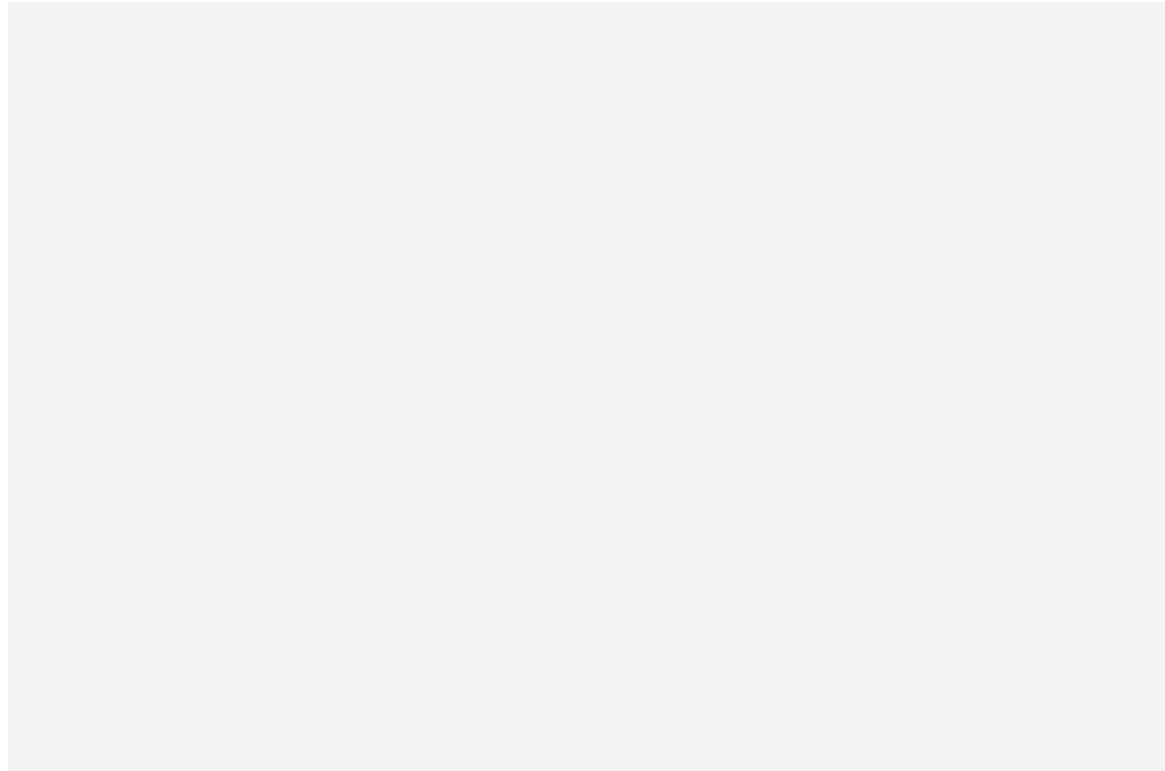




How one Girl Who Codes is helping educate women around the world



Dea Kurti (@deakurti), 16, is a junior at Brooklyn Technical High School and a graduate of the 2017 Girls Who Code Summer Immersion Program at AT&T in New York. She's also the daughter of Albanian immigrants, and her parents' experiences—as well as her own passion for women's rights—inspired her to create Novel Girls, a program that sends books regarding education and human rights to women and children in Albania and Ukraine. She says that participating in Girls Who Code gave her the push to get started—and the sisterhood has her back: her Summer Immersion Program classmates are currently hosting Novel Girls' first book drives in their schools and communities! Dea talked to Girls Who Code about her Summer Immersion Program experience, her vision for Novel Girls, and how to get involved.

Why did you apply to the Summer Immersion Program?

I had done classes in school on computer science, electronics, and the digital world, and my school is known for targeting kids who are interested in STEM. But for Girls Who Code, I wanted to do something I hadn't done before. I love biology, I love math; I'm a very well-rounded

person. But I wanted to try something new. I wanted to know how to code—that was the goal.

What was your final project?

My group made Roadmap, which is basically a checklist that helps refugees come to the United States and provides them with all the documents they need, all the resources they need to come to the United States. It also helps them get their green card, it helps them get residency, and then continuing off of that, it helps them with free resources that they can use once they're in the United States.

So for example, let's say you have a girl who's 18 years old, and back in her country she had only finished 5th grade. There are laws that protect her that would allow her to go back and take those classes. Let's say a little boy comes in and he needs surgery. Different free projects work to give health care to refugees. It helps with health care, jobs, shelter, coding programs, and a whole range of different free resources they could use coming to the United States.

