

Craig's story: “I'm only one boy!”

“Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked.”

—Viktor E. Frankl

Some people's lives are transformed gradually. Others are changed in an instant.

My own moment of truth happened over a bowl of cereal one morning when I was twelve years old. Sitting at our kitchen table, munching away, I was about to dive into the daily newspaper in search of my favorite comics—*Doonesbury*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, *Wizard of Id*. The cartoons were my morning ritual. But on this particular day, April 19, 1995, I didn't get past the front page. There was one headline that was impossible to miss: “Battled child labor, boy, 12, murdered.”

I read on.

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 traveling 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.

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After reading this article, I was full of questions. What kind of parent sells a four-year-old child into slavery? Who would chain a child to a carpet loom? I didn't have any answers. What I really wanted was to talk to Marc, my older brother by six years, but he was away at college. I knew that even if Marc couldn't answer my questions, he would at least know where to start looking. But that day I was on my own.

After school, I headed to the public library and started to dig through newspapers and magazines. I read about children younger than me who spent endless hours in dimly lit rooms making carpets. I found stories about kids who slaved in underground pits to bring coal to the surface. Other reports told of underage workers killed or maimed by explosions in fireworks factories. My head was swimming. I was just a kid from the suburbs, and like most middle-class kids, my friends and I spent our time shooting hoops and playing video games. This was beyond me.

I left the library bewildered and angry at the world for allowing such things to happen to children. I simply could not understand why nothing was being done to stop the cruelty. How could I help?

I asked myself what Marc would do.

As brothers, we've never been rivals. We are too far apart in age to feel any sibling jealousy. And, as corny as it sounds, we've always been there for each other. When I was younger, I watched in awe as Marc seemed to excel effortlessly in everything—school, public speaking, rugby, and tennis. But what set Marc apart was his belief that he could make a difference.

When Marc was thirteen, he turned a passion for environmental issues into a one-boy campaign. For an eighth-grade science project, he tested the harmful effects of brand-name household cleaners on the water system. Next he used lemons, vinegar, and baking soda to create environmentally friendlier alternatives that did the job just as well, if not better.

Marc seemed to be unstoppable. He gave speeches, founded an environmental club, created petitions, and collected thousands of signatures. As a result, he became the youngest person in our province to receive the Ontario Citizenship Award.

A younger brother could have no better role model. He taught me that young people have the power to make a difference when it comes to issues they care about. Why not me?

Riding the bus to school, I would uncrumple the newspaper article and look at Iqbal's picture—he was wearing a bright-red vest, his hand in the air. One day, I asked my teacher if I could speak to the class. Although

I was generally outgoing, public speaking was definitely not my favorite activity. I can still remember how nervous I felt standing up at the front of my classroom, and how quiet everyone became as I shared what I knew about Iqbal and the plight of other child laborers. I passed out copies of the newspaper article and shared the alarming statistics I had found. I wasn't sure what would happen when I asked for volunteers to help me fight for children's rights.

Eleven hands shot up, and Free The Children was born.

As I jotted down the names of volunteers, I still didn't know the next step. But, as we started to dig up information, things became a lot clearer.

We began researching the issue, and soon after we were out giving speeches. We began writing petitions and held a community garage sale fundraiser. Before long, Free The Children chapters were popping up in other schools. In a few short months, my family's home literally became a campaign headquarters. Phones rang with news of protest marches led by children. Fax machines churned out shocking statistics on child labor in Brazil, India, Nigeria. The mail brought envelopes from human rights organizations all over the world offering photographs of children released from bonded labor.

Then we learned that Kailash Satyarthi, a leader in the fight against child bonded labor, had been detained. We wrote to the prime minister of India and demanded he be set free. We collected three thousand signatures on a petition and mailed it to New Delhi in a carefully wrapped shoebox. A year later, a freed Kailash came to North America to speak. He called our shoebox "one of the most powerful actions taken on my behalf."

We were making a difference.

Then, in September, 1995, just as eighth grade was about to begin for me, my mother took me aside. As Free The Children continued to grow, our house had been overrun by youth volunteers. Kids were sleeping on couches and floors, and the phone rang at all hours. "This can't go on," she told me. "We have to live as a family. We have to get back to having a normal life."

