One of top citizens under 20 earns accolades

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Bilaal Rajan spent part of last summer in Tanzania, Africa. He used proceeds from charitable donations to help fund the Hands for Help project — a nursery school for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

Don't let Bilaal Rajan's diminutive stature fool you.

Still shy of his 12th birthday, he is described as articulate, cerebral, driven and passionate by those who know him best.

Since he was a young boy, the academic standout at St. Andrew's College has been lifting children from poverty and smashing through barriers.

It all started with a rhetorical question, asked with the idealism and naivity of youth.

"Why shouldn't children in other parts of the world have what we have here in Canada and what we often take for granted?" he wondered.

His philanthropic zeal was sealed when he was 8.

He had just finished reading a news story outlining the plight of Haitians struck by natural disaster.

A photograph of a crying child filled him with compassion and the urge to help.

But his altruism can be traced back further to when he was just four, when he sold clementines door-to-door and gave the proceeds to Indian earthquake victims.

When he talks about the many charitable causes he has led, the frantic pace of his words urges anyone listening to keep up.

The passion is genuine and clearly audible and for anyone meeting the young man for the first time, it is easy to forget he is still just a boy.

But there are momentary displays of his youth.

On his last school day of the year last week, he became distracted by some activity outside a meeting room near the main foyer of Aurora's prestigious private school.

He excuses himself from an interview with a reporter and a school official, returning a few minutes later with his hands full of freezies that he spreads across the table and offers to his guests.

Kim Silcox, the school's marketing and communications director, quickly re-focuses him and, without missing a beat, the pin-striped- clad boy outlines his plans to stamp out oppression.

Last month, the Grade 7 student was the youngest honoured in this year's Youth in Motion Top 20 under 20 awards, for his efforts to help improve the lives of children around the world.

He was selected ahead of 42 finalists, short listed from about 300 nominees.

Now, he will be paired with Free the Children founder Craig Kielburger as part of a mentorship, organized through the Governor General's office.

Its mandate, to help improve the lives of children, led their paths to cross before the mentorship, however.

With another school year now behind him, Bilaal said he's looking forward to using Mr. Kielburger and his vast network as a sounding board.

Only he isn't sure what those ideas will be yet.

"There's always just one sentence that triggers my mind ... and whatever goals come along," he said.

His impressive list of accomplishments would rival most adults more than twice his age.

He knows disaster looms around every corner and when tragedy strikes, he will almost certainly be there to answer the call.

In 2004, he raised $6,000 to help children affected by severe tropical storms in Haiti.

In response to the devastating tsunami later that year, Bilaal initiated the UNICEF Canada Kids Earthquake Challenge, through which Canadian children raised more than $1.8 million to help their peers whose lives were impacted by the disaster.

"We are extremely proud of Bilaal for the extraordinary work he does to raise awareness and funds for the world's most vulnerable children," president of UNICEF Canada Nigel Fisher said.

"Bilaal has made a huge difference in the lives of children around the world and is an inspirational example of the remarkable change that can come when children are exposed to global issues and are empowered to care for those who are less fortunate than themselves," Mr. Fisher added.

In addition to travelling the world, fundraising and advocating for UNICEF, Bilaal is a straight-A student.

He is also the author of a new book, Making Change, which will be released later this year in which partial proceeds from the sale will go to UNICEF Canada.

"It teaches kids how to maximize their true potential. I thought it was something kids needed to hear," Bilaal said.

Initially, it was aimed at African children.

But he realized the eight principles outlined in his book had a universal appeal.

He has already made an impression on his classmates and St. Andrew's brass as well, including middle school director Michael Hanson.

"In my 29 years of education, I don't think I've met a young man, at his age, with that level of talent, commitment and drive. I don't know how he does it, to tell you the truth," he said.

What's more, despite his exceptional accomplishments, he is accepted by his peers as simply another Grade 7 student, Mr. Hanson added.

Bilaal's drive often requires school administrators and teachers to help him strike a balance in his life, Mr. Hanson said.

"His age is no barrier. He is so aware of global issues."

He spent part of last summer in Tanzania, Africa where he used proceeds from charitable donations to help fund the Hands for Help project, a nursery school for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

Despite all his accomplishments at a young age, he is quick to deflect the praise heaped on him.

"It's not just me making a difference. There are kids all over Canada getting involved," he said.