

Mesa Girl Scout's project helps the wheelchair-dependent



TRIBUNE NEWS STAFF

At age 15, Ariella Hirsch follows Girl Scout Law, which urges members to make the world a better place.

The Mesa teen did just that to help wheelchair-dependent people and for her invention, earned the Gold Award, a coveted honor for Girl Scouts and the highest they can achieve.

Ariella's Helping Hand device gives wheelchair-dependent people gain a measure of independence by providing a hands-free way to hang a bag of small items or a large item while they are motion.

The Simi Valley, California, transplant also created an instruction manual that can be downloaded for free online so that anyone can build Helping Hand with \$12 worth of parts from a hardware store.

In doing all this, she earned her Gold Award, given to Girl Scouts who demonstrate extraordinary leadership in developing sustainable solutions to local, national, and global challenges.

A sophomore at Arizona Agribusiness & Equine Center – Mesa Campus who also is working on an associates degree in engineering at Mesa Community College, Ariella was inspired three years ago while she was selling Girl Scout cookies in front of a grocery store.

She saw a in a wheelchair exiting the store hurriedly and heading to his car.

"What caught my attention was the gallon of milk, weighing 8 pounds, he was carrying," Ariella explained. "It was in a plastic bag, suspended in his mouth because he had no other way to carry it.

"I could only imagine how painful, difficult, and potentially damaging it was to his mouth," she said. "I knew in that moment I could design something to help him carry groceries and other items and still have both hands free. I soon realized it was a perfect Girl Scout Gold Award project."

"Helping Hand is so simple to make and versatile. I am excited to see how others adapt it to fit their specific wants and needs," she added.

While any wheelchair-dependent person can use it, she specifically had in mind helping disabled veterans.

That drew praise from David Liddle, a 23-year veteran, former Veterans Administration employee and a service officer and chaplain with the Disabled American Veterans East Valley Chapter 8, Mesa.

"In 2009, after suffering an injury to both my knees, I spent nearly a year and a half in a wheelchair," Liddle said. "Thinking back on the time, I see now that this device would have provided much needed assistance that would have helped me be nearly self-sufficient.

"One of the most important goals of the Disabled American Veterans is to help Veterans return to and maintain self-sufficiency, vital to the recovery of injured service members.

"Ariella and her parents Ken and Josie should be very proud of their young lady's tenacity and drive, imagination and spirit – and her desire to better the lives of American disabled veterans."

While the pandemic made aspects of the project challenging, it also had an upside.

Most of Ariella's research and development were complete before many businesses and other operations closed, though she had to cancel plans for spring and summer visits to service clubs and VFW posts to present her project in person.

"The upside was the amount of time she could dedicate to the project while continuing distance-based schooling from home," her mother Josie Hirsch said.

Ariella's achievement in earning the Gold Award is no isolated accomplishment,

She continues to be an honor roll student, was captain of Simi Valley Adventist School's Robotics team in 2018-19, regional robotics competition pit manager 2019-20 and won her Girl Scout Silver Award in 2018 and Bronze Award in 2015.

She also was a member of the senior planning team for nonprofit festivals with responsibilities that included all aspects of children's game areas from planning to operation.

A lifelong Girl Scout having started in Daisies, she said she has made many memories and friendships through her association with the organization.

"We love to get out and do stuff together, and some of my favorite memories are from camping, touring municipalities, volunteering at community events, and even traveling to Washington D.C. together," Ariella said.

Along the way, she said she acquired knowledge and skills that will prove useful throughout her life.

Working on the Helping Hand project continued to strengthen those skills, she said.

She already has earned U.S. Patent Pending status for the device.

"I am very excited for being able to accomplish my Gold Award so early," Ariella said. "I feel my previous endeavors in helping organize large non-profit and regional student events prepared me for the scope of my Gold Award.

"It's empowering to look at what all my hard work has accomplished. It means a lot to me to have created something that helps a population that has sacrificed so much for our country, and this is a small start to say 'Thank You.'"

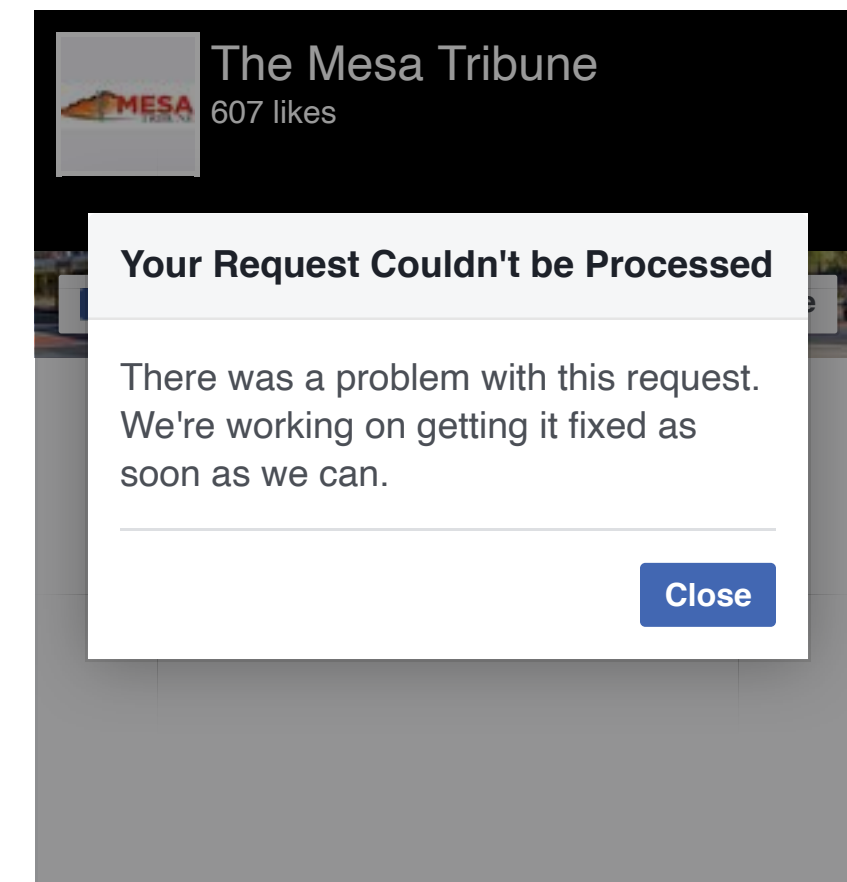
As for other Girl Scouts who have yet to go for the Gold Award, Ariella has this advice: "Do it! It is really big. Be patient and take it one step at a time."

Her instructions and a video about the project are at helpinghand4vets.com and [facebook.com/HelpingHand4Vets](https://www.facebook.com/HelpingHand4Vets).

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