Georg Rückriem

Interview mit Craig Kielburger


Georg Rückriem: Craig, why did you write the book?

Craig Kielburger: Well, I was actually approached - at the age of thirteen - by various organizations, mainly in North America, to put together a book about FREE THE CHILDREN and our work. First - I have to admit - I was somewhat hesitant, but I came to realize that in fact this book could take the place of a thousand speeches, that it is something concrete that we can leave behind to inspire people. Also, of course, all profits are going to benefit children. Hopefully it would raise a lot of money, to help children and so we are hoping that this book will inspire people, especially young people in countries like Germany to action. I also hope that it will provoke a debate amongst parents, amongst educators, about the idea of youth involvement in society. Especially I hope that the book is able to show the two extremes: the extreme in developing countries, where children are forced to work 12 to 16 hours a day, children to support entire families, and then the extreme here in Germany or in Canada, where children are not given enough responsibility. They are not given a voice, not given a chance to participate in school, in society, in government. Now, we believe that young people even should be given a voice in the United Nations. And neither extreme is correct, you know. We have to find a middle way. I still find it somewhat ironic, to tell you the truth, that concerning a lot of these children who I have met, you know, a lot of children around the world, the pimps and drug dealers believe in these children’s abilities and their parents and teachers do not believe in the abilities of their children.

Georg Rückriem: So, you think that writing is a form of „making politics“?

Craig Kielburger: It is a form of political engagement, yes, I hope that. Over the past three years I had the opportunity to travel extensively and to meet with children and to hear about their hopes and dreams and their troubles, and I think in many ways this book is the way to give back. Because in many ways these children have taken me into their lives, they have shared with me


\footnote{Craig Kielburger, Befreit die Kinder. Die Geschichte meiner Mission, Econ Verlag, München - Düsseldorf 1998}
their sorrows and their hopes, and I hope that through this book I can give back as the mirror to reflect my story to the world, so that all are going to listen. But not only the negative, the sad and depressing, but also to inspire people, because in many cases, after four or five years of bondage and slavery, these children have never given up hope, that one day they will be free, that one day they would have a better life. And I hope that that message of optimism, of hope, of friendship, will also come through. These children have taught me the true meaning of friendship. For example, as I mention in my book, if I give an orange to a street girl in Brazil, she would automatically take it, peel it, and divide it amongst their friends. That is the true effort of sharing a friendship and that is what we in the West in many cases have forgotten. We must learn from these children.

Georg Rückriem: You call the book „History of my mission“.

Craig Kielburger: That is the title of the German book?


Craig Kielburger: Well, I think most young people do not see the power of a pen. I believe through putting thoughts down on paper, as it is the case in this book, through putting the stories of these children down on paper, it takes on a life of its own. In many ways, I think, this book is similar to a flag. Like for a mountain-climber the flag symbolizes: „we did it, we have been able to overcome this obstacle“ I hope that this book will act as a kind of flag, a flag which young people can rally around and which parents can use to show to their youth, to learn more about the involvement in society. I hope that in many ways the story of starting to FREE THE CHILDREN, the story of these streetworking children around the world will act as a spirit to move people’s actions. So, this is, of course, in a way my own form of writing, because the book refers on my visits, refers on my meetings, my experiences. But I think, every child would have been able to write a book, to write his own book, of course. It’s not a question of genes, it’s a question of learning, that is, of support. That’s it.

Georg Rückriem: Why don’t you publish your book in the Internet?

Craig Kielburger: We do have a website, you know. There you can see many hits every day. We could do it eventually. I do not know, in the future perhaps. I do believe that there are many ways to influence change. I do not believe that we should use only one. We are hoping to carry the message for example through this book and use it to raise benefits and funds for these children. For the internet we have a website which many people look at. Through speeches we carry the message. Writing to people we carry the message. Through pamphlets and flyers and leaflets and other sort of print information we carry the message. We do not want to rely to one, because each form hits different people in society. For example there are people who would not read pamphlets but look in the internet, some who would not pick up the book, but would read a flyer, some would not pick up the flyer, but would go into the internet. And that’s why we trying to hit them from all these various aspects.

