

# The Power of Youth

## *— a Legacy Of Scouting Story*

by Susan Mackie

**“T**o know that change was possible, to know that a smile could again return to the face of a child who had been forced to work endless hours in hard labour – that was all the inspiration anyone could ever need...these children are the real heroes.”

– Craig Kielburger

On a sunny day in April 1995, an ordinary 12-year-old boy named Craig Kielburger was flipping through the morning paper, looking for his favorite comics. During his search for *Wizard of Id*, a story caught his eye and he began to read. It told of another boy, also twelve years old, who had been sold into slavery at a Pakistani carpet factory, and later murdered for speaking out against child labor.

Sitting at his family’s sunny Thornhill, Ontario breakfast table, something stirred deep inside Craig. Maybe it was the injustice, maybe it was the unthinkable conditions the boy Iqbal had been subject to, maybe it was the fact that this had happened to another boy, not so very different from Craig. Whatever feelings sparked in him that day eventually turned into a quest to end child labor that would lead him to visit over 40 countries, found a worldwide organization, and see him nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

*Kids Can Free the Children*, as his organization is called, is an influential children’s rights group run by youth and for youth. With hundreds of thousands of members worldwide, KCFTC has raised funds for more than 300 schools in developing nations, distributed 100,000 school kits, and over 2.5 million dollars worth of medical supplies. Advocacy from KCFTC has resulted in Canada, Mexico and Italy passing legislation to better protect sexually abused children. It has also tirelessly lobbied for major corporations such as Nike to adopt labels for child-labor-free products.

Craig was involved in the Scout Movement for a very long time – from Beavers through Venturers, and looks on Scouting as one of the happiest and most valuable experiences of his life. In fact, he credits Scouting for helping to instill in him the values that spurred him on to help others in the splendid way he has.

I sat down for a phone interview with Craig one Sunday afternoon, when he was in the middle of writing a term paper for university. He was pleased to have the chance to speak to members of Scouts Canada – our youth in particular. His energy crackled across the telephone line; I couldn’t help but sense the enthusiasm and drive in a man of such young years.

Susan Mackie: Craig, I want to talk to you about your experience in Scouts. What did you most enjoy about it, and what are some of your happiest memories?



Photo courtesy of Craig Kielburger

*Craig's  
passion  
shows as  
he speaks*

Craig Kielburger: Well, I had the greatest time all through Scouts. The camping, the camaraderie, the outdoors – they were all terrific. I would have to say though, that my best memory was the weekend my dad came to camp to act as cook for the weekend. I was eight years old at the time, and I remember I was embarrassed at the thought of it – after all, no kid wants his parents along on a Scouting trip! It turned out to be one of the best times of my life. I got to go fishing and hang out with my dad – it was the greatest father/son bonding time I'd ever had.

I have to say Scouting really was my life. I got all the badges, and I think I still have the sash! The outdoor training was the best I could have ever received for my human rights work. It was my first experience with volunteer work, and it was great preparation for community service, and instilled in me a sense of responsibility to others.

The camping skills I was taught were incredibly useful to me, as I traveled through developing worlds. We camped everywhere, sometimes under very difficult conditions. We had to know how to start our own fires (particularly in Nicaragua and Ecuador). It was my first experience with leadership where I was in charge of my friends – I learned what it's like to be a leader, and how to manage groups.

Many people have asked my advice on what sort of path their children should take – I'm happy to say I always advise them to enroll their children in Scouts.

SM: Craig, what impact has Scouting had on your life, and your drive to help others in the way you have?

CK: Scouting was the most important part of my life when I was young. In fact, I still speak to Scouting groups – including my own group! Scouting opened my eyes to the idea of community service and responsibility – it fundamentally teaches you these things. Above all I enjoyed the time with my peer group.

SM: What would you say to Scouting youth today who want to make a difference, and don't think they can?

CK: We are all part of a larger group – the world. Sometimes it can all feel too overwhelming in the face of the massive suffering in the world today. But Scouting truly is a family and a group we can call upon, to realize that whether you have ten or thirty members to start with, you can challenge your leaders and your friends to get involved

to take action and be creative. I would encourage leaders to help nurture that spirit within their youth. There are some things we should never lose – and that includes our call to service. Scouting continues those traditions of service – our morals, ethics, good citizenship, caring, and compassion. The heart of service to others is what makes us Scouts. And I still think of myself as a Scout today.

SM: In what specific ways can our leaders and youth help in the cause of child labor?

## Scout groups could also start their own "Free the Children" chapter.

CK: Well, Scouts can help with "Free the Children". We have a program where we send school kits to children who can't afford school supplies. Believe it or not, it's against the law to attend school in certain developing countries if you don't have school supplies! Kids can put together backpacks, pencils, paper, pencils, pens, and have them shipped overseas to those in need. Groups can also "adopt a classroom" – exchanging letters to classes overseas.

Scout groups could also start their own "Free the Children" chapter. If older youth are interested in volunteering overseas, there are plenty of opportunities in countries like India, Kenya, Thailand, Nicaragua, and Ecuador.

SM: When you look at the state of child labor when you began your efforts and the way it is today, how far have we come? How has your perspective changed?

