

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.



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Pinned 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

detained.

Was there anything we could do? We decided to write a letter to the prime minister of India, insisting that Kailash be set free, and we organized a three-thousand-name petition. Both were put in a shoebox, which we wrapped in brown paper and mailed to the Indian government in Delhi. We had worked very hard, and it was an action we hoped would have some impact. A year later, when Kailash came to Canada to speak about his humanitarian work, he recalled the shoebox containing all those names of Canadian children. “It was one of the most powerful actions taken on my behalf,” he said, “and, for me, definitely the most memorable.”

A highlight of the summer was the community garage sale we undertook to raise money for Free The Children and help spread our message. About fifty of our friends signed up to help.

I don’t think our parents knew what hit them. We had put out the word that FTC wanted to collect anything and everything we might be able to resell. Soon the donations started to arrive: old toys, books, furniture, clothes—you name it. They were heaped across our backyard and throughout our house.

We sat down and looked everything over.

“What we have,” one of us concluded, “are countless piles of junk.”

“Junk, but not useless junk.”

“Some of it needs a little fixing up.”

And for days we washed, cleaned, painted, sorted, and labelled. Of course, in between we played ball and cooled off in the swimming pool. The night before the sale, a couple of us slept outside in a tent with our dogs to protect all of the merchandise.

At five-thirty the next morning, the first customers arrived. We weren’t quite prepared for what the following hours would bring; it was something a friend would later describe as “a character-building experience.”

To every person who showed up, we explained our purpose for having the sale. Many of them congratulated us, and added a donation to the price of whatever they purchased. Others were just out for a bargain, including one guy who tried to walk off with a computer after paying only two bucks. My brother, Marc, the rugby player, put a stop to that.

But it was much more than just a sale. Older kids dressed up as clowns to entertain younger kids while their parents shopped. There were organized games, bead bracelet vendors and a lemonade stand. We had FTC

members with petitions on clipboards going through the crowds. TVO brought in a film crew.

As the crowds grew, so did the traffic problems. People we hadn’t seen in a long time came by. Strangers became new friends. Whenever someone asked who was in charge, one of the FTC crew would step forward, much to the visitor’s surprise.

That summer we learned more than what books or teachers could have taught us. We learned to take the initiative, and follow through. We learned a greater sense of self-worth. We discovered we could do more than talk about the world’s problems. When we set our minds to it, we could make a difference.

When school was set to resume in September, my mother took me aside. There was a serious matter on her mind. Throughout the summer, our house had become a rather public place, with kids and parents coming and going non-stop. The telephone and fax machine rang all hours of the night with messages from our contacts around the world. Our house was in a constant state of turmoil. My parents had been very patient through it all, but the strain was starting to show.

“I think it’s time for you to quit,” my mother said. “You’re about to begin Grade 8. This is your last year of elementary school, and it is an important year. Your dad and I have to go back to teaching. You have accomplished so much. But this can’t go on. We have to live as a family. We have to get back to having a normal life.”

I went to my room to think about what she had said.

At first, when Free The Children began, we received as much as we gave—we enjoyed the feeling of self-worth, happiness, the new insights and a sense of accomplishment. But now we had reached a whole new level of commitment, that point when real giving does not come without pain. Despite the pain, I knew in my heart that I could not quit, that our group had to at least try to do more. I had learned too much about the abuse of children. I was no longer the person I had been five months before.

But I also knew the toll it was taking on the family, how disrupted all our lives had become. I sat in my room a long time before coming out.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I know it’s been hard for you and Dad with everything going on around here,” I said. “But I just can’t give up now. You always tell us that we have to fight for what we believe in. Well, I believe in this.”

It was a turning point for my parents. Until that moment, they had seen Free The Children as a phase, a group of kids with a noble purpose who would eventually go on to other pursuits. But now they realized for me it had become a mission.

My parents looked at me long and hard and saw the commitment in my face. “All right,” my mother said. “If that is your decision, we’ll support you.”

And that support has never waned. Though not long after, it would be tested a great deal more than it had ever been before.