Georg Rückriem: How did you write?
Craig Kielburger: Well, it took almost a year in fact. I actually was somewhat naiv, I maust admit. I thought: „Oh, I’d sit down and write a book, it’s easy!“ But it was much harder than it seems. At the same time, I had, for example - you know, most of it focuses on this trip to South Asia - fifty hours of videotape, hundreds of hours of audiotape, and I had my personal journal. There was so much information, it was difficult to choose which. I took a month off school, to put together a rough draft, and I worked about 12 hours a day typing. It may look like child labour. But in reality it was a labour of love. Reliving the adventures and the stories was incredulous, and I hope I can do the same for the readers in fact to truly draw them into mother Teresa’s, to draw them into the streets of Bombay, to draw them into the city districts of Bangkok, the red light district there. But also bringing home the children’s joy, the passion, the energy, that was seeming to explode from the time. I put together the rough draft, and I had the help of a person in Canada named Kevin Major, and also an editor to work through it, to add structure, to put it into a book form actually.

Georg Rückriem: Is it the same way you prepare your lectures and your speeches?

Craig Kielburger: Writing speeches, I find, is very different from writing a book. It took me a long time to learn the difference. Writing a speech has a certain rhetoric to it. You must convey a message in a very short period of time. You have to speak in ????. Writing a book requires a very different writing style. And actually that is why I was lucky enough to have the help of various people who taught me along the way the different structure that a book has from the structure of a speech. It was an incredible learning experience, to tell you the truth. I enjoyed it immensely. I had the help of a couple of teachers. I had the help of another Canadian author, who I was oftenly on the phone with, who would help with structure. And my editor, of course, you know, I was very fortunate.

Georg Rückriem: Craig, are you a politician?

Craig Kielburger: No, not in the typical sense. I do not run for an office, nor do a want to become a politician. In fact, no, I am not a politician! I had the chance, to be honest with you, to meet some politicians, and after meeting some, I know I will never enter politics. They scared me away! Because in many cases, politicians have to compromise their beliefs, and I do not believe in that. I believe what I am, and I believe what the other so and so thousand members of FREE THE CHILDREN are, and instead of politicians, we could be called ambassadors. Because we are trying to carry a message. We are trying to represent the children of the world. We are trying to represent those children who have no voice, no vote, no economic quote. We are trying to be ambassadors by trying to give voice to the voiceless.

Georg Rückriem: In fact you are quite different to most of other children, even outstanding regarding your political activities. Are you a „Wunderkind“?

Craig Kielburger: No. I don’t believe that. Not outstanding and no Wunderkind. A typical child goes to school every day, perhaps plays videogames, watches TV, hangs around malls, as I did before. I believe that’s normal. But I also believe that the caring so deeply that it motivates you into action is also normal. And I believe perhaps people were surprised by my involvement with childrens rights and FREE THE CHILDREN. But in reality it is not something new. Young
people for years have wanted an opportunity to become involved, an opportunity to express themselves, an opportunity to do good, to give back, to help others. And as soon as we gave them that opportunity, young people from all sector of society, youth from everywhere jumped on. I am not the only person, I am not doing this alone. I am not a wonderchild at all. Instead, I would say, these children are the real wunderkinder, these children are the true heroes. I come from a middle-class family, I have clothes, food for my stomach, a roof over my head. I have everything I had ever needed. All I am trying to do is to give back, for who is much given, is much expected. And I had the opportunity to give back. These children who have faced injustice, who have faced poverty, abuse and suffering, but still to this day help others. For instance an Indian who is crippled, who has no legs, and the others, they carry him from place to place, that is a true wunderkind, that is a child who has leadership skills.

Georg Rückriem: All the same, not every child acts this way, not every child is able to act like you.

Craig Kielburger: I do not agree! I believe every child is able. I would debate you on that. I believe deep down that every child has the ability to start an organization like FREE THE CHILDREN. Every child has the possibility to do even greater than that. But it comes down to support, support in the families, support of teachers, support of friends. It comes down to believing in themselves, believing that they have the capabilities to change the world by helping a person at a time.

Georg Rückriem: Even in Germany? How do you explain, that the German chapter of FREE THE CHILDREN had been founded by university students, not by children?

Craig Kielburger: I think that today young people are more aware through the internet, through mass media. They are more informed about the suffering that exists. But they are also more frustrated. They do want to become involved, but they cannot find the infrastructure which allows them to have a voice. FREE THE CHILDREN here in Germany is only a few weeks old. It is just starting up in fact. But if you look at a country like Mexico, or the United States, or Australia, as soon as the message was brought into the school, was brought into the communities, young people lacked on it, because there was an opportunity for them to prove their capabilities, there was an opportunity for them to give back, to help others. And that is what young people for so long have been looking for. The difference between a child who starts an organization like FREE THE CHILDREN and a child who has that same dream but it never turns into action is the support which is in place. If I had walked up to my parents and had said to them: „Listen, Mom, Dad, I have a great idea. I want to start an international network of children helping children“ - what do you think had happened? If they had shun the idea and said „Bad idea! Go back and do your homework!“ - I would not be here. Same if my friends had shun the idea, if my teachers had shun the idea. Luckily I had received that support and that is why I think, that it is so important that young people, that we deliver the messages not only to young people, but also to parents, teachers, adults, and that is the reason that so much of the book is dedicated to the idea what is childhood. They are trying to stir a debate there.

