

How a 12-Year-Old is Single-Handedly Taking on the Water Crisis in Flint, Michigan

Mari Copeny, AKA 'Little Miss Flint' has raised half a million dollars for Flint, Michigan and talks social justice to her 100,000 Twitter followers every day. She won't stop until she's president.

By **Libby Ryan** | August 06, 2019

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When Mari Copeny won a pageant at age 8 in the midst of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, she saw the chance to use her new title of 'Little Miss Flint' to fight for her hometown. Four years later, Copeny is a renowned activist at age 12, saying, "Now everybody just knows me as Little Miss Flint."

In the years since the Flint water crisis began, Copeny has raised more than \$500,000 as Little Miss Flint for her fellow kids in the city. This money goes to water bottles, uniforms, backpacks, and other school supplies. She wrote a letter to then-President Barack Obama asking him to come to Flint to address the crisis—he did—and she currently makes Amazon wishlists for supplies, including specific social justice-minded books to fill Flint classrooms.

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"She throws us huge ideas and I'm just like, 'really Mari?' And then I get behind her," said Lulu Brezzell, Copeny's mom. "She hasn't failed at anything yet."

Becoming Little Miss Flint

Copeny was in elementary school when the water in Flint became undrinkable in 2014. Old lead-filled pipes leaked toxins into the city's new water source, resulting in widespread skin rashes, a deadly outbreak of

Legionnaires' disease, and potential cognitive damage from the neurotoxin—all while the government insisted for months that the water was fine. Flint residents have been left without clean water for years, meaning families like Copeny's became completely dependent on bottled water. So Copeny started raising money and speaking out on social media under her pageant nickname, talking about the ongoing problems in her town.

Since then, many of those dangerous pipes have been replaced. And although the state of Michigan says 90 percent of Flint homes have water that meets federal standards for lead, that still leaves some households at risk. Flint's mayor, Karen Weaver, said she wouldn't declare the water safe to drink until long-term medical testing proved the risk was gone. Copeny's message about Flint? "The water is still bad and it's not fixed."

Being a Kid Activist

Copeny is part of a generation that's ready to get things done. Move over, moms and dads. The kids are ready to lead.

"Parents or the older generation these days, they don't even listen, to be honest," said Copeny. "We're more connected to the internet. We actually listen. We know how to use social media. We have louder voices than them."

Under the Twitter handle "LittleMissFlint," Copeny—through Brezzel, who manages the account—broadcasts her voice to her 104,000 followers. She shares fundraising efforts for her Flint campaigns, amplifies other young activists' work (like Copeny's role model Yara Shahidi), and calls out politicians on issues ranging from gun control to climate change.

"She's very outspoken. And it's like, yes, she's challenging all these people, but at the same time, she's at home challenging me," her mom said. If Brezzell tells her daughter she can't tackle a big idea, she says Copeny will reply, "This is what you taught me to do." And then the mom has to agree. "I have always taught her that if you don't think something's right, challenge it."

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Copeny suggests parents of social justice-minded kids should "follow their lead." And Brezzell advises that parents like herself, with budding activists in their homes, should "always encourage them—even if it drives you nuts—to speak up if they see things not right in the world."

The 12-year-old was just appointed to the Kids Board of Directors for KIDBOX, a kids fashion subscription box that donates clothes to kids in need (in a buy-one-give-one format similar to Toms or Warby Parker). She and the other young activists on the new board hope to inspire like-minded kids around the country to find speak up against injustice they see in their lives.

"They can use their voice and they don't have to be shy or quiet," said Copeny. "They have to use their voice if they want to help what's going on in their communities."

"No matter what, if you keep on fighting and you keep on using your voice, then eventually somebody's going to listen to you," Brezzell said she tells her daughter. "That's where she gets the idea that all these people are going to listen to her: 'We're going to get our way.'"

One of her current projects? Recruiting candidates vying for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination to participate in a youth-led town hall to answer questions from the under 18 set. Copeny won't be able to vote in 2020, but she's planning ahead for a future in government.

Her Twitter bio labels her as a "Future President" and she reminded us to watch for her turn at the ballots as soon as she's eligible. She's done the math, saying, "Vote for me for president, 2044."

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