



FREE THE CHILDREN

children helping children through education

Stories from Around the World

A compilation of
Free The Children stories

Junior World-Changers Kit

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STORIES FROM
AROUND THE WORLD

The Birth of a Movement

Craig Kielburger began his journey as a social activist on an ordinary Wednesday morning when he was 12 years old. Sitting at the breakfast table, he was flipping through the paper for the comics when a headline jumped out at him: “Battled child labor, boy, 12, murdered.”

Curious, he sat down to read the article. That’s when he first learned about Iqbal Masih, a former child labourer-turned-child rights activist. Sold into slavery at the age of four, this Pakistani boy spent six years chained to a carpet-weaving loom before escaping at the age of 10. He spent the next two years speaking out for the rights of enslaved children. His calls for justice captured the world’s attention. They were also the likely motive for a carpet-maker to have him killed.

Iqbal’s story shocked Craig, especially because they were the same age. Of course he had seen suffering on television, in the newspaper and even when walking past homeless people. But like many others, he had learned to tune it out.

Reading Iqbal’s story changed that. Craig was angry.

While doing research to learn more, Craig made another terrible discovery: In many parts of the world, instead of going to school, children exactly like him were forced to work in the most awful conditions. To Craig, it seemed unbelievable that he’d never heard about any of this before. He wondered, “Am I the only one?”

That’s when he decided to share what he had learned with his class. That day, he asked his Grade 7 teacher for permission to share his research at the beginning of class. Craig felt nervous standing in front of his classmates, telling them about Iqbal and the hundreds of millions of children who were forced into situations of child labour. Then Craig asked the question that made him most nervous: “Who wants to help?” Before he knew it, 11 hands flew up! That’s when Craig learned that having the courage to try makes even the hardest things possible.

When Craig and his friends—the twelve 12-year-olds—got together that evening, Free The Children was born.

The World Overseas

The Picture of Empathy

Written by Theresa Karsner, *Volunteer Trip Participant*

“Beep! BEEP! BEEEP! BEEEEEEEP!” blew the chipped yellow taxi cab. My heart was pounding. It was the summer of 2005, the third summer I was spending as an international volunteer, and my most recent trip was to Calcutta, India. It was pandemonium. Yet even that could not explain what my eyes witnessed.

People were everywhere.

It was like looking at a painting that was in constant motion. Merchants sold chai tea, soapy men rinsed off near a side-street water pump, women walked past in colourful saris. Rickshaws and cows were everywhere. The potent smells of various spices carried through the streets, their heavy smells never leaving my nostrils. The intense images of poverty that surrounded me invaded my heart.

Calcutta hit me like an ocean wave and I was becoming a part of the motion.

I volunteered for two weeks at Mother Teresa’s Shishu Bhavan Center, a centre for children with special needs whose parents had either died or abandoned them.

It was there that I had the most profound experience of my life. It was there that I met Amanda. The first time I saw her, she was lying on a bright red mat, like the rest of the children. She was beautiful. Looking at her, I was overwhelmed.

Amanda had thick black hair that was shaved very close to her head and a striking golden-brown skin tone. Although her eyes were alive, her tiny hands were curled up under themselves and her frail legs were molded into a hardened bunch. I was told that she was suffering from physical as well as mental disabilities and that she was terminally ill. There was no doctor to diagnose Amanda’s symptoms, but the pain she was experiencing hit home with me immediately. I knew the disease she suffered from.

As a child, I was diagnosed with a severe form of juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, an illness that affected every joint of my body, and sometimes confined me to a wheelchair. It was an illness I battled against and won. But looking at Amanda, I was reminded of all the horror stories the doctors had told me about the effects the illness would take on me—effects that had already taken their toll on Amanda. It was the same illness, but the difference was that I had regular physical therapy and received medicine.

Amanda didn’t have any money. She couldn’t afford the kind of health care that I had.

In that moment, I knew how I wanted to spend the rest of my time in India. I asked, and the sisters at Shishu Bhavan honoured me with the care of Amanda. I was acutely aware of the pain she was experiencing, and from that point on I worked to the best of my ability to make her as comfortable as possible. She could not communicate with words, but she managed to tell me what her life was all about through her

facial expressions and the jubilant sounds she uttered.

To this day, I can still see Amanda with her eyes closed tightly, smiling from ear to ear and voicing sounds of happiness as I sang to her: “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine ...” I found that singing in her ears, making funny noises and rattling a bell invigorated her spirits. She reminded me constantly to look beyond what my physical eyes could understand and look deep into my heart.

Although Amanda was unable to speak and did not understand English, the bond between us grew stronger by the day.

The days passed and then came the time to say goodbye. I carried her over to her bed, sang her one more song and combed her hair. With tears falling down my face I said, “I will carry you with me always.” As I started to walk away, Amanda opened her mouth widely and smiled, and sang a high-pitched sound of happiness.

