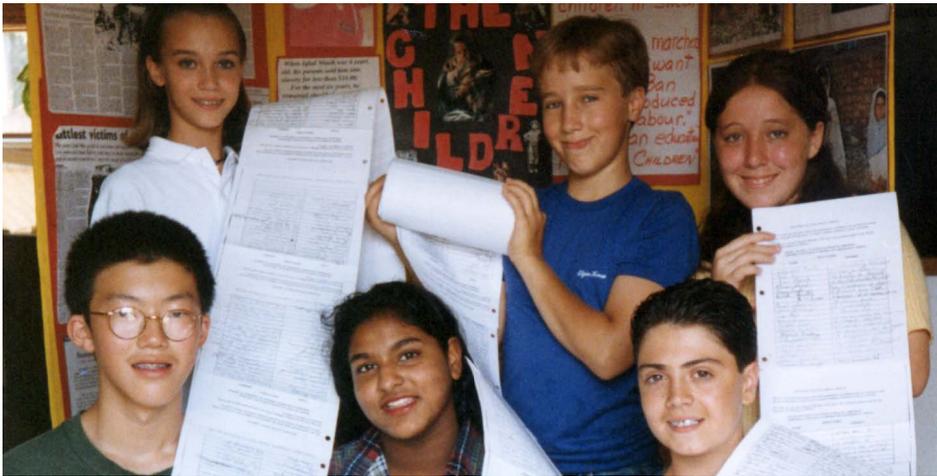


THE POWER OF LETTERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER



Letter writing and collecting signatures on petitions were some of the first actions Free The Children (WE Charity) took to prompt social change. Photo source: WE archives.

Growing up, there was an unspoken absence in Zainib Abdullah's life.

In Richmond Hill, Ontario, far from the home her family left in Iraq, she pieced together the story of her uncle. He had been unjustly arrested and disappeared years earlier by Saddam Hussein's government, without a trial or a chance to say goodbye to his loved ones.

Now she puts pen to paper, writing letters on behalf of people unfairly imprisoned around the world.

"I wasn't able to write to my uncle, but this is a way I can help others," she says, lifting her pen from a letter at Amnesty International's annual [Write for Rights](#) event in Toronto. "There is definitely a healing element."

The pen holds power and letters can change lives.

More intimate than an email, more impactful than a tweet, the personal touch of a letter can reach prisoners of conscience hidden away in the world's darkest corners and remind those in power they can't act with impunity.

Journalist [Khadija Ismayilova](#) spent nearly two years in prison on trumped-up charges of tax evasion after she exposed corruption

in Azerbaijan's government. [Malek Adly](#) called on people to protest human rights abuses in Egypt and ended up in jail. Both of them walked free this year after massive global letter writing campaigns.

Letters and petitions were among our first actions as young activists.

When [Kailash Satyarthi](#) was arrested in 1995 for raiding carpet factories to fight child labour, we wrote an impassioned letter to the Indian Prime Minister and included 3,000 signatures on a petition for his release. We put both in a shoebox and mailed them to New Delhi.

A year later, when Satyarthi came to Canada to speak, he remembered the shoebox brimming with names. "It was one of the most powerful actions taken on my behalf," he said.

We hear a lot about [clicktivism](#)—about tweets unleashing global awareness campaigns and social media causes going viral. While it's easier than ever to mobilize huge numbers and support, the low barrier to entry can mean that many worthy causes fade into white noise.

That is why we believe in meeting with your MP (that's why they have offices) and in marches of protest. And when your feet can't carry you far enough and meetings aren't an

option, write a letter or pick up the phone. This was a major theme at the recent [Women's March on Washington](#) because politicians pay attention when people raise their voice.

When Canadian computer programmer [Hamid Ghassemi-Shall](#) was arrested in Iran in 2008 and baselessly accused of espionage, Abdullah immediately got involved with his case. At one event she attended, his wife Antonella Mega played a voicemail she'd received from prison.

"We listened to him saying how much he loves her and it was beautiful. Antonella was beaming," Abdullah recalls. "I remember thinking, 'what if he's never released!'"

Finally free after five years in prison, Ghassemi-Shall told supporters at an Amnesty International event how their letters gave him the energy to keep fighting, and Abdullah couldn't help but reflect on her own uncle.

"I think about him sometimes, about what it would have been like for him to get a letter."

That's what keeps her writing.