



# 1 THORNHILL

**M**y mind goes back to April 19, 1995. I woke to sun streaming through my window, a welcome sign that summer was on its way. It was Wednesday, another school day, one I was looking forward to, in fact. Today were the tryouts for the cross-country running team.

As I stretched my way from under the blankets, I watched my dog go through her own waking-up ritual at the foot of my bed. I hauled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt.

“Hey, Muffin. Let’s go, girl.” I gave her a playful rub about her neck and off she went, racing ahead of me and down the stairs.

My mother, up for an hour or more already, was in the kitchen making lunches. The Kielburger household would soon be heading off to school. Both my parents are teachers. There were just the three of us; my older brother, Marc, had gone away to a junior college in January.

“Hi, Mom. The paper arrived yet?” I said, pouring cereal into a bowl.

“It’s on the chair.”

Every morning I read the comics before heading off to school. *Doodlesbury*. *Calvin and Hobbes*. *Wizard of Id*. These are my favourites. If I find one particularly funny, sometimes I’ll cut it out and post it on my bulletin board, or tape it to one of my school books. We all can use a good laugh every day.

I picked up the *Toronto Star* and put it on the table. But I didn’t make it past the front page. Staring back at me was the headline: “Battled child labor, boy, 12, murdered.” It was a jolt. Twelve, the same age as I was. My eyes fixed on the picture of a boy in a bright-red vest. He had a broad smile, his arm raised straight in the air, a fist clenched.

I read on. “Defied members of ‘carpet mafia.’” Scenes from old movies came to my mind. But this wasn’t any such mafia; the dateline was Pakistan. The boy was someone named Iqbal Masih.

I read quickly through the article, hardly believing the words before me.

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan (AP) – When Iqbal Masih was 4 years old, his parents sold him into slavery for less than \$16.

For the next six years, he remained shackled to a carpet-weaving loom most of the time, tying tiny knots hour after hour.

By the age of 12, he was free and travelling the world in his crusade against the horrors of child labor.

On Sunday, Iqbal was shot dead while he and two friends were riding their bikes in their village of Muridke, 35 kilometres outside the eastern city of Lahore. Some believe his murder was carried out by angry members of the carpet industry who had made repeated threats to silence the young activist.

I turned to my mother. “Have you read this? What exactly is child labour? Do you think he was really killed for standing up to this ‘carpet mafia,’ whatever that is?”

She was as lost for answers as I was. “Try the library at school,” she suggested. “Maybe you’ll find some information there.”

Riding the bus to school later that morning, I could think of nothing but the article I had read on the front page. What kind of parents would sell their child into slavery at four years of age? And who would ever chain a child to a carpet loom?

Throughout the day I was consumed by Iqbal’s story. In my Grade 7 class we had studied the American Civil War, and Abraham Lincoln, and how some of the slaves in the United States had escaped into Canada. But that was history from centuries ago. Surely slavery had been abolished throughout the world by now. If it wasn’t, why had I never heard about it?

The school library was no help. After a thorough search I still hadn’t found a scrap of information. After school, I decided to make the trek to the public library.

The librarian knew me from my previous visits. Together, we searched out more information on child labour. We found a few newspaper and magazine articles, and made copies.

By the time I returned home, images of child labour had imbedded themselves in my mind: children younger than me forced to make carpets for endless hours in dimly lit rooms; others toiling in underground pits,

struggling to get coal to the surface; others maimed or killed by explosions raging through fireworks factories. I was angry at the world for letting these things happen to children. Why was nothing being done to stop such cruelty?

As I walked through my middle-class neighbourhood, my thoughts were on the other side of the world. And my own world seemed a shade darker.

That evening I had great difficulty concentrating on my homework. I pulled out the articles I had brought from the library and read them over, again and again. I had often seen the faces of poverty and malnutrition on television. At school we had discussed the famines whole nations have been forced to endure. But this was different. For some reason these descriptions of child labour had moved me like no other story of injustice.

Perhaps it was because the stories were of people my own age, and many even younger. Perhaps it was because these few words had shattered my ideas of what childhood was all about—school, friends, time to play. I had work to do around my house—carrying out the garbage, cleaning up the backyard—but it all seemed so trivial compared to what these children had to do.

I thought of how I would react if I found myself in their place. I felt sure I would rebel, gather everyone together and stand up to the cruelty. But I *wasn't* in their place; I could only imagine what I would do.

I opened our world atlas on the kitchen table and searched the index until it led me to a map of Pakistan. I discovered it wedged between Iran, Afghanistan and India, with the Arabian Sea along its southern edge. I couldn't locate Muridke; it was too small to be on the map. I did find Lahore, and repeated the word several times out loud. It seemed so far away, a world I didn't know at all.

I had to find out more.

"I have a friend who worked overseas, in Africa," my mother told me. "Why don't you give her a call? If she can't answer your questions, I'm sure she'll know of someone who can."

That first telephone conversation led to calls to several human rights organizations. Little did I think, in the months to come, it would lead to hundreds of other calls and faxes around the world, all in a quest to get to the heart of the issue of child labour.

Two things struck me right away. First of all, none of the organizations

I talked to seemed to know much about child labour. But equally amazing: every person who tried to answer my questions was an adult. Without a single exception. Even though the issue was all about children, there were no young people involved in these organizations. I could hardly believe it. Shouldn't other children be speaking out in defence of children?

I'm always fascinated by coincidences, how one random event can come on the heels of another and together alter the whole direction of a person's life. Early the following week, in the Life section of the *Toronto Star*, there was a full-page article in celebration of Youth Week. As part of the activities, an organization called Youth Action Network was sponsoring an event at a downtown convention centre that coming Friday. Youth organizations were invited to set up displays and distribute information.

I'm not sure why, in the end, I decided to call the number in the article. I guess it was because I was tired of being able to speak only to organizations run by adults.

By a stroke of good fortune, my call was directed to Alam Rahman. Alam, whose parents were from Bangladesh, was a recent university graduate. I had no way of knowing it at the time, but Alam would become a very central figure in my life. I spoke to him for more than an hour about Iqbal and child labour. I tested the idea of getting some friends together and starting a children's group to fight such cruelty.

Alam didn't hesitate. "It's a great idea, Craig. You should try it!"

That was all I needed. The following day I asked my Grade 7 teacher, Mr. Fedrigoni, if I could have a few minutes to speak to the students before class began. I'm sure he must have thought it was about some social function or a football game I was organizing during lunch break.

As usual, we stood by our desks while the morning announcements came over the public-address system, followed faithfully by the national anthem. Then we sat down and quietly listened to Mr. Fedrigoni say how there had been a few problems with discipline the day before, but that he hoped this would be a better day. When he had finished, he simply said, "Craig has a few comments he would like to make to you." He looked at me and nodded.

I walked to the front and turned to face the thirty students in my class. The room was silent except for a couple of boys whispering in a back row. When I began, they too were quiet. But I was still nervous; I always found speaking in front of my peers a tough thing to do, and I still had no idea how

they would react to what I would say.

“I was wondering if anyone saw this article on the front page of last Wednesday’s *Toronto Star*,” I began.

I had made photocopies of it, which I passed around the classroom. As I did so, I started to tell Iqbal’s story. I described his struggles and his dream, and how that dream had been cut short by an assassin’s bullet. I presented the alarming statistics on child labour. As I spoke, I could see that many of my classmates were just as shocked as I was by the story. Anger, sympathy, disbelief filled the room.

“So this is the issue,” I said. “I don’t know a lot about it, but I want to learn more. Maybe some of us could start a group to look at it together.” And then came the fateful question, “Who wants to join?”

About eleven hands shot up, and I very quickly jotted down their names. I thanked Mr. Fedrigoni and the class for the half-hour of their time I had taken.

And through that simple action, it began.

At lunchtime that day, some of us got together and talked about what we could do. I was amazed at how enthusiastic they all were. I told them about the youth fair on Friday.

“Do you think we could put together a display?” I asked. “We haven’t got much time.”

“Sure. Let’s do it.”

“We can all meet at my house,” I said.

That night, twelve of us got together. It was a very tight deadline, with just two days to prepare. We found an old science fair board, and we covered it with coloured paper, pasting on all the information I had found on child labour in the library, then drawing pictures to illustrate it.

We had determined that our first objective should be to inform people of the plight of child labourers. Armed with such knowledge, they might be willing to help. We decided to draw up a petition to present to the government, and called on the expertise of a couple of human rights groups to refine the wording for us.

But we were still without a name for our group. For more than an hour we struggled to come up with something suitable. We flipped through the newspaper clippings for inspiration. One of them reported on a demonstration in Delhi, India, where 250 children had marched through the streets with placards, chanting, “We want an education,” “We want freedom,” “Free

The Children!”

“That’s it!” someone shouted. “Free The Children!”

“Perfect,” I said. “We’re using their words. Children speaking for children.”

“Exactly.”

We had found a name. Marilyn Davis, the best artist among us, had earlier drawn a picture of children chained to a carpet loom. Before pasting the picture onto our information board, across the top she had written slogans, including “Break the Chains” and “Save the Children.” Now we pasted a piece of paper over the word “SAVE” and wrote “FREE” in big letters.

Free The Children was born. We hoisted our board like a giant placard, in solidarity with the children who had marched through the streets of Delhi.

I remember lying awake that Thursday night, thinking about what we had gotten ourselves into. Here we were, just a group of friends, a ragtag lot compared to all the other organizations sure to be taking part in the youth fair. Yet we had worked hard, read all the information I had collected, and felt confident we could get our point across to anyone who was willing to listen.

As I slowly drifted off to sleep, I could only think: ready or not, here we go. And the next morning, that’s exactly what happened—off we went, the start of something that would take over my life and catch the world’s attention to an extent that none of us could ever have imagined.

I am often asked where I found the confidence to start Free The Children and take on the responsibility of being its spokesperson. Was there something in my family background that prompted me to grab on to this issue and get so deeply involved in it? Others are more blunt about it. What were your parents like? Were you a *normal kid*?

“Normal” can mean a lot of things. If it means playing basketball, watching TV, listening to music, hanging out with my friends . . . sure, I did all those things. I still do. But to me it can also mean getting involved because you believe so deeply in a cause that you can’t see yourself just standing on the sidelines, waiting for other people to act.

I can’t honestly say that I remember my parents ever becoming involved in any social issues when I was young. But they did instil in my brother and me a sense that people should take care of one another. And they grew up in the Sixties, so perhaps the idealism of young people then had some effect on them. They never talked much about those days. It was only recently I

discovered that before they were married my mother ran a drop-in centre for street kids in Toronto, and my father worked at L'Arche, a home for mentally challenged adults in France that had been started by Jean Vanier, a Canadian humanitarian.

My father's ancestry is German. His father arrived in Canada during the Great Depression, when he was just nineteen. My grandfather was a big man, and from the many stories he's told me, I know he earned money fighting boxers in Toronto, for what was considered suicide pay. Eventually he and my grandmother saved enough money to open a small grocery store close to the area of downtown Toronto known as Cabbagetown. His family worked in that store day and night. They closed the store only one day in twenty-three years, to take a trip to visit Niagara Falls.

My father worked in the store after school and on the weekends. He thought there was no chance for university, and never even discussed the possibility until his last year of high school. He was amazed when my grandparents told him they not only consented to the idea, but had saved up enough money to make it possible, with the understanding that he would still help out in the store.

My mother, the second youngest of four children, was born in Windsor, Ontario, just across the border from Detroit. She was only nine when her father passed away, and my grandmother was left to provide for the children. The family went through some difficult times, including one summer when their only shelter was a tent. Sometimes the family had to go without proper food. Often the simplest things, such as a bologna sandwich, became a treat. But my grandmother was a strong and determined woman, and with only a Grade 8 education she worked her way up from cleaning other people's homes to an office job at the Chrysler Corporation, where, eventually, she became head of her department. She instilled in her children the belief that they could do anything they wanted in life, and, working together as a team, their family life soon improved.

When my mother was ten years old, she began to work weekends with her older sister in a neighbourhood store, sorting pop bottles, waiting on customers, and delivering groceries. The whole family worked very hard, and in the years that followed, they could look with pride on the fact that every one of the children went on to university. My mother was always able to add a perspective on the issue of child labour from her own experience.

It was my parents' strong work ethic and belief that we must face chal-

lenges in life to achieve our goals that most influenced my brother and me. We grew up with the mottoes "Go for it!" and "The only failure in life is not trying."

My brother, Marc, is six years older than I am. He became, in many ways, my role model. Marc was good in everything—school, sports, public speaking—and I wanted to be just like him. He was a swimmer and football player. Rugby was one of his favourite sports, and sometimes, horsing around in the backyard, he would tackle me. Just to toughen me up, he said!

When he was thirteen, Marc became interested in environmental issues. For a Grade 8 science project he set up a series of experiments to test the effects of various commercial home cleaning products on the environment. He was able to prove that these cleansers had serious negative effects, including the pollution of the water system. The following year he took the project one step further: using combinations of everyday kitchen items such as lemon juice, vinegar, baking soda, and water, he concocted recipes to make his own household cleansers. He demonstrated that not only were these cleansers environmentally friendly and cheaper, but they did the job just as well as—if not better than—the brand name products.

Marc went on to prove that the paint used to decorate china plates and to label food wrappers often contained harmful amounts of lead. Food was exposed to this lead when the plates were scratched by cutlery or when it came in contact with the outside of the wrappers. As a result of his commitment, including the many speeches he gave, petitions he initiated and the environmental clubs he helped to set up in schools, Marc won an environmental award from YTV, Canada's Youth Television Network, and he became the youngest person ever to receive the Ontario Citizenship Award.

I think it was from watching my brother's involvement in environmental issues that I realized children have power. And to this day, my mother tells me that she would watch me as I listened to my brother practising his speeches, mimicking his words and expressions as I followed him, the whole time using my hands as if I were conducting an orchestra.

Sometimes when Marc was visiting high schools to get names on a petition, he would invite me along. Handing me a petition sheet and a pen, he would explain what it was all about. "Just go up to people," he would say, "and speak slowly and clearly." It was my first taste of activism. I was only seven years old. The high school students towering over me thought I was so cute that they didn't hesitate to sign the petition.

It helped that I had a bit of a speech problem. When I went up to the first group of high school girls and rattled off the lines Marc had taught me, I caused a sensation. “Oh, come and hear the way this kid talks. He’s so cute!” Soon there was a crowd of students gathered around to hear me speak. That day I collected more names on the petition than all of Marc’s friends put together.

“Someday I will give speeches,” I would tell my mother.

“Don’t worry,” she would say. “You don’t have to give speeches if you don’t want to. You could be good in something else.”

My speech problem was caused by chronic ear infections. These infections, and the ailments related to them, were a part of my childhood I had learned to live with. A loud cough caused by bronchitis made me sound like a truck (to use my father’s constant expression). I remember one school-teacher getting angry with me because she thought I was trying to disrupt the class.

“Craig,” she would say, “please don’t do that! The other students are trying to study.” I could never figure out why she thought anyone would make such a noise on purpose.

Because I wasn’t hearing certain words or letter sounds correctly, my speech was sometimes slurred. Or I would drop letters, or mispronounce *rs* or certain vowels. Once a week my mother took me to the hospital for a session with a speech therapist. At first I saw no need of it. I thought I could go through life without using *rs*. But in the end, I took the therapist’s advice and started to really concentrate on the program, including a daily session of practising a list of words with my mother in the car on the way to school. Before long, things were improving.

When I was ten years old, all of my speech problems disappeared. The ear infections that had plagued me for so long had stopped. One day my mother said to me, “You know, Craig, you are saying all your words clearly now.” What a great feeling!

Now I could have fun in our backyard pool without the earplugs and the dreaded swim cap covering my ears. The week-long camping trips I would take with my scout troop became less of a worry for my mother. Those camping trips were one of the highlights of each year for me. I loved getting away from it all.

Some of my best scouting memories are the canoeing excursions we would take to Algonquin Park or Georgian Bay. Paddling and portaging

through uninhabited country, through rain or shine, until, at the end of the day, we reached a spot to pitch our tents. As pack leader, I would be the one to organize setting up the tent and cooking the meal that followed. Macaroni and cheese was our specialty. In fact, we practically lived on the stuff.

After a long day of canoeing, there is nothing quite like sitting around a fire, devouring the evening meal, and then later, as it grows dark, watching the stars come out and listening for the sounds of nature far away from the commotion of city life.

The following spring, after my speech problems had cleared up, I found out about a public speaking competition in our community. I was immediately interested, but I had little time to prepare, and it would be my first speech.

“You can’t expect to win,” my mother cautioned. “You will be a winner just for trying.”

And so we decided the speech would be about “What It Means to Be a Winner.”

The night before the competition, I had a coughing attack. My mother stayed up with me, feeding me hot tea and cough syrup. In the morning, my mother said that maybe it wasn’t such a good idea for me to participate in the competition.

“No,” I said. “I’ll be fine. I want to go.”

I spent the morning sitting up in bed learning my speech. But I still wasn’t feeling well and couldn’t seem to remember the words.

“Just do your best,” my mother said to me. “That’s all that matters.”

When my name was called, I stood up and walked to the podium at the front of the room. I could feel the butterflies in my stomach. I looked at all the eyes staring at me. Suddenly I couldn’t remember a word of what I had practised. And, unlike the other speakers, I didn’t have any cue cards to refer to.

So I began to speak from my heart about the things I had learned about “winning.” I spoke about sports coaches who scream at children and make them cry when they make a mistake. I told them about a note my mother had written to me when I lost a science fair competition, which said I was still a winner to her. The more I talked, the more my confidence rose. I found my voice getting stronger and my hands come alive. I concluded by stressing the importance of fighting for the things we believe in, even when there are obstacles put in our way. That was what winning was all about.

I could hardly believe the applause as I returned to my seat. My mother gave me a hug. The previous year's provincial winner spoke next. She was poised and articulate. You could tell she had a lot of experience. I thought she was clearly the best speaker of the group.

The judges returned half an hour later. They reminded the speakers that we were all winners, making reference to what I had said in my speech. They began by announcing the third-place winner. Then in second place they named the girl who had won the provincial competition the year before. I was completely stunned. I had won the gold medal!

I learned something very important the day of my first public speech. There was no doubt that the girl who placed second gave a more articulate speech. I had won because I had spoken not from words on a piece of paper, but from my heart. It was a lesson I would never forget.

I had an entire week to practise my speech before the next competition. Over the following two months, I won first place at the next four levels and ended up second in the province. That fall I represented my school at regional and school board-wide competitions and again won the gold medal for our school. My brother started to kid me that public speaking was in my blood.

I was now twelve years old and in Grade 7. Boy Scouts remained a major part of my life, but I had also taken up tae kwon do. I continued my extracurricular activities at school, including teaching soccer to some of the younger students. On Sundays I went to church, and played floor hockey with the neighbourhood kids in the afternoon. I still found time now and then to read a good book.

One day, I heard from a friend that the local library was being closed down, because the city councillors had decided it was too expensive to run. There was a meeting called to discuss the matter, so a few of my friends and I decided to attend. We sat at the back and listened to the adults make their comments. When it came time for questions, again it was only adults speaking.

I raised my hand. I stood up and talked about the importance of the library to young people, how they depended on it for their research papers and science projects. I talked about how far away the other library would be—a twenty-five-minute bike ride, one way. When I was finished, other children stood up and began to speak.

One of the organizers of the fight to save the library phoned me a few

days later, wondering if I would attend a second meeting. Eventually I was asked to speak on behalf of elementary school students to a large gathering that included the mayor and our city councillor.

It was the first time I had become involved in an issue that was bigger than myself. In the end, we lost the fight to save the library, but I had learned a lot from the experience. I learned that children's opinions are seldom considered, even when it's an issue that affects them directly. I learned that many adults don't think of us as having a role to play in issues of social justice, assuming that we have little to contribute. But I also learned that, with enough determination, young people could be heard. And that what it required, first and foremost, was a sound understanding of an issue and the confidence to speak openly about it. Only then would we establish our credibility.

When Free The Children travelled to downtown Toronto for the youth fair that Saturday morning in April 1995, we hardly knew what to expect.

We proudly set up our makeshift information board on a table and sat on the floor in a circle, where we stapled our information sheets together. As we did so, we couldn't help noticing the other organizations' impressive displays, their large, glossy panels, their professional brochures, their neat arrangements of videos and books. But the one thing the other groups didn't have was elementary school children. A few high school students took part, but mostly there were adults who spoke at the fair about what their organizations were doing "for" children. We were the only children speaking for themselves.

People flocked around our table to hear what we had to say. Twelve-year-old children working for other children? Children speaking for themselves about human rights? We were an oddity. That day the second goal of our group began to emerge: putting more power in the hands of young people. Children needed to have a voice and had to be able to participate in issues that affect them. Who best to understand children than other children? We realized that not only did children like Iqbal need to be freed from physical enslavement, but children like us needed to be freed from the misconception that we were not smart enough, old enough or capable enough to contribute to social issues.

Over the next two months, we came to feel that our group had built a solid foundation. We had a name, we had definite goals, and soon we were

to have an office.

My house seemed to be the ideal location. It had always been open to kids. Marc's friends and my friends had always used our house as a place to get together for fun, school projects or parties. There were young people constantly coming and going.

Even better, there weren't a lot of doors separating one room from the next. One member of Free The Children (or FTC for short) could be working in the living room, stapling together information sheets; others could be in the dining room, discussing strategy; another could be at the kitchen table, writing letters. As wonderful as this idea sounded, and as much as we all felt it would work, my parents weren't so thrilled.

"How about the den?" my mother suggested. "I think that's a more reasonable possibility."

The den had once been a garage and, as my mother pointed out, had the great advantage of being close to the front door, so that people could come and go without much disturbance. We checked it out and, much to my parents' delight, decided it would be perfect. We retrieved an old filing cabinet from the basement, added a table and a bookcase, and we were in business.

Soon the filing cabinet started to fill with print material from the numerous organizations to whom we had sent letters requesting information. We cut out articles and compiled press clippings on the issue of child labour and filled our shelves with books, videotapes and any other information we could find. We covered the walls with posters and moved in the family computer, which was soon in constant use. Before long, we were putting together basic kits for distribution to schools and anyone else who might contact us for information about our organization and the issue of child labour.

One night my dad brought me into the room to remind me that I had left the lights on (something I did all the time). I remember standing there, with my hand on the light switch, looking around and thinking: It's amazing that with such a small group we can do all this. We had grown an incredible amount in the space of a few months—and in the months to come, we could only grow bigger.

We were ready to take our campaign on the road. I drew up a letter in which I spoke about Free The Children and how we wanted to reach out and talk about the issue of child labour with young people. I gave it to my principal, and he arranged for it to be distributed to all the schools within

our school district. The response was slow. It made us think that not many adults believed a group of twelve-year-olds could hold a class's attention for more than ten minutes.

Our first request came from a neighbouring school. With a date in place, we set to work preparing for our visit. We decided the best approach would be to tell stories of the children, the same stories that had affected us so deeply when we first heard them.

When the day came, we crowded aboard my family's minivan. At the school we piled out, clutching our posters and information sheets. We walked nervously and almost in single file, towards the first classroom. Each of us was going over in our minds what we would say.

The teacher was very friendly. She explained to the students who we were and why we had come. We stood there—Ashley Stetts, Vance Ciaramella and I—lined across the room in front of the blackboard, almost as if we were facing a firing squad. We all took a deep breath.

Vance spoke about Iqbal. Ashley told the story of a young girl named Easwaris who worked in a fireworks factory. Her job was loading the sulphur and charcoal into the fireworks tubes. There had been an explosion in which Easwaris's eight-year-old sister had been killed, and she herself now had scars lining her back and arms.

"According to the International Labour Organization, there are more than 250 million working children," I told the students. "That's equal to the entire population of the United States!"

By the end of the presentation, the students were just as shocked as we had been when we first heard about child labour. We left them with a challenge to take their first action and write a letter. It could be to a company, asking them to ensure that their products were child labour-free, or to a world leader, challenging them to put more money into education and the protection of children, or to the Pakistani government, demanding that Iqbal's killers be brought to justice.

We went from class to class, giving the same speech. And each time we had the same response. The students were eager to get involved. They wanted to help. In fact, by the time we finished the fourth class, the teacher brought us back to the first and the students presented us with a pile of letters.

These were the first of thousands of such letters we would receive from children in the years that followed.

Slowly but surely, our campaign began to grow. Speaking at one school led to an invitation to speak at another, and then at another. We began to receive invitations from parent-teacher associations, local churches, and service groups. More and more letters filled our office files, and more and more information covered our walls.

We began to get a reputation as an organization that provided good speakers who were able to hold the attention of a crowd. In late May we received a request to speak to a world issues class at a high school, Brebeuf College. The presentation would be to a class of Grade 13 students, most of them six or seven years older than we were. It was certainly a big jump from speaking to those first Grade 5 and 6 classes.

The session took place in a portable classroom on a hot spring day. Despite every window being open, the place was stifling. The thirty students, in their white shirts and loosened ties, filled the room. It looked like a mini-United Nations; there were students from a dozen different ethnic backgrounds. One student was twirling a pencil, moving it from finger to finger and back again.

Marilyn Davis, Adam Fazzari and I gave the presentation. Despite the age of our audience, we felt confident about what we had to say. After all, we had given the same presentation many times before. We each knew just where the other was going to stop, and where each of us would begin. We each took turns speaking, one perfectly synchronized with the other. When we wrapped up, we asked for questions.

“Well, don’t all leap at us at once,” I said to break the ice.

The first question was easy. A student asked if Iqbal’s killers were ever brought to justice. I told the class that in fact someone had been arrested, but that it was widely suspected he did not commit the crime.

Then, a student piped up. “If you eliminate child labour, won’t you send local currencies plummeting, causing unemployment and economic chaos amongst the countries?”

Marilyn looked at me. I stared back at her. She glanced at Adam, then said, “Craig, you take this one.”

An answer stumbled out. “I’m not really sure if that’s the case. I can honestly say I don’t really have an answer . . .”

Another student asked, “What gives you the right to go to these countries and tell them what to do? Aren’t you simply white imperialists coming from a rich country, telling these people in the Third World how to raise

their children?”

The questions came fast and furious. “What do you suppose happens to those children after they are taken out of child labour?”

“Wouldn’t the World Trade Organization stop any chance of a boycott of products made by child labour on the grounds that it would affect international treaties?”

Marilyn, Adam and I stood there and looked at each other after each and every question. Some of them we were able to answer, but most of our responses were simply lame and unconvincing. Often we had to say that we honestly didn’t have an answer.

Through it all, I found the room unbelievably warm. At times I thought I was going to faint. The three of us felt as if we were under attack, and shrinking more and more as the questions piled up.

I brought it all to an end and thanked the class. We walked outside for some fresh air. The teacher followed, asking if I was all right because I was sweating and had turned pale.

When the teacher had gone back inside, Marilyn turned to me and said, “That was torture.”

Adam added, “I wouldn’t want to have to go through that again.”

We sat on the steps of the portable, out of view of the students, although with the windows open we could hear that they were already on their next topic: global trade. We sat there, holding our posters with the pictures of the child workers, thinking to ourselves that maybe we were getting in over our heads. If we were going to get seriously involved in this issue, then we would have to know what we were talking about.

Later that day, after soaking in a long bath and watching some TV, I went into the office and began looking through our information. I wrote down every question that had stumped us, and I went looking for the answers. I called Alam Rahman and asked if he would go to the University of Toronto library and search out material for me on the issue. Our group did a systematic review of all the literature. Day by day, the answers began to build up.

I put together a three-page letter addressed to the class we had spoken to at Brebeuf College. It began: “Thank you very much for your challenging questions. We have undertaken research on the issues you raised and have found answers. If you have more questions, we will be more than happy to respond to them.”

And a few weeks later another invitation arrived from Brebeuf College,

this time to speak to a class of Grade 12 students. And this time, when we were confronted with the questions, we had our answers.

We had learned that knowledge was our key, that the only way adults and students would take us seriously was if we knew what we were talking about and had a good response for every question. We had to be able to defend our views.

Of course there was still an attitude from some adults we met that we were just a “cute bunch of kids” who had started a club. They wouldn’t take us seriously, just flash that all-knowing smile of approval that usually comes before a pat on the head.

That didn’t deter us. We just pressed ahead.



## 2 TORONTO

**P**inned to the wall of our Free The Children office was a large map of the world. We had sent dozens of inquiries to organizations located all over that map, and with each response the world seemed to shrink. Our neighbours were no longer simply the kids down our street in Thornhill. They were the kids in India, in Africa, in Brazil. More than ever I thought of us—all of us—as the children of the world.

Human rights organizations around the world sent us photographs of children released from bonded labour in carpet factories, newspaper reports of protest marches by children, and the ever-shocking statistics on child labour they had gathered from sources throughout their country.

It was through one such organization that we learned of an explosion in a fireworks factory in Rhotak, India, that killed twelve children and injured dozens of others. From our fax machine emerged the startling pictures and media reports. I immediately sent copies, with a covering letter, to Barbara Hall, the mayor of Toronto. Free The Children asked for permission to speak to city council. Permission was granted, and the council members were obviously moved by the material we placed before them. They were uncertain whether any fireworks brought in by the city were being made by child labour, but they promised to investigate, and they passed a resolution not to purchase for city events any fireworks made by children. There were no doubts in our minds about such a resolution. These were hazardous jobs. Many children had been killed or scarred for life.

As school closed for the summer, I was more enthused than ever about what we were trying to do. Besides the fireworks issue, our other major concern was the news from India that Kailash Satyarthi, one of the leaders in the fight against child bonded labour, was being harassed by police and threatened with imprisonment. Later we learned that he had been