In that brief moment I realized just how similar Amanda and I were. It was love that cured an illness that the doctors said would leave me crippled and end my life early. And it was love that gave Amanda the strength to embrace life’s many gifts.

My trip to India opened my eyes to this beautiful world. I learned that anything is possible. Now, when I close my eyes, I can still see Amanda’s peaceful body resting and healing the world. As I think about walking through Mother

Teresa’s centre on my last day, I remember something Mother Teresa once said: “If there is no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to one another.”

Thirsty under the Kenyan Sun

Written by Jason Apostolopoulos, *Volunteer Trip Participant*

I was only 12 when I first visited Kenya on an international volunteer trip.

I discovered the magnificent beauty of the country on the first day of my trip during a hike in the Kenyan rainforest. A line of trees stood like majestic gates to the rainforest. This was just the beginning.

The first part of the hike went by slowly as the beauty of the rainforest stopped us in our tracks at every turn. In one place, rays of sun peeked through mile-high trees, reflecting off small ponds bordered by colourful plants and vegetation. In another place, rivers wound through vast tunnels of lush trees.

After three hours of hiking, we came to a place where all of the rivers of the rainforest came together in one giant waterfall that cascaded for hundreds of metres. To the sides stood cliffs covered in green vines, and before us stretched the savannah where we could see elephants, lions and gazelle roaming the plains.

That night, during dinner at the centre where we were staying, a fellow group member gave a presentation about global hunger. As I listened to the talk and reflected on my day, one question came to mind: In a place with so much poverty, disease and hunger, how can such beauty exist? My answer would soon come.

Our first day had been an introduction to the nature of Kenya, so it was fitting that the second day would introduce us to the country's people.

We awoke early the next morning and left for the village of Ol Moran, where a market and goat auction would give us our first taste of Kenyan life in action. The village had no running water and no electricity. The small homes and shops were all that made it distinct as a village.

Shortly after arriving at the village, the over 40-degree Celsius weather started making me sweaty and thirsty. I set my sights on a drink vendor a few feet away and headed in that direction.

Suddenly, I heard laughter. There, on my left, were two small kids, covering their smiles with their hands. I turned toward them and waved, belting out a loud "Hello!" But my boisterous greeting only silenced their laughter. Their smiles turned into screams and they ran away, disappearing behind one of the vendor's wooden signs.

For a short 12-year-old kid who had never scared anyone in his life (although I had tried), I was completely taken aback by such a strong reaction. But it was sweltering hot, and my thirst made me forget about the kids and instead refocus on making it to the drink vendor.

Then there was that laughter again. Was I hearing things? Sure enough, there in the same spot stood the same two kids.

My previous attempt at an introduction had completely failed, so this time I simply knelt down and whispered the only word I knew in the local language. “Jambo,” I said, which means “hello” in Swahili.

The kids’ once-smiling faces now looked perplexed and curious—an expression that remained as they tentatively approached me. Very carefully they touched my hand and pointed at my face, their smiles returning. Although there were no words, this was their own version of hello. I didn’t realize it then, but to these kids, I represented the outside world with which they rarely came into contact.

Within minutes we were playing games together. I picked them up and spun them around, and in return they taught me their versions of tag and hopscotch.

Before long, my thirst had returned. I desperately looked around and found a small water cooler that had been set up for the occasion of the market. I stumbled toward it, cupped my hands under the tap, and took a big gulp of cool water.

As I went for a second sip, I noticed four small hands had also taken their place under the tap. I looked and found that the same little kids had followed me.

Smiles once again lit up their faces, this time not because they were looking at me or playing a fun game, but because they had found clean water to drink. Because of something I always had at home—because of something they rarely had here.

In the face of so much despair, these kids looked at life with such a fresh and bright perspective that in that one moment they taught me more than I had ever learned back home.

It was there that I found the answer to the question I had asked myself the day before: The beauty of Kenya exists despite the hunger and the poverty, because the beauty exists not only in the landscape, but also in the smiles and the hearts of the people, and in the laughter and hope of the children.

School Spirit in Rural China

Written by Garry Norman, *Volunteer Trip Facilitator*

It had been raining all night and all morning. The streets in the tiny mud-brick village of Wu Jia Zhuang were as thick and sticky as wet concrete.

There were 70 of us visiting the village: volunteer trip participants, our new friends from schools in Zhangjiakou city and a camera crew to document the adventure. Our hockey bags overflowed with health kits, school kits and teaching and sports equipment—supplies for the children we were going to visit. Together we all slopped down the road in the rain toward the first of many schools built by Free The Children in rural China.

It took us about 15 minutes to make what would have been a two-minute walk under normal conditions, and it wasn't long before most of us were covered in mud up to our knees. When we got to the gates of the school, though, our struggle became worthwhile.