Earlier that summer I had met Dr. Panuddha Boonpala, a woman from the International Labour Organization in Geneva. She had worked with child labourers in the streets and factories of Thailand. I took to her right away. She was very bubbly and often broke into a wide grin, which made her look like a young girl. “If you really want to understand the issue of child labour,” she told me, “then you should go to South Asia and meet the children yourself.”

Her words never left me. The more I thought about what she had said, the more intense became my desire to make such a trip.

I felt my knowledge of the child labour issue was comprehensive—as comprehensive as it could get, given the resources available to me. But one thing was lacking in almost all of the material I had collected. There was very little perspective provided by the children themselves, the actual workers, the ones the articles and research papers were all about.

There was, it seemed to me, a virtual industry of organizations speaking on behalf of young people. But where were the working kids in all this? What did *they* feel about their predicament? If they had a choice, would they want to go to school? Did they have to work to survive? Some of the publications I read suggested that the kids had no interest in going to school, that they didn’t want to learn to read and write, that the work they did wasn’t even exploitative. Were these kids, then, different from myself and my friends?

These questions swam through my mind, and I knew that if I really wanted to understand the situation of these children, I would have to meet them myself. When I spoke to students they often asked, “Have you ever met any of these children?” and “How do you really know this is true?” I would always have to say no, that I hadn’t actually seen the conditions

myself. No, but I did hope to go see the children someday.

My answers lacked authority. The more I thought about it, the more I felt I really needed and wanted to go to South Asia. And, in fact, I had read so much on child labour and seen so much through other people’s eyes that going to Asia myself was the logical next step.

Logical or not, my parents wouldn’t even consider it. “It’s another world. It’s too dangerous. You’re only twelve!”

I had discussed the idea on the telephone with Alam Rahman a number of times. Alam and I had gotten to know each other better. He was intrigued by the idea that people as young as myself would start a group to work on such a complex issue as child labour and make a serious commitment to it.

At twenty-four years of age, Alam was a serious and committed person himself. I think that’s what attracted my parents to him. They began to see him as a mentor for me. Over the months that we came to know him, my whole family grew to respect him as a person, as well as the depth of his knowledge and his willingness to spend long hours for the cause of social justice. In short, Alam was someone my parents admired and trusted.

One day, when I was working with a group of FTC friends at a food bank, I met Alam there. “Craig,” he said, “I’m going to South Asia for a year. I’m visiting my family in Bangladesh and then travelling around. Do you want to come with me? You could meet some working children.”

I almost passed out. I couldn’t believe my ears. “Are you serious?”

Alam had travelled to Asia before. But now he had decided to take a year off from his studies at the University of Toronto to find out more about his Asian roots. Though he spoke Bengali fluently, he wanted the opportunity to learn Hindi and Tano.

The time had come for me to get serious with my parents about going to Asia. But I knew it would not be easy; my parents wouldn’t even allow me to take the subway to downtown Toronto on my own—let alone go to Asia.

“Guess what, Mom. Great news! Alam is going to Asia and he asked me if I want to go.”

“Is that right?” she answered, knowing full well what was coming next.

“I know how much you think of Alam. He could be my chaperone. You know he would take good care of me.”

Silence. This is a good sign, I thought. At least it wasn’t the instant “no” that had sprung back at me every other time.

I pleaded, “Mom, what do I have to do to change your mind?”

“Convince me that you would be safe,” was the firm reply.

Convince her that I would be safe. Now, at last, I felt I was getting somewhere. Not an easy thing to do, I thought, but at least I know what I’m working with.

Looking back, I realize my mom was never totally against the idea of me going to Asia. She had definite and serious questions in her mind, and she was honestly looking for ways to answer them with me. She wanted to be supportive, as she had always been in the past, but at the same time her maternal instincts were welling up within her. If I could prove to her that I would be safe, that the trip would be well-organized, that the mountain of details that would come with such a trip could be taken care of, then I would be free to go. If not, then there was no way she was letting me out of her sight.

I immediately wrote to UNICEF in New York, telling them of my pending trip and asking for advice about the arrangements. I knew they had contacts in every country, and that my parents would trust them. I sent letters to organizations in South Asia and contacted people I had met through human rights organizations in Canada.

