

Story by Mike Latona
Photo by Andrea Dixon

MOVIE on the

Speaking up for those who can't



Craig Kielburger talks to an audience at St. John Fisher College on Feb. 28 about empowering youth to help suffering children all over the world.

Craig Kielburger chatted so easily Feb. 28 with his long line of young well-wishers, he seemed to blend right in with them. He had just finished speaking at St. John Fisher College in Pittsford.

However, it quickly became obvious that Craig is no ordinary teenager.

One girl, 17-year-old Mary Ward, gave Craig a check for nearly \$500 that was raised at her parish, St. Matthew's in East Syracuse. Mary had ridden 100 miles with her mother so she could make the donation to Craig in person.

Some college students told Craig about their missionary trip to Brazil, and he talked about his own experiences in that South American country.

Then there was the high-school senior who told him she's going to Nazareth next year. "Oh really? I was just there two weeks ago," Craig said.

Except the girl was referring to Nazareth College in Rochester. Craig was referring to Nazareth, in the Holy Land — the home of Jesus.

Just moments earlier, Craig had captivated an audience of 300 people as he emphatically related tales of exploited children in the many countries he has visited. A Catholic from Toronto, he is founder of a five-year-old movement, Free the Children, that now includes 100,000 volunteers in 27 countries. He has written a book by the same title. Among his many awards, in 1998 he became the youngest person to ever receive the Ontario, Canada, province Medal for Good Citizen-

ship.

He's on the road more than two-thirds of the year, visiting sites where children suffer from poverty and exploitation. He also gives lectures asking young people to join his cause. While traveling, he studies for his classes at an alternative high school back in Toronto.

That's a lot of ground to cover for someone who just turned 17 in December. Craig noted that some people have questioned his activist efforts, simply because teens aren't supposed to get involved in that kind of stuff.

And he keeps proving them wrong. "We need to break the stereotype that we're not old enough or smart enough," Craig told the mostly-teen gathering at St. John Fisher. Many who attended his presentation had also seen him speak at the National Catholic Youth Conference in St. Louis in November.

Craig told the Rochester Diocese audience that his interest in activism began at age 12. One day, while looking for his newspaper's comic section, he stumbled across a story about a child laborer in Pakistan who had been murdered after trying to raise awareness about the substandard pay and working conditions that Pakistani children were subjected to.

Craig presented disturbing slides he had taken, revealing children from foreign countries who were shabbily dressed and working in deplorable conditions. Describing an 8-year-old girl in one slide, Craig said she had abruptly stopped speaking to him for fear that "the master would beat her." These children, Craig said, are innocent victims who illustrate the tremendous gap between the rich and poor of the world.

Craig acknowledged to the *Catholic Courier* that these sights have overwhelmed him at times. But, he added, "For every time I've been discouraged, I've seen ten times as many things that would inspire me."

And when he does become upset, he said, "You channel your anger until it moves you to action."

Craig said he follows the example of such famous civil-rights figures as Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks, who are renowned for advancing their causes in the face of adversity.

"They refused to give up their dream of justice. And the world's better because of it," Craig said.

He was also inspired by a meeting he once had with Mother Teresa. "I asked her, 'How do you do it?' And she said, 'We can

do no great things, but we can do small things with great love.'"

Anyone can support Craig's cause, he said, by refusing to purchase goods made by exploited children in factories commonly known as "sweat shops." He claimed that such major companies as Nike footwear and Starbucks coffee have been notoriously connected with sweatshop labor.

Craig also asked his audience to write letters of protest to manufacturers and government officials. In addition, he asked for support in building schools for poor children, in the hopes that education will give them a better chance of escaping the sweat shops.

"Forty billion dollars were spent last year in the world on golf. It would take only \$10 billion to put every child in the world through school," Craig remarked.

Two youths from St. Jerome's Church in East Rochester, Nicole Matroniano and Katelyn Stegman, said that Craig's Feb. 28 talk made them stop and think.

"I felt like I wanted to go out and do something to help people," said Nicole, 14. Meanwhile, Katelyn, 13, remarked that she felt "kind of selfish" about her possessions after seeing the poverty that the child laborers experience.

Ashley Perez, from Church of the Good Shepherd in Henrietta, was unable to attend the talk. But she saw Craig three months earlier in St. Louis, and said that his talk at the NCYC has made her reconsider her future.

"I've always wanted to become a dancer and photographer, but I felt like I'm not doing anything to make the world better. I thought about it a long time, and this is kind of a wake-up call," said Ashley, who turns 16 on March 18. "There's something else I'm supposed to do ... I know there is something more, and I don't have to wait until I'm older."

Because of Craig's influence, Ashley said she hope to go on a mission trip this summer.

"He gave me faith in myself," Ashley said. "Seeing someone else like him makes me feel like, 'Hey, I can do this too.'"

EDITORS' NOTE: To contact or learn more about Free the Children, phone 1-800-203-9091, e-mail to frechild@do.com or visit its Web site at www.freethechildren.org.

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