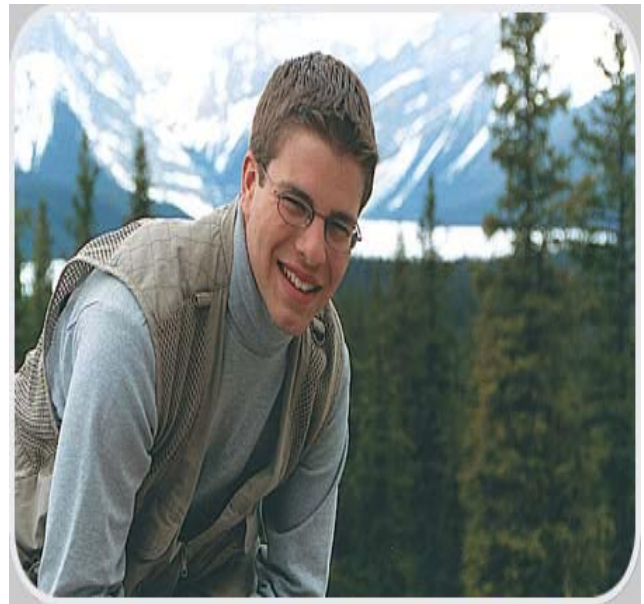


This edition of *real leaders* shines the spotlight on youth. Founders of vastly different initiatives, **Simon Jackson**, **Ryan Hreljac** and **Rahul Raj** demonstrate that a powerful vision can go a long way. Simon Jackson is a 19-year-old who has dedicated himself to the preservation of the spirit bear, a species living on the West Coast that is threatened with extinction. Ten-year-old Ryan Hreljac raises money to build wells in Africa so that communities can access safe drinking water. And Rahul Raj is encouraging university students to help tackle poverty. Founded by Raj, Meal Exchange uses points which students donate from their meal cards to buy food for local food banks.

One of the first youth-run environmental organizations in British Columbia began with a visit to the Yellowstone National Park – when **Simon Jackson** was 7 years old.

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve had a passion for bears and the wilderness they call home,” Simon enthuses. “When I was 7, my family took me to Yellowstone where I caught my first glimpse of a bear – she was a grizzly sow with two cubs. I was enthralled by these



Simon Jackson founded the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition to help protect the spirit bear and has been named as one of Time magazine’s 60 Heroes of the Planet for his efforts.

magnificent animals and I think it’s reprehensible that we are not doing anything to protect one of the rarest species.”

The species he speaks of is the Spirit Bear, also called the Kermode. Currently, the population of the rare white spirit bear numbers less than 400. Found nowhere else in the world, the last intact habitat of this bear is located in British Columbia, on Princess Royal Island, Pooley Island and the adjacent mainland.

Kermode bears can be black or white, but the latter are much more scarce as only 10 percent of the bears are born with a white coat. The white bears possess a double recessive gene which affects the colouring of their fur. To protect the white bear, the black bear also must be protected – this way, the gene in question is not likely to mutate.

The well-spoken 19-year-old explains: “These bears are as unique to the world as the panda bear is to China, yet there is no sanctuary set aside for their protection. In fact, logging plans for the area are already being drawn up.” The future of the land is in question, with competing interests being the protection of a rare bear versus the importance of the forestry industry in a struggling economy. With this imminent threat in mind, Simon founded the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition.

The Coalition is an umbrella organization which aims to give a voice to youth and unite them globally in the quest to save the spirit bear. It sets out to accomplish this goal in three ways. First, presentations are made in schools in order to raise awareness of the plight of the spirit bear. A 10-minute video, written, narrated and co-produced by Jackson, is a tool used in the classroom to increase interest in the cause. The documentary is being distributed to schools around the world and is currently one of the top-ten educational videos in Europe. The Coalition’s comprehensive website also sets out to promote action. To date, more than 300 presentations have been made to elementary and secondary schools, as well as universities and various service groups. Simon points out: “One of the main goals of the presentations is to encourage people to write letters to the government to request that the area be preserved.”

A second strategy involves keeping the issue in the media spotlight as much as possible. The spirit bear has garnered much attention in the press as a direct result of Jackson’s efforts. In addition to television, radio and newspaper reports and profiles, Simon personally has been recognized for his work. In April 2000, he was honoured as one of 60 Heroes of the Planet – and one of only six youth from around the world – in *Time* magazine’s Earth Day 2000 global edition.

