

WORKING TOGETHER AS YOUNG PEOPLE

Marc Kielburger, 23, is the director of Free the Children USA's national and international programs. Jeff Farr, World Tribune associate editor, talked with him about how to inspire young people to take leadership in peace at the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation in Santa Barbara, Calif., April 15.

Jeff Farr: You and your younger brother, Craig, have created an incredible movement called Free the Children, based on the principle of children saving children. When I was reading your brother's book, *Free the Children*, something that struck me was how he calls you his mentor. I think that it's important for youth to mentor youth—this is one of our focuses in the SGI, the Buddhist organization that I'm involved with. Based on your experience, what do you think are the most important ways that young people can mentor other young people?

Marc Kielburger: It starts with our profound sense of responsibility to ensure that the next generation of young people are youth peacemakers, that young people are concerned about human rights and are socially involved.

The basis of Free the Children is twofold: We free children from child labor, and we help free kids from the idea that they can't do anything in society, that they're powerless. The way that we do that is through mentoring.

We now have 100,000 members in 27 countries, but the key is that these young people need to be a team. And then we have older youth who are not "members," but are extremely involved in the mentorship aspect.

Basically, they help coach young people in the areas of public speaking, awareness, leadership skills, getting involved in issues, inspiring others and running meetings. All of these are skills that older youth may have more experience with, but younger youth need to have.

Young people can raise young people because they are the ones who can relate to them. An adult standing up saying, "You know, when I was your age, I walked uphill both ways"—those kinds of things—is not effective. That's the old paradigm.

The new paradigm is young people saying: "Look, I've been able to do this. I've learned this. I don't have all the answers, but I know that I can make a difference, because I've done it. What I want to do is ensure that you guys have the power, ability and confidence to achieve the goals that you have set as well."

The results can be phenomenal with this kind of dialogue, because there is a sense in the younger people of "Wow, somebody a little bit older than I am has done it—this is where I want to be in my life. Let me follow my peer." This is different from "Let me follow this adult. Let me follow my teacher." Not to say that the latter is necessarily wrong or negative. It's different.

As young people, we want to look cool. We want to be hanging out with the young people, as well as the cool crowd. Who better relates to other young people than young people themselves?

Farr: Both you and your brother have a strong determination to fight injustice. This is so

encouraging to see in young people. How can we instill in more young people a sense of justice—plus the confidence that they can achieve justice?

Kielburger: First, adults have to believe in the power of youth. If adults dismiss young people and think that they should be seen and not heard, or heard and not seen, that's the old paradigm. The new idea is adults believing that they can create an intergenerational dialogue.

Second, again, is mentorship. We think that maybe once a month in the schools, we can highlight heroes like Martin Luther King Jr., like Mother Theresa. And also local heroes, like the baseball coach, like the Boy Scouts leader. It's important for parents to instill in their children the idea that you don't have to be a head of state to be a leader. You don't have to be leading an organization with 17 million members. You can be a leader in your own right.

Third, it is most important to identify young people's gifts. Every young person has a gift. My brother is very well versed in public speaking, for instance, but other young people are very good at organizing. Others are very good in art. And others are extremely good in sports. It is necessary to ensure that young people are aware of their gifts, that they know that they are special, that they are unique. They need to have a sense of self-confidence and self-respect based on those gifts.

Young people are always told no. "Don't talk to strangers." "Don't do drugs."

How often are young people told yes? "Yes, you're unique." "Yes, you're amazing." "Yes, you're special." "Yes, you can achieve the things that you want to." That positive reinforcement, even though it sounds so basic, is so key.

My brother and I are working on a book called *A Generation Stuck on Fastforward: How to Inspire a New Generation of Young People*. It's a guide for Boy Scouts leaders, parents, adults, teachers, educators—anybody who works with young people—on how to inspire a new generation of leaders. There are a million books out there written by psychologists, and they probably are very authoritative in all of the theories. But it's different when you are working with young people on a day-to-day cycle. And it's different if you are able to do it.

I'm not trying to pat myself on the back, but we've been able to inspire a generation of young people to free the children. You guys have been able to inspire a generation of young people through the SGI. The tools that you guys have used and the tools that we have used are amazing and should be shared.

Farr: Now you are involved with the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, too. Why do you feel that young people should take responsibility for the nuclear weapons issue?

Kielburger: I feel that this issue is extremely pressing. I work on the issue of children, but of course if we have a nuclear holocaust, the whole of humanity—our entire future—will be eliminated. The children are our future, so it really is all tied into this web.

I feel that young people can get involved in a number of ways. It's important for us to understand the issue and to do research on it. We have to become peace leaders and peace builders on a local, national and international level. After all, the situation of nuclear weapons is international.

My opinion is that society in general recognizes that we don't need this type of weapon. That's where we need to start—from the grassroots. Everyone needs to say: "We don't

need this kind of thing. We can live in peace.” And the way to get there is to create a new generation of peace builders.

Young people can take actions in their everyday lives — very simple actions — that will enable them to take peace leadership. They can become more active in conflict mediation, more active in peace building on a local level. That tiny drop in the pond sends out the ripple, and the ripple will, in my opinion, enable us to ensure that our world is more peaceful and eventually free of nuclear weapons.

Farr: With all of your social involvement, I am sure that you and your brother have experienced many obstacles. What was the worst one? How did you overcome it?

Kielburger: Our worst obstacles have been adults, to be perfectly honest with you. Some adults believe that young people should not be active decision-makers in society, and it's hard to break down that idea.

There are a lot of adults out there who say: “OK, young people, who's pushing you? Who's behind you? You must have a secret agenda.” And we say, “We don't, actually.”

The way they figure it is that just because we're doing something good means that we're being pushed by a political agenda. That makes me upset. Just because we're young people does not mean that we shouldn't have the power to influence positive change. We change their minds through showing them what we can do. We don't necessarily sit down with them and talk to them until we're blue in the face. We change their mind through action.

Basically, we say: “Look, we could spend an hour sitting here talking to you or spend an hour talking to 100 young people in a school gymnasium. Those 100 young people then can go on a fundraiser and build a school in a place like Nicaragua. That school can provide an education for 40 children. Those 40 children can break the cycle of poverty.”

I'm not going to sit there and beg people to believe that I'm trying to influence positive change. I'd rather just go around and do it. If they want to see what we're doing — wow, that's great! If not, we'll eventually impact their community and their lives. Young people will show them that we're actually doing what we want to do.

Of course, it's always challenging for young people to work together — especially young people from around the world. I'm just kind of realizing that my way of doing things isn't the international way of doing things. And in order for us to actually have an international movement and an international impact, we need to have an international point of view and consciousness. But the best thing that we think to do is continue to work together as young people and to stay focused.