

PARENTING/SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW

Meet a Local Teen With a Passion for Technology in the Service of Sustainability

Naman Mutalik Desai is working to raise awareness and create solutions

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

PUBLISHED ON: MAY 02, 2024



Editor's note: This article was sponsored by the [Gates Foundation Discovery Center](https://discovergates.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) (https://discovergates.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content).

Naman Mutalik Desai is a 15-year-old sophomore at Tesla STEM High School in Redmond and a [Youth Ambassador](https://www.discovergates.org/exhibition/youth-programs/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) (https://www.discovergates.org/exhibition/youth-programs/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content), at the [Gates Foundation Discovery Center](https://www.discovergates.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) (https://www.discovergates.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content). ParentMap caught up with this thoughtful and driven young man to learn more about his joint passions for technology and sustainability, and how he is working to use the first one in support of the second.

Q As a youth change-maker, what issues are you most passionate about?

The three issues that I've worked with most are food security, environmental justice and sustainability. All three relate to quality of life. Oftentimes, more affluent communities have more food security, a cleaner environment and sustainable infrastructure. On the other hand, poorer communities have limited access to healthy foods, and they're often located near polluted industrial areas — that's the environmental justice aspect. Ideally, we want equality where people from all walks of life are able to live in clean environments.

On a global scale, Earth's population is rapidly rising, and we need to feed that population. To do so, farmers resort to using fertilizers to produce higher crop yields. But it's very easy to apply an excess, which has damaging environmental consequences like eutrophication (<https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/eutrophication.html>), when excess nutrients filter out into bodies of water leading to harmful algal blooms.

Q How did you become involved in sustainable agriculture activism?

I first learned about eutrophication because of a project I did in eighth grade. I was kind of alarmed by how big of an issue it was, so I decided to learn more.

Around the same time, I applied for the Mike Yarrow Peace Fellowship (<https://wwfor.org/mike-yarrow-peace-fellowship/>), because I needed mentorship on how to expand my efforts. They give every single Peace Fellow a \$500 grant to help fund a campaign and provide nonviolence training, which I truly believe people from all fields should look into, because peaceful conflict resolution is very important.

Then in the summer, I went to India where I met activists who work on environmental sustainability. After talking with them I realized how much there was to learn about eutrophication. My goal now is to do research, raise awareness and create solutions, and the hope is that I can be an active part of these solutions.

Q How did you become involved with youth programming at the Gates Foundation Discovery Center?

As for the Gates Foundation, the summer after eighth grade, I got COVID. I was home, tired and exhausted from being sick. During that time, I came across the Youth Ambassador Program's website and I decided to apply. I wanted to engage in some community-focused activity after I recovered from that mental toll that COVID exacted, and I wanted to learn more about youth leadership and youth activism.

The Youth Ambassador Program essentially brings together around 40 teenagers to create the Teen Action Fair (<https://www.discovergates.org/youth-programs/teen-action-fair/>), which spotlights social issues that affect teens. I've been on the Teen Action Fair Marketing Committee for the past two years. I was responsible for designing the color scheme of the fair and making some of the content for social media and advertisements.

I've learned a lot about different issues, and it's really put my personal privilege into perspective and given me this drive to use that privilege to make significant change.

Q How can technology support sustainable agriculture, and what is your work towards that end?

Ultimately, we want to ensure sustainable resource management. There's a field called precision agriculture (<https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/precision-geospatial-sensor-technologies-programs/precision-agriculture-crop-production>), which involves the extensive use of technology to appropriately and efficiently allocate resources across farms and gardens.

I'm quite sure that many gardeners and farmers have no idea of their environmental impact. So raising awareness on this issue hopefully gives them direction towards what changes to bring about. I'm trying to spread scientifically accurate information to as many people as possible in an accessible manner.

I have a blog where I detail my research (<https://theridgeguy.com>) on soil health and fertilizer pollution, and I'm currently working on infographics and posters along with educational videos and various media to raise awareness on fertilizer pollution, especially in home gardens. I'm going to create social media accounts on various platforms to send these out. If people want to see the real-time progress of my campaign, I will post developments on my blog.

Q What advice do you have for other youths looking to get involved in community service?

I think the biggest thing is to start exploring. There are many organizations in need of youth who will help their cause. Volunteering is a great way to do this, because one can gain a lot by giving back to the community. Personally, I've gained a lot of knowledge of different communities and different cultures, along with confidence and communication skills. Once you explore many options it is very easy to find a passion, and when you do find that passion, stick with it and see where it takes you.

Q Do you have any advice for parents on how to support their child in the pursuit of their passion?

Parents, initially, they're going to have to lead the search for opportunities, but only enough for their child to get their foot in the door. Take a look at what your child is already good at or passionate about and try to look for volunteering opportunities that relate to that. There are plenty of local organizations for your child to volunteer at, so just nudge them toward each opportunity and when your child finally hits their stride or finds their calling, let them run free. If it's a passion, they're going to make time for it.

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