

Youth Philanthropists: Getting a jump start on doing good

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By Andy Levy-Ajzenkopf

What is the first thing you think of when you see a 10 or 11-year-old? Childhood? Innocence? Silly games being played out among happy-go-lucky children? Most of us would think of all those things and then smile reflectively, remembering our own halcyon days of youth. But some extraordinary young people are challenging these preconceptions about childhood and doing so in the most conscientious of ways: as bona fide philanthropists.

Not content to be limited to the role of "just kids" with some spare change in their piggybanks to donate to whatever cause because some adult told them to, the youth profiled here are setting a shining, philanthropic example for all Canadians. More importantly, they are following their own moral imperatives by helping those in need.

Children helping children

One of the first Canadian youth to come to prominence as a dedicated philanthropist was **Craig Kielburger**. In 1995, at age 12, he stood up for children's rights after reading about the senseless death of Pakistani child activist, Iqbal Masih. "It was anger that moved me to action," recalls Kielburger. "I couldn't believe another 12-year-old halfway around the world could be killed for standing up against child labour." So he decided to found [Free The Children](#) and 11 years later it is the world's largest network of children helping children at the local, national, and international level through representation, leadership and action.

Now a man of 23, Kielburger is a multiple Nobel peace-prize nominee and an inspiration to millions of children worldwide. Over the years, his quest to help liberate children from child labour and abuse has raised more than \$9 million, provided daily schooling for more than 35,000, and drawn the attention of the international community. He is a much sought after public speaker and has even appeared on *Oprah* as part of her "Angel Network". What's more, he remains true to his cause and seeks to instill hope in youth everywhere that they too can make a difference.

"Who could better understand children than children themselves?" he asks rhetorically. Kielburger remains steadfast in his faith that youth must play a vital role in shaping the present and future of philanthropy. "At Free The Children, we strive to help young people realize their potential as agents of positive social change, and instill within them a sense of civic responsibility and global citizenship. Too many people think the only way to help is by writing a cheque. True philanthropy is not about money; it's about compassion and the action it inspires." Other youth are taking that message to heart.

Speaking up and being heard

Hannah Taylor, 11, is another notable Canadian philanthropist. She is the founder of the [Ladybug Foundation](#), a Winnipeg-based organization providing help to Canada's homeless. Taylor's impetus to help occurred one Christmas when she witnessed a man scavenging for food from the garbage. She was so struck by the sight that she vowed to do everything she could to help. And help she has, striking out on speaking tours across the country and the world. "I will never ever stop caring [for] and loving our homeless and hungry," she says with conviction.

A born orator, Taylor's public addresses have succeeded in bringing high-profile attention to her cause. Her disarming, little girl charm mixed with plain-speaking, truthful messages about the plight of the homeless, have earned her high-profile speaking engagements in prominent, corporate circles such as The Empire Club of Canada. She's also gained the ear of high-ranking politicians like former Prime Minister Paul Martin. All of this has assisted her foundation in raising more than \$500,000 to help the homeless. She preaches a simple and heartfelt line.

"I believe that if we all care in our way about our homeless people we can make their lives better. It doesn't take a lot, just caring enough in your heart to say 'Hi' or share your mitts or your sandwich," she says. "People don't always see our homeless because they are afraid and not sure what to do to help. They are people and we need to care for them. Don't be afraid of them just love them like family." It's tough to ignore that kind of sincerity, especially when it comes from a child. And Taylor isn't unique in Canada. Though many youth may not have the same level of exposure, there are others who spearhead their chosen causes at the local level.

Thinking global, acting locally

Jordyn Harrison, 16, of York region Ontario, is doing his part to make his municipality a better place. Inspired by a story he read about foster children when he was 11, he founded **Kids for Kids**, a grassroots, community project that provides duffle bags, knapsacks, toys, and books for local foster kids who are sometimes forced to move from home to home, often without the means to carry their belongings. Harrison has done it all through sheer persistence.

"I approach major corporations...just asking for donations," says Harrison. "We get to work when we have donations, and when we don't have [them] we go out and look for them. When we get [donations] we call up the [foster] agencies and ask about their needs." It's a system that he has applied for five years and which has helped more than 3,000 kids in his community so far. Still, the needs of these children persist and he knows it. "It's sad when you see how many [foster] kids there are and there's always more on the list," he says. He has no plans to stop his help any time soon. And there are still more youth out there striving to make a difference.

The children are our future

Nine year old **Bilaal Rajan** seems ready to take the torch from the likes of Kielburger and run with it in his own fashion. "I've seen movies about Ghandi and Nelson Mandela and they really inspire me," he says. "Craig Kielburger is another youth...well, I shouldn't say he's youth anymore because he's quite old," he says giggling. "He's a great inspiration for young people like me." We're sure that "old man" Kielburger would forgive him for the ageist slight considering how much Rajan has accomplished thus far.

The Toronto native has been helping those in need since he was four, when he sold tangerines to help raise money for India's earthquake victims. Five years on and he has succeeded in heading campaigns for both UNICEF and the United Way. Now he's decided to found his own organization, [Hands For Help](#), where he can dedicate his efforts as he sees fit. "I wanted control for myself," he says. "That's why I started Hands for Help. I'm not going to just give to causes like disasters, but also to people who are blind and disabled...for any community in need, anywhere." And his ambitious dream has already begun.

Hands For Help's latest project is set in Mexico, where Rajan hopes to provide economical and efficient lighting to impoverished villages. When asked if he ever feels his work is hard, his response is straightforward. "Nothing's hard because I know [my work] is going to a good cause," he says. Rajan, like Kielburger, knows that youth can make a difference, but he also cautions that they should only do so because they want to. "Don't do it because I'm telling you to. Don't do it because your parents are telling you to do it. Do it out of your own will, because it's the thought that counts," he counsels.

It's a message that more and more Canadian youth are hearing and responding to, ensuring that the nation's philanthropic future is in good, little hands.

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