

POINT OF CHANGE Conference Keynote Speaks to a *Generation of Purpose*

By Craig Kielburger, Co-Founder, Ambassador for Free The Children (Volunteer)

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If you think about the greatest threats facing the world today, your mind will probably conjure images of terrorism, diving stock charts or hurricanes caused by climate change.

But, for some of the greatest minds on earth, none of these issues are their top concern.

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of attending a forum on this very subject. In my awe of the philosophers, religious leaders, Heads of State and great thinkers all around me, I tried hard to take in every word.

The issue they agreed upon as the most menacing was not the obvious. I think the Dalai Lama phrased it best in his closing remarks. He said the biggest threat is, “a generation of passive bystanders.”

The bystander effect may not grab headlines but it could very well have an enormous impact on peace and stability

in the world. Those studying the effect explain that the more witnesses there are to an injustice, the less likely we are to do something about it. We assume someone else will take responsibility.

This problem is at the root of many of the crises we face on a global level. We know about hunger, oppression and environmental devastation. For many of these problems, we even know the solutions. But, they require collective action and the bystander effect obstructs it from taking place.

Luckily, the bystander effect is a threat we can combat. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “If we are to have true peace in the world, it must begin with the children.” By starting with youth and changing their perspectives, the empowerment they feel can last a lifetime.

My first step towards taking action came one morning at the kitchen table when I was 12-years-old. I read a story in the newspaper about a former child labourer killed in Pakistan. I was angry. The boy was my age. So, I went to school and

with the help of a supportive teacher, my classmates and I started Free The Children.

Today, we are the world’s largest network of children helping children through education. We have involved more than one million young people in North America, while our Adopt a Village model provides education, clean water, health and alternative income projects to serve communities around the world. This has included building more than 650 schools and schoolrooms in Africa, Asia and South America.

Many adults tend to think the younger generation is apathetic. I don’t believe this is true at all — not from what I’ve seen. Young people are a very aware generation, having been born in a world made much smaller by 24-hour news and the internet. But, they are a generation that is searching for their place.

It’s our job to open doors and encourage them to take an active role as global citizens.

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Change the way that youth see the world and we will succeed in changing it.

To do this, we look to challenge the traditional views that education is just reading, writing and arithmetic. We are not trying to replace the education system — merely compliment it by developing leadership skills and active citizenry.

These skills can be developed through clubs. We've seen this in the O Ambassadors program, a joint initiative between Free The Children and Oprah's Angel Network. About 1,700 student clubs across North America increase awareness about the Millennium Development Goals in their communities and raise money for development projects abroad. The students learn that one person can make a difference. Even at a young age, they can be agents of change.

These skills are also developed by encouraging students to volunteer abroad.

Every year, more than 2,000 high school students spend their school breaks volunteering at our project sites in developing

countries like Kenya, India and Ecuador. Their schools often support their involvement through foreign language classes, school clubs and credits.

Volunteering can do so much more than drawing out that warm, uplifting feeling you get from helping your fellow man. In fact, a study by the University of Virginia found that students who volunteer get better grades and stay in school. They develop stronger self-esteem and practice leadership skills which inspire them and drive them to go further.

Schools are the ideal place for combating the bystander effect. But, it involves taking a proactive approach to education.

I'm very excited to be sharing more of this message at the Annual Connecticut Nonprofit Conference on Nov. 10. Together we can create a lasting legacy by helping young people grow as global citizens.

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Join the movement at www.freethechildren.com