

EMPOWER TEENS AND THEY'LL CHANGE THE WORLD

HERO GENERATION: A 15-year-old's plan to save the planet shows just how potent a market his peers are

By **BOB JEFFREY**

EVEN TWO YEARS AGO, when he was just 13, Avery Hairston was the kind of on-the-go kid who ought to have had a BlackBerry to schedule his days. He had better things to do than devote an hour to watching the slide show of Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" with his mother. "Why am I going?" he asked. Duty prevailed. After the show, he took a different view. The first thing he said: "We should buy a hybrid."

His parents knew he continued to think about the environment, because from time to time he'd ask, "Why aren't people doing simple things to help?" No answer satisfied him, so he began trying to come up with a simple thing everyone could do.

Last year, a light bulb went on for him—literally. A compact fluorescent light bulb. True, the cost of a CFL is dramatically higher than the cost of an incandescent. But it lasts 10 times longer. And it uses two-thirds less energy.

When Avery started thinking about this breakthrough in energy-saving lighting, it wasn't just in terms of his family's apartment and the homes of his friends. "I know one kid who got interested in saving energy—he changed 140 bulbs in his house," he says. "But I was thinking about a critical mass, because that's what makes a difference. If every household in the country substituted just one CFL bulb for a conventional bulb, it would be like removing a million cars from our roads."

A "critical mass," he knew, included a great many people who really couldn't afford CFL bulbs. How would they get these bulbs?

Avery lives in Manhattan. He attends the Collegiate School, the oldest in America. His father, Charles Hairston, was an award-winning TV producer. His mother, Sara Levinson, has been president of MTV, NFL Properties and women's publishing at Rodale. Once upon a time, she was even my boss at DDB. So Avery knows a few people, me included.

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

It's a good thing he does, for his big idea was too big for any 15-year-old kid: a charity to buy CFL bulbs for the residents of New York's housing projects.

Armed with a vision and a posse of energetic classmates, Avery soon had a world-class lawyer as well: Richard Beattie, chairman of Simpson Thacher. For organizational purposes, he acquired an adviser (the Natural Resources Defense Council) and a fiscal sponsor (the Open Space Institute). And to distribute the bulbs: Help USA, run by Maria Cuomo Cole.

When I heard about Avery's cause, with its catchy name, RelightNY, I immediately saw an opportunity for **JWT** to help. Improving the environment is a goal most of us embrace. Few of us know what to do,

however; saying we need to reduce carbon emissions, for example, is maddeningly nonspecific. But a group of smart New York kids with a single message and a clear way to achieve it—that's something else. As the activist and Nobel Prize-winning author Pearl S. Buck once said, "The young do not know enough to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible—and achieve it, generation after generation." After seeing Avery and his classmates in action, I agree.

RelightNY represents the type of grass-roots activism that evokes thoughts of Vietnam War protests or the women's-rights movement, though



LIGHTING THE WAY: Avery Hairston (bottom row, second from right) and his RelightNY advisory panel. Back row (left to right): Stephen Todres, Will Pagano, Daniel Bernstein, Taiki Kasuga, Jack Schlossberg.

Front row (from l.): Peter Chapin, Peter Ginsberg, Avery, Brendan Harvey.

today much of the rallying is done over the internet rather than on the streets. Avery and his teen advisory panel (Daniel Bernstein, Peter Chapin, Peter Ginsberg, Brendan Harvey, Taiki Kasuga, Will Pagano, Jack Schlossberg and Stephen Todres) have inspired us at **JWT** not only to back this project but to share it with everyone we know. After all, among this group of young men could be the next Al Gore, helping to change the way we think and act.

BEYOND BAKE SALES

And there's something about this kind of focused local effort that takes me back to my childhood. As a kid in Rhode Island, I saw my parents revere John F. Kennedy, and we listened together to his inspirational speeches. "Ask what you can do for your country"—those words ring in my ears every day. You bet I want to help someone who's echoing that message.

Avery isn't slick like JFK, but he's definitely someone people respond to. A few years ago, at his school's "Invention Convention," he invented a car wash for the head, a box designed to wet the hair and cool the neck on hot days. Just his luck, the convention was held on one of the hottest days of the school year. Kids lined up to soak their heads in Avery's shower. Many more might have tried it if the box had been made of something other than cardboard. Soaked with water, it eventually collapsed.

Avery always seems to be looking for something extra to contribute. The ninth grade at Collegiate is not for wimps. But Avery is that all-around kid who gets good grades and plays guard on the junior-varsity basketball team, and then volunteers as a referee in a

sports league for second- and third-graders.

Avery is also a savvy New Yorker. Not for him the conventional way of fundraising for charity. "Everybody who has a cause at Collegiate does a bake sale," he told me. "The school is very environment-conscious. My eighth-grade-science teacher, Amy Bell, is an expert on the environment and is always talking about it. But it's hard to make more than \$300 from cupcakes and cookies."

So Avery started with a questionnaire that he e-mailed to his buddy list. Eight kids said they'd help. Soon they were meeting at Starbucks to create a business plan and content for their website (RelightNY.com). **JWT** became RelightNY's first sponsor, followed by Virgin Mobile, LiveEarth, Rodale and Philips. Not a bad start for a program that doesn't officially launch until March 23. I sometimes wonder if I should hire these boys to be a part of my strategic team. They've proved to all of us that big companies may say yes if you just ask.

The Planet may be in crisis, but they're not going to let it ruin their good time. This insouciance is very appealing.

Meeting Avery has reaffirmed what we as an agency have always believed: that today's youth are truly part of the next hero generation. This isn't to say these are serious, buttoned-up kids who carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. If Avery is any barometer, this group laughs a lot—and the humor is sitcom-worthy. The planet may be in crisis, but they're not going to let it ruin their good time. In an era of passionate but largely humorless advocates, this insouciance is very appealing.

Avery and his friends embody today's teens. They are content creators, cause drivers and discretionary consumers. We should speak to them as such. In turn, they'll continue to invite us into their conversations, telling us what's on their minds—what they believe in and what moves them.

JWT is committed to doing what we can to get their message out to New Yorkers. Who can predict if we'll succeed in helping them "relight" the city's housing projects, along with the apartment buildings of New York's better-heeled residents? But there's one thing I'm sure of: Avery Hairston is a kid people want to help. In a world where it often takes a celebrity to get anyone to care about a charity, that's not a small thing.

BOB JEFFREY ...



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