



Giraffe Heroes Project

#StickYourNeckOut

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Dear John,

You *have* to read these quick descriptions of eleven real heroes, people who have "taken arms against a sea of troubles"—*peacefully*. From a warrior turned peace-teacher to a hip hop impresario, they are all lights in the darkness.

As long as there are Giraffes, there's hope.

—Ann Medlock, Founder





West Pointer **Paul Chappell** got his combat experience on deployment in Iraq, where he was a battery commander. But after he was promoted to Captain, he walked away from the strong career he was building, a career that was exceeding his father's.

The elder Chappell had served in Korea and Vietnam, rising to the highest of the army's enlisted ranks, and bringing home a case of PTSD that made home dangerous for Paul and his Korean mother. Paul describes his younger self as having a "mass shooter personality" as he

dealt with a violent father and with classmates who bullied him for being both Black and Asian.

Adding combat experience to memories of that violent childhood brought Chappell to a 180—he gave up the career he was building, gave up longtime friends, and diverted all his skills and training to learning the ways of peace, becoming the student of associates of Dr. King, and going back to college.

The result is his [Peace Literacy Institute](#), where Chappell writes and teaches, helping others create schools, workplaces, communities, and families where peace prevails.



For over 20 years, Dutch obstetrician/gynecologist **Rebecca Gomperts** has been working to help women obtain safe abortions in parts of the world where that care is illegal.

She's done that in international waters on a small ship outfitted as a clinic, coming ashore in a small boat to ferry women who need care out to the "Women on Water" ship. Portugal sent warships to prevent her from docking. Morocco also stopped her from docking, and in Poland she was met by a mob of men threatening her as a Nazi.

Nevertheless, she's continued, providing information online, at "[Women on Web](#)," a nonprofit that receives over 10,000 emails a month from women in 120 nations. On the site, women can learn how to get safe abortion pills, how to use contraceptives, and even get relationship counseling.

Gomperts does telemed sessions with people who are up to 10 weeks pregnant; they pay a fee for the pills, or not, if they have no money.

In 2018 she began mailing safe abortion pills to "tens of thousands of people in the US, regardless of their address." The former US administration's FDA told Gomperts stop, but she refused. When the agency began blocking payments to her nonprofit and seizing its packages from the mail, she sued the agency saying, "Unjust laws should not be respected."

She's been jailed more than once by governments trying to stop her. As with all who engage in civil disobedience, she accepts that consequence of her resistance, and goes

right on resisting.

By the fall of 2021, COVID had hit hard all over the world, and **Jackson Gwartney**, a high-schooler in Olathe, Kansas, was concerned, that so many people there were in trouble.

That included students who were too young to be vaccinated, and families that couldn't afford masks or other protection.

"I wanted to help make sure that the younger kids and those that could not afford masks had some sort of protection or mask available to them so they could continue with their education, be able to enter a restaurant or business, and to help protect them from getting sick and possibly dying."

So the 15-year-old started asking everywhere for mask donations. For a while he had no luck, but then he found a company in Olathe that takes returned packages from Amazon and resells them. The company had unopened boxes of new masks and face shields that it was throwing into dumpsters.

When he asked the company if he could have the masks and shields, they said, he could dumpster-dive for them on Fridays after 4:30. Jackson went for it, wearing protective gloves and a mask while climbing through it all. He got cut several times, but, as he says, "Thank goodness for tetanus shots."

Every Friday he brought the masks home—an average haul being about 350 masks—and he and his mother sorted them by size on the dining room table, removed any that had political or profane messages on them, and boxed up the remainder for Jackson to deliver to individuals and local organizations he'd enlisted to help distribute them.

Masks went to schools, to people without homes, to foster children, veterans, groups with special needs, and to seniors. Jackson himself took masks and face shields to nursing homes and to the Sheriff's office.

In all, the teen salvaged and delivered over 10,000 masks and shields.





Sherelle Hogan has survived a desperately bad childhood and gone on to help other young people survive and thrive.

Both her parents were imprisoned; her father was killed soon after he was released. In foster care, Hogan was abused. In school, she was bullied.

She blamed herself for all of it until she shattered on her first day of high school, and found herself in a hospital where a staff psychiatrist confronted her, saying, “Little girl, if you don’t find a reason to live, you will die.”

That shook her enough to get her through high school, the University of Michigan, and a job in a corporation. But that job soon felt like the wrong place to be.

She quit, and created the nonprofit Pure Heart Foundation, whose mission is “to embrace children with incarcerated parents and empower them to break the cycle of generational involvement in the criminal justice system.”

Through Pure Heart, she’s served thousands of families who have incarcerated parents, counseling the children, taking them on field trips, buying them clothes and supplies. To do it all, Hogan has enlisted the Detroit Lions and the Detroit Pistons, and over a hundred volunteers.

None of the kids in her program have followed their parents into prison.

A member of the Standing Rock Sioux nation, **Tokata Iron Eyes** has been an environmental activist for half of her young life, standing on the history of her nation's oppression to speak out for the earth and against further injustices.

Now a teenager, she was only nine years old when she testified against the operations of a uranium mine in the Black Hills, and only 12 when, in a video that went viral, she spoke against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through vital water-shed areas.

Tokata and fellow environmental activist Greta Thunberg hosted a series of rallies in North Dakota and South Dakota, speaking out about the global climate crisis and against the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline. Tokata has gone on to serve on the boards of clean-energy groups, to facilitate environmental campaigns, and to travel the world, making sure that people from all countries and cultures understand what's happening to the earth's climate.