“Convince me that you would be safe.” Every night those words raced through my mind as I formed my plan. When my father set a second condition for going, that I would have to raise half the plane fare myself, I knew I was winning them over.

UNICEF in New York agreed to contact their offices in South Asia to see if they would help. PLAN International, a development agency formerly known in some countries as Foster Parents Plan, also went looking for contact people willing to take care of us. I faxed friends we had made over the past months in organizations throughout South Asia, hoping for offers of accommodation.

It was a very good start.

Of course, I was back at school, trying to concentrate on the work to be done there. And the day-to-day operations of FTC continued. Over the summer our members had drifted off with their own vacation plans. After the garage sale, we found it difficult to get together for meetings, and it seemed to me that the energy within FTC, which had been so high, had begun to subside.

I was worried that FTC would not regain its momentum. But after the

first few days of September, it was clear there was no reason for concern. The phone started to ring, with kids checking in, anxious to discuss our plans for the fall, and offering their own ambitious ideas for new projects.

Free The Children was filling a gap in many kids’ lives. At an age when we were constantly being told by adults what to do, FTC was something we took on voluntarily. It had our names on it. And it was our reputations that were at stake. FTC was almost revolutionary in allowing kids large amounts of responsibility. It seems to me that one of the consequences of a consumer-driven society is that many kids are bored by life in the suburbs. How many video games do they want to play? How many times do they want to go to the shopping mall? Kids are longing for something more meaningful in their lives, something more challenging, and something that allows them to prove themselves. FTC answered that need, and the kids involved in it weren’t about to give it up.

For many of them it wasn’t an easy decision. Among our peer group they were being labelled by some as do-gooders and wimps. For the so-called “in crowd,” FTC just wasn’t cool enough. The mere fact that we were doing something out of the ordinary made us targets. We were unusual. We didn’t fit their mould.

Some of them taunted us. “Hey, man, like my shirt? Some kid made it. It’s the latest thing to have clothes made by kids.”

Many of their snide comments had to do with our stance against brand-name companies guilty of human rights abuses. Some of us spoke out against such companies, and began wearing clothes without brand names. The fact that we were taking on popular culture, criticizing companies that made running shoes or baseball caps—the very symbols of youth culture—made us different. And no kid wants to be seen as different.

But an interesting phenomenon was developing. FTC was attracting some of the most popular girls in school. These were girls who did well academically and were very involved in extracurricular activities such as sports and school clubs.

Where girls go, of course, guys follow. And soon we were attracting not just the type of guys who regularly volunteer for things, but jock types, too—guys who never volunteered for anything in their lives. In other words, Free The Children was becoming cool. The fact that a TV crew was making a documentary about our work gave us credibility.

Many of the reporters who came to interview us could not believe that

a group of kids could ever have achieved what we did on our own. Adult support was important to the organization, but in our formative years, when FTC could have gone either way, kids were (and still are) the heart and soul of the organization. Free The Children would be nowhere today if it were not for the original group of young people, some as young as ten and eleven, who believed in what we were doing, who didn't listen to the naysayers and the complainers, who resisted peer pressure and just said, "We want to get involved in this because we believe in it."

Free The Children reached another milestone that fall. I was invited to speak before two thousand delegates at the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) convention in Toronto. It was the largest group I had ever addressed.

When I entered the convention hall and weaved past table after table of union members, all I could think was, My God, this is a lot of people!

I was led to a seat at the back of the stage. I looked out at the audience but could see nothing because of the massive bank of lights shining in my eyes. I shuffled through my notes. My heart was pounding.

An organizer asked me how long I planned to speak, and I said, "Ten or fifteen minutes—"

Someone to my left interrupted. "You're booked for three minutes. You'd better cut down on that speech."

I looked again at my notes. I hardly knew what to cut. The person was staring at me, with eyes that suggested I was not to take one extra second.

I looked out at the lights, thinking, if they seem bored, then I'll cut it down.

Jane Armstrong, the person responsible for my being there, introduced me. It took all of forty-five seconds. Then she turned my way and said, "The stage is yours."

I began the walk to the rostrum, but someone put out a hand to stop me. A person came running up the stairs to the stage with a two-step ladder and set it in place.