Third, the Coalition seeks endorsements from high-profile individuals and celebrities in order to increase support and add credibility to the issue. Jackson has made many distinguished contacts, including Dr. Jane Goodall, ethnologist and conservationist, Prince Charles and Prince William, the late actor Jack Lemmon and author J.K. Rowling. Actor Haley Joel Osment and Welsh Soprano Charlotte Church are honorary members of the Coalition’s Board of Directors.

“There’s a real stereotype that youth are simply not interested in being involved in public policy. And that’s just not accurate.”

- Simon Jackson

Matt Price is involved in the spirit bear campaign through the Natural Resources Defense Council and describes Simon’s work ethic: “It’s sheer persistence,” Matt observes. Simon doesn’t know what ‘no’ means. He’s very focussed – he recognizes when an opportunity comes along and capitalizes on it.” Matt explains that when the Backstreet Boys performed a concert in Vancouver, Simon saw a chance for publicity. “Simon hung around at



The population of this rare white spirit bear currently numbers less than 400.

the back stage door until one of the performers came out. They started chatting, and before you knew it, the Backstreet Boys were endorsing [the spirit bear campaign] on stage.”

Simon comments: “There’s a real stereotype that youth are simply not interested in being involved in public policy. And that’s just not accurate. Youth are the future stewards of this land and, as is the case in many issues, our future is being negotiated without our consultation. Aside from working with the forest industry and the local First Nation communities to help give a voice to the bear, we also give youth a voice, ensuring their message is heard and taken seriously in this complex land-use issue.”

For the First Nations people who occupy the land in question, Simon argues that it is in their best interest to save the spirit bear because ecotourism has more financial potential than forestry. The Tsimshian people have a spiritual

connection to the animal and have told the story of the spirit bear for centuries. According to legend, Kermode bears were entirely black but, during the last ice age, the ice and snow turned some of the enchanted bears white. These unique bears were thought to lead special people to extraordinary places where all lived in peace and harmony.

The Spirit Bear Youth Coalition has enjoyed success in its endeavour. Thanks to tens of thousands of individuals who voiced their support for the spirit bear, 135,000 hectares of land inhabited by the animal have been protected by the BC government. “It’s a great first step,” grants Jackson, “but there is more work to be done. There are many areas still in dispute and we will have to work with our partners to accomplish our goal and conserve 100 percent of the land – even if it means fundraising to buy out the areas that need to be protected.”

Salimah Ebrahim is an Associate Director on the Board of the Youth Coalition, and she has nothing but praise for her colleague. “Simon is the heart of our organization and he gives us the energy to go on. We try to get him to make presentations at every chance we get because he really is the face of this movement.” As a classmate of Simon’s in high school, Salimah says that it was not uncommon for Simon to receive calls on his cell phone at school: “Simon would be in class, and all of a sudden he’d be getting a call on his cell phone from the Minister of the Environment!”

Having graduated from high school in British Columbia in June of last year, Simon took a year off to focus his attention on the cause of the spirit bear. He concludes: “The Spirit

Bear Youth Coalition hopes the protection of the spirit bear will be a legacy of ‘absolute freedom and wildness’ for all generations, for all time.” Simon has just begun his undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto where Salimah is also studying.

Both students feel that Toronto will offer many opportunities for the Coalition. Salimah sums up: “Simon is the bear’s best ambassador. He’s eloquent, he’s gracious, and you can see the drive in his eyes. This is only the beginning.”

For more information on the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition, visit www.spiritbearyouth.org.

Range of the Kermode Bear in British Columbia



One afternoon, my son and I went to Briargreen Public School in the leafy west end of Ottawa to hear a young boy speak about his experiences of raising money for wells in Africa. It was a rainy day, far removed from the realities of the dry heat of another continent, but **Ryan Hreljac** quickly moved all the members of his audience into a different dimension – one in which a 10-year-old boy could dream a dream of clean water for every person in Uganda, and begin to make it a reality.

