



Peacemaker Snapshot: Craig Kielburger



Craig Kielburger: Free the Children

Born and raised in Canada, Craig Kielburger began his journey down the road of peacemaking and social activism at the age of 12. One evening while flipping through the Toronto newspaper for the comics, Craig saw a picture of a young boy that was his age. The picture was of Iqbal Masih, a 12-year-old Pakistani boy. Craig read the story about Iqbal and was shocked by what he learned.

At the age of four, Iqbal was sold into slavery by his parents. They did not want to sell Iqbal but they felt as though they did not have another choice. For six years, he worked between 12 and 14 hours a day in a carpet factory. Also, Iqbal suffered beatings from his master, was chained to his carpet-making loom, and was not allowed to go to school. During those years, Iqbal's parents tried to buy their son back from his owner. However, it seemed that Iqbal's parents would never be able to buy his freedom because Iqbal's owner kept increasing his price by charging his parents for the bowl of rice he was fed daily and for any mistakes in Iqbal's work.



Unfortunately, Iqbal was not alone; there were many Pakistani children that shared Iqbal's circumstances. When he was 10, Iqbal escaped from his enslavement by the carpet factory owner with the help of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front and the Pakistani police. After his escape, Iqbal began to attend school, spoke out about child labor enslavement, and helped to free many other young people. However, at the age of 12, Iqbal was murdered; it is a crime that remains unsolved to this day.

Although they were the same age, Craig was very aware of how different his life was from Iqbal's. Craig could hang out with his friends, go to school, live with his family, and

so forth. Those were all things that Iqbal and millions of other children could not do because they were slaves. In fact, Craig was shocked to learn that slavery still existed in the world. He went to his local library to learn more about child labor and slavery. While researching child labor, Craig discovered that the carpets, as well as other products, that the children made, were exported and sold in other countries, including Canada. After finishing his research and gathering statistics, Craig photocopied the article on Iqbal and prepared a presentation for his classmates at school. His presentation inspired a group of his classmates to help him in his attempts to defend children's rights around the world. Thus, **(Kids Can) Free the Children** was born.

Craig and his friends began **Free the Children** to do their part in helping to free the children of the world from abuse and exploitation. Moreover, they wanted to free children from the idea that they were not old enough, smart enough, or capable enough to help change the world. Craig was able to recognize the amazing things that Iqbal had accomplished at such a young age and was aware that he and others could do the same. They started out by organizing many small projects: they wrote a petition asking world leaders to help end child labor and the exploitation of children; they began a letter-writing campaign to newspapers, the Prime Minister of Canada, the President of the United States, and other world leaders; they began an educational campaign on child labor and children's rights by making flyers, creating bulletin boards, giving speeches to other classrooms, community groups, etc; and they organized fundraising events (garage sales, car washes, bake sales, and walk-a-thons) to raise money to help build schools and to create alternative sources of income for working children and their families.



Quickly, Craig and Free the Children began to gain recognition. When Free the Children was six months old (and Craig was still 12), Craig was invited to speak to 2000 people at the Ontario Federation of Labor Convention. He was told he had three minutes to address the audience, but 15 minutes later he was exiting the stage to standing ovations. People at the convention were so moved by Craig's speech that they donated \$150,000 to Free the Children. The donation was unexpected; Craig was there only to educate the convention participants on child labor. However, with the help of this large donation, Free the Children was able to build a rehabilitation and education center in Alwar, India, for children who were freed from slavery as carpet weavers.

Two months after the convention, Craig decided that he needed to take a trip to Southeast Asia to meet the child workers and learn more about their situation. It took a while, but Craig finally convinced his parents to allow him to go on this trip. On this trip, he met many children and listened to their stories. Many of these children did not even know what school was because they were forced to work as slaves. From these experiences, Craig wrote a book, *Free the Children*. Craig gives all of the profits from his book to the organization.



Upon his return to Canada, Craig continued to speak out against child labor and for children's rights. Soon, many media outlets were speaking about him and his work. As

other young people heard about Craig, they too became empowered to work to create change. Free the Children was an avenue for these young people to become involved. Through Free the Children, schools in North America, Europe, and other industrialized countries developed partnerships with schools in countries where child labor rates were high. These partnerships are called “Friendship Schools,” and they allow young people around the world to work toward finding solutions to injustice.

Over the years, Craig has been the recipient of a lot of criticism. Some adults feel that he is too young to be telling adults what they should and should not do. However, Craig feels strongly about youth leadership. He feels that it is important for young people to have a voice and the opportunity to take part in issues which affect them. He thinks young people need to become involved because they have a great deal to contribute—energy, enthusiasm, and the willingness to learn. Furthermore, Craig thinks that young people make powerful leaders—in part, because they are not worried about elections and politics. For these reasons, the members of the Board of Directors for Free the Children are all under the age of 18. In 1999, Craig and his brother Marc co-founded **Leaders Today**. **Leaders Today** is an organization that empowers youth to become active global citizens by training them in the skills of leadership, teamwork, effective communication, and self-confidence.



Since it began in 1995, Free the Children has helped many children around the world. With the use of the internet, Free the Children has encouraged thousands of young volunteers in more than 35 countries to fight for children’s rights. Youth members have raised money to build schools for over 15,000 kids and have created more than 100,000 school kits to give to students. The work of Free the Children has lobbied many businesses to adopt child-free labor policies and to adhere child-free labor labels to their products. Furthermore, Free the Children has advocated on the behalf of children with political and religious leaders, including the Pope, Mother Theresa, Queen Elizabeth II, the Dalai Lama, and various presidents and prime ministers.

Over the years, Craig has accomplished many great things. He has been honored with many awards and distinctions. However, many feel that his greatest accomplishment has been proving to the world the leadership skills and power of young people.

