Before my surgeries, I’d sometimes even choke briefly on food before I could swallow it.

Plus, the exterior of your mouth and nose can look unusual, and kids can be cruel. Some would say to me, “What happened to your nose? One side is droopy.” I’d try to shrug it off by saying, “I was born like this. Want to play?”

LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: ALYSON ALIANO/GETTY IMAGES FOR CHOICES; RIGHT AND INSET: COURTESY OF THE BRENOFF FAMILY

FEELING A CONNECTION

In 2012, my mom and dad took my younger brother, Simon, and me to visit my old orphanage, and I was introduced to a woman named Fu Hui. She was about 19 at the time, had been born cleft-affected, and needed more surgeries. We didn't speak the same language, but a translator helped us talk.

I felt a connection with her. She was shy, always looking down. She often put her hand by her face and didn't like to go out—she spent all day in her room. I felt so sad that she wasn't able to get the same medical treatment that I had

gotten. So I looked her in the eye and said: "I'm going to help you." I didn't know how, exactly, but I was determined to find a way.

LAUNCHING MY BIG CAMPAIGN

For a community service project this past spring, one of my friends was raising money for a charitable cause through a crowdfunding site called Crowdrise.com. Crowdfunding is where you ask people for money online, and if enough of them agree to chip in, you receive their donations. A light bulb went on in my head. I thought: I could use that site to raise money for Fu Hui's surgery!

The orphanage said that her treatment would cost \$3,800, so that was my goal. I wrote a story about myself to explain why helping Fu Hui was so important to me, and then—with the quick click of a button—my request went live on the Internet.

In the beginning, I was worried people wouldn't donate. So I got to work. I e-mailed the link to my doctors, plus a bunch of companies and fellow students. My friends also spread the word by reaching out to their social media networks.

What also helped: My mom works for the news site the Huffington Post, so I wrote an article about my campaign, and



Doesn't Dolce look cute here? And here's Harry, our Field Spaniel, fast asleep on his favorite chair!



I'm a vegetarian, and I love spinach. I sauté a bag every morning for breakfast!



I love my family (left to right: Simon, Mom, Dad, and me), and I really look up to my mom. She's smart, and sometimes when I'm stumped about something, she helps me see the pros and cons—then lets me make my own decision.

I like murder mysteries, like the Jeff Resnick Mysteries series by L.L. Bartlett.



I love running because it lets you think and appreciate your surroundings. I'm on the cross-country and track teams at school.



Fu Hui visited Beijing with her dance team. Here she is at the Great Wall of China!



ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (SPINACH); COURTESY OF THE BRENOFF FAMILY (ALL OTHER PHOTOS)

the editor-in-chief tweeted it to her 1.58 million followers. Amazing!

REACHING MY GOAL

I figured it would take weeks to raise the money, but I did it in two days! It was shocking. Every time I saw the amount rise, I'd say, "Are you kidding me?" In fact, I blew past my goal, raising about \$6,000 in total. And it wasn't like one rich person wrote a giant check—I was getting lots of \$10 and \$20 donations from Chinese adoptees around the world.

Within a week, I also got a surprise call from a charity called Love Without Boundaries (LWB). They saw my article and said that LWB would be able to arrange Fu Hui's surgery. My eyes got teary! It felt so good to know that Fu Hui

would finally get treatment.

Fu Hui had her surgery a few weeks later, and it was a success. She still needs to wear braces and have some teeth extracted, but she's no longer embarrassed by the way her face looks. She even sent me an e-mail to thank me—she said she now goes out more with her friends and has joined a dance crew that she loves. She's like a new person!

Seeing how much I helped Fu Hui made me want to do more, so I plan to launch other campaigns with LWB to raise money for Chinese orphans. This whole experience has taught me that when one person takes a stand to help someone, it's like dominoes—other people help too. Kindness is *definitely* contagious. •

3 Things Sophie Wants You to Know

1 IGNORE THE HATERS. If people are judgmental, don't let them get to you—giving bullies attention only empowers them. So tune it out. Live your own life.

2 LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE. A lot of times we let minor things bother us, but remember: There are people in this world who are suffering a lot more than we are. Knowing that will help keep your problems in perspective.

3 FORGIVE OTHERS. Often, people say mean things because they're insecure—not because there's something wrong with you. Keeping that in mind may help you feel less angry.