I took one step up the ladder, then another. My head appeared in full view over the rostrum. I could hear a trail of laughter from the conference delegates. I smiled into the glare of lights, trusting that somewhere beyond them was the audience.

I started the way I had started just about all my speeches, with the

story of Iqbal. I was nervous, but before long my words were interrupted by loud applause. It gave me new confidence. My voice grew stronger and stronger. I pushed aside my notes. Even though I couldn't see them, I could feel the energy of the audience. With each passing minute I took greater control of what I wanted to say.

Indeed, many minutes passed, several of them interrupted by applause. By the time I had finished, the audience was on its feet. I clasped my hands together and said, "Thank you very much." Fifteen minutes had gone by quickly.

A leader of the union, Ken Signoretti, took hold of my hand and raised it in the air. The applause hadn't stopped. He whispered in my ear that I was not to go anywhere.

"On behalf of the Ontario Federation of Labour and its steering committee," he said, "the OFL wishes to pledge five thousand dollars to your cause!" He presented me with an OFL T-shirt and helped me put it on. Again my hand was raised in the air.

It started a chain reaction. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Canadian Autoworkers Union, the Steelworkers Union, one union after another walked up to the mike and matched what the OFL had given, and challenged others to do the same. Most moving of all were the individuals who stood up and pledged thirty or forty, and sometimes a hundred, dollars on behalf of their families and children.

T-shirt after T-shirt arrived on the stage, and before long I was wearing eight layers of them. In all the heat and the bright lights and the tally of money rising higher and higher, I leaned into the mike and said, "I think I'm going to faint!"

After an hour and forty-five minutes, I left the stage. I walked past table after table, shaking hands, accepting their hugs and acknowledging their applause. Needless to say, my fellow Free The Children members were all smiles when I finally reached them at the back of the room.

"This is unbelievable!" I shouted to them over the noise.

It was more than unbelievable. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars had been pledged, to be put in a separate bank account and used for projects that would directly help the exploited working children of the developing world. The donation was hundreds of times bigger than any FTC had ever received. Never in our wildest dreams could we have expected it.

Free The Children had truly taken flight. And for all of us gathered at

the back of the room, hardly able to contain our excitement, there was no turning back now.

We made our way to where we had set up a booth to gather names on a petition we had been circulating. There were no problems getting signatures. In fact, we ran out of pens and had to rush off to photocopy more petition sheets to keep up with the crowds of delegates stopping to sign. They stuffed our little donation box full of coins and bills, as well as notes of congratulation and encouragement. Among those present was Michele Landsberg, a columnist with the *Toronto Star*, who interviewed us for her newspaper. What she had just witnessed, she said, was extraordinary.

Soon it was all over. Two thousand people had walked through our midst. With our petitions piled high and our spirits in orbit, we loaded into the family van and headed home. That night, over pizza and pop, we recounted story after unbelievable story of what had happened that day.

On Sunday morning, my father left the house early, before the newspaper had been delivered. He returned a few minutes later and slowly made his way to the kitchen. He pulled out the *Toronto Star* and placed it in the middle of the table. There, on the front page, right below the masthead, was the headline “Boy 12, takes OFL by storm with child labour plea,” and next to it was a photo of our group and the long scroll of our petition. I read the story by Michele Landsberg out loud, turning to page two to complete it. We sent my father out to buy ten more copies for other FTC members.

Over cereal, and before the comics, I read the article again. It seemed such a short time since I had first seen the story of Iqbal in the very same paper.

All this came in the midst of preparations for the trip to Asia.

One of our first considerations was getting the many visas necessary for the trip. The Indian consulate wasn't so bad, but when my father and I arrived at the Pakistani consulate, the lineup was the longest I had ever seen, more than a two-hour wait just to submit a simple form. The official told us to come back in ten days to get the visa. When it came time to apply at the Nepalese consulate, I was very thankful my father volunteered to go by himself.

I wish he could have done the same when the day arrived for my vaccinations. I hate needles. The torture session commenced with the arrival of a stainless steel tray bristling with syringes. And after injections for typhoid,

yellow fever, diphtheria and tetanus, the doctor announced that this was only the first round. “Come back in a week, and we'll take care of hepatitis B and meningitis.” I was feeling like a pincushion.