There were kids everywhere, all dressed in their best clothes, grinning from ear to ear. They sang, "Welcome, warm welcome!" in Mandarin, excitedly waving colourful flags and clapping. They took us into the school's playground and sat us down on benches as the entire community gathered around for a welcoming ceremony. This was the first time a group of foreigners, especially youth, had visited their village.

The rain forced us into the school to teach English and games for the rest of the morning, but by lunch the sun was baking the mud dry so we were invited back out to the playground to finish the welcoming ceremony.

For the next hour and a half, kids from every grade in the school astounded us with local folk dance routines to welcome us into their school and to thank us for making the long journey to see them. We were deeply humbled by their warmth and gratitude.

It's no wonder they put so much energy and joy into greeting us. They are so proud of their school; it's the centre of their village. It's the only building that isn't made from mud bricks or dug out of a hill. It's the only building that is two stories high. It's located on the largest property.

The school it replaced was made out of mud bricks and a thatched grass roof that was continuously in need of repair. Its dim rooms with dusty, dirt floors were about half the size of Western elementary school classrooms, and each had as many as 60 kids crammed inside. In winter, the only thing to keep everyone warm was a small coal stove in the middle of each room with just a hole in the roof for ventilation.

Sunnili is an example of a student whose life has been improved at the new school. She's the first graduate, and is now in high school pulling in excellent grades in all subjects and planning to go to university to become a scientist.

Her success is a testament to the importance of education. Without a good school to learn in like Sunnili had, most rural kids would never have the chance to dream like she does, let alone to work to achieve their dreams like she's been given the chance to do. And I know she will achieve those dreams.

The story of Wu Jia Zhuang school is just one of the many during our incredible journey that sticks out in my memory.

Surviving Poverty, Surviving War

Written by Hellen Kamara (as told to Lloyd Hanoman, *South Asia Projects Director*, Free The Children)

Hellen Kamara is 17 years old. She lives in Moyamba, Sierra Leone. During the country's 11-year civil war, Hellen lost her school, her home and many of her friends. The poverty already so prevalent in her country became even more widespread—the rebels looted, burned and destroyed, leaving communities like Hellen's with nothing.

“My family and I were living here since the start of the war,” Hellen says today. “We later had to leave for the capital city Freetown because of the bad things we faced from the rebels in the township.”

There were many bad things. Hellen's family home was burned to the ground and the only secondary school in the area was destroyed: the structure was burned and the furniture was stolen for firewood. She watched as rebels tortured her parents. Boys were forced to become soldiers and girls were assaulted and terrorized. Hellen was one of these girls.

To escape the violence, Hellen and her family fled and hid in the nearby bush. Poverty here took an even greater hold: without a home to live in or proper food to eat, Hellen and her family were always on the move and were forced to eat whatever they could find. “We slept in the bush and [had to eat] all sorts of food in the bush. We walked by foot . . . and

I came across so many sick people.”

Hellen’s story is shared by thousands of children in her country. Today, they and their families are still struggling to recover after the destruction of the war. Many schools, homes and health care facilities are still unusable, thousands of children are unable to pursue their education, and poverty is widespread. In fact, Sierra Leone is ranked among the poorest countries in the entire world.

With the help of friends around the world, things in Sierra Leone are improving. In Hellen’s community, Free The Children recognized the need to rebuild the all-girls secondary school. St. Joseph’s was constructed in partnership with the local community and with funds raised by youth. Today, it provides a safe place for young women to develop new skills and become empowered to make a difference in their communities.

Despite all that she has been through, Hellen is confident for her future and the future of her country.

“With all the experiences I have faced in life, from war to peace, after much struggle, I hope to see a brighter future,” says Hellen. “My thinking is to become a professional lawyer, to help see that Sierra Leone continues to be a peaceful and straight-forward country.”

Namaste: My Journey to India

Written by Katelyn Rothney, *Volunteer Trip Participant*

Going on a volunteer trip to India was like digging into my soul and rearranging everything I thought I knew. Last summer I embarked on a 33-day journey to India. It was my second volunteer trip; my incredible good fortune having taken me first to Kenya in 2008.

Never in my dreams did I imagine I would undergo the transformation that I did on both trips. Each time I’ve come back home believing in my ability to create change.

From the day I arrived in India, the rest of the group and I were generously welcomed and immediately treated like family. Never in my life had a greeting felt more genuine than the bow and very delicate “Namaste,” which means “I bow to you.”

I underestimated how new it would all be. In addition to the usual cultural differences, my role on the trip was also new. I was no longer a first-time tripper—I was a junior facilitator. With this responsibility in mind, I made an effort to keep my eyes open. I noticed that each participant was unique, had a purpose, a distinct goodness to them.

On a daily basis I observed, in all of them, the “spark” that Craig Kielburger always talks about, and the intense desire to be change-makers. We quickly became a family, and India – beautiful, historic and colourful – became our home.

