

CRAIG KIELBURGER: A MOVEMENT IS BORN

Mark Reno wrote this case under the supervision of Professor Mary Crossan to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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The morning was like any other. Craig Kielburger grabbed the *Toronto Star* to read through the comics over breakfast before school. He was in Grade 7 and had just turned 12. This particular morning, however, he never made it to the comics. Craig was struck by the front page headline that read “Battled Child Labour, Boy 12 Murdered.”

The article went on to tell the story of another 12-year-old boy a world away from Craig’s home in Thornhill, Ontario. Iqbal Masih grew up in Pakistan, and at the age of four his parents pledged him as collateral against a loan of only US\$16. Iqbal’s life in bonded labour began. He was forced to work in a carpet factory tying tiny carpet knots day in and day out to repay his family’s debt. At the age of 10 he managed to escape. With his new-found freedom he traveled the world with a pencil in one hand and a carpet tool in the other telling of the horrors of child labour. Two years later, while cycling in his hometown in Pakistan, Iqbal was shot and killed for speaking out for what he believed in.

Craig was so angered by the article that he tore it from the paper and marched to school. He wasn’t sure what to do, but he knew he needed to do something. Nervously he asked his teacher if he could address the class. Seeing the anticipation in his eyes, the teacher took a chance and said yes.

Craig read the article verbatim as his knees shook and his hands sweat. When he was done, he asked a simple question: “Who will join me?” Eleven hands were raised. Their fledgling group, Twelve12-Year Olds, was formed.

The group set out to make a difference the only way they knew how: they contacted charity after charity hoping to donate their time and efforts in some way. The responses they received were less than encouraging. Charities at this point in time had virtually no interaction with children in the role of volunteers or donors. Thus, defaulting to the standard charity model, the voice on the other end of the phone told the group that if they wanted to make a difference they could do so by finding their parents’ credit cards. This appalling response was the catalyst for a different sort of charity — they realized they would have to create the change they wanted to see. Free The Children was born, and now they had to decide where to start.