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Free the Children founder awarded Children's Nobel Prize

Joanne Laucius, CanWest News Service; Ottawa Citizen

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Craig Kielburger, the 23-year-old Canadian children's rights worker who founded Free the Children at the age of 12, has been awarded the World's Children's Prize.

He is the first person from the developed world to win the prize, known as the "Children's Nobel Prize," and awarded for outstanding contributions to defending the rights of children.

Kielburger was chosen as the winner by a jury of children, including landmine victims, refugees and former child soldiers, slaves workers and street children.

"They are extraordinary," Kielburger said Tuesday. "They have become activists in their own countries."

Kielburger is to accept the award from Sweden's Queen Silvia Thursday outside Stockholm at Gripsholm's Castle with more than 100 children participating.

The news was especially poignant to Kielburger, coming only a few days after the 11th anniversary of the founding of the project he initiated as a Grade 7 student.

On April 16, 1995, Iqbal Masih, a child debt slave working in a carpet factory in Pakistan was assassinated after he became a symbol of the fight against child labour abuses.

Three days later, Kielburger, then 12, brought a newspaper clipping about the assassination to school and asked his classmates if they were willing to do something about child labour practices. Eleven of his fellow students took up the challenge, and Free the Children was born.

Since then, the Toronto-based organization has helped build 430 schools in 23 countries and provides education to 35,000 children, and Free the Children is building 100 schools with Oprah Winfrey's Angel Network.

About \$7 million is raised each year by the organization, 70 per cent of that from walkathons, bake sales and car washes organized by Canadian children, said Kielburger. Masih was posthumously awarded the first World Children's Prize in 2000.

"I hope this will send a message to young people you can make a difference at any age," Kielburger said Tuesday in a telephone interview from Sweden.

The award is worth about \$40,000 US. Kielburger is donating the money to Free the Children's adopt-a-village program in East Africa. The program allows donors to adopt wells, classrooms, a women's co-operative and other elements of a village. About half the schools in eastern Ontario's Upper Canada District School Board are raising funds for the program, and there are about 30 chapters of Free the Children in the Ottawa area.

Two other shortlisted candidates will win separate prizes. The Global Friends' Award will go to the Association of Orphan Heads of Households, a group that fights for the rights of children whose parents were killed in the 1994 genocide. The World Children's Honorary Award will go to Jetsun Pema for her 40 years of work with Tibetan refugee children in India.