Well, what do we talk about? All our members are children between 8 to 18 of age. But we still realize we need the help of adults. For example we need the help of adults as lawyers, as accountants, as educators, you know. We are still young. We don’t have all the answers. The university students here, they are actually true students. At the same time, as last night though, when
I was in Cologne, I actually met with them, but also with an entire group of elementary and high school students who, too, in their own schools here in Frankfurt, in Munich, in Stuttgart, they had started groups also. They are just ordinary members. Two young people from Frankfurt - there was another one from Munich - they do starting up. At the same time, young people need a support. We received many, many letters from young people here in Germany. They said they wanted to become involved, but they are looking for teachers, parents to support them. We cannot do it alone. We still need help. At the same time, at FREE THE CHILDREN, all the decisions are made by children. An adult will never speak for a child. It is almost children who sit on the board, decide, what projects to fund, who carry the message. We have to have the help of adults, but it is heart und soul that remains children.

Georg Rückriem: Do children in Canada or in Europe have better or other conditions to get involved in social problems than children in the developing countries? Is there a difference?

Craig Kielburger: Oh, big difference that is! Absolutely! But I wouldn’t divide it between children in developing countries and children in industrialized countries. I would divide it between children who are wealthy and children who unfortunately are underprivileged. That is how I would make the division. Because there are many wealthy children that live in countries like India and Peru who behave in exactly the same ways that children in the industrialized world. It is because the young people today in the industrialized world have been taught that they are nothing more than consumers. We are taught that we are little vessels to be filled with knowledge till the age of eighteen. When we turn eighteen, magically we become responsible. That doesn’t happen. Young people have rights, but we also have responsibilities. And if we want to turn into true citizens of this world we must also be given responsibilities as we go along. You know, children, for example, who are living on the streets of Bombay or Nairobi, these are the most incredible children who I have met. Because to them, responsibility is finding a place to sleep at night, get food for their friends, that means negotiating with pimps and the police, so that they won’t get beaten or abused. And that is the true essence: it is too much responsibility, yes! But at the same time children rive to the challenge, just how to FREE THE CHILDREN. Our members around the world when we challenge them to collect health and school supplies for the benefit of the children of the world they will go to their schools, to their friends, to their peers, they will organize this. They will grasp and rally around it.

Georg Rückriem: What do you think then about the childrens initiative in Berlin who fights for a society without any age restriction? That means, they fight, for example, against compulsory education or against the restriction of the voting age at eighteen. What do you mean?

Craig Kielburger: A mixture. Because, firstly, I personally do not believe, well, I believe that with rights comes responsibility. So if you give young people all those rights, you must also give them the responsibilities to come hand in hand. If you give, for example, an eight year old the right to vote, the eight year old must be adequately educated. If you give the eight year old the right to choose to go to school, he must be properly educated. I do not agree with everything they state. I believe that with rights comes responsibility. And they go hand in hand, otherwise you create chaos. And you create a generation of lost youth.
Georg Rückriem: Unlike you these German children fight for the full equality of rights for children in their own country, not in developing countries. Do they inspite of this give back? Or do you think they do not help others in the developing world?

Craig Kielburger: Yes and no. Indirectly yes, because they empower youth and so will help others. But I also believe that with rights comes responsibility. If you give young people the right to vote you must also challenge and stay with them. But you must also use your power to help and ensure that other children have that same voice.

Georg Rückriem: You say that children should have a voice on all levels of political decision making. Have you got an idea how that could take place? How e.g. children could get a seat in the United Nations? Who sends them?

Craig Kielburger: Well, I do not believe that change is coming over night. It is going to take time, and one has to be naiv, in fact, to think that tomorrow youth will have a saying. First, young people will become involved in the communities, become involved in their schools, by organizing themselves in structures like FREE THE CHILDREN. So they have a voice and organize themselves, political parties would be forced to listen, and governments will be forced to listen, and it carries from a local level to a national level, to an international level. But it comes down to organizing themselves. For example, FREE THE CHILDREN now has a voice. We even challenge people at the United Nations. How? Because we carry growth behind us. Just two weeks ago I was speaking at the Committee of the UNESCO. UNESCO is planning for the 21 century. I was one of the speakers there to talk about. We are involved in a campaign just now to have an empty seat at the UN Security Council. An empty seat can represent children, can remind government leaders in decisions they make. A symbolic seat, that is what we are asking for. For example, we want to place every day a rotating item, for example a teddybear for the children of Hercegovina, a carpet woven by the hands of a child of Pakistan, now everyday a new item to remind the world leaders. So, this way children have their voice and through little actions like that we are trying to give children a voice.

