The young woman stood alone in a silent, darkened auditorium, thousands of youth watching her as she lit a single candle that barely lit her face.

"I'm only one person. What difference can I make?" she quietly asked.

Then she turned to the four people closest to her and lit the candles they were holding. As she did that, she asked them, "I'm only one person. What difference can I make?"

Those four people walked to the corners of the room and began to light everyone's candle, including ours, asking the same humbling question over and over. Within minutes the entire auditorium was illuminated as we all chanted thunderously and in unison.

It was a moving demonstration that showed how thousands of small acts can create a tidal wave of change.

This was at an international conference we attended where youth gathered to discuss major challenges facing the world. It was full of energy, passion, and innovation, but left us a little overwhelmed. The problems we discussed were so vast that we felt like two tiny droplets of hope in a sea of despair.

But that single flame was a symbolic gesture that reaffirmed our belief that ordinary people—students, dentists, mechanics, homemakers—can come together to make a difference. We've seen so many times that you don't have to be a prime minister to change the world, and you don't have to be rich. What you need is the courage to dream of a better tomorrow and the commitment to work with those who share your passion.

This global togetherness is what drives today's generation of young social activists. Every day we meet incredible youth who are devoted to issues such as ending poverty, fighting AIDS, and protecting the environment. They are politically aware and dedicated to making a difference.

Marie Abbott, of Whitehorse, Yukon, was so appalled by the news of children forced to become soldiers, she raised money for a school in Sierra Leone and a children's centre in Tanzania.
Their idealism is grounded in a new reality. The personal computer—which celebrated its 25th birthday in August—and the resulting Internet boom are connecting young people to all corners of the globe.

With the click of a mouse, a 12-year-old in Toronto can now learn about how child labour endangers children in India, or how AIDS affects northern Malawi. With another click of the mouse, that child can contact other people around the world who are interested in the same issues.

And not only can they see the world through the Internet, but the ease of international travel means that young people can also experience the world first-hand. Africa, or anywhere else, is no longer a far-off place.

Today’s youth are the first generation of global citizens.

As technology continues to break down borders, young people are the ones who readily embrace it because they’ve had it all their lives. While previous generations grew up with global divisions such as the Berlin Wall, this one is surrounded by the tools to unify us.

Armed with this new global perspective, youth are challenging their peers and their governments on global issues. They are becoming responsible, engaged citizens.

A recent youth opinion poll found that more than 80% of young Canadians are concerned about global issues such as AIDS, human rights, and poverty. Two-thirds of them said they use the Internet to research these issues.

Like our friend Fiona who, after learning about famine in Niger, e-mailed everyone she knew asking who wanted to help make a difference. Together, she and her friends started Oakville Teenagers in Action. In less than a year they raised enough money to build a school in Sierra Leone and send local teens on volunteer trips to Africa.
Young people like this are at the forefront of a movement toward global consciousness that will have huge political and social implications. Because the world is more interconnected than at any time in history, they are more likely to vote with international issues in mind, do business with other countries, learn a foreign language, and even live or work abroad.

With youth at the helm, this new kind of globalization will focus not just on economics and technology, but also on human rights and environmental protection. Its impact has the potential to be far greater than we can even imagine.

Change is already starting to happen. After years of public pressure, leaders of the world’s richest nations pledged in 2005 to double aid to Africa and cut billions of dollars in debt owed by poor countries. Much of that pressure came from youth who, with their increased understanding of poverty and ability to organize online, fought for change.

Even everyday local actions reflect this new reality. Whether it’s through shopping for fair-trade clothing, signing an online petition, or corresponding with someone in a different country, young people are using their new-found worldliness to make a statement.

And like that flame, together they can make a difference.

Craig Kielburger founded the charitable organization Free the Children when he was 12, more than 10 years ago. Both he and his brother Marc are very active in the Free the Children organization. The brothers are passionate about activism and social involvement. Through public speaking and writing, they tell others about the need for action. Free the Children helps children around the world, by providing education and programs that help them help themselves.

Reflecting

Reading Like a Writer: The authors use supporting details to convince you that individuals acting together can create positive change. Which details do you find most persuasive?

Making Connections: What connections did you make as you read this article? How did making those connections help you to understand the article?

Critical Literacy: What do Craig and Marc hope to achieve with this article? Is the article effective? Why or why not?