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Grapevine 11-year-old supports soldier's march, War Kids Relief

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Listen up, kids – 11-year-old Sarosha Hansraj has a summer project for you.



COURTNEY PERRY/DMN

Sarosha Hansraj, 11, center, founder of Children Care for Children, meets with Gunnar Swanson, left, and Dina Fesler of War Kids Relief before Swanson begins a 1,000-mile walk from Texas to Minnesota to raise money for children of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Collect money and donate it to a cause that is near to her and her friend Sgt. Gunnar Swanson: Helping children who have been traumatized by war.

She will cheer on Swanson as he departs Dallas on July 4 for a three-month walk to Minnesota to raise money and awareness for children affected by war in the U.S., Iraq and Afghanistan.

The nearly 1,000-mile walk, called A Soldier's March for Peace, will benefit the Minnesota-based group War Kids Relief, which provides children in Iraq and Afghanistan with education and job training and connects American and Iraqi kids through a cultural exchange program.

Swanson will walk from Dallas to Northfield, Minn. Along the way, he'll meet with schoolchildren and collect donations. He also plans to collect letters from students to send to children overseas.

Sarosha of Grapevine has raised money to buy dictionaries and school supplies for kids in Afghanistan. She hopes Swanson's walk inspires children and adults to "learn about each other and respect each other."

"The more we respect each other, there will be more peace and unity in the world," she said.

Peace march organizers want kids to contribute. They hope students will become budding philanthropists like Sarosha and find ways to raise their own money.

Sarosha, a student at North Hills Preparatory in Irving, formed Children Care for Children, whose mission is to help disadvantaged children worldwide get an education. She has held a basketball fundraiser and sold flowers.

Sarosha formed the group after her parents told her a story about a farmer who struggled to feed his family after his crops were ruined by heavy rains. While her parents made up that story, Sarosha was moved.

Swanson, executive director of War Kids Relief, got involved with efforts to help children affected by war because of his experiences in the Middle East. Swanson, now retired from the North Dakota National Guard, served in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, conducting riverboat patrols and convoy operations.

He remembers kids would line the streets as he and other soldiers drove through the country. The military members pulled over and talked with the kids and exchanged items.

"It was a real morale booster every time we saw the kids," he said.

But that didn't last long. Swanson and others learned that insurgents were recruiting children to plant roadside bombs.

He wants kids to get an education instead of being lured by insurgents.

"Providing them with skills ... provides them a different way of living that they weren't aware was possible without our help," Swanson said.

Last year, Dina Fesler, managing director of War Kids Relief, met Sarosha at an event in Minnesota and later introduced her to Swanson.

Fesler said she hopes children will visit the peace march's Web site, warkidsrelief.org/march, and share details of what they're doing to raise money.

"We're trying to create a country full of little Saroshas doing whatever creative projects they can [to donate]," she said. "We want kids to tell their stories."

Sarosha hopes Swanson's walk gets children – and adults – to think about what people have in common rather than their differences.

"You don't have to think really deep or far," she says. "You can just look above or beneath you and see the sky and earth. Do you think the sky and earth that we see here is any different than the sky and earth kids in Cairo or China or Afghanistan see? It's the same sky and earth."

"It makes all of us one big family."