

[WE LEARN FROM HER]

# Save a crayon, save the world

On average, teachers spend about \$945 of their own money on classroom supplies. Sheila Michail Morovati's ingenious idea helps them keep their cash, puts crayons in underprivileged kids' hands, and benefits the planet, too.

BY JESSICA PRESS



Sheila reading to kids during a recent drop-off (above), and one of the students enjoying the new batch of art supplies (left).

**W**HEN SHE CLOSES HER EYES, Sheila Michail Morovati can still hear the squeals of delight from the children she encountered on a street in Mexico nearly 30 years ago. "I was around 9 years old, on vacation with my family. After leaving a restaurant with small toys and a balloon from the hostess, I was suddenly surrounded by 15 or more local kids, clamoring for these gifts. My mother whispered, 'You'll just get 10 more minutes of fun with these, but they'll have weeks of joy with them, so hand them over.'" Ever since that day, Sheila, now 37, has had a keen sensitivity to the disparities among children around the world, an awareness that, in part, led her to study sociology at UCLA. But it was having a child of her own that helped her discover her mission.

"Five years ago, when I took my then-2-year-old daughter to restaurants, I started noticing that the free crayons we left behind were swept into the trash," she says. She was struck by the wastefulness, so she approached managers at the restaurants she frequented in her hometown of Los Angeles, asking if they'd be willing to collect crayons after diners left. Then she reached out to Title 1 schools—those with a large portion of children who come from low-income families—asking if they'd want to arrange to pick the crayons up once a month. She was met with a resounding *yes* on both sides, ultimately convincing chains like Islands Restaurants and California Pizza Kitchen to come on board. And when the schools started to say they had too many crayons after a few months of donations, Sheila forged a relationship with the National Head Start Association (NHSA), which aids more than 2,800 preschool programs that welcome donations for their classrooms as well as for children to



take home. In 2013, Sheila officially founded the nonprofit Crayon Collection; so far it has helped to relay millions of crayons to children in the United States and as far away as Hong Kong, Beijing, and Australia.

"Some of our students come from homes that don't have any art materials—they're just not in the budget. And it's amazing to see their faces light up because of something as seemingly simple as holding and using a crayon for the first time," says Gail Pinsker, a community and public relations officer at Santa Monica–Malibu Unified School District. Crayon Collection's impact is transformative, she explains: "Because of Crayon Collection, children who are shy at first begin to open up and build confidence in and enjoy their work, thanks to these powerful tools of self-expression."

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

**START COLLECTING.** Set up a crayon drop-off at your kid's school, or ask local eateries to put theirs aside. Locate schools in need with Crayon Collection's school finder.

**DONATE.** The organization is looking for funds to develop an awareness campaign that encourages better-served schools to pitch in.

**SUPPORT OTHER CHILD-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATIONS.** "I recommend NHSA, of course, and Baby Buggy, which donates gear to low-income families," says Sheila.