

Oral Presentation Sample (B)
Kids can be Activists or Bystanders
BY CRAIG KIELBURGER

The following is adapted from a speech by Craig Kielburger, a student from Canada who has been active in building a campaign against the use of child labor to produce products such as sports equipment, clothing, and handmade rugs. The speech was delivered before the American Federation of Teachers at its 1996 convention.

We have started a movement called Free The Children, a youth group made up of young people mainly between 10 and 16 years of age. Our purpose is not only to help those children who are being abused and exploited, but to also empower young people to believe in them-selves and to believe that they can play an active role as citizens of this world.

People sometimes look at me and say, "Well, you're only 13 years old, and 13-year-olds don't do these types of things, and is it normal?" And I ask you, why are people so surprised when young people get involved in social issues?

In other countries, children our ages and younger are working up to 16 hours a day in factories and fields. They are fighting in wars and supporting entire families. Drug dealers don't underestimate the ability of children. So often I find myself believing that the schools and that the adults in our lives underestimate who we are or what we can do, the good that we can do in making this world a better place.

We have been receiving hundreds of copies of letters written by children all over the United States, and I would like to read one of them to you now. This letter is to the president of the Nike Corporation.

"Dear Mr. Nike President: My name is Jamie, and I am eight and three-quarters years old. My Nike shoes are all worn out, but I will buy no more Nike running shoes if you don't tell me that you have no child labor in all of your factories" — and "all" is underlined. "Yours truly, Jamie."

Jamie may only be eight and three-quarters years old, but he's already learning that he does have a voice, that he is important. Jamie is learning to be an active citizen of this world.

It is not often that a young person my age has the opportunity to give his teacher advice — let alone nearly 3,000 teachers. But I believe that in this information age, with its global economy and global human rights, one of the greatest challenges that you as teachers and educators will face is to prepare your students to live in the new global village and to become active citizens of this world. As young people, we are capable of doing so much more than simply watching TV, playing video games, hanging around malls, or simply regurgitating information that is fed to us through schools or the media.

Now, don't get me wrong. I personally love hanging out with my friends and playing video games. But there is much more on top of that that young people can do. Today, young people in North America are more aware, more informed, and perhaps more frustrated than any other generation of youth, for we see all the poverty and injustices in the world. Yet, what role do we play in today's society? Where are the infrastructures, the opportunities which allow us to participate, to give and to help?

We can either grow up as bystanders simply closing our eyes and becoming immune to what is happening to the people in the world around us, or we can be taught that we can participate, that

we do have a voice, that we are important, and that we can bring about a change. And this is why I believe so strongly that service to others, whether at a local – for we have many problems in our own neighbourhoods – at a national, or even international level should be an integral part of our school, of our education.

I say education because when young people are challenged to look at others and to help others, we realize how lucky we truly are. We learn leadership skills and self-respect. We are able to put our energy and enthusiasm to a worthwhile cause. We learn that we can make this world a better place. Some people say that I am exceptional. But to me, the true heroes are the boys and the girls who work in near slave-like conditions to make the soccer balls which your children play with, to make the clothes which your children wear, and who even make the surgical equipment which saves lives in American hospitals.

As educators, you are such a powerful group. You have the power to motivate people, to stand up, and to bring about a change. What will you do to help these children? People, especially young people, live up to those expectations which others draw for them.

Today, if I leave behind one message with you, it will be to believe in us, the young people of today. Don't be afraid to challenge us to play a greater role in society, and please, don't underestimate who we are or what we can do. Our generation may just surprise you.

Craig Kielburger continues to work with Free The Children (see <http://www.freethechildren.org>). Free The Children describes itself as the "largest network of children helping children with over a million active youth in 40 countries around the world."