There were days when I was faced with issues that broke my heart. I witnessed real child labour. A mother with hungry children looked deep into my eyes and asked if I could spare even a little to help her and her family. Children worked on construction sites, operating cement machines without protective gear. They carried heavy materials up cement stairs, making for a dangerous journey.

In Lai, a community in Northern India, we were told a story I won't forget for the rest of my life. Eight young children travelled hours each day to school to sit inside a makeshift classroom. Resting on mud floors, it was dark, crowded and covered by a small tin roof.

Every monsoon season, the rain would pour through the roof and into the classroom. The eight children would grab their pencils and erasers and evacuate the classroom for fear of drowning. Waiting for the storm to cease, they would sit in the mud in the very schoolyard where we were being told this story.

That was two years ago.

When we looked around the schoolyard, we now saw four classrooms, a tree nursery, a well and a medicinal herb garden. Over the past two years, the Lai community's partnership with Free The Children has grown into something that now affects the lives of every person living there—young and old. The construction of the Free The Children school brought new possibility and put a proper roof over the heads of the children eager to learn and to be

part of making their community better.

Seeing this community with its new school, smiling students and happy parents gave us hope. We knew we had accomplished what we came to do. We participated in a cycle of change that will affect not only the people of Lai, but also us, our ideas about the world and every choice we have made since we came home from India.

Getting Creative Together

Written by Alem Tedeneke, *Volunteer Trip Facilitator*

I just returned from a trip to Ecuador, where I spent six days volunteering with 10 students and two teachers in Chimborazo province.

Chimborazo is one of the poorest provinces in Ecuador. In the small community of Pulingi San Pablo where we volunteered, families struggle with things like poverty, access to education and finding the means to live sustainable lives.

We were there to work together on solutions to some of these challenges.

We started by painting two schools and repairing a guinea pig house. Guinea pigs are a delicacy in Ecuador, and the community members raise them to sell at the market. This provides a good source of sustainable income, especially for the women of the community.

The women in Pulingi San Pablo are incredible. Not only do they work at the eco-lodge where we stayed, but they also take care of their land, raise their kids and work together at a women's cooperative they have created with help from international volunteers.

Every Wednesday, the women get together at their cooperative to knit and crochet. They sit in a circle and spend the whole day making scarves, gloves, hats and sweaters to sell to tourists. Each week one woman brings tea and another

brings cookies. Then they all share stories.

The cooperative is made up of generations of women: grandmothers, mothers and daughters. The money made from the sales is divided equally between them all. This not only helps by adding another source of income, but it also allows them to buy wool from the community which provides a market for the wool produced in the area.

The women of Pulingi San Pablo are working together, with each other and with friends like us from around the world, to create sustainable lives for themselves and their community. The income they generate from the cooperatives means they can care for their families and send their children to school.

The cooperative in Ecuador also provides the women with a creative outlet. Not following a pattern, they are able to let their imaginations go free and to have fun with one another.

At the end of our stay, I was honoured to be given one of their beautiful sweaters. Now, back in Montreal, I wear it often and remember these amazing women.

Stories of Freedom

Confidence

Written by D. Henry Claffin, *Free The Children Writer*

Thirteen-year-old Ana Maria and her mom live on their own in a small house in San Miguel. Though Ana Maria is in Grade 7, she already sees the world with the eyes of an adult.

“In the community, there are not really [job] opportunities,” says Ana Maria. “Most of the adults have not finished school and do not have jobs, and furthermore our land does not produce much, only enough to eat.”

Without the support of a husband, Ana Maria’s mother sometimes struggles to provide enough food for the two of them. She has to sell off their animals at very low prices and even leave home to get work in a city called Machachi, far north of San Miguel near the national capital, Quito. For Ana Maria, one of the worst parts of her family’s situation is when her mom gets sick and there is no one to take care of her. But no matter what, her mother insists that Ana Maria stays in school and studies hard.

Ana Maria is now involved in the new Girls Club program, which is part of Free The Children’s alternative income programming in San Miguel. She is one of 13 young women who meet every Thursday to do workshops and activities that will empower them as young female leaders. The program is just getting started but Ana Maria and her friends have already learned a lot about leadership and human rights and finished a project where they made cards from recycled materials.

Two summers ago, Ana Maria was part of Free The Children’s summer leadership program in San Miguel. There, she and her peers delved deep into a wide range of subjects, including indigenous culture, public speaking, team work and how to use cameras and computers.

“When I participated in the leadership program,” Ana Maria says, “this allowed me to lose my fear of speaking in public, and now that I am part of the Girls Club, I have more confidence in myself.”

Ana Maria explains that the biggest thing Free The Children has helped her discover is self-confidence. With this empowered sense of what she is capable of, Ana Maria aspires to eventually be able to support her mother the way her mother now does for her.

