

Person of the Week

Little wonder, Dylan Mahalingam

by Archana Chaudhary/SATimes

They say child is the father of man, 13-year old Dylan Mahalingam, proves this adage true. In 2004 when he was just 9, Dylan founded Lil' MDGs (Little Millennium Development Goals) – taking cue from 2000 UN millennium summit wherein 189 countries devised goals to make the world better by 2015.

With Lil' MDGs Dylan aimed to mobilize children across the world to participate in helping fulfill MDGs. Till date he has managed to encourage more than 1300 children in 34 countries who work to solve local issues. Lil MDGs have raised funds and resources to help underprivileged children in Tibet, India, Uganda and many other countries.

All this while Dylan maintains his grades in school, learns Karate and keeps his passion for music alive. Dylan spoke exclusively to SATimes. **How did you get inspired to start something like Lil MDGs?**

Dylan: I was inspired after a trip overseas when I witnessed issues such as hunