

End Child Labor

June 12 is World Day Against Child Labour

What do you say to a child who has experienced child labor? I found myself in this position in Nepal recently. A teen, Shree, described how as a little boy he worked with his parents in the brick factories of Bhaktapur, rising at 1 am to carry mud and mix bricks. Luckily, when he was 7, a school, the Sankhu-Palubari Community School, first opened its doors to Shree and other children at risk of child labor, giving them a free education and an alternative to the back-breaking, lung-infecting work in the brickyards, as well as a childhood and a promising future.

The school was launched in 1999 by The Advocates for Human Rights, a non-profit organization based in the Twin Cities, to provide an alternative to child labor. Now, 14 years later, about 350 students are enrolled in grades pre-K through 10 at the school, which is located about an hour by bus from the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu. Many of the students are from families that are low-caste, indigenous, or other marginalized groups.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 215 million girls and boys around the world are swept up into child labor, some into human trafficking. Children, like Shree, are engaged in work that not only deprives them of their rights and an adequate education, but also is hazardous to their health and commits them to a life of poverty and drudgery.

The ILO launched the first World Day Against Child Labour in 2002 to highlight the plight of these children. Observed on June 12, the day works as a catalyst for the growing worldwide movement against child labor.

When in his final year at Sankhu-Palubari, Shree, one of the best students in the area, passed his 10th grade School Leaving Certificate exam with distinction. Now in high school and a 12th grader, he likes to write poetry and listen to music. In the afternoons, he volunteers at Sankhu-Palubari, the school that changed the course of his life and where his two younger brothers study instead of working in the brick factories. He helps the teachers in the classroom and encourages the students to study hard. When they get discouraged, he tells them, "Choose the road that makes your future very bright."

The bright future Shree envisions for himself is to continue his education after high school and become a math and science teacher to work in rural Nepal with children who, without a school and teachers, would most likely work instead of learn.

So, what do you say to the young girl toiling in a Nepal brick factory, exposed to acute respiratory infections, spinal injuries, and lung cancer? What do you say to the child beading blouses with tiny fingers in a suffocating textile sweatshop in India? What do you say to the little boy in Gambia working in an auto repair garage or selling items on the street? What do you say to the young child who is sold into human trafficking?

Through his deeds and goals, Shree is telling these children that he is working to break this cycle of abuse.

For you and me, I say that we speak with a loud, unified voice on June 12 and proclaim, “We are committed to protecting you, the world’s children, by ending child labor.” Then, we put our words into action.

By Jennifer Prestholdt, deputy director and director of International Justice Program for The Advocates for Human Rights. a nonprofit organization based in the Twin Cities and marking its 30th anniversary this year.