

Statesman

Westlake student honored for leadership by Teen Vogue

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Westlake High School junior Saanya Bhargava is in heady company, having recently been honored as one of Teen Vogue's "21 Under 21" female leaders of tomorrow. She was recognized by the magazine for championing girls in STEM education and developing innovative solutions to reduce plastic waste in the oceans.

Human rights activist Malala Yousafzai, the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, praised the 21 worldwide honorees in the December-January issue of Teen Vogue, saying "our generation is full of leaders, creators and self-starters ... solving some of our most pressing problems and encouraging others to join them. I am inspired by their stories ... They make the world around them take notice and, hopefully, take action."

Bhargava, 16, said she was "very much surprised" when contacted by Vogue, especially since she did not apply and was the only honoree selected from Texas.

Her educational interests are in the STEM field and environmental science. Bhargava said that between her freshman and sophomore years, she had an internship at Dell that fueled her passion for science.

"When I saw what they were doing with plastic ocean pollution, I was inspired by its use," Bhargava said. "The packaging Dell is using for its XPS computer, now has 25 percent reclaimed ocean plastics. It made me think of how it could be applied to other areas to keep plastic outside the ocean."

“It wasn’t my idea, but during my internship, I helped Dell develop a supply chain, and pinpoint locations from which they can get abundant plastic pollution to recycle and use for computer parts and packaging,” Bhargava said.

This was a fortuitous internship, because Teen Vogue contacted Dell for award nominees, and they recommended Bhargava.

As a result of what she learned, she started an organization at Westlake called impact.gravitas to continue her interest in reducing the amount of plastics that go into the oceans. The group’s goal is to “reduce the amount of single use plastics, and use alternative materials that degrade into the environment without being harmful. For instance, multiple companies are creating biodegradable straws.”

Bhargava noted the importance of that goal.

“One seventh of the world depends on the ocean for food – that’s about a billion people,” she explained. “These plastics get into the seafood and then into us – you never really know what you’ve eaten. ”

She said her conservation group was particularly motivated by the fact that, “Without significant action, there may be more plastic than fish in the ocean, by 2050.” She said this is according to a study by the World Economic Forum, which brings together national leaders, business people, journalists and economists to discuss pressing global issues.

In addition to her environmental work, Bhargava helped start the STEM Advocacy Conference of Texas. This high school organization advocates for STEM education in Texas at both the state and federal levels.

She also spends time leading community outreach for the award-winning FIRST Robotics Varsity Team at Westlake, of which she is a member.

Malala Yousafzai reminded the “21 Under 21” winners, “You are building the future ... If you see a problem in your community, start solving it. If you have a dream, work hard to achieve it. Know that when you stand up, your sisterhood around the world stands with you.”

Bhargava has only just begun.