Everything was moving ahead, but still I hadn't heard anything in response to all the faxes I had sent to organizations overseas. Without their input I couldn't put a schedule together, and without a schedule I couldn't make plane reservations. Without reservations, I couldn't give Alam the information he needed. When I called to inquire about flights, the airlines wouldn't take me seriously, or they quoted fares that were out of the question, and I was due to report to the doctor for the second round of dreaded injections. Grade 8 math was beginning to look easy.

I retreated to the sanctuary of my bedroom.

Sometime later that day, there was a knock at my door. My mother walked in with a smile on her face and three faxes in her hand. She didn't say a word, just held out the faxes. They were all from Asia. They all asked, “When are you coming?”

The organizations I had contacted all thought the trip was a great idea. They raised none of the concerns that had been raised at home in Canada. They would work with me to develop a schedule that best met my needs, and they assured me I would meet lots of working children. One of the groups, SACCS (South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude), only now realized that the person with whom they had been corresponding over the past several months was twelve years old. They were particularly excited by the trip and what it could do for the profile of child labour.

Things were looking up!

Now I really needed to get down to raising enough money for the trip. Besides the money I had saved from doing jobs around the house, and those I landed around the neighbourhood (raking leaves, cat-sitting, and so on), I raided my bank account, sold my hockey cards, and hinted to my relatives that early birthday or Christmas presents of a monetary nature would be greatly appreciated.

My relatives came through wonderfully. They offered to do whatever it took. A few of them, I knew, had doubts about whether I should even be going, but that didn't stop them from supporting me as much as they possibly could.

Everything was coming together. A focal point for planning was something that came to be known as the Samosa Summit.

Alam had decided to go ahead of me to Bangladesh and spend some time with his relatives. I would meet him there, and then we would set out on our trip across South Asia. He arrived at our house just a few days before his departure for Bangladesh, bringing with him a brown paper bag filled with vegetarian samosas from his favourite Indian restaurant. We sat around the kitchen table and set the samosas on a plate in the centre. I had never eaten Indian food before, and didn't know what to expect from these triangles of pastry stuffed with minced vegetables and spices.

As we began to outline my itinerary, I quickly realized that the three weeks over the Christmas holidays my parents had first agreed to were just not going to be enough. We added another week.

"But what about Nepal?" I said. "It doesn't make sense to go all that way and not get to Nepal."

Another week was added, and another.

"We'll give you the seventh week on one condition: that's it. No more. Seven weeks, period. You can't miss any more school."

As it was, I had to make a solemn promise to do as much school work as I could on the trip. Fortunately, my teachers had not argued against me going. They considered it a good educational experience—but just to be sure, they outlined all the school work I was to try to cover.

My parents, of course, had a lot of questions for Alam about the trip. Did all the bus and train travel need to be organized in advance? If I fell ill, what would happen? Where would I be staying at each step? Were the places safe? How, in fact, would I meet working children? Could I even expect to get into the factories and sweatshops? Would it be safe to use the still and video cameras I was planning to bring?

Alam pointed out that there was only so much planning that could be done beforehand, but I think my parents were reassured by his calm, businesslike approach. They knew he had my best interests at heart and would do all he could to make it a worthwhile trip for me, without ever sacrificing my safety.

Through all our discussions, the samosas sat on the table uneaten. Finally, Alam reached for one, explaining that he had been careful to choose the mildest variety. "In India," he said, "they are ten times spicier." I could see that this would be a test of my ability to fit into Asian culture.

Without hesitation, I took one and bit into it, convinced that if I could handle a Canadian samosa, I could certainly handle India. All eyes were on

me as I started chewing.

My mouth was on fire. I almost gagged. For someone to whom fast food meant pizza or fries, it was quite the mouthful.

But I was determined not to spit it out. I gulped down a glass of water, swallowing half the samosa in the process. My mouth was still on fire. I tried milk, then yogurt. I gasped for breath and stubbornly smiled through teary eyes.

Alam shook his head. We all laughed. I had, for the moment at least, bitten off more than I could chew.

"I have a feeling," Alam said, "this is going to be a very long trip."