Making a Difference

Interview with Dylan Mahalingam
Founder of Lil’ MDGs

by Amy Entwisle

How did you learn about the Millennium Development Goals?
Seeing poverty firsthand provided me with a new awareness; at the same time, it made me feel sad, helpless, and angry. I talked to my sister, who’s six years older than I. She had done a lot of volunteer work combating the spread of HIV/AIDS. One reason the disease is rampant in some countries is lack of awareness of how it spreads, so she organized kids to raise funds for educational workshops in those countries. Through the United Nations Development Programme, she found contacts in the respective countries and sent money for the workshops. I saw that my sister’s efforts had a profound impact on both donors and recipients: the kids who raised the funds developed a new understanding of the problem and also established friendships across continents, and the recipients stopped seeing themselves as victims and took charge of their lives. My sister pointed out the Millennium Development Goals to me—one of which is combating HIV/AIDS—and I thought they were a really good idea. Together with two of my cousins, we founded Lil’ MDGs.

How did you get started?
I wanted to give to those who needed it, and I wanted to involve more children in the process. To start, we used some of my sister’s contacts from her volunteer work. My family is from India, and we also have relatives in Indonesia and Japan. They became our points of contact in their respective countries. We used them as our distribution channels. They also helped

When 15-year-old Dylan Mahalingam was 9, he and his family traveled to India. There, he witnessed people living in the street. He saw children working for a living instead of going to school. So in 2004, Dylan formed an organization that galvanizes children to work toward the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, eight objectives targeting world health, education, and human security. The organization, Lil’ MDGs, is now 20,000 volunteers strong. As Dylan demonstrates, kids really can make a difference.
us network with schools in their countries so we could establish Lil’ MDGs bases there. They continue to help us regularly.

**It sounds like family was really important in your efforts.**

Initially we had to overcome a lot of skepticism about our ages and lack of experience. It was difficult to convince businesses that despite our age, we were serious about what we wanted to do. We didn't necessarily know the proper way to approach them for support and sponsorship. My sister helped me through those hurdles. And my parents transported me wherever I needed to go, managed the financial and legal aspects, and advised me when I needed it. They listened to me when I was frustrated, and they always encouraged me.

**How do you publicize and fund Lil’ MDGs?**

We use e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter, and hold awareness and benefit events, including an annual benefit concert, which is our biggest fundraiser. We also conduct several smaller fundraisers over the course of the year, such as a recent snowshoe hike in New England. In addition, we have corporations and individuals who are regular yearly donors.

Then there are sponsorships. In 2009, Nestle recognized my work with Lil’ MDGs. They agreed to organize and sponsor 20 events nationwide to coincide with World Sight Day. One was a comedy event in my school’s theater to benefit New Eyes for the Needy, an organization that purchases new eyeglasses for the poor in the U.S. and recycles glasses for indigent people overseas. Providing vision care helped meet MDGs one and two.

I’m also a youth speaker for the UN, so I speak at official UN summits and conferences throughout the world. And I offer workshops and speak to school and youth groups—locally, regionally, and internationally—to talk about the MDGs.

**How did you come to be a youth speaker for the UN?**

I was speaking at one of our annual benefit events at the Palace Theatre in Manchester, New Hampshire, and someone associated with the UN was in attendance. A few weeks later, I received an e-mail from the United Nations Development Programme saying that they wanted to showcase Lil’ MDGs as an example of youth working toward the Millennium Development Goals.

**Do kids simply hear about the Lil’ MDGs and say, “How can I help?”**

Children are naturally compassionate and empathetic. They want to help. The problem is, most kids aren’t aware of these huge issues facing the world. Even when they are aware, they often they feel that—as children—they don’t have the ability to do anything to help or that whatever they can do won’t matter. Lil’ MDGs is designed to empower kids and give them a way to get involved.

Kids who want to volunteer have the opportunity to
join us in one or more of our ongoing activities. Sometimes they want to do something of their own in their community. In that case, they look to us for information, tools, and resources to do this. Once we get their proposal and confirm that what they want to do falls under our mission, we provide them with funds and materials to start their project. We also help them reach out to local businesses and media to advertise their efforts. For example, a group of students in San Diego wanted to hold a fundraiser for human rights for children, and the event was done under our umbrella: we did all the paperwork necessary to set up a fundraiser at a restaurant, created brochures and other event materials, and shipped them. The kids coordinated the event locally. Our work and accomplishments serve as inspiration for other children to realize that, if they invest a little time, they too can make a huge difference.

We encourage kids in different parts of the world to pick issues that they’re passionate about and work toward them. Some are passionate about the environment, some about girl empowerment, and others about education. There are now about 20,000 regular volunteers in 47 different countries around the world and in 39 states in the U.S. To date, we’ve made a tangible difference in the lives of over a million people worldwide.

How do you choose projects?
Sometimes through our contacts, we hear about places that need help. One of our contacts in India, for example, told us about Kids with Cameras, an organization that aims to get kids in India out of brothels by providing them with cameras and training so they can sell their photographs.

We have a grant application on our website. We’ve already given out $75,000 in grants, but we currently receive more applications than we can fund. Our biggest obstacle is finding adequate sponsorship for our events.

You’ve made incredible progress, but there’s still a lot to do in order to reach the MDGs. Do you ever feel discouraged?
Right now, it appears that most countries will miss the deadline for the MDGs. In August, I attended the UN launch of the International Year of Youth. The purpose of the meeting was to create new strategies to more effectively engage youth in efforts to meet the MDGs. We discussed strategies that have worked, some that didn’t, and new strategies that we can implement going forward. Lil’ MDGs was invited to attend the UN MDGs Review Summit in New York the following month to offer workshops to youth from several countries. Since then, we’ve expanded into seven more countries and engaged an additional 1.5 million youth in working toward one or more of the eight MDGs. That’s in addition to the 20,000 kids who volunteer on a regular basis. So our impact continues to grow.

What will you do after the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals has passed?
It’s not clear what the UN’s position will be on the goals at the next review summit, but for now I’ll continue working toward these goals. In fact, we’ve hired a consultant to create a 10-year plan for the organization. Remember, it’s not only me working toward this. I’m just representing the organization.

Dylan Mahalingam is a sophomore at Pinkerton Academy in Derry, NH. In addition to pursuing the MDGs, he plays tennis, snowboards, does karate, and plays piano and guitar.