“I want to become a teacher and have a good life for my family. I think that in the community, there will be many changes for the better, and I think that the projects will continue and that the leaders in the community will work hard to ensure this happens.”

A Hospital Near Home

Written by D. Henry Claffin, *Free The Children Writer*

Alice Mosonik, a 40-year-old mother of nine, lives in Eneleraï, Kenya. Stunningly picturesque but isolated in the hills of the Maasai Mara, her home is 10km from the nearest medical clinic, a bare-necessities outpost called the Mulot Mission. Longisa District Hospital is another 5km beyond that—a long distance to walk and an expensive trip by bus.

For years, Alice's husband suffered from asthma. "He had to go to far off hospitals to seek treatment," Alice explained. "This was expensive since we had to go for frequent follow-ups and collect drugs every now and then." The chronic disease kept him from work and held the family in poverty.

In 2007, Alice's husband died from an asthma attack. She remembers this as the worst day in her life.

One of Alice's daughters has asthma as well. Frightened, they repeat the same process: long bus rides to reach the hospital, sacrificing household necessities for medicine, losing days of work and school for life-saving treatment.

Now, it is much easier. With the help of the Eneleraï community and through the Adopt a Village development program, Free The Children has built the Baraka Health Clinic. The large clinic brings affordable medicine and services to isolated villages throughout the Mara.

"I believe if the hospital would have been as near as Baraka Clinic is, my husband would still be alive," Alice laments. "The clinic will help the community be free of disease and hence save lives, especially for those with chronic illnesses."

Beyond her own struggle, Alice puts in perspective the impact that the clinic has had on her community. "Maternal and child health services are easily accessible to mothers. Since no time is wasted by travelling far distances, the mothers can now dwell on other economic activities."

Free from disease, Alice and her community have the opportunity to devote their energy to improving their lives, keeping their children in school and having agency in shaping their own future. For Alice, it means that the worst day of her life will not have to be relived with her daughter.

Breaking the Cycle

Written by D. Henry Claffin, *Free The Children Writer*

“There are not many jobs in my village,” laments Warnakulasuriya Don Edna Leena. “The economy is bad especially because of the war.”

A mother of three, Leena is from a small fishing village called Sea Street, north of Colombo, Sri Lanka. She has lived her whole adult life in the shadow of Sri Lanka’s 26-year civil war that destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of people.

For years, Leena and her husband tried to get a bank loan for their dry fish business. “We both have good knowledge of making quality dry fish,” said Leena, “but we did not have the money to establish a strong business. We applied to the bank for a loan many times, but we were denied a loan because of our weak economic situation.”

Leena’s family was caught in one kind of cycle of poverty: they needed a loan to improve their business, but they could not get a loan unless they had a more successful business. As food prices increased daily, Leena struggled to provide her children with nutritious meals on a household income of a little over \$3 a day.

In 2009, Free The Children’s Adopt a Village program helped to create the Livelihood Development Society (LDS), an organization run by and for the women of Sea Street to promote sustainable development. The Society has a bank

that pools the resources of these women and provides microloans and savings accounts.

“The loan from the LDS was the chance I needed to help move my family out of poverty,” Leena proudly states. “Today, I am an entrepreneur, and my husband and I work together and we have a good business. I put money in my savings account regularly, and we are able to take care of our children properly, especially their education needs which is important for me.”

Through her \$500 loan with the Livelihood Development Society, Leena has tripled her household income, providing the start she needed to free her family from poverty. With that freedom, she has whole-heartedly turned her focus on feeding her children and making sure they can go school.

The Water-Bearer

Written by D. Henry Clafin, *Free The Children Writer*

Days after the January 2010 earthquake, about 100,000 Haitians fled from their ruined homes in Port-au-Prince, seeking shelter, food and water.

Milot Bien Amie's family was among them. With nothing left, Milot, his wife and four children could not stay in the capital in the scramble for scarce supplies. They escaped to the Central Plateau, where international NGOs were setting up internally displaced persons (IDP) camps as quickly as possible.

Arriving in the rural village of Pandiassou, Milot and his family were given a tent and a small space on the soccer field of the local elementary school. They now share this field with 20 other tents, each housing 3 to 12 people.

As the months wear on, tents are starting to tear, the few household items they have are wearing out and the prospects of work and food aid are fading fast.

In the last week of August 2010, the community water fountain went dry. For days, the families had no water other than the few drops collected from rainfall.

Every year, hurricane rains get so heavy they break the pipes that bring water into the villages. Locals are prepared for this and rely on other sources of water. However, those in the camp struggle to find their way in a foreign, rural environment.

After a few days, Milot could wait no longer for the fountain to turn on. He borrowed a wheelbarrow and empty containers and set out to discover where his local neighbours were getting their water. Following them to a man-made lake 25 minutes away, Milot filled every jug and labouriously wheeled them back to his camp. Like that, Milot became the community's "water bearer."