Georg Rückriem: What role do your summer camps and workshops play in this connection?

Craig Kielburger: I am very impressed, in fact. You know more than ... wunderbar! Our summer camps help to train youth leaders. To teach them not only leadership skills but even self-respect, to teach them empathy, to teach them, you know, those concrete skills they need. For example, when FREE THE CHILDREN began, they were a couple of kids. It took us a long time before we established our credibility, before we were taken seriously. And what we do now is train young people what we learned: First, find an issue that you believe in, then do your research. Only if you have the facts, the statistics, to back you up, you are taken seriously. Knowledge, in fact, is what gives you the power, to stand in front of the press, to stand in front of the governments, because when someone challenges you, he challenges you on a debate. You'll be able to defend your views. Then we talk about organizing ourselves. How to organize youth structures in schools, in communities. How to fire up others to join the cause. The more people you have, the more power you have. This is what we are training young people on. We also run a program called Saturday program, in which we take underprivileged youth and in which we help them to teach self-respect. Especially these underprivileged youth they are taught that they don’t do well in that. They are taught: „You are going to turn out just like your parents. You are not
going to amount to anything.“ We are teaching them: “Well, if you have the capability, you can become prime minister. You have the capabilities whichever you believe in.“ That takes hard work. We are trying to give them the tools needed to reach their goals. Now we have children that are eleven years old, who travel around the world carrying our message, giving speeches, who are organizing leadership workshops and so on.

**Georg Rückriem:** Do children come to your summer camps?

**Craig Kielburger:** Oh yes! There is a big demand. We cannot hold as many as actually are necessary. We don’t have the staff to run them throughout the year in fact.

**Georg Rückriem:** Who runs them?

**Craig Kielburger:** University students, high school students. Students in their own life have been empowered and want to use what they have learnt to give the others.

**Georg Rückriem:** And no adults?

**Craig Kielburger:** We bring adults in as speakers, of course. We realize that we have still a lot to learn. We bring specialists on. For example every year we bring professional people who donate their service, who usually lead workshops and have to give a speech. That adults will come and lead the workshop for the youth. We are still learning from adults. We do not have all the answers. Adults are training us and giving us the tools and the skills that help ourselves to help our peers. The book, you know, is about child labour, but the big thing I want to get across is the issue of youth empowerment. I really hope that the parents, the teachers, and the young people will pick it up. We have empowered ourselves. And that is what I am trying to get across to people.

**Georg Rückriem:** Is there a certain age as limit to leave FREE THE CHILDREN?

**Craig Kielburger:** Actually at the age of eighteen they stop being members. There are associate adult members. They still help us as mentors, but they no longer give speeches, they no longer make decisions. They are helping with courtesy. But once the structure is in place, we must put the structure in place first. In fact even my role has begun to change. I am trying to train with other youth and they will be giving the speeches. I am no longer giving speeches. My role is now to train youth. I work in the office, for example. We have university students who help us in the office, that is why my role is becoming associate member. But again it is children who are giving the speeches, who are making the decisions, who travel, who visit the countries, whose views are the ones that we carry.

**Georg Rückriem:** What will happen to FREE THE CHILDREN when you become associate member - in about three years?

**Craig Kielburger:** Oh, I will always be involved, not as spokesperson, though. I will no longer be spokesperson. I think that FREE THE CHILDREN will continue to grow. Even if the whole
thing will die, FREE THE CHILDREN will have reached its purpose. Because we would have proved that young people can do it. That young people have the capability to start their own FREE THE CHILDREN, to start the movement to achieve good, that young people can truly change the world. And that is something that exists in our hearts. No adult can take that away from us. No person can take that away from us. We have so many young people who are eleven, twelve years old who are carrying the message. They in fact are ten times more incredible, because they are more empowered at ten or eleven that I ever was. And with their new empowerment they are going to take it to incredible new models. But it will not die as I leave. It is my mission, yes, but FREE THE CHILDREN is not mine, it does not belong to me. It does not belong even to our members. It belongs to all the children of the world, because it is an idea, it is something that exists in our hearts, more so than as an actual organization. It is the idea of youth voice.

**Georg Rückriem:** Thank you very much, Craig.