

## Engage Youth to End Apathy

“As philanthropists, I encourage you to look at children not as problems to be solved, but as problem solvers,” said Craig Kielburger. “Recognize that they care about the causes you are addressing, even as they might identify slightly different ways to address challenges.”

Kielburger, co-founder of Free The Children, an international charity, Me to We, an innovative social enterprise, and We Day, a signature youth empowerment event, spoke to a packed room during Philanthropy Southwest’s Annual Conference. Sharing stories of his charitable endeavors and his learnings from the tens of thousands of young people he works with around the world, Kielburger encouraged philanthropists to continue the legacy of their work through the next generation.

His path to become an international social entrepreneur began when he was 12 years old. Kielburger was outraged when he read a story in the local paper about another 12-year-old boy from Pakistan who had escaped child labor and made it to the U.S., only to be assassinated when he returned home. The article prompted him to ‘do something.’ Working with his brother and 10 friends, their so-called Group of 12 turned their passion into action.

Just two years later, he received a call from the Dalai Lama (which his mom assumed was a prank call from one of his pals) asking him to join a gathering of 30 people in Stockholm to identify and discuss the single greatest challenge facing our world. All issues were put on the table, says Kielburger, from the intractable war in the Middle East, to the fair distribution of food, grinding poverty, and more. “In all of our discussions,” he said, “we kept coming back to ‘will’ – if the government had the will, if the people had will, we could work together to tackle our most difficult challenges. The Dalai Lama proclaimed that we are raising a generation of passive bystanders, with the expectation that someone else will solve this.”

“So often we model apathy and teach young people they are powerfulness,” Kielburger said. “We walk past the homeless and look the other way, closing our eyes to the needs around us. Even when we do feel a connection, we think we can’t make a difference, that we are too small and powerless.”

One pathway Kielburger points to as moving young people out of the passive bystander role, to being an “upstander,” is service learning. “We now have programming in 10,000 schools,” he said, “with a focus on empowering young people to take what they’re learning and apply it through service. They see the relevancy to what they are learning.” He pointed to studies that show students involved in service learning tend to earn higher grades, are more likely to go on to postsecondary education, are less likely to use drugs, and are more likely to realize positive life changes.

“We help young people see that while charity starts at home, in our own school and neighborhood, it doesn’t end there,” said Kielburger. “Looking globally helps us see things at home differently. For example, when kids hear from young people their age across the world

about being forced to serve as a child soldier, having to walk two or three hours each way between school and home, or struggling every day to get clean water, their early morning, cold bus ride to an old school doesn't seem so bad. Kids gain very different perspectives about their lives."

This translates into a lot of positives, he says, such as participation in actions like "We Scare Hunger, where kids donate food to food banks, rather than collect candy on Halloween, or "We are Silent," during which students don't speak for 24 hours, taking a pledge to go silent about issues we don't talk about enough.

He encouraged funders to step it up in considering how they can genuinely involve young people in their philanthropic efforts, and to take actions that help turn the tide of apathy into a sea of inspiration that can change the world. *Learn more at [www.metowe.com](http://www.metowe.com).*