But how could I give up when I was only getting started?

My parents had instilled in me the belief that goals come with challenges. "Go for it!" they always told me. "The only failure in life is not trying."

That's what I thought I was doing, but I guess even they were not prepared for what Marc and I would do with the lessons they had taught us.

I asked for time to think.

As I sat in my bedroom trying to figure out if I should give up or keep going, I thought about how happy I was. Working with a team toward a common goal, I felt a sense of accomplishment and joy. I was happier than I'd ever been in my life. Free The Children was also filling a gap in many kids' lives. At an age when we were constantly being told by adults what to do, this was something we took on voluntarily. I knew in my heart I could not turn back. Too much would be lost. I was no longer the person I had been five months earlier. Besides, there was so much left to do. When I emerged from my room, I told my parents I was sorry, but I could not give up. "You always tell us that we have to fight for what we believe in. Well, I believe in this."

To my surprise, they understood. I think they were even proud. Later, I would learn that the roots of their understanding stretched back generations to the teachings of *their* parents.

When he was just nineteen, our father's father arrived in Canada from Germany during the Great Depression. He earned "suicide pay," fighting boxers in Toronto. It was dangerous work, but every bruised rib or black eye was, in his mind, a small price to pay for achieving a not-so-humble Depression-era dream. When he had saved enough money, he opened a small grocery store with our grandmother. They worked there day and night, closing only one day in twenty-three years to visit Niagara Falls.

That was how our father grew up: working in the store after school and on weekends. His dream, however, was different. He wanted an education. But he thought there was no chance for college. Then, in his last year of high school, his parents announced that they had saved enough over the years to make his dream possible. He was overjoyed.

Our mother, the second-youngest of four children, was born in Windsor, Ontario, just across the border from Detroit, Michigan. She was only nine when her father passed away. At ten she was working weekends in a neighborhood store. There were lots of struggles. One summer her family's only shelter was a tent. Life was hard, but my grandmother, with only an eighth-grade education, taught herself how to type and then worked her way up from cleaning other people's homes to an office job at the Chrysler Corporation (she eventually headed her department). Through her stoic example, she instilled in her children the belief that they could achieve anything they wanted in life.

I was unaware of this history and I was also ignorant of my parents' commitment to supporting social issues. Although they were not activists, both were dedicated teachers who believed in teaching both inside and outside of the classroom. Whenever they had the opportunity, they

tried to help us learn about the world and what we could do to make it a better place. These lessons didn't involve marches or protests—they were simpler than that. When we asked a question about the environment, it would lead to an afternoon picking up garbage in the park. A comment about the Humane Society would lead to a challenge to reserve part of our allowance to help the abandoned animals we saw on TV.

Our family history of helping swayed my parents. They knew about fighting for ideals and dreams. Our house remained a zoo and Free The Children continued to grow.

Yet if they had known what was coming next, they might have had second thoughts.

Up to that point I had frequently talked with Alam Rahman, a twenty-four-year-old human rights activist and University of Toronto student. He became a mentor to me. I confided in him that I felt some of my statements on child labor lacked authority because I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. We talked frequently about whether I should make a trip to Asia to see for myself. I never really thought it would happen—I had been begging my parents for months without results.

Then one day, Alam told me that he would be going to South Asia to visit relatives. Would I like to come? My poor parents never knew what hit them. I pestered them for weeks. Fortunately, they thought very highly of Alam and eventually my mother said, "Convince me that you will be safe."

If I could somehow prove to her that I would be fine, that the trip would be well organized, that the mountain of details could be taken care of, then I could go. I began faxing organizations throughout South Asia advising them that I would be coming, applied for travel visas, and raised money through household chores and the generosity of relatives. Then, with my parents' blessing, I marked the date of my departure on my calendar.

The plan was a seven-week trip to meet children who worked in the most inhumane conditions imaginable. We met children working in metal factories, pouring metal without any protective gear. We met children as young as five years old in the brick kilns, working to pay off debts taken out by their parents or grandparents and passed from generation to generation. We met a ten-year-old boy who worked in a fireworks factory, badly burned all over his body from an explosion that had killed fourteen other kids. In another encounter, we met an eight-year-old girl working in a recycling factory, taking apart used syringes and needles with her bare hands.

