
When I grow up, I want to be...

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Some kids have an immediate answer to this question. They may dream of becoming a professional athlete. Or they may have a passion they want to follow, such as an animal lover who wants to be a veterinarian.

But can kids really know what they want to be when they grow up?

The answer is a definite yes! The four kids you see here are grown now, but when they were very young, they knew what they wanted to be when they grew up. And now, as adults, they are all living their dreams.

As kids, they played with friends and went to school just like you. They even misbehaved sometimes. But as they grew up, they proved that the difference between wanting to do something when you grow up, and actually doing it, is how hard you work for it.

As one of these grown-ups put it: “Just do it, and don’t let anyone tell you you can’t.”

Television reporter Eun Yang

When Eun Yang was growing up, she looked for anything she could turn into a microphone so she could pretend to deliver the news like a reporter on television.

“As a child I thought it was neat that there were people on TV, who seemed important, and they told you what was going on,” she said. She wanted a job on television someday. Yang worked hard in school and got good grades, and for fun she played outside with friends or curled up with a book. “I would read a lot, oh my goodness,” she said.

Though shy, she found that she could get up in front of a group and speak really well, so she was active in her elementary school’s public speaking program. She especially remembers

winning a trophy for her dramatic reading of the children’s book “Tikki Tikki Tembo” by Arlene Mosel. She felt she was meant to be on television.

In high school, however, Yang began to doubt her dream. She felt a lot of pressure from her parents and teachers to pursue a career that would “allow me to get a job and earn money,” she said, such as a doctor or lawyer. For a while, she figured a job in television “was just a childhood dream.”

But when choosing colleges, Yang couldn’t let go of her childhood dream. “I said, ‘This is what I want to do in my heart, why not go for it?’ ” So she went to the University of Maryland to study broadcasting and when she wasn’t in class she worked at TV stations doing jobs including answering the phones.

Her last year in college, Yang had classes until about 3 p.m. every day, then went to work at WUSA, the local CBS station here, from 3:30 to 11:30 p.m. On weekends, she worked for no pay so she could get more experience,

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especially helping reporters. It was exhausting, but when she graduated she got hired as a reporter trainee. “That extra effort? It pays off,” she said.

Now 38, Yang is an anchor for the morning news show on NBC4, which means she has to go to work in the middle of the night! But her crazy schedule allows her to spend the afternoons with her three children, who are 7, 5 and 3. Getting out of bed in total darkness is always hard, but she is motivated because she knows people are relying on her for the news.

“It’s such a privilege,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s hard work. But I love it.”

Brain surgeon Benjamin Carson

Young Benjamin Carson liked going to the doctor, even if it meant getting a shot.

“I was always interested in medicine, from the beginning,” he said. So a trip to the doctor was always “worth it.”

By the time he was 8, Carson knew he wanted to be a doctor. He was from a very poor, African American family in Detroit, and his single mother

worked as a maid. The youngest of two boys, he wasn’t a good student and got in trouble a lot, so his teachers and classmates thought he was dumb. He began to believe them. “You just assume you can’t do it anyway, so why even try,” he said recently.

Then one day, Carson’s mother came home from work and turned off the TV - for good. “She worked in the homes of wealthy people and noticed they were reading books,” Carson said. “She said we were going to start reading. She made us give her two book reports a week.”

From that moment, books became Carson’s escape, showing him heroes and places he never knew existed. Soon, kids stopped calling him dummy and started calling him bookworm. “I began to think of myself as a doctor,” he said.

Carson’s grades skyrocketed, and after high school he went on to college and then medical school. There, he chose to become a neurosurgeon, someone who operates on the brain and the spinal cord, which he liked because he could fix someone’s problem so quickly. “There would be this person suffering, and two days later they’re,

like, on top of the world,” he said.

Now 60, Carson works at Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore. He also has a foundation that provides college scholarships and is opening reading rooms for kids all over the country.

Carson believes his story can make a difference in kids’ lives. “When they hear it, they begin to think, maybe I can do that, too,” he said.

Teacher Sheila Hensley

Sheila Hensley owes her career to Betsy Key.

“She was my first-grade teacher, and she was beautiful,” Hensley said. “I remember what it felt like loving her.”

Hensley, who grew up in Tennessee, wanted to become a teacher like Miss Key. But it was not an easy choice. Hensley struggled in school because she had dyslexia, which causes the brain to see letters and words out of order and makes reading difficult. As a result, she also misbehaved a lot in school, she said.

In seventh grade, a teacher sent Sheila to a second-grade class to help a

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teacher grade papers, and Hensley was good at it. This was her first taste of success in school, and it made her certain that she wanted to become a teacher.

“I was in heaven,” Hensley said. “I still like grading papers.”

Because of her reading difficulty, Hensley always wanted to teach little kids, in part because she likes helping kids learn to read. Plus, she still messes up sometimes when she reads, and she doesn’t like to do that in front of older kids!

Hensley, 46, teaches pre-K at Garfield Elementary School in the District. She feels especially good when she’s able to help a child who is having trouble. These kids, she said, have to be taught how to learn and figure out other ways to understand something. Doing that, she said, will help them in all parts of their life. “You may have more tools for success if you have learned how to overcome difficulties,” Hensley said.

Hensley remembers many of her students, especially a little girl she taught 20 years ago. The girl had dyslexia, just as Hensley did, and had a very hard time in school. Hensley

understood this student’s issues in a way no one else did. “She used to come sit with me and I would point to words in the songbook so she could read along,” she said.

That little girl teaches third grade now.

Monkey expert Russ Mittermeier

At age 7, Russ Mittermeier knew he wanted to be a jungle explorer. But he lived in the middle of New York City, so that left him only one option.

“I went to the zoo a lot,” said Mittermeier, head of Conservation International, a District-based group that seeks to protect endangered animals. At the Bronx Zoo, he fell in love with a rare South American monkey, a white uakari, which was the only one of its kind in captivity anywhere in the world. “That made a big impression on me,” he said.

Mittermeier wanted to go to the places where such monkeys lived. His desire for adventure only grew as he read, and reread, every Tarzan book. He looked for any opportunity to work with animals, and in college he studied monkeys from the Amazon - even

leading a research trip to the Brazilian rain forest. He has discovered 12 new species in his life, and seven species have been named after him.

“I’ve always had a very, very clear focus,” he said.

At 62, Mittermeier is one of the world’s leading experts on primates, an order of mammals, including humans and apes, that have highly developed hands and feet and large brains. The monkeys and lemurs he loved as a child still touch him the way they always did. Though his profession is all about science, “I really study them because they are so cute,” he admits.

Mittermeier has been to 155 countries in his lifetime, travels up to 300 days a year and has spent weeks at a time in most remote parts of the world. It’s not always fun. “The best times are when you see something that you are looking for,” he said. “The tough times are when you get sick in the field,” he said. He has been very sick in places where there are no doctors.

When not overseas, Mittermeier lives in Great Falls. His three kids grew

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up traveling with him frequently, and his two grown sons are wildlife experts themselves. His daughter, now 15, has been to all seven continents!

Mittermeier told his story by phone from Madagascar, after days in the jungle observing rare species of lemur - just what he always wanted to do.

— *Margaret Webb Pressler*