

Small school, big difference

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Wednesday May 02, 2007

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After a year-long fundraising campaign, the school's Grade 8/9 students have raised \$6,700, exceeding their target of \$6,000, and are three months ahead of schedule. The money will be used to build a school in the south-east Asian country of Sri Lanka.

On hand to receive the money were motivational speakers Garry Norman and Erin Blanding of Free the Children, an international non-profit organization founded by children's rights activist Craig Kielburger.

"Marshall school has just been a champion," said Blanding. "They have single-handedly fundraised enough money to build this school in Sri Lanka, which is a place that was completely crushed by the tsunami in 2004."

Blanding hopes the big contribution by this small school of only 148 students will inspire other schools in the area to undertake similar projects. Marshall is one of the few communities in western Canada to have gotten involved with Free the Children so far, she said.

The idea for the project came in September 2006 when the Grade 7/8 class attended a conference with Mark Kielburger, brother of Craig Kielburger, who won world-wide fame for his campaign to end child labour.

"We heard speeches and it inspired us," said student Erica Simon. "We just decided as a class that we wanted to make a difference, and building a school was that difference."

School principal Steven Turnbull says an important aspect of this project is that it was organized by the students. While staff provided guidance, all important decisions were researched and voted on by the students.

"The most important part is that it was student generated," said Turnbull. "The students got to take ownership of the project and kind of run with it that way." Youth reaching out to youth is what Blanding and Norman are trying to promote with the We Generation tour, which is travelling to schools across North America. The tour is designed to be both educational and inspirational, and is based on the belief that today's young people are the most powerful generation in history. "This is the first generation that has the power to end absolute poverty in our

lifetime,” said Blanding, citing a statement issued by the United Nations. “This is the first generation that can mend any major problem we see in the world. Anything at all. We’re the first generation where this is possible.”

While the wealth of today’s youth holds great potential, it will only bear fruit if young people take action to improve the world around them. It is unfortunate, says Blanding, that consumer advertising and pop culture is promoting self-centered values, leading some to refer to today’s youth as the “me generation.” Blanding and Turnbull believe the students at Marshall school have gotten the message.

“I’m hoping from this presentation they see that one little person can make a difference and how that can change the life in the school, the community, or even the world around them,” said Turnbull.

Simon says this experience has inspired her and she hopes to travel to China in a few years.