"The life is better here for our children," Milot says, "but we need to find work and be able to access the things that we need, including water."

Milot has stepped up to help free his community from thirst. But he cannot do it alone. Free The Children, which built a school a Pandiassou and supported relief efforts, is now working with the community to repair and strengthen the pipes.

Long-term, Milot, Free The Children and others in Pandiasou are helping create a permanent and secure water source not only for the IDP camp, but also for two nearby villages.

The Struggle to Stay in School

Written by D. Henry Claffin, *Free The Children Writer*

Sohan Meena's parents believe that you learn more by working than at school, no matter what age you are. But that is not the whole reason why Sohan and his younger brother were working in the alcohol business before either had turned 10.

Sohan's father grows maize for his family and works in construction. His mother, in addition to taking care of her eight daughters and two sons, works at the construction site alongside her husband. In the unforgiving land around the village of Lai Gow near Udaipur, India, the Meena family is doing everything it can to put food on the table.

As the eldest son, it is Sohan's responsibility to put aside his own future to help feed his younger siblings. But despite what his parents said, he was determined to go to school. After a few years of working in the city, a Free The Children school was built right in his own community. Sohan returned home, thrilled to have the chance to get a good education.

His family still needed money, so Sohan also got a job cooking for a crew of a nearby stone quarry. He would wake early and quickly clean the kitchen and cook breakfast for the crew. From 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Sohan would be in school, where he made many friends and received good marks in all his subjects. After school however, he would immediately return to the quarry to make tea then dinner for the workers.

Between school and work, Sohan would only see his family once every two weeks. He hoped to finish school so he could get a better job and maybe even play a part in making his dream come true, to bring electricity to his village.

In 2009, when Sohan was just 13 years old, the owner of the quarry took him to the city of Udaipur to work in his house as a cook. Sohan left his school and his community to help support his family, hoping that his younger siblings will be luckier than he.

The World at Home

Lending a Hand in Sierra Leone

Written by Lisa Fielding

Courtesy Canadian Living Me to We Awards

Inspiring others to realize they can make a difference, 12-year-old Logan MacGillivray has campaigned across his province to support children in Sierra Leone. With guidance from the Centre for Development and Peace Education (CDPeace), and the help of his basketball team and donations from local businesses, he raised more than \$9,000 to send a shipping container full of school, recreation and building supplies to Sierra Leone.

“When you are trying to do something good, people will come forward to help,” he says. “So nothing is too big to do.”

Logan speaks at schools to raise awareness of social issues in Sierra Leone. He is also working on filling a second container with items to equip Listen to the Children, a children’s community resource centre in Mayagba, Sierra Leone. The centre will feature a classroom, a library, art, computer and music rooms, an outdoor recreation area and provide assistance in training local teachers.

Last fall, Logan finished a documentary called *Listen to the Children*; proceeds from DVD sales are donated to the construction of the centre. “I am very honoured that a lot of people feel I have done a good job,” he says.

“And that means a lot of people are aware of needs in Sierra Leone.”

The Dalit Freedom Network

Written by Jaime Eisen

Courtesy Canadian Living Me to We Awards

Twelve-year-old Julia Thicke has always been passionate about helping others, no matter how far or near they lived to her. So when she learned that many children in India don't have a place to play, she was outraged.

Julia became determined to help give kids overseas, who were just like her in so many ways, the playground they deserve.

"I just wanted to help give them something fun," says Julia.

Friends of her family put Julia in contact with the Dalit Freedom Network, an organization devoted to raising awareness and funds to aid the Dalit—a group of 250 million people who are considered to be the lowest members of Indian society. The Dalit people live in poverty and are denied access to education and health care.

Julia began to forgo birthday presents, asking for donations to her cause instead. Then, she planned a Bollywood-themed school dance, with all proceeds going toward building the playground. Julia raised nearly \$900—enough money for a playground at one of the Dalit Freedom Network's elementary schools in a rural village outside the city of Hyderabad, India.

Because of her dream and her hard work, Julia provided hundreds of children with a place where they can enjoy swings, a slide, a seesaw and a merry-go-round. It is a place where kids can be kids, no matter what challenges they face outside of the playground.

Julia continues to speak out about the struggles that the Dalit people face. She raises awareness in her community about the need for international aid and cooperation, inspiring many of her friends and peers to get involved.

Kids Helping Kids

Written by Jaime Eisen

Courtesy Canadian Living Me to We Awards

Brennan Wong has been working with Free The Children since he was eight years old. Now a teenager, he is one of the organization's most dedicated and energetic volunteers.

Brennan has taken part in a bunch of Free The Children programs and campaigns, including Take Action Academy, Vow of Silence, Halloween for Hunger and Adopt a Village. He even travelled to China and India to visit Free The Children's communities. On these eye-opening trips, Brennan made a lot of new friends and helped build a school in each country.

