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Riverview students form group

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A group of Grade 5 students at West Riverview School have become the first elementary students in Atlantic Canada to form a Youth in Action group in support of Free the Children.

Free the Children is the charity activist Craig Kielburger formed when he was 12. It began as and remains an organization that promotes children helping children.

Jane Smith, a Grade 5 teacher at West Riverview, was inspired to start the group after her daughter Sarah, 19, went to Kenya this summer to help build a school there.

She invited Kailea Switzer, the Atlantic regional network co-ordinator for Free the Children, to come and speak with her students.

"She had 78 Grade 5 students spellbound for 30 minutes and all the adults passing the Kleenex box," she says. "My daughter inspired me and Kailea inspired the children."

Thirty-one children - nearly half the Grade 5 students - signed up to be part of the Youth in Action group. Switzer, a third year student at Mount Allison University, hopes this elementary group is the first of many. "Elementary students are so shamelessly idealistic, it is so nice," she says. "If you can get them thinking they can change the world at that age, hopefully that will stay with them and they will grow up with that belief and incorporate it into the rest of their life."

Switzer says the organization is all about empowering youth - not just those it helps, but those who are doing the helping.

Sixty-five per cent of Free the Children's funding comes from people under the age of 15.

"That is pretty incredible," Switzer says. "It is an organization specifically for youth. It lets youth do something and tells them how they can do something."

Part of the reason Smith is interested in the organization is because it helps children realize they can make real change in the world and gives them the tools to make it happen. "The challenge for me and the exciting part for me is teaching them how to lead and how to fund-raise," she says. "If we can instill in them a sense of social responsibility, our world very desperately needs that, and then teaching them the skills to do something with that, giving them an opportunity to make a difference, I really believe it is something exciting."

Free the Children runs three programs to improve the lot of children: building schools; providing clean water, clinics, and other things to maintain health; and providing families with alternate sources of income, freeing their children to go to school.

West Riverview has set a goal of raising \$8,500 to build a school in Kenya, something Smith expects will take a couple of years to achieve. She says their first big fundraiser is a book of poems on children's rights written and illustrated by the students.

Anyone who would like to support the fundraising efforts can drop donations off at West Riverview School.