My first stop was Dhaka, Bangladesh, where we were taken to one of the city's largest slums, an entire valley filled with corrugated tin, woven

reed, and cardboard huts. The people who lived there owned next to nothing. Their clothing was in rags. Human and animal waste filled the gutters. There was little food. When I saw the utter poverty, I wanted to stay there for the entire seven-week trip and volunteer, so I asked a human rights worker in the slum how I could help. He told me, “Continue your journey. Learn as much as you can. And then go back home and tell others what you have seen and ask them if they think it is fair that places like this exist in the world. Because it’s the lack of action, the refusal from people at home to help, that allows this to continue.”

Later in Delhi, India, witnessing and learning about the lives of child laborers, I learned the Canadian prime minister was also there, with eight provincial premiers and 250 business leaders, to drum up trade deals. He was not raising the issue of child labor and that angered me. Free The Children’s young members had repeatedly asked the prime minister to address this issue, but to no avail. We had written letters and requested a meeting, but the only response we had received was a letter informing us that the prime minister was a very busy person and would not be able to meet with our group. Now, after everything I had witnessed, I was convinced that if he knew of just one of the heart-wrenching stories, he would surely help. I gathered my courage and decided that we needed to do whatever we could to make sure these children’s stories were heard. In the end, we decided to hold a press conference.

At the time I had just turned thirteen years old. In my view, the issue at stake in my struggle was one of right and wrong. I was outraged that the prime minister was signing billion-dollar trade deals without even mentioning the children who were making many of the products involved.

One of the most difficult lessons I was learning in Asia was that the fate of the children I met was shaped by the actions of people in wealthy countries like my own—especially people’s tendency to consume inexpensive products without wondering how they had ended up on the shelf. I was convinced that once people were confronted with evidence of the suffering caused by child labor, they could not help but want to put a stop to it once and for all.

On the day of the press conference, all of Canada’s large television and newspaper outlets were there. I tried to be as presentable as possible, despite having messy hair and wearing a dirty blue T-shirt. I spoke briefly about the horrors of child labor witnessed during my trip and then introduced Nagashir, a new friend, who told his story quietly through a translator.

I had met Nagashir a short time before at Mukti Ashram, a rehabilitation center for freed child slaves. All the children at the center had been forced into bonded labor and abused by their former masters. All had heart-breaking stories to tell, but Nagashir’s was particularly horrific. Speaking with him through a translator, I soon realized he had been robbed of his childhood, his humanity violated. He couldn’t tell me how old he was when he was sold into bondage; he didn’t know. He simply put his hand out to show how small he was at the time. Now at about fourteen years old, he was a shell. He could barely speak and seemed numb to all around him.

Years ago, a man had come to his desperately poor village with promises of an education and a good job. Like many other children, Nagashir and his younger brother were sent with him and ended up in a factory, working at a loom, tying thousands of tiny knots to make carpets for twelve hours a day. In exchange for his labor, Nagashir was given a small bowl of rice and watery lentils at the end of each day. When out of hunger and exhaustion he fell behind in his work, he was whipped and beaten.

It was only the hope of protecting his younger brother that gave Nagashir strength. This same feeling drew the other children together as well, and they relied on each other as a family. When the younger children cried out of homesickness, the older ones would comfort and calm them. When one child was sick, his friends would finish the work on his loom so that he wouldn’t be beaten.

Sadly, I learned this wasn’t always enough to protect the children. Nagashir showed us the scars that covered his body. His hands were mangled with cuts from the carpet knife. His master, unwilling to lose any productive time, would fill the cuts with gunpowder paste and light them to cauterize the wounds, then send him back to work. Most shocking were the scars on his legs and arms, and against his throat, where he had been branded with hot irons. This had been Nagashir’s punishment for helping his younger brother escape from the factory. The lesson was seared into his skin and his soul. Traumatized, he lost his ability to speak; for years he didn’t utter a word.

Nagashir was freed from the carpet factory in a midnight raid and brought to the rehabilitation center. At Mukti Ashram, the staff worked with him to slowly help him heal physically and emotionally. Weeks after having arrived at the center, he was found sitting in the garden, singing this song quietly to himself—his first words in years.

*If you want to live, live with a smile
Live with love, don't cry
Don't shed your tears
There are storms, there are disasters
In life there are ups and downs
But don't shed your tears*

*Smile—pain is part of life
But finally you get job
If you want to live, live with new hopes
Live with new aspirations
Live with love
Live with a smile*

Later, Nagashir was reunited with his family, including his brother. Nagashir and his brother were never again forced to work, and his brother started to attend primary school.

As Nagashir told his story at the press conference, he held out his arms and legs for the cameras to show his branding scars. The flashes of the camera bulbs were blinding, and we squinted into the large crowd of reporters. It was a frightening yet thrilling experience. But we were united, and with a small group of other children I signed a joint declaration calling on the countries' prime ministers and business leaders to remember the children as they signed their trade deals. It was all we could do.

I left India for Pakistan with no idea that the press conference was carried on networks throughout the world, including CNN. Within no time, the prime minister's handlers were looking for me. He wanted to meet. I was scared, but I also knew it was the best opportunity I'd have to date to voice my concerns.

The meeting went well and ended with the prime minister agreeing to bring up the issue of child labor with the heads of South Asian governments. It was exhilarating and strange. I was only a kid, but people were listening to me. I remember the feeling when I first realized I could actually make a change in the world. It floored me. I felt as if the laws of gravity had been broken. It left my skin tingling with excitement. It still does.

It also had the personal effect of striking down for me one of the most disturbing statements that children often hear: "Kids are to be seen and not heard."

I returned home transformed by the kids I had met. But at that point

even I didn't know the extent to which my trip would subsequently shape the direction of my life. Almost as soon as I got back to Canada, life in our Thornhill house changed forever. Free The Children had initially started as a group of twelve twelve-year-olds, but now it was gaining an unstoppable momentum.

Of course, we still had a lot to learn. We had to figure out how to create an international movement and still attend high school; help educate child laborers, not just free them; and convince others to join us in our mission, not just be bystanders

At the time, I didn't think to stop and define my own personal transformation, but years later, as Marc and I reflected on the lessons we took from journeys both at home and abroad, I came to think of it as a shift from ME to WE.

Having reached my own turning point almost by chance on an ordinary Wednesday, I'm now passionate about doing all I can to help others arrive at their own crossroads. I believe that every journey from ME to WE is as unique as each one of us, filled with twists and turns that lead in directions we might never have expected. I know that as more and more people choose to embark upon this journey, our actions in turn encourage others to find their own routes. When I think about the future, I imagine all of our paths converging, forging a new direction for our society. As I look around today, I can see that this process has already begun.

WE is a movement that brings people together and gives them the tools to change the world. Our unique family of organizations empowers people at home, around the world and with our social enterprise.



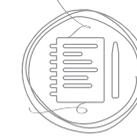
WE Charity empowers change with resources that create sustainable impact. We do this through domestic programs like WE Schools and internationally through WE Villages. Our WE Schools program is active in over 10,000 schools in the United States, Canada, and the UK, engaging over 2.3 million students in service learning. Our WE Villages program is active in 8 developing countries, creating a sustainable model of international development.

- ▶ Over 1,000 schools and school rooms built, allowing for the education of 200,000 children
- ▶ \$36 million worth of medical supplies collected and distributed
- ▶ 30,000 women have achieved economic self-sufficiency
- ▶ More than 1 million people provided with clean water, health care, and sanitation



WE Day is a powerful, life-changing experience with world-renowned speakers and performers, mixed with real inspirational stories of change. It is an opportunity for young change-makers to come together and celebrate their year of action. Students can't buy a ticket to WE Day, they earn their way by taking one local and one global action through the yearlong WE Schools programs.

- ▶ 36.4 million volunteer hours logged by WE Schools participants
- ▶ \$105 million raised for local and global causes
- ▶ 12.9 million pounds of food collected for local food banks
- ▶ 91% of students felt strongly about turning their inspiration into action after WE Day
- ▶ 90% of educators said students have demonstrated increased leadership
- ▶ 89% of students feel empowered to make a positive difference in the world



Start now!

Before you begin this section, find a notebook that can serve as your personal ME to WE journal. As you explore the Start Now! activities at the end of each chapter, this journal will be a place to record your thoughts, feelings, and ideas as you begin to make the shift from ME to WE a reality in your life and the lives of others.

- ▶ Like Craig, we all have passions waiting to be discovered. Set aside some time today to make a list of the things that you feel passionately about. Ask yourself:
 - » What do I feel most thankful for? What makes my heart overflow with gratitude? The words of a loved one? A leisurely stroll through the park?
 - » What kinds of things make me angry? A war being fought somewhere across the world? Negative attitudes in my community?
 - » What are the values I hold most dear? What five values guide me as I move through life?
- ▶ Once you have brainstormed answers to these questions, identify the one issue that does the most to ignite your passion.



Living ME to WE

1. **Create a recipe for good deeds.** This Saturday, spread your morning newspaper out on your kitchen table. Read it together with your spouse, friends, or children, and discuss the articles that catch your attention. Next, choose one issue that you feel drawn to and list ways you can make a difference.
2. **Don't burn the cookies.** Firefighters play an important role in keeping our communities safe. A plate of treats is a great way to let them know that your family is grateful for all of their hard work and to make new friends at the same time.
3. **Put the world on your wall.** Hang a map of the world on a wall in your kitchen, family room, or your child's bedroom. When you discuss issues with your kids or talk about where products are made, have them find the appropriate country on the map.

My story

Kim Phuc

I still can't look at the picture, not even today. It hurts too much.

That image of myself as a little girl in Vietnam, running with my arms hanging wide, naked, my skin on fire, my mouth open in terror and crying for help, the smoke all around me—it still is too powerful. I feel so horrible inside, like it's happening all over again. I can smell the burning, I can feel the heat, and deep in my soul, it hurts!

So I don't look. I keep the picture filed away, hidden from view.

But I don't feel hatred for that picture anymore. Instead, I feel grateful. To me, that picture is a gift.

It took a very, very long time for me to feel that way.

For many years, I was just The Girl in the Picture—and I hated it.

I had been photographed when I was nine years old and my village was hit by napalm. We were running on the highway, away from the explosions. The sky was red, as if heaven were on fire. I could not keep up with my brothers; they ran too fast. As I ran, I turned to see an airplane flying low to the ground. I had never seen one so close before. I watched it drop four bombs into the swirling smoke. I kept running.

Suddenly, a force struck me from behind. I fell forward onto the ground. I did not know what I was doing when I pulled at the neck of my shirt. I just felt so hot. My burning clothes fell away from me. I looked at my left arm. It was covered with flames and brownish-black goo. I tried to wipe it off and yelled in pain as my hand began to burn too.

I knew I should catch up with my brothers, but I felt so tired and so thirsty, like I was burning from the inside. "Oh Ma," I kept crying. "*Nong qua! Nong qua!*" Too hot! Too hot!

That's when the journalist took my picture.

I hardly remember what happened next. The journalists poured their canteens of water over my skin; it was falling off in pink and black chunks. The photographer got a poncho to cover me, then helped me into a van and drove me to the hospital in Saigon. The van swerved around refugees, and with every bump I screamed in agony. The napalm had incinerated my ponytail and left my neck, my back, and my left arm a raw, mushy, oozing mess. It had killed my two cousins. I wished it had killed me too.

It wasn't until much later that I learned that the picture, taken by AP photographer Nick Ut, had been printed on the front pages of newspapers around the world and won him the Pulitzer Prize. It made Nick famous. It made me famous too, though I wished with all my heart it had not.

For the next fourteen months I remained in an American hospital in Saigon, enduring many surgeries and painful procedures paid for by a private foundation. I had to relearn how to stand, walk, and feed and dress myself. Finally, recovered, I was sent back to my village to try to rebuild my life.

But my life would never be the same.

I could not take the hot sun on my unstable new skin nor the blowing dust in my damaged lungs. I suffered bad headaches and sudden, intense pain. My family was forced to live in a hot, airless house in the city as war raged around us. We had little money, not even for the ice I depended on for pain relief.

As the years went by, I remember as a teenager feeling so very ugly! I would look in the mirror at the scars that covered my body and ask "Why me?" I was able to hide my disfigurement by growing my hair long, wearing long sleeves, and resting my left arm on my hip so you couldn't tell it was shorter.

It was my shameful secret. Once, when I was seventeen, sitting at my desk waiting for the teacher to arrive, I heard some girls talking about a boy who had scars on his hands. "He is so handsome," one girl said. "Ooooh! Yuck!" the others chimed in. "Have you seen his scars? So ugly!"

The only thing that kept me going was my dream of becoming a doctor. I'd been so impressed with how the doctors had helped me; I wanted to help people too. I studied hard and was accepted into medical school. I was thrilled—but it was short-lived. A few months later, foreign journalists found me. They wanted to interview me ten years after the war.

At first, I was flattered—me? Famous? But then the Vietnamese communist government took over, demanding that I act as their anti-capitalist poster girl, their symbol of the war. They told me what to say and do, watching my every move. They made me abandon medical school and be available to pose for the cameras. Outside, I was smiling; inside, I felt so sad, like I was a victim all over again. I could have no friends; it was too dangerous. They warned my parents that if something happened to me, they would go to prison.

In between media interviews, I went to the library, reading every book I could find on religion. I'd hoped that within those pages I would find some answers, some meaning for my life. There, I found my answer.

God, I decided, had saved me for a purpose. Through my new faith, I would find that purpose.

The Vietnamese government finally relented and allowed me to continue my education, this time in Cuba. It was there that I met my husband—and decided that I would finally escape the clutches of the communist government.

I told no one, just bided my time. And one day, I saw my chance.

It was 1992. My husband and I were returning from our honeymoon in Moscow, and the plane needed to refuel in Canada. I looked out the plane window at the wide open spaces of Gander, Newfoundland. We knew nothing of this country except that it was cold—and free. That was enough for me. I had never felt so scared in my life—or so strong. With pounding hearts, we left our bags on the plane and never turned back.

I came here to get away from Vietnam, from the war, and from my life as The Girl in the Picture. I wanted to make my life quiet. It did not work out that way, but that's okay. I have found something else—something better. I have found my purpose. I travel and speak out to tell people that war is bad, that tolerance and forgiveness are good, that our real enemy is anger and bitterness.

And I have found that people listen. I believe that's because I speak from my heart. They see me as an innocent little girl who suffered so much, who is supposed to be angry, who is supposed to be dead.

Although I did not become a doctor, I did find another way to heal. In 1997, I established the Kim Foundation, a non-profit group that provides funds for medical assistance to children who are victims of war and terrorism. In 1997, I was appointed a Goodwill Ambassador for Peace for UNESCO.

I could have stayed frozen in time, forever The Girl in the Picture, forever the victim. But I no longer run away, and I am no longer a victim. It was the photograph that saved my life, but it was my reaching out to others that finally convinced me it was a life worth saving.

Marc's story: "What kind of legacy?"

"That which we witness, we are forever changed by, and once witnessed we can never go back."

—Angeles Arrien

When I was eighteen, I worked as a page in the Canadian House of Commons while starting my first year of college. Dressed like a penguin in a blazer and tie, I served water—with ice or without—delivered "top secret" messages, and fetched stationery for the country's most powerful leaders. It was a small job of smaller details, but just as in the U.S. Congress, it kept the country running. Except for one nervous moment when I accidentally dumped a glass of water on the prime minister, I was thrilled to be a part of history in the making. Fresh out of high school, I was accustomed to catching flak for passing notes; now it was my job. I imagined that my life in politics was off to a great start.

One day I delivered a note to a formidable and balding gentleman who stopped me with a query. "What kind of legacy do you want to leave, son?"

Baffled by a question I had never been asked before, I gave a snappy answer. "Sir," I replied, "I intend to study hard and deliver water with ever greater efficiency. One day, I will become a senior page and tell all the little pages where to get the water and the stationery."

He was unimpressed, but he did not let up. In his next breath, he told me about his work with an amazing charity that volunteered in the slums of Thailand. Was I interested? "No thank you, sir," I replied. I was happy where I was.

I figured that was the end of it, but this gentleman persisted. The next day *and* the next, he called me over to ask the same question. When school ended for the year, I was on a plane to Bangkok, Thailand. The man was very persuasive.

It was a huge risk. I was turning my back on a supposed dream job, which was writing speeches for a member of Parliament. I had to put my scholarship on hold. All my savings went to buying the plane ticket. I told my parents I was off to “change the world” and, in order to secure their permission, I had to promise I would finish school. When they asked me questions about the safety of where I was staying, I made up vague answers.

I had finally recognized that I was faced with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a real difference in people’s lives. I felt that if I didn’t seize it right away, it would become harder and harder to do so with each passing year. I knew that if I let myself grow accustomed to life in Ottawa and its comforts, I might never again find the courage to make such a journey. And so I got on the plane.

When I arrived in Bangkok, I was startled by the airport’s marble floors and beautiful architecture. Skyscrapers loomed large in plated gold. From the back of a taxi, I looked to my left and saw a BMW. A Mercedes was on my right. Why did I give up a great job to come to Thailand to help all these wealthy people? On the one hand, I was terrified—there I was, alone and far from home, unable to understand Thai and with no easy way to communicate with loved ones. On the other hand, I was angry because I felt I had been tricked into putting my life back in North America on hold just to help people who didn’t really need it!

Then the cab entered Klong Toey. Forgotten by many, this slum community sits on the edge of the Thai capital surrounding the city’s major port, a world away from Bangkok’s wealthy neighborhoods. Stretching for miles, it is a sprawling sea of corrugated tin, mud and cement bricks, zinc roofing, open sewers, and garbage heaps. It’s not on any tourist map. In fact, it isn’t on *any* map. It was a world away from suburbia. My heart sank as I came face-to-face with poverty for the very first time in my life. As we headed deeper into the slum, I was stricken with self-doubt. Would I be strong enough to cope in this kind of environment? Would I really be able to make any kind of difference? Outwardly I was trying my best to remain calm, but inwardly I was quickly beginning to doubt that I would be able to stomach my new surroundings. I was certain I’d made a mistake.

Tens of thousands of people live in Klong Toey on less than a dollar a day. In a country much loved by tourists for delicious food, beautiful beaches, and diverse culture, the people of this community are hungry, isolated, and struggling to meet their most basic needs.

I had been assigned to work at the community-development center, in a part of the slum known as the “slaughterhouse.” A major source of revenue for the community was slaughtering animals and preparing meat for sale.

As I drove into the slum, I considered the divide between those in Bangkok who had so much more than they required and those in Klong Toey who had little or less than nothing. I was greeted by the center’s friendly volunteer coordinator and directed to my simple apartment where I dropped my belongings. From this apartment, I would hear the slaughtering of pigs every night from midnight until dawn, their shrill screams tearing through the night air.

Next I was ushered to the AIDS ward of a hospice in the slum. I would later learn that the ward did not exist, at least not officially. Not a single person in Thailand had AIDS, according to the Thai government at the time. People got “sick,” of course, sometimes “very sick,” but no one had AIDS. The hospice was home to an ever-growing number of “very sick” people.

I entered the ward and was greeted by two Thai nurses.

“Thank goodness you are here, Marc,” said the first.

“You’re a doctor, right?”

I shook my head.

“So, you are a medical student then!”

I shook my head again.

“But you know medicine, right?”

“Kinda,” I offered. “I watch *E.R.* every Thursday.”

After a rapid exchange in Thai, the first one said, “No problem. Get ready for your four-hour medical school training!”

“But in my country medical school takes four years!” I protested.

“We don’t have that long,” she replied. “So we better get started.”

During the next few hours, I learned to clean wounds, administer IVs, treat bedsores, and dispense medicine. The work was punishing, made worse by stifling heat, frequent blackouts, and an incredible stench in the air. I tried desperately to hide my weak nerves and queasy stomach, but more than once dashed for the bathroom to throw up.

Just when it seemed my training was coming to an end, the nurse took