"Free The Children is kids helping other kids," says Brennan. "We'd usually be playing video games or buying things, but using our time to help other people is so much better."

As a young leader who spreads Free The Children's message in his community, Brennan always encourages others to get involved.

Brennan has even organized his own events to raise funds and awareness, including jewellery sales, movie nights and coin drives at his school.

Brennan says he wants to "inspire others to make a difference." He makes a point of doing just that every year

on his birthday, when he throws a Celebrate for Change party and asks for donations to Free The Children instead of birthday presents.

Little Women for Little Women

Written by Laurie Mackenzie

Courtesy Canadian Living Me to We Awards

When Alaina Podmorrow heard about the hardships facing girls in Afghanistan, she wanted to make a difference. “I felt really moved about what’s happening and how they don’t have rights like education,” says Alaina, 11.

Alaina attended a speech by journalist Sally Armstrong as part of a fundraiser for Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan), an organization that raises funds for teachers’ salaries in Afghanistan, and was inspired to host a silent auction in Lake Country, B.C., where she lives.

What started as a one-time-only event inspired Alaina to form Little Women for Little Women in Afghanistan (LW4LW). Today there are 10 chapters of LW4LW across Canada and each one holds its own fundraising events. Collectively they have raised enough money to pay the salaries of 40 teachers. “You can do anything you put your heart to,” says the Grade 6 student. “Don’t let someone tell you can’t because you’re too young.”

Alaina continues to make a difference by speaking to schools, youth groups and community clubs. Her motto is simple: Let’s build a bridge to peace; education equals peace.

Growing Up Doesn’t Mean Growing Apathetic

Written by Ela Hefler (*Grade 11 student at Monarch Park Collegiate in Toronto and a member of Free The Children’s Youth Advisory Committee*)

In March 2011, I had the opportunity to attend an amazing and inspiring day with a number of passionate, motivated youth—Free The Children’s Youth Summit in Toronto. There I was part of a youth panel that discussed our experiences with Free The Children, what inspires us and tips for fundraising. At the end, we fielded questions from the audience. A young boy in primary school put up his hand and asked, “What is the worst thing that we do to people who need our help?”

So I told him, the worst thing we can do is ignore them. When we ignore those in need we allow them to live with hunger, thirst and disease, leaving them uneducated and exploited. We make it about us and them, when in fact we are all one. But ignoring the issues doesn’t make them go away.

Maybe we are lucky, because this problem is easily reversible; we can overcome it. When you take action to help another, however small, you refuse to close your eyes. You show that person that they are worth it; that you’re in it together.

Kids know that very well. They know right from wrong. They’re perfectly, shamelessly idealistic. I saw that

firsthand on April 19, 2011, when my high school worked with our family of schools to help out school children in Haiti.

We had 250 backpacks and 25 eager primary students ready to help fill them with school supplies they had been collecting for two weeks. We came together to put together school kits for Haitian students.

When Free The Children works in an international community they do their best to contribute to the local economy by purchasing necessary materials locally. But Haiti is different. Still recovering from the devastating earthquake in 2010, it continues to be a challenge to purchase supplies locally. So we created school kits for Haiti, each with a backpack, notebooks, pencils, a pencil sharpener, erasers, pens, crayons and pencil crayons. We also provided athletic equipment like soccer balls, tennis balls and jerseys.

We may have come together to help the children of Haiti, but stuffing backpacks had many personal rewards as well. After filling the backpacks with school supplies, we had some time to get to know each other better. When we sat down to talk, all the younger students eagerly shared stories of what they were doing to make positive change in the world and why it was important.

I hope the primary students who helped us that day never lose their drive, their determination and their optimistic hearts. I hope that myself and the other volunteers were able to show that that growing up doesn't mean growing apathetic.

Children, teenagers and adults alike have the power to change the world, if only we are willing to at least acknowledge its problems.

A Playground for Everyone

Written by Jaime Eisen

Courtesy Canadian Living Me to We Awards

Zac Andrus is 16 years old and has cerebral palsy, a condition that makes it hard or impossible to control one's muscles and body movement. But Zac has never let that stop him from making a difference and motivating others to do the same.

When Zac was six years old, he asked his mom why he couldn't play on the swing at his local park.

"When she told me why I couldn't, I was so sad," Zac says. "It wasn't fair that there wasn't an accessible swing for people with disabilities."

In 2007, Zac started fundraising for a fully accessible playground in his hometown of Port Hope, Ontario. He visited local schools to give speeches about living with a disability and about his hope to one day be able to play on his neighbourhood playground.

Through various initiatives, Zac raised \$30,000. In November 2009, he watched his dream become a reality as he gathered with his family, friends and neighbours for the opening of Port Hope's first accessible playground. They even named the playground "Zac's Dream."