Tokata knows she's speaking for more than her own First Nations people. "It's important to step into one another's shoes. . . . We're all living on the same planet and need the same things. ... Something needs to change or there's not going to be a next generation."





Shayle Matsuda is devoting his life to science, and to gaining acceptance for LGBT scientists like himself.

Matsuda discovered the work that still fascinates him when he was a child visiting Chicago's Shedd Aquarium. Seeing all the sea creatures that day launched his lifelong fascination with marine biology.

As a teen he realized he was gay; in his 20s he understood that he was transgender and began the process of transitioning, hoping he would still have a place in marine biology.

Now Dr. Matsuda, he's kept his standing and is working to be sure other trans people are also accepted in the sciences.

"I struggled with gender for a long time," says Matsuda, "but, as a scientist, I was always looking for some evidence. I was like, 'Are you sure? Is there proof? Like, do you really know this is you?' . . . Transitioning is a really scary thing on its own, but I was really scared about what this would mean for me in science, especially science not necessarily in San Francisco."

Matsuda is an expert on coral reefs at a time when reefs dying all over the world from the climate crisis. He's an expert on transitioning at a time when others making the journey need his experience and guidance.

Dr. Matsuda has become a visible, valuable presence at events and online, sharing his experiences with others to give them hope and courage. As he says, “All it takes is one story to change someone’s life.”



Benjamin Mendoza, 10, and his brother **Nathaniel**, 12, are sons of a woman who immigrated to the US from a city in Poland that’s now filling with refugees from Ukraine. The three of them were talking at the dinner table about the Russian invasion and the boys said they wanted to do something to help Ukrainians. Mom asked them what they’re good at, and the boys said, “Basketball.”

Well that’s not going to be much help. Unless you’re two kids who figure out that they can go on social media, “sell” making three-pointers, and send the money to Ukraine relief groups. Their mom thought she’d have to kick in \$499 of their \$500 goal.

The boys set up a Venmo account (@threepointersforUkraine) and raised \$9,000 in the first five days. They soon had to enlist volunteers to help them make all the shots they'd sold—\$25,000 worth. Shooters have joined them from all over the US, and from Puerto Rico, Australia, Switzerland, and Germany. The giving has grown to include sending food, clothing and supplies to Ukrainian refugees.

Because two kids in Minnesota had an idea of how to help and went all in to get it done.



Brandon Smith and **Royal Ramey** were experienced firefighters and yet were turned down when they applied for firefighting jobs in California, where firefighters are desperately needed.

The problem? They've been in prison. They learned to fight fires while incarcerated in a State “fire camp.” (Note that the State pays prisoners from \$2 to \$5 a day to do this dangerous job. The average salary for a professional firefighter in California is over \$51,000.)

When their applications were rejected, Smith and Ramey enrolled in a “fire academy,” passed exams to be licensed as EMTs, and finally got hired as pros. It took them two years.

As paid professionals working fires alongside prisoners in fire camps, they were fielding questions about how they got the jobs. Remembering how hard it had been, they created the [Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program](#) to help others do the upgrade they'd achieved.

FFRP has since trained and supported over 3,000 currently and formerly imprisoned men and women. Trainees are coached on dealing with parole restrictions, lack of transportation, and precarious finances. They're prepped for the exams and job interviews and, while they're in the FFRP program, many of these men and women are employed by FFRP itself, felling trees, clearing lots, maintaining highways, and removing snow. Last year FFRP even created its own firefighting crew.

Brandon Smith and Royal Ramey say that they're atoning for their own past crimes by making the world a better place. Over 3,000 trainees are sure they're right about that.



Lennox Yearwood, an ex-Air Force chaplain, music impresario, and political activist known as the “Hip Hop Rev,” has been a force for change in all his roles, even when that’s meant being fired or jailed.

After Hurricane Katrina, he led a march in New Orleans to protest the treatment of Blacks in that crisis. The march led to the conviction of several police officers for violating Black citizens’ human rights. Following up, his Gulf Coast Renewal Campaign stopped the evictions of survivors from emergency housing.

When Chaplain Yearwood organized a concert tour to protest the US presence in Iraq, the Air Force “honorably discharged” him. He went on to organize “Shut it Down,” a concert calling for the closure of the Guantanamo Bay prison. His “Make Hip Hop Not

War” national bus tour took hip hop artists, vets, Congress members, and peace activists across the country, campaigning to stop US actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In an anti-war protest at the US Congress, he was arrested for “assaulting a police officer” though it was Yearwood who had to be treated for injuries.

Yearwood's nonprofit [Hip Hop Caucus](#) gets people, especially young ones, involved in activism and service—a *lot* of people. The Caucus has 700,000 members with teams in 48 US cities across 30 states. He worked with hip hop artists to do a “Vote or Die” national campaign, and created a 50-state strategy for P. Diddy’s Citizen Change, a program to involve the hip hop generation in community-building. He founded Hip Hop Voices, for the AFL-CIO’s Voices for Working Families.

Yearwood’s current focus at Hip Hop is the climate emergency, including “One World One Voice” to involve young people, “Green and City” to unite Black mayors in doing environmental projects, and “Green the Block,” to educate more people about the crisis and involve them in solutions.

Is his whirlwind of actions realistic? Yearwood says “What is unrealistic is thinking we can put off for decades action that is desperately needed now to ensure our survival as a species.”

**And with that reminder that we all need to get real,
we leave you for now,
urging *you* to do all you can for the world,
with whatever you've got, wherever you are.
Be the light.**

**To meet more real heroes, do LIKE [Giraffe Heroes on Facebook](#),
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