CK: By sheer numbers child poverty and child labor are on the rise. The most important battle we are winning is changing attitudes – more people are aware than ever before about this issue. We have worked with a million children overseas, and over 250,000,000 child laborers, but the most important battle is at home. I'm proud to say that our books are textbooks now – part of the curriculum in many schools across Canada. Our group also provides leadership training to 300,000 annually in North America. It's been an unbelievable challenge, but there is an army building up to change attitudes here at home, and to someday end all child labor in the world.

Young people have the solution! You have the power to take action on any issue you choose – whatever your passion (my one great love was for the environment).

SM: Craig, when you were caught up in your efforts with this project – did you feel you had time to have a childhood?



## Leaders Today

Leaders Today is dedicated to youth leadership. It helps young people realize their fullest potential through youth leadership education and development using innovative, youth-inspired curriculum.

Leaders Today administers one, two and five day youth leadership workshops around the world, and holds annual youth leadership training academies, facilitator training programs and college preparation courses throughout North America. It also organizes overseas volunteer spring break and summer trips to Kenya, Thailand, Mexico, Nicaragua, India, and Ecuador. To find out more information surf to [www.leaderstoday.com](http://www.leaderstoday.com).

CK: I get asked that very often. There were many times I felt overwhelmed, but I always made time for fun. It's all a balance – blending work (sometimes I work till midnight and beyond) and recreational activities. Sometimes my friends and I end up shooting baskets at midnight!

SM: Were there times you felt you'd had enough? What kept you going?

CK: There were times I wanted to quit and crawl under my bed, but you take that emotion and let it buoy you – let the anger and frustration push you to take more action. That first step is the most daunting – it gets easier after that. And now, nine years later when I have seen more change and more hope than I could have dreamed of – it's so worthwhile.

SM: What is *Kids Can Free the Children* doing now?

CK: (laughs) In the tradition of Scouts Canada – school boards are now bringing us in, to run leadership programs for grade 10 and grade 12 as part of the curriculum for civics courses. The boards have purchased 17,000 copies of our textbooks, to enhance our teaching of leadership training, community service and support. We are really a great team. All we are today is what we were nine years ago – only now we're a small group times 1000.

We've had laws passed in Canada protecting kids from sexual abuse. We've done our work one letter at a time, one person at a time. You would be amazed at how many youth are taking action. I'm so proud of that.

SM: Craig, tell me about your studies now at university, and what you see in your own future?

CK: I'm currently in my second year at the University of Toronto, in peace and conflict studies, which is an interdisciplinary degree in war and the causes of war. I plan to stay with *Kids Can Free the Children*, but be more focused now on our newest venture, *Leaders Today* (see sidebar), so that we can make sure we stay true to youth and always be involved.

SM: Craig, I have to ask: how did it feel to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize?

CK: The funny thing was – I read of my nomination in the paper! They don't let you know in advance, so it was quite a surprise. It was a great honour for our work, because young people were acknowledged – it sent a message that

## Books by Craig Kielburger

Kielburger, Craig. *Free The Children*. With Kevin Major. McLelland and Stewart Inc. 1998. \$29.99.

Kielburger, Craig and Marc. *Take Action*. Gage Learning. 2002. \$16.95.

Kielburger, Craig and Marc, and Shankaran, Deepa. *Take More Action*. Gage Learning. 2004. \$16.95.

All books may be purchased from [www.freethechildren.com](http://www.freethechildren.com). Royalties benefit the *Free The Children* charity.

you don't have to be "famous" to make a positive difference. But I was so thrilled to be nominated along with such people as U.S. President Jimmy Carter.

SM: You are a real hero to underprivileged children today, and have met many important and famous individuals. Who are your heroes?

CK: That's an easy one. My real heroes are the kids I've had a chance to meet, and the many more I haven't. These are kids who have so little and yet still share what they have with others – it's the little acts that are the miracles. I remember meeting one little girl in Thailand who had been virtually starving – I met her as she was breaking an orange into pieces to share with all her friends.

SM: So Craig, do you still like the comics? And what do you do for fun?

CK: You bet! You always need your laughs every day. I have to admit the Scout in me comes out every now and then. I love rock climbing, and hope to get to do more of it.

CK: I'd like to issue a challenge to society: don't live in a bubble. True happiness comes from helping the collective. If we take the time to listen to our children and youth, and get kids involved, we will see the end of slavery and child labor. Even here in Canada, there is a problem – migrant labor is a huge issue. One in five Canadian children today lives under the poverty line. And on a personal note – if any of my former Scouting leaders are reading this – I'd like to send you a big "thank you" for everything!

There are great things in store for this enterprising, energetic and compassionate young man – of whom the Scouting Movement is so proud. X



## Kids Can Free The Children

**KCFTC** is an international network of children helping children at a local, national and international level through representation, leadership and action. The primary goal of the organization is not only to free children from poverty and exploitation, but to also free children and young people from the idea that they are powerless to bring about positive social change and to improve the lives of their peers.

KCFTC is unlike any other children's charity in the world, as it is an organization by, of and for children that fully embodies the notion that children and young people themselves can be leaders of today in creating a more just, equitable and sustainable world. To find out more information surf to [www.freethechildren.com](http://www.freethechildren.com).