When Ryan was 6 years old, his teacher told him that every eight seconds someone dies from drinking unsafe water. She also said that, for a penny, he could buy a pencil for a school child in Africa; for a few dollars, he could buy a working man a hot lunch; and for \$70, he could buy a well. Ryan's imagination took flight from that moment. He pestered his parents to help him raise the money to buy a well. Busy with the concerns of two careers and three sons, they were not immediately enthusiastic, but Ryan was not to be put off. Over the next few months, he raised the \$70 by taking on extra chores around the house and doing yard work for his grandparents who owned a motel a few hours away from Ottawa.

"The worst was the vacuuming," says Ryan.

Ryan's mother Susan saw the cookie tin filling up with small bills and loose change. She contacted a friend at Canadian Universities Services Overseas to find out to whom Ryan should give his money. "I wanted Ryan to feel that this money was going to real people he could meet and speak with," says Susan.

The friend recommended WaterCan as an appropriate organization for Ryan's donation. WaterCan is a Canadian charity,

founded in 1987, that provides water and sanitation in developing countries. Ryan met with Nicole Bosley, then Executive Director of WaterCan. She told him that the cost of establishing a well was closer to \$2,000. Too young to be put off by such a large number, he simply stated that he would do more chores.

Four years later, Ryan's work has inspired donations of more than \$100,000. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has matched this at a ratio of 2 to 1, which brings the total to \$300,000. Part of what Ryan has raised bought a drilling rig in the year 2000 that has since drilled more than 30 wells in Uganda.

Ryan's story has: inspired Royal Bank Dominion Securities to set up a website for his work; attracted the attention of a Toronto lawyer who set up the 'Ryan's Well' foundation for the funds Ryan's work would gather; encouraged Royal Bank Investments to donate funds to the foundation; drawn the support of a small internet company in Ottawa which now donates his website's on-ramp; and inspired children younger and older than himself to dream big dreams. "My friend Taylor was only 5 when he started saving for his well," he tells university students and business groups. "If we all do something, even if it's little, we make things better."

Ryan's story offers a unique opportunity for people to shake off the complacency of age and appreciate what one single child has done for the planet. Too often, it seems that political and geographical differences overwhelm the good intentions of adults and aid agencies. Monetary donation requests come all too frequently, and often, stories of ill-used funds make us tuck our wallets back into our pockets. Ryan challenges our inaction.

Ryan stutters a bit during his presentation. He gets excited about his subject, and sometimes the words don't come fast enough. The children in the audience want to make sure he's one of them. Someone who has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show and laid a wreath at the War Memorial in Ottawa with Prince Charles might have let celebrity go to his head. "What computer games do you like?" someone asks. No worries, he's a regular kid. Ryan loves sports, computers, his friends and his family. "How long do you want to do this work?" another child asks. "As long as I live," he answers. Everyone is moved. Ryan dreams of becoming a water engineer and working in Africa.

Ryan's first well was dug near Angolo Primary School in northern Uganda. Ryan and his family visited Africa in the summer of 2000. More than 2,000 people turned out to welcome Ryan and his parents, and Ryan's penpal, Jimmy, was the first to greet him at the school. He was led to the well, which bore the inscription, "Ryan's Well - 2000." Carved animals and plaques made by his African friends are now proudly displayed when Ryan is invited to speak.

"The number of children at Jimmy's school has gone up from 700 to more than 1,700 since the well was put in," says Ryan. "People want to move nearer to a well, so they come to the town and put their children in school."



Jimmy Akana and Ryan Hreljac at Ryan's Well, Angolo Primary School, Northern Uganda, July 2000.



Ryan spends a day in class at Angolo Primary School, Northern Uganda, July 2000.

Ryan's visit to Uganda was coordinated by WaterCan and Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief (CPAR), partners working together since 1996 on water and health projects in Uganda. CPAR's mission is to build healthy communities in Africa. "We were really impressed by how well CPAR has been able to integrate and educate the people it serves," says Susan Hreljac. "They have created a climate in which the Ugandans are partners in the truest sense of the word. CPAR helps people to articulate their needs, then provides a process in which everyone takes responsibility for a successful outcome. It was inspiring."

Ryan's generosity has inspired more generosity. One neighbour asked his wife what she wanted for a Christmas gift, and she replied that she wanted Ryan to visit his well. The word got around and friends and neighbours donated AirMile points to the Hreljac family so that they could fly to Uganda and WaterCan picked up the remaining travel costs.