Hunger for Haiti

Written by Kimberley Fortin, *Leader of the Cedar Park Free The Children Group*

The Cedar Park Free The Children Group is a community group based in Pointe-Claire, Quebec. We have about 30 members from many different schools, ranging from ages 12 to 21. We have been raising money for Free The Children development projects in Sierra Leone, China, Kenya and Haiti since 2003 and have so far raised a grand total of \$112,345.79!

On May 27 and 28 we held a 24 Hour Famine and Spaghetti Dinner event to raise money for a school in Dos Palais, Haiti. Our 24-hour famine was kicked off by Jimmy Ung, a Me to We motivational speaker. Following that there were non-stop activities until 3:00 am, including a coffee house event, parachute games, a Freedom from Thirst workshop and a movie. We started the next day by each having only one bowl of rice, which actually made most people feel hungrier. This portion of the event helped us to understand what it's like for those living in poverty who only have a small quantity of food every day and have to work or go to school on an empty stomach.

We spent the day discussing world news, playing board games and Haiti Jeopardy, holding Freedom from Poverty and Exploitation workshops, a video presentation on my recent trip to Kenya with Free The Children, skits and the preparation of food for our spaghetti dinner! Sixteen

youth participated in our famine and there were about 50 people at our spaghetti dinner. Overall, this event raised over \$1,300. Our event accomplished many things; not only did we raise money, but we raised awareness and had fun at the same time, while proving that young people can change the world one step at a time.

Africa Comes to California

Written by Emily Gelb, *Free The Children Youth Programming Coordinator*

On Friday March 18, a group of students from the Free The Children club at Keys School in Palo Alto, California hosted a school-wide Africa Day! Entirely student led, both teachers and students engaged in a day full of exciting activities where they learned more about African cultures and Free The Children's projects in Kenya and Sierra Leone.

Throughout the day, students discussed issues like poverty and exploitation. They also explored why projects like beekeeping and animal husbandry help families break the cycle of poverty by generating long-term, sustainable alternative income.

One of the most powerful parts of the day was a simulated water walk, where students raced through an obstacle course while carrying gallons of water. It was not an easy task, and many of the students were shocked to learn how heavy water can be. They were moved by the fact that their peers abroad have to carry that much water every day. After spending the morning learning about the lack of access to clean water in Africa, and the many consequences of using dirty water, this activity had a serious impact on the students.

The students also had a lot of fun. They learned how to bead necklaces, just like the mamas in Kenya. There was Bingo, prefaced by a lesson in Swahili and the importance of education. Students also cooked, and tried traditional African meals like Ugali—maize flour cooked with water into a porridge-like consistency. Most of the students didn't mind Ugali, but were grateful for their ability to choose a variety of different foods for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

According to educator Rebecca Stern, who has had the opportunity to travel to Kenya to visit Free The Children projects, the highlight of the day was playing the drums with a special guest named Francis. Francis grew up in Uganda and taught the students about the important cultural role that the drums play throughout Africa. "To see the students so engaged and interested in a continent so far away from them, and their everyday lives, was really powerful. It was great to watch the kids teaching other kids," Stern concluded.

The day was a huge success; a balance between understanding the realities of poverty in Africa while also celebrating the beauty and diversity of African cultures.

Changing Attitudes

Principal Pedro Santana describes Angelo Patri School as the kind of school in the Bronx “you would see in the movies.” The school faces a multitude of challenges ranging from crime, low-attendance, delinquent behaviour and constant graffiti. School budgets are constantly being cut and resources are scarce. But when Pedro learned of Free The Children’s youth programs, this school’s fortunes turned around in an enormous way.

Pedro saw the program as a way to inspire and motivate a group of middle-schoolers who were always in the halls, could not focus in class and had low grades. He thought: what better way to reach these students than to place them all together in one class and encourage them to work together? This approach was unique in that not only did Pedro intend for this class to act as the school’s Free The Children chapter, but this group of students also studied together for their regular classes. Through Free The Children, a new “family” was born at Angelo Patri.

The results were immediate. Students in the Free The Children class started attending school regularly and were taken with the idea of helping those that have even less than they do. In June 2008, the club threw a carnival fundraiser where they managed to raise \$4,000 from a community that had so little to give. The event marked the first time ever that the school was able to hold a school-wide function without an incident of student misbehav-

our. In fact, it went off without a hitch and everyone had a wonderful time!

The class returned from summer break with a visit from the tour speakers. Michel and Katie spoke in front of the eighth graders and felt as if they had entered a “home,” not a school. They could not believe the stories they heard about the transformation: student suspensions went down from a yearly average of 250 to 6, attendance and GPA levels rose, and the school has rallied around the cause of looking beyond themselves.

Since then, the club has been taking many local actions in an effort to improve the lives of the less fortunate in the community. Pedro has noticed that his students have become “phenomenal community members” and are truly changing the lives of others, as well as their own.

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