Students’ Butterfly Effect Project Soars with Amnesty International

Earlier this summer, Kaia Marbin, a 6th grader at Wood Middle School, decided she needed to do something about the immigrant children detained at the border and other locations across the United States.

Kaia, who had organized a “blessing bag” drive for the homeless via the school’s new Community Service Club last spring, wanted to draw attention to the fact that some 15,000 children are currently being held in federally contracted shelters.

“In late June we were part of an event at Lake Merritt where we put up ribbons representing each child,” Kaia says. “But this time we thought, ‘let’s make butterflies. They’re symbols of migration. They fly with freedom. They’re each unique in their own way, and migration is beautiful.’”

Kaia and her friend, Lily Ellis, who attends school in Berkeley, also wanted to create a project that was eco-friendly, so they decided to make their butterflies out of recyclable and upcycled materials, including construction paper, magazines, and paper coffee filters. After stringing the butterflies together in batches of 10, they hang them from stands made of bicycle wheels and lumber.

Using a hashtag of #butterflyeffectmigration, the girls’ parents then took to social media in hopes of inspiring other people to start making their own butterflies. The goal? To create 15,000 butterflies to raise awareness about the number and plight of migrant children in detention – and inspire people to take action.

“A Priority Campaign”

It worked. Children and adults in not only Alameda and Oakland but also Vallejo, Philadelphia, Oregon, and Long Island have made butterflies, as have teams in London, Brazil, and Zimbabwe. Alameda’s City Hall has an installation. So too does the UC
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the East Bay Children’s Law Offices, and ZooLabs.

Among those requesting the installation are the San Francisco and Oakland libraries, the Children’s Creativity Museum, the Mission Economic Development Agency, and Oakland’s City Hall. And after seeing a KTVU news segment on the project, Amnesty International is partnering on the project, reaching out to its 500 chapters for butterfly-making support.

“One of our priority campaigns this year is child detention,” says Sara Schmidt, who manages the organization’s youth and student program from the Oakland office. “We want our members to help set up butterfly projects in their own communities and include a call to action to end child detention.” Schmidt is also helping the students develop background materials and suggested actions for people interested in helping children held in detention centers.

As of September 17, more than 12,500 butterflies had been created.

The group is working now to finalize plans for November 20, which is the International Day of the Child. Plans currently under consideration include bringing the installation to the border for detained children to see, stringing the butterflies along the border, holding a rally in support of children in detention, and sending postcards to children.

For more information (including how to make butterflies and display stands and where to join butterfly-making events), please go to: https://butterflyeffectmigration.org/. (The website is maintained by Kaia’s younger brother, Jahan, a student at Otis Elementary School.)

_The Butterfly Effect Migration Project’s partners include Amnesty International USA, Alphabet Rockers, Destiny Arts Center, and Culture Strike._