Recently, Ryan became a penpal for Olympic gold medallist Daniel Igali. A native of Nigeria, Daniel is working with Ryan for plans to help people in his country. If you asked Ryan what his dream is now, it is no less than providing clean water for every person in Africa.

The children at the school where Ryan spoke on that wet afternoon in Ottawa have raised \$750 for Ryan to give to WaterCan. He thanked them and presented the principal with a copy of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. When my son went to his school the next day, he brought a copy of the *Reader's Digest* story about Ryan to his teacher. A few days later, she asked me for Ryan's website address (www.ryanswell.ca). As WaterCan's Christina Lubbock said at the end of Ryan's presentation that afternoon: "Your actions are having a 'ripple effect,' which is just what happens when you throw a pebble into a pool of water and you

watch the circular waves spreading out and growing.”

Although Ryan has collected \$300,000 for his African water work, he has seen for himself that money is not the measure of a person’s quality of life and he encourages his audiences to do whatever they can to improve lives in Africa. “If you don’t have money to give, just do little things in your house to make things better,” he says. “It’s not by individuals that we change things, it’s by teamwork.”

The current rash of water advisories and tragic death in Canada related to tainted water supplies bring home the African saying that “water is life.” Ryan’s efforts have brought Africa closer to those who know his work, and we are all united by a common concern about maintaining safe water supplies. Inspired and

nourished by Ryan’s message of hope and care, we are now challenged to find our own ways of creating a healthy future for ourselves and our neighbours.

Contact Information – Ryan’s two brothers Jordan and Keegan are also generous with their time and talents. Jordan provides audiovisual support at his brother’s many speaking engagements and Keegan often helps Ryan with his paperwork. The Hreljac family lives in Kemptonville, a small town just outside of Ottawa. For more information about Ryan, WaterCan and CPAR, access: www.ryanswell.ca, www.watercan.com and www.cpar.ca.

This story was written by Anne Makhoul.

Throughout the world, hunger is a widespread problem. In Canada alone, there are an estimated 5.5 million people who are hungry because they cannot afford a regular diet of nutritious food. Almost 2.3 million of these people are children under the age of 15.

In 1993, **Rahul Raj** was a first-year business student at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. In a creative attempt to tackle the complex hunger problem in his community, Raj implemented a unique initiative that involves collecting financial donations in order to contribute to a solution. Interestingly enough, the **Meal Exchange** program founded by Raj receives all of its donations from university students.

The concept may seem counterintuitive at first: With rising tuition rates, most students do not have large sums of disposable income to donate to charities. However, most Canadian students living in residence *are* required to purchase a prepaid meal plan at an average cost of \$2,500 per year. Meal Exchange allows students to donate excess meal points from their meal plan to support local food banks.

“The idea came about when I lived in residence at Laurier,” Rahul explains. “I’m not a big guy, especially relative to the football players I lived with. I obviously had a smaller appetite than they did, but we all had the same meal plan. I knew that some of my meal points would go to waste, so I started thinking about ways to make use of this excess resource.”

The program operates as follows: Students canvass their peers for the donation of meal points from their meal plans. Volunteer student coordinators, recruited by Meal Exchange’s full-time General Manager, facilitate the program at their university. Each semester, the student coordinator runs a donation campaign by encouraging students to donate meal points to feed hungry individ-



Rahul Raj founded Meal Exchange as a University student in 1993.

uals and families in their community. With the assistance of university administration and food services, the points are converted to food and distributed by students to local community agencies.

Meal Exchange provides a way for students to have a direct impact on social service agencies in their community without feeling like the money is coming directly out of their pockets. “It’s a psychological thing,” Raj comments. “If you ask students for a \$10 cash donation, they hesitate to give it to you because they’re thinking of all the things they could be buying with that \$10. But if you ask them to donate a meal which will be debited from their meal card, most students agree because it’s relatively painless, since the card is already paid for.”

Raj also wants to challenge the notion that students are not interested in their community. He notes: “There’s a misconception that students don’t want to become involved in the community since they live there only temporarily, while they’re at school. Students get a bit of a bad reputation because some people think that all they do is drink and party. One of the

goals of this project is to revoke that idea, and to foster a more positive relationship between students and local organizations.”

