

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SHE DIDN'T WAIT TO GROW UP TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Six years after taking four environmental proposals to City Hall at age 10, Caymus Maxson is named a 2026 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes national winner

The 16-year-old founder of Trash Turtles has spent six years turning concern into action, from policy advocacy and waste prevention to scholarships, youth leadership and a simple idea anyone can put into practice: #LeaveWith3™.

PACIFIC GROVE, Calif. / MADEIRA BEACH, Fla. | September 15, 2026 | Caymus Maxson was 10 years old when she saw something on her Florida beach that did not make sense.

A tractor was raking the sand, dragging seaweed, plastic, cigarette butts and other debris to the water's edge, where the next tide could carry it back out. The same beach was nesting habitat for sea turtles, and the debris posed a threat to the turtles coming ashore to nest and to marine life just beyond the beach.

She wanted to know why.

On December 5, 2019, Maxson took her questions and ideas to Madeira Beach Mayor Maggie Black. A little more than a month later, she stood before the Madeira Beach City Commission with four proposed ordinances addressing cigarettes, single-use plastics, polystyrene foam and balloon releases.

She opened with a line that sounded very much like the 10-year-old she was:

"The question you may be asking yourself is why in the entire cosmic universe is a 10-year-old girl standing here talking to the City Council."

The moment was captured on video.

When Maxson founded **Trash Turtles** soon afterward, the name came from the nesting sea turtles she had set out to protect.

Six years later, Maxson is 16. Trash Turtles has mobilized more than 1,500 volunteers, removed more than six tons of debris, collected approximately 75,000 cigarette butts for recycling, helped put water refill stations into schools and awarded \$8,500 in scholarships to other young changemakers, among other environmental initiatives.

And today, Maxson has been named a **2026 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes national winner**.

The recognition marks a six-year journey that began with one child deciding that noticing a problem was not enough, and discovering along the way that young people have a voice and can use it to create change.

FROM FOUR PROPOSALS TO POLICY CHANGE

Maxson's instinct from the beginning was not simply to pick up what was left behind. She wanted to understand why it was there and what might prevent it from getting there in the first place.

At 10, that meant researching four issues, proposing solutions and bringing them to local government.

Then she kept talking about them.

Through Trash Turtles, Maxson continued advocating and educating around cigarette waste, balloon releases, single-use plastics and other threats to beaches and marine life.

Two of the policy changes Maxson first advocated for at age 10 eventually became law: Madeira Beach restricted smoking on its beaches, and Florida prohibited intentional balloon releases statewide.

For Maxson, the experience reinforced an idea that would come to define much of her work: **notice the problem, understand it, act on it and keep showing up.**

Sometimes the result is immediate. Sometimes it takes years.

CLEANING UP WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING

In February 2020, Maxson founded Trash Turtles.

The cleanups came quickly, but so did a larger question: **Could they prevent some of the waste instead of simply becoming better at picking it up?**

Trash Turtles began putting existing TerraCycle programs to work, collecting cigarette butts and writing instruments for recycling. The writing-instrument effort eventually reached participants across seven states, with one school drive alone collecting more than 1,100 pens, markers and highlighters.

When Maxson saw how many disposable plastic bottles were being used in schools, she pursued another solution.

Working with Surfing's Evolution & Preservation Foundation, she prioritized grant funding for three \$2,000 water refill stations, worked with schools on installation and paired the infrastructure with environmental education and awareness designed to reduce reliance on single-use plastic bottles.

The objective was not simply to remove more trash.

It was to create less of it.

#LeaveWith3™ was also part of Trash Turtles from its early days: take responsibility for your own trash, then leave with three additional pieces.

Three pieces will not clean an ocean. **Thousands of people making the same small choice can begin to change one.**

THEN SHE STARTED INVESTING IN OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE

As Trash Turtles grew, Maxson began asking another question: what if some of its resources could help other young people act on their own ideas?

Trash Turtles created an environmental scholarship program that has now awarded **\$8,500 to eight young changemakers across four states.**

Maxson reviews applications, interviews candidates, helps select recipients and follows their progress afterward. Recipients have gone on to attend Harvard, Ohio State, Clemson, Florida State and the University of South Florida.

The scholarships represented another evolution in her thinking.

At 10, Maxson was trying to convince adults that a young person's idea deserved to be heard.

Now she was in a position to tell other young people that theirs did, too.

ACT. BUILD. LEAD. TEACH.

By 2024, Maxson's environmental work had begun expanding beyond the organization she created.

She became a major youth contributor to the **Tampa Bay Roots & Shoots Hope in Action Summit**, participating in months of planning, helping engage organizations and ultimately leading her own session, **"Planet Protectors: Organize to Beautify."**

Trash Turtles also hosted a Day of Action cleanup connected with the summit.

There, Maxson had the opportunity to meet and speak with **Dr. Jane Goodall.**

Following the summit, she was invited to interview for **Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots Youth Council USA** and was selected, beginning her service on the national council in January 2025.

