



Meet an ambassador for UNICEF, all of 11 years old - Bilaal Rajan

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HOW CAN THIS person be only 11 years old?

He speaks so well, so maturely, has seen so much of the world, and is so conscious of the welfare of others.

He must be at least 25, just shorter than most adults.

Bilaal Rajan is a mere 11, a Grade 7 student at St. Andrews College in Toronto, and a worldwide ambassador for UNICEF.

A couple of hundred Grade 7 students at Sackville Heights Junior High School hear Bilaal speak of the impact they can have by raising UNICEF dollars at Halloween to provide poor countries with schools and shelter.

The ovation after his Power Point presentation is thunderous and every teacher in the room, and UNICEF Atlantic regional director John Humble, hope the message has been received.

“Today gave our students a chance to see beyond their own world,” says guidance counsellor Cathy Silverstein. “These good kids are very involved in fundraising for projects like the Terry Fox Foundation, Turkey Club and IWK. Many don’t have a lot, but they come across with funds for good causes.”

Student Kaitlin Welcher was impressed with Bilaal. “It’s amazing that he’s raised five million dollars,” she says. “And I’d never have the courage to talk in front of this number of people.”

“Bilaal grew up in a giving way of life,” says Aman, who, with his wife, Shamim, has always volunteered in their Ismaili Muslim community, which believes in taking care of the other person.

Bilaal, with two books on fundraising and motivation ready for publishing next spring, has spoken to groups for years. Just last summer, he spent several weeks in Tanzania on UNICEF’s behalf. After the tsunami in 2004, he visited Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Maldives to encourage children and adults, and to see where the needs were greatest so he could raise more money.

The young Richmond Hill resident speaks English and French fluently and understands and speaks some Spanish and Mandarin. His marks are straight A's. He studies while on the road, as he has been for the last 10 days in the Maritimes, addressing schools on UNICEF's trick-or-treat campaign.

"Together we can make a difference," he tells the Sackville students. "My passion is making a difference. You can do it, too."

He begins his speech asking the question, "How do you start a fire?"

An audience member answers, "Use a match."

Someone else calls out, "Rub sticks together."

Like a good instructor, Bilaal agrees, but then says, "All it takes is one spark. I want each of you to be that spark for children around the world."



Bilaal Rajan, 11, Richmond Hill, Ont., is a UNICEF ambassador who spoke to Grade 7 classes at Sackville Heights Junior High School on Wednesday. Among the students were Kaitlin Welcher, Melissa Robinson and Joel Patey, all 12 years old. (Joel Jacobson)

He cites examples in Malawi and Rwanda, where he has also travelled. "Half the people live on a dollar a day. Half don't go past Grade 5. Here you have 30 children and one teacher in a classroom. There they have 150 in a class and one teacher, and sometimes three kids for one desk."

A small effort by you can make a big difference for them, he says.

Where did this kid get the oomph to do all this?

“I saw a UNICEF ad in the paper when I was in Grade 4, seeking aid for Haiti after a hurricane,” he says. “I asked my parents how I could help and they suggested I donate my allowance. I got \$10 a month and thought that wasn’t enough.”

His father, Aman, a Canadian since he was 10, is a wholesale food distributor. He sells healthy foods to Toronto-area schools and Bilaal asked to sell cookie boxes at his school.

“I thought he’d sell a few dozen boxes,” recalls Aman, travelling with his son on this Maritime excursion, “but he sold 1,000 dozen boxes.”

Bilaal nods. “I sold them at recess and after school, and then sold them at busy places throughout Toronto. I raised \$6,000. Then I made cold calls to businesses and corporations and got \$467,000 worth of goods for Haiti. It just snowballed from there.”

Snowballed, indeed.

“After the tsunami in 2004, I asked UNICEF to send out a challenge to raise \$100 for each child. My goal was \$1 million. Through that request, we raised \$1.8 million, which was matched by the (Canadian) government and now my total fundraising is up to about \$5 million.”

Bilaal, who speaks at teachers’ conferences, too, says he does this because he knows it’s right. “There are children out there who need our help. They need it more than we do.”

He says he’s a normal kid who skateboards, plays soccer, lacrosse, tennis and skis. “I love to read and play drums,” he adds.

“Bilaal grew up in a giving way of life,” says Aman, who, with his wife, Shamim, has always volunteered in their Ismaili Muslim community, which believes in taking care of the other person.

He’s proud of Bilaal. “He’s mature and he won’t quit. We say ‘Wow’ at all this but it doesn’t faze him. Whenever I hear him (speak), it’s hard not to blush. We’re really proud.”

They’ll probably be even more proud when Bilaal achieves his dream of being an astronaut AND a neurosurgeon.

“His goal is to be the first man on Mars in 2025,” says Aman. “He’ll only be 29, maybe a bit young, but with Bilaal, you never know.”

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