In 1996, however, Raj became worried about the future of the program. He was in his final year of school and was concerned that Meal Exchange would falter in the absence of a leader. So Raj took the project a step further and, together with his friend Ryan Saunders, co-authored a thesis entitled “Creating and Managing a Non-Profit Organization,” using Meal Exchange as the basis for their research. Raj began to solicit interest from students at the Universities of Guelph and Windsor in order to broaden the scope of the program. It worked. By 1999, Meal Exchange had received a development grant from the Trillium Foundation, formed a Board of Directors composed of students and community members, and hired a full-time General Manager.

Greg Reade was a Volunteer Coordinator as a student at the University of Guelph and has now been General Manager of Meal Exchange for more than two years. “I’ve cer-

tainly seen a lot of expansion and progress in the past few years,” Greg comments. “Three years ago, Meal Exchange had chapters in only two schools; now we have chapters on 20 campuses across the country.”

Greg also explains that Meal Exchange is developing a second program that will allow schools that do not offer meal plans – as well as students living off-campus – to participate. “It’s a project called ‘Clear the Shelves!,’” Reade explains, “and it’s a process whereby we encourage students to donate canned food that might be left on their shelves at Christmas or at the end of the school year. Meal Exchange will arrange for the pick-up and drop-off of the food to local food banks.”

The benefits of the program to both the community and the students are enormous. With more than 250 student volunteers who facilitate the donation process on campuses across the country, Raj maintains “the initiative is designed as a vehicle to develop student leadership skills, expose them to civic experiences and expand their knowledge of the social



Student volunteers facilitate the food donation process on university campuses across the country.

service industry and the hunger problem in Canada.”

Kim Campbell is Operations Manager at the Guelph Food Bank and agrees that being a recipient of goods collected by Meal Exchange is having a real impact on her organization. Kim notes: “Often there are important food staples – products like peanut butter – that we don’t receive. Meal Exchange is unique because they ask us what kind of products we need, and that’s what they deliver. It really does make a difference.” Kim explains that the Food Bank makes a list of foods in order of priority, and Meal Exchange does its best to supply what’s on the list. “And what’s nice is that the students will often volunteer to help us unpack all of the food,” Kim concludes.

The success of Meal Exchange is undeniable: With chapters established on 20 colleges and universities, the project continues to attract interest and grow. So far, more than \$130,000 has been raised by students from schools including Wilfrid Laurier, Brock University and the University of Guelph. This figure translates into 43,000 meals or 62,000 pounds of food for families that would have otherwise gone without. Meal Exchange also was characterized as “one of the most creative non-profit organizations in Canada” by *Maclean’s* and honoured by the Peter F. Drucker Foundation as a runner-up for its 2000 Non-Profit Innovation Award.

Raj continues to have ambitious goals for the program: He predicts that the initiative is poised to achieve its annual donation objective of \$1.3 million annually by 2004. “It’s a realistic goal given that more and more schools are establishing chapters all the time,” Raj observes.

“The amount of time Rahul devotes to Meal Exchange is pretty amazing, especially considering he has a full-time job,” Greg muses. “He’s the driving force behind the program, and he’s quite an inspiration.”

Raj acknowledges that such a program could not exist without the establishment of partnerships with community organizations and foundations, as well as each university’s food services administrator. Montreal’s McConnell Foundation provided the program with an operating grant in May. And Rahul is quick to point out that Meal Exchange has been the catalyst for the development of sustainable relationships in the community. “At the University of Guelph, ten students have maintained an ongoing relationship with their local food bank and have become involved in the daily operations of the agency.” The program also collaborates with volunteer mentors. For example, a graphic designer trained one student volunteer in website development and a film student produced a six-minute documentary video on the activities of Meal Exchange.

The initiative has recently launched a comprehensive new website which attempts to personalize the face of hunger. The site allows users to click on the name of any university in Canada and provides detailed statistics on the poverty situation in that school’s city as well as the impact that a student’s participation in Meal Exchange would make. Based on the number of students enrolled in a particular educational institution, the site then calculates the number of emergency meals students could provide to help reduce hunger in their community.

The site also has an online ‘Hunger Forum’ devoted to the discussion of the complex problem of poverty. With the assistance of professors who have agreed to integrate the Hunger Forum into their course curriculum, Raj hopes to provide a virtual space in which conversation and debate can be fostered to address Canadian hunger.

To learn more about Meal Exchange, visit the website at www.mealexchange.com.

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