Since then, her role has included **inviting guest speakers, introducing the council to new connections and sharing her experience through talks with educators and others working to help young people turn ideas into action.**

In July 2026, she joined fellow Youth Council members at their national summit in Chicago, continuing a leadership journey that has increasingly moved from doing the work herself to helping others find ways to act.

It is a progression that mirrors the way her work has evolved:

Act. Build. Lead. Teach.

USING HER VOICE TO MOVE PEOPLE TO ACTION

Communication has been part of that progression, too.

Since founding Trash Turtles, Maxson has personally created more than **850 pieces of environmental education and awareness content.** She researches the subjects, writes the copy, films and edits videos and chooses the music herself.

Followers often recognize the spin that opens her videos and the greeting that follows:

“What’s up, Trash Turtle Nation?”

To date, Maxson has accepted no paid endorsements. Funds raised through Trash Turtles go back into supporting its initiatives.

For her, communication has a different purpose: explain an issue, make action feel possible and give people a place to begin.

And much of that communication happens nowhere near a screen.

She speaks in schools and on environmental panels, conducts interviews, works with nonprofit and community partners, participates in cleanups and brings environmental ideas to government and other decision-makers.

Her work has been documented by television, print and digital media over six years and was featured in the 2022 documentary ***TRASHY: A Zero Waste Film***.

SIX YEARS OF SHOWING UP

The numbers tell part of the story.

1,500+ volunteers. More than 50 cleanups. Six-plus tons of debris. Approximately 75,000 cigarette butts collected for recycling. Three school water refill stations. Eight scholarship recipients. \$8,500 awarded. More than 850 pieces of environmental education and awareness content.

But Maxson has come to measure impact another way.

“I’ve learned that showing up consistently, to cleanups, to council meetings, to classrooms, matters more than any single grand gesture.”

That consistency has taken her from a meeting with her hometown mayor to City Commission chambers, classrooms, environmental panels, documentary film, Jane Goodall’s Roots & Shoots Youth Council USA and now national recognition from the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes.

The recognition followed the work, not the other way around.

A NEW COAST. THE SAME MISSION.

Maxson and her family moved to California’s Monterey Peninsula last year, bringing the next chapter of Trash Turtles to the West Coast.

Since arriving, Maxson has continued speaking, educating and participating in local cleanups while building new environmental relationships in the Monterey Bay community.

For Earth Month in April 2026, she returned #LeaveWith3™ to its simplest premise with a **30-day #LeaveWith3™ challenge**, picking up and sharing at least three pieces of trash every day throughout the month.

On **Saturday, September 19**, Maxson will join **Surfrider Monterey** for California Coastal Cleanup Day in Sand City, continuing the hands-on work that began on a Florida beach six years ago.

She is also looking ahead: expanding collaborations that can help advance policy change, awarding more scholarships, working with colleges including **UMass Dartmouth** to bring #LeaveWith3™ to campuses, and setting her sights on collecting **100,000 cigarette butts for recycling**.

The geography has changed.

The underlying idea has not.

#LeaveWith3™ asks people to take their own trash and leave with three additional pieces.

Any age. Any place. Three pieces.

It is deliberately small.

Because one of the biggest things Maxson has learned in six years of environmental work is that change does not always begin with something big.

“I’ve come to understand that environmental issues are rarely the result of bad intentions. Usually, they come from a normalization of everyday systems that have never been challenged.”

And after six years of challenging some of those systems, Maxson remains decidedly hopeful:

“That realization makes me hopeful, because change is only one choice away.”

MEDIA AVAILABILITY

Maxson will participate in the **Surfrider Monterey California Coastal Cleanup Day event in Sand City on Saturday, September 19**, with opportunities for on-site interviews and current-action footage.

She will also be in **New York City October 15–19** and is available for in-person media interviews, including **morning availability for live or taped in-studio television interviews**.

A six-year visual archive is available, including Maxson’s 2019 meeting with the mayor; original footage of her addressing the Madeira Beach City Commission at age 10; early and current Trash Turtles cleanups; water refill station installations; scholarship presentations; environmental education videos; speaking appearances; Hope in Action materials; photographs with Dr. Jane Goodall; Roots & Shoots Youth Council imagery; and current interview and B-roll opportunities.

ABOUT TRASH TURTLES

Founded by Caymus Maxson in February 2020 at age 10, **Trash Turtles is a youth-led 501(c)(3) environmental nonprofit dedicated to saving the planet one piece of trash at a time.**

Through advocacy, prevention, cleanups, recycling, environmental education and awareness, scholarships, partnerships and #LeaveWith3™, Trash Turtles works to make environmental action accessible to people of every age and in every community.

To date, Trash Turtles has accepted no paid endorsements, and funds raised go directly back to supporting its initiatives.

MEDIA CONTACT

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