I really love this project, because it was so simple and it made so much sense that this had to be done. Two other girls and I worked together, and it took us a week to get the information, to actually figure out, *Wait, how does this work?*, because it was so confusing. Even as a native English speaker, I had no idea what was going on. I realized that this was a huge problem. There's a refugee crisis—it's very difficult for a refugee to even know how to come to the United States. It seems impossible because there are so many different things—the wording and phrasing, all the different forms. It was a lot. That's, I think, when I got really passionate. I was like, *I have to do this. People need this.*

And now you run a project called Novel Girls—could you tell us about that?

I'm very passionate about women's rights, and I wanted to do something to help women. My parents are both immigrants from Albania, and they didn't grow up like I did. They tell stories about how back in their day, things were different. Their dedication, their hard work, inspires me. So I considered answering the question, *What can I do for people like them to make their lives easier?* I realized—people in Albania, what do they not have? They don't have access to proper education. Women's rights are a huge issue there. That's where I would say my idea sparked.

I've been working on Novel Girls for a couple of months, but after doing Girls Who Code I realized *I have to do this, I have to start*. So I just emailed every single person I could find online who was in any way related to book giving or education or women, and I got maybe two responses back. I was ready to quit—I thought, *I don't wanna do this anymore. This is so difficult*. But, I realized how fortunate and blessed my life has been. I live in New York City; I go to a great school; I have a wonderful family; I have food; I have shelter, and there are people in the world who don't have those things. Giving them even one book—that can completely change someone's life. So I thought, *I have to do this. It's probably going to be painful for a little bit. It's going to be saddening not to get responses back, but let's do it*.

So I started smaller. I thought, *Maybe HeForShe or DoSomething won't help me—but what can I do in my community?* So I started setting up book drives across the city, and one in Texas and one in Florida, which I'm still working on, but I started setting those up for this year. So this year is when it's really launching. It's about to begin next week—it's very exciting. Texas is gonna begin very soon. So it's starting to form, it's becoming something.

We're hoping to send books to Ukraine, to women's shelters, and also to schools in Albania. For Albania I wanted to focus on children more than women, just because my parents are from there and I lived there for a couple of years, and I've seen the school system there and I've seen the students there, and the education that I'm getting—you can't compare it to what they're getting. Also, the books are in English. In Ukraine almost everyone speaks English, so that wasn't a problem, but for Albania I'm hoping to get children's books, because they do teach English in schools. I'm hoping that later on, maybe in a couple years once I'm in college, I can focus on different parts of the world that also don't speak English, and the project can become bigger. Right now it's difficult to do that, but later on I can definitely focus on French, for example, or Italian, Spanish, Chinese.

How do you collect books for Novel Girls?

Well, I met 20 amazing girls through Girls Who Code, so I asked around! I said, *Hey, do you wanna do this?* And they said, *Yeah, of course, I'll look into it.* It was just a small thing. I tried to make it a big thing, and I realized you have to start somewhere. You can't start with this large scope—you have to start in your community, very local, and then you can make it a broader thing. Right now we have book drives happening, but our first donation is going to come in around December.

What kinds of books do you send?

At first, I thought I would collect books about women, any books—I thought, *It doesn't matter, it'll just be books, it'll be great.* Then I realized that you can't start from this huge scope. You have to zoom in. You have to figure out what you want, and then you can continue. So one thing I realized I could focus on was computer science skills, even something as simple as a Python handbook. I'm actually working with PythonAnywhere, to get some of their books out, because they're so helpful. They're simple and they make it very straightforward for you. And then also books about feminism, books about women's rights. Women in Ukraine

and in Albania, and around the world, even in the United States, aren't treated equally to men. In the United States we still make 78 cents to a man's dollar. And in other countries it's so much worse. So books that target feminism, books that talk about women's rights, books that talk about voting rights and human trafficking. Those types of books are what I wanted to get out.

At the same time, I wanted young kids' books, and children's classics that would make kids say, *I want to read this book*. For example, Harry Potter. Harry Potter is another reason I started this book drive. Like everyone is, I was obsessed with it. I had to learn English for the first time in kindergarten. My teacher showed me Harry Potter. My mom told me what it was about in Albanian. I fell in love. I learned English because I wanted to read the Harry Potter series. It completely changed my life. Without the motivation and imagination that learning English instilled in me, who knows where I would be right now.

There are people across the world who don't have access to books. It's as simple as that. They can't simply read for pleasure. So just books that they'll be able to read, books that they can say, *I had a good time reading this*, books that make people happy.

Interested in donating books or hosting a book drive? Get in touch with Novel Girls at bths.novelgirls@gmail.com. (And if you're not sure what books to donate, we have some ideas!)

