



Marley Dias Always Gets It Done

The founder of #1000BlackGirlBooks is shaking up the literary world, inspiring young activists, and adjusting to her first year of high school.

BY TOMMIE ETHINGTON

*For our January **Beginnings Issue** (<https://www.southwestmag.com/beginnings/>), we interviewed 14 achievers, from a rookie cop to a new American citizen, about the act of starting—or starting over. Marley Dias launched the #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign in 2015 because she wanted to see more diverse characters in children’s literature. Since then, she has donated more than 12,000 books to schools around the world, and in 2019, she’s planning to launch an app.*

How did the idea for #1000BlackGirlBooks come about? Why is this issue important to you?

I’ve always had access, through my parents, to diverse stories, and that has definitely made me a kinder person toward those who are different from me. For people who only read about their experience, they’re not able to see the importance of other people’s stories and appreciate them for being as beautiful as they are. In fifth grade, my teacher assigned a series of books. All of them had white boys and their dogs as the main characters. I say that jokingly now, but at the time, I was very frustrated because I did not see black girls being

reflected. I decided I wanted to do something to have my story be told and other kids' stories be told. Now I'm developing an app for my campaign, #1000BlackGirlBooks, to help the people who are telling these really important stories get their books purchased.

Have you always been so goal-oriented?

I talk a lot to my mom because she is a very smart person. Our conversations grow into serious discussions: "What can I do?" and "What is the bigger scale of impact I can make?" I'm always the person who will think small. So my mom has always pushed me to think big—work hard and take really big strides rather than just taking the small route.

Are there certain things you do, or steps you take, to ensure you meet your goals?

The real place where my goals come to fruition is over pancakes with my mom. We go to our local diner and I order a short stack—I can't eat too many—and we have a discussion about the future. Then, I write my goals down in my journal afterward. I think it's really important to journal.

At the beginning of #1000BlackGirlBooks, how did you know where to start?

I did research to actually understand what was happening in the literary world so I could boost my opinion and emotions with facts. The best place to start is really to analyze and understand the problem and how it affects your community.

Did the campaign take off right away?

In the beginning, my parents and family and friends loved the idea of #1000BlackGirlBooks, but there wasn't a lot of outside support. It seemed like no one cared as much about the lack of diversity because people weren't donating books. I realized that wasn't true after the campaign was discovered through social media and the hashtag. My frustration became a universal thing that so many other people could connect with. I think the biggest turning point was when I got the call to be on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. I was crying and my friends were crying, and it was such an awesome experience to know that our story was going to be put on one of the biggest platforms.

What was the first school you donated to? How many books have you donated since?

The first place we wanted to donate books to was the Retreat Primary and Junior High School in the parish of St. Mary, Jamaica. It's where my mom went to school and her mom went to school and her mom went to school, so it has deep connections with my family. We also understood the importance of needing to put black girl stories into black girl spaces. We have collected over 12,000 books to date. We've gone back and donated to that school in Jamaica again, and we've donated to places in South Africa, all across the East Coast, and in places like Arizona and California. We want to make sure that the messages of #1000BlackGirlBooks and the importance of diversity is visible throughout all of the school systems in the world—that's really the bigger goal.

Was it hard to find books with black characters?

A lot of times people think and assume that there aren't a lot of books out and being written about black girls, but that's actually not the case. It's just that a lot of these stories are by self-published authors and that means they're not with big publishing houses or being sold at Barnes & Noble. We've learned through the campaign and people donating books that I've never heard of—even as a book nerd—that so many people *are* telling these stories; they're just not getting the platform that they need.

You mentioned that you're developing an app to help these authors. What will that look like?

Yes, with the #1000BlackGirlBooks app, we want to be able to make it so that the people who are telling really important stories are able to get their books purchased and share their emails and the links to their Instagram. The idea is that readers can go on the app and look for whatever story they want. We're hoping to launch in the spring, and I'm so excited for what this app has to share with so many young readers and new parents who want to add black girl books to their personal libraries.

Is there one book that you learned about through the campaign that you recommend?

President of the Whole Fifth Grade by Sherri Winston is a perfect middle-grade book because I think there are some elements that are really complex—it talks a lot about leadership—but there are also a lot of really fun elements for kids to read about when they're between third and sixth grade.

You're also an author yourself. Can you tell me a little bit about your book that came out last year?

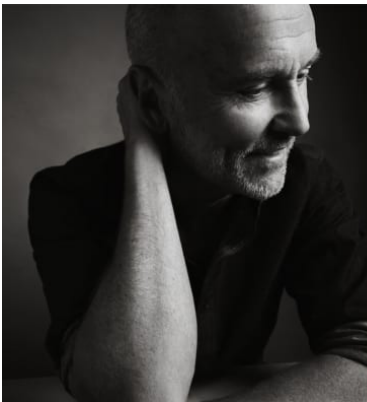
I've always wanted to write something and have something published, but Scholastic actually brought this idea to me of wanting to make #1000BlackGirlBooks' origins into a book, and that grew into *Marley Dias Gets It Done and So Can You!* It's intended to help kids age 10 and up create their own campaigns and use their gifts and talents to change the world.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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