

Families

WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

STORY FOR ALL AGES

The Change the World Kids

Phebe and Nika were two girls, both eight years old. Sometimes they heard about bad things in the world—things like wars where people would die, or earthquakes that would shake the ground and destroy people's homes. They wanted to help, but they weren't sure what kids could do.

The girls talked to other kids in their congregation, the North Universalist Chapel Society in Woodstock, Vermont. This was the start of the Change the World Kids—a group of kids who work together to protect different parts of the interconnected web of all life.

The Change the World Kids' motto is *No one can do everything, but everyone can do something*. Nika, Phebe, and the others learned that when one person takes even one small action they send ripples of change into the world. That is the "ripple effect." Picture a calm lake. Now, imagine yourself poking a finger in the water. You will see tiny ripples, all around.

In Vermont, where Phebe and Nika lived, many kids had birdfeeders in their backyards that attracted beautiful songbirds. When Vermont got cold, birds migrated south to spend the

winter in warmer places. One spring, the Change the World Kids noticed fewer birds came back to their bird-feeders. They wanted to know: What had happened to the birds?

A scientist explained that the birds the kids saw in Vermont in the spring and summer were losing their winter homes in Costa Rica because people were

cutting down trees. People in Costa Rica wanted the wood to build new homes. Or they cut the forest to make more pastureland to feed cattle or to grow crops. The children learned that when birds migrate south for food in the winter and find none, they die. What could the kids do? Vermont was thousands of miles from Costa Rica, and the kids were just kids!

The Change the World Kids understood the ripple effect. They



The Change the World Kids in action with projects around the world.

Empowering
young UUs
to care
and act

The Families pages are adapted from Tapestry of Faith lifespan faith development programs.

www.uua.org/tapestryoffaith

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couldn't do everything to save the birds, but they could do something! They raised money to start a tree nursery, *Bosque para Siempre*, "forest forever" in Spanish. They used some money to buy land for a new winter habitat for migratory birds. Some kids visited Costa Rica and helped to plant trees to give birds fruit and shade.

One time in Costa Rica, the Change the World Kids helped tag birds for scientists to track the birds' migration. Some kids got to hold a rose-breasted grosbeak and a wood thrush—species that spend part of the year in Vermont. The kids knew they would, in time, hear and see more birds in Vermont again!

Nika and Phebe grew older. New children joined the Change the World Kids, from different religions, in many parts of the country. To help protect the earth, Change the World Kids have sold reusable shopping bags and made clotheslines to use the power of the sun, instead of electricity, to dry clothes. They do projects as simple as shoveling snow for an elderly neighbor and as complicated as raising money for schools in countries where children their age have suffered from war.

With every action, big or small, the Change the World Kids prove that each person can do something to protect the earth and all life on it. Every action makes a ripple. The ripples change the world.

Thanks to the Change the World Kids, Meg Miller, Julian Scherding, and Phyllis Arata-Meyers for information and permission to tell their story.

EXPLORING TOGETHER

Does Your Home Have Room for a Sharing Tree?

Find an agency your family can help by collecting donations. Then, make a Sharing Tree. On the branches, hang notes that specify needed items. A Sharing Tree gives tactile, concrete meaning to a cause that could seem abstract or remote to a young child.

Many agencies gather holiday wish lists from children and teens in their care. Make an ornament of each "wish" and add the requests to your family gift shopping.

In cold climates, people need new mittens and hats. Allocate some family finances and encourage everyone to decorate the Mitten Sharing Tree.

Gather funds to preserve ocean life in envelopes decorated with dolphins, coral, and other sea creatures.

Collect new socks and underwear for a refugee settlement agency.

Prepare "caring packages" of toiletries or other comforts for military troops.

Give children opportunities to earn money so they can contribute. Or, do a fundraising project together.

When shopping for donation

items, invite children to make the selections. Involve them in your family's choice to spend money on others' food, clothing, and other needs, along with your own.



Illustration © Maine Artist Karla Gerard

Which Is Better to Give—Time or Money?

Adults may feel guilty writing a check instead of physically stepping in to help. But children have limited opportunities for safe, meaningful, hands-on service. Engaging them to raise funds for a cause they choose can be a powerful alternative.

Thousands of organizations run projects to meet the world's needs for food, clothing, shelter, peace, and ecological balance. Money helps them bring health care to rural villages, save endangered species, and shelter homeless families.

- > Guide children to choose a problem to explore.
- > Help children understand why the problem exists.
- > Learn together how money can help: Where will the money go? How will it be used?
- > Support children to raise money in your congregation, neighborhood, or community.
- > Follow-up! Before too much time has passed, show children how their gift helped.



How to Empower a Giving Child

Service to others fosters empathy, compassion, and understanding. When children and teens choose their service, they also grow in leadership, confidence, and responsibility.

LOOK for service opportunities every family member can participate in.

DECIDE together. Give young children options. Older children and youth can generate possibilities and participate fully in decision making.

TURN “teachable moments” into “actionable opportunities.” Does your child express concern about a homeless person? A polluted stream? Learn more together. What actions can you take?

LOOK beneath a problem’s surface: We give to the food pantry, but why is there a need for a food pantry? What else needs to happen?

READ *The Power of Half: One Family’s Decision to Stop Taking and Start Giving Back* by Kevin Salwen and Hannah Salwen (father and daughter). See how one family, together, changed their lives and a part of the world.

Make an ‘I Can’

Write “I can...” on a piece of construction paper and wrap it around an empty, clean tin can. Each time your child takes action to help others or promote justice, drop a coin in the “I Can.”

Target the money to help empower others.

Donate to an underfunded school or a microfinance project in a developing country.



Kids Who Feel Their Power to Care and Help

Sixteen-year-old Julian Scherding is the communication spokesperson for Change the World Kids in Woodstock, Vermont. We asked Julian why he joined the group and how he came to both care and believe his actions could help the world.

“It had to do with the people and their beliefs that surrounded me,” said Julian. “I saw their example and there was something I wanted to follow.

“The fact that I was raised here probably has something to do with it. My parents have us do chores after school and on weekends. I never was the kid that sat in front of a TV while my parents made dinner and did laundry.”

It’s not just Julian’s parents. “In this community, there is a lot of emphasis on helping locally, working for the environment, and giving to people who may not have as much as we do. It felt natural to go to a group that helps and contributes.”

The Woodstock group advertises their free help in a local newspaper. “Our goal is to never turn work down,” said Julian. At weekly meetings, the group will prioritize service projects, enlisting adult help as needed. One parent’s carpentry skills allowed the group to remodel a local

family’s home. An adult environmental organization is partnering with the kids to reforest several Vermont conservation lands.

“It feels good to be part of something that isn’t controlled by adults,” said Julian.

“The kids discuss and decide everything. It’s a lot different from a classroom. People are respectful to one another and don’t talk over one another.”

For Julian, hands-on projects solidified his commitment. “We went to stack an older couple’s firewood for the winter. The woman had recently had a hip replacement, and the man had had a stroke. They were by our sides the whole time, their faces beaming. When your hands help a family stay warm for the winter, or you plant trees to help restore forestland, you realize the effect you are having on that family or that ecosystem, and you feel even more of a drive to help.”



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Right: ©iStockphoto.com/Graffizone

A Parent's Loving Choices Nurture a Child's Loving Power

🌱 **How can I teach my child to notice unfairness?** 🌱 **How can I activate my child's empathy?** 🌱 **How can I empower my child to express caring through action, and to believe the action makes a difference?**

We want our children to blossom into self-directed agents of love, truth, and justice in their world. Yet children have limited opportunities for personal agency. We set rules for their health, safety, and behavior. We choose their religion. We may select a school, a sport, a musical instrument. The list goes on.

Children need us to structure and guide their experience of the world, but they also need us to empower them. Within the world our decisions create, we can, and should, encourage children to use their own power to make a difference.

Empowerment can begin at a very young age, as we offer children choices that show what

we believe about the world and our place in it. Whether the choices are drinking milk or orange juice, putting away toys before a treat or after, or donating money to an animal shelter or to Arctic habitat preservation, we build our children's loving power when we ground all the options in our values. Invite a child to choose a healthy drink, to decide



when to take care of their play space, or to select where (rather than whether) to give. Later, point out the positive results of a child's choice to affirm that their choices matter.

Our own modeling may be the most important tool for raising an empowered, caring child:

🌱 **When I point out injustice, my child learns to notice it.** 🌱 **When I articulate my feelings of empathy, my child learns to care.** 🌱 **When I act to make a difference, my child learns actions matter.**

Piano lessons pay off not when the notes are pitch perfect at the recital, but when you watch as your child moves the keys and pedals, lost in making music. Likewise, the fruits of moral instruction come not as pennies dutifully collected for a charity you have selected, but when your child brings you a brand new, long-awaited toy and asks, "Do you think there is a child who needs this more than I do? Can we give this away?"

🌱 **Do I make caring choices for my child that support their growth, their safety, and their understanding of right and wrong?** 🌱 **Have I left my child room to experience empathy and to feel the power of their own actions?**

We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.

— Marian Wright Edelman

FAMILIES: WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

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Susan Dana Lawrence, Editor
Judith A. Frediani and Alicia LeBlanc, Contributors
Ann Casady, Graphic Design

FIND OUT MORE

- Change the World Kids in Vermont has supported kids in Arkansas, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Maine to start their own CTWK groups. www.changetheworldkids.org
- The "voluntary simplicity" movement, represented by a website at www.simpleliving.net, has generated multiple resources to help families reduce their engagement with consumerism. One is the book *Living Simply with Children*, by Marie Sherlock.
- Zoe Weil's book *Above All, Be Kind: Raising a Humane Child in Challenging Times* demonstrates how parental modeling helps children and teens develop their own standards for compassion and action.
- The Giraffe Heroes Project collects stories of people of all ages who have chosen to "stick their necks out" for the common good. www.giraffe.org
- Craig Keilburger started Free the Children when he was 12 years old, to combat child labor. Read Craig's story. www.freethechildren.com

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