



— DEBORAH NILSON KMETZ

MHS sophomore Janani Shivakumar has merged her love of soccer with her passion for climate action and gender equality.

# *MHS athlete pushes climate, equality issues around globe*

Shivakumar takes message to India, U.N.

■ **By DAVID LIEBERFARB**

*SPECIAL TO THE MIRROR*

The global popularity of soccer has yet to catch on in the United States, especially in men's competition. For women, it's another story. Team USA's World Cup success has inspired millions of girls, especially Metuchen High School sophomore Janani Shivakumar, whose enthusiasm has attained a global level.

Shivakumar has played two years for the MHS girls soccer team, but her real impact has been at the international level. Last summer and again in December, she visited her family's hometown of Coimbatore, in southern India. She spent the winter holiday coaching two teams of high school girls in a 10-team soccer tournament that she organized. And she plans to repeat the trip next winter.

Also a member of the MHS girls track team, Shivakumar has managed to link her love of sports with her passions for climate action and gender equality. She was honored by the Metuchen Board of Education last fall for her efforts, which included a three-minute speech at the United Nations during the International Day of Peace.

"I am a world citizen," she said at the U.N.

She cited in her speech the international agency's Sustainable Development Goals, including responsible consumption and climate action. One of her own main goals is to battle gender bias faced by girls in India, which she observed firsthand as a youngster.

Born in Metuchen, Shivakumar spent her middle school years in India, where she saw that although soccer was popular among boys her age, few girls took part. "Street soccer is a popular activity, and there are academies and clubs for boys," she said.

That lit the spark. Initially denied the opportunity to compete with the boys, as a 6th grader she managed to join a club where at first she was the only girl. Her example inspired others, and "toward the end of my stay, there were enough girls to form their own team in that league," she said.

Her family returned to America in

time for her to enter MHS, where her off-the-soccer-pitch initiatives have included the Environmental Club, the Green Team and a vegan club that she founded. Then, when winter break began, she and her father flew to India.

"The tournament took up most of my time," said Shivakumar, who is the founder of Girls Play Global, a non-profit organization whose ultimate aim is to create awareness of water scarcity issues around the globe. "For most of the girls, this was their first time playing in a tournament," she added. "Some traveled hours to get there."

Girls representing 10 high schools engaged in five-on-five games with 10-minute halves on smaller-than-regulation fields. Shivakumar said the teams she guided were inexperienced, but she expects to spend more time with them when she returns in December.

She said her latest project is called Kicks for Climate Action. Among her goals are reducing our reliance on single-use plastics, conserving water and energy and fostering more plant-based diets.

As for her future, she said her "dream school has been Johns Hopkins University for as long as I can remember," and she plans to study neuroscience and pursue a pre-med track in college.

"Eventually, I hope to attend med school," she said.

Shivakumar played at the JV level most of last season as a defender, according to MHS girls soccer coach Mike Knoth, but appeared in a few varsity games for a team that finished 16-4-1. "She is a hard worker and excellent teammate. She is also an outstanding student," Knoth said.

Her goal-oriented approach to life has made a big impression on Knoth and Athletic Director John Cathcart. "I think she's a really brave young woman," Cathcart said. "She's got a Western attitude of, 'If the boys can do it, why can't the girls?' She tied athletics into concern about climate change," Cathcart said.

Shivakumar's three-minute talk at the U.N. can be viewed on YouTube at [youtu.be/xF2MS5P\\_rx8](https://youtu.be/xF2MS5P_rx8). Her organization's website is [girlsplayglobal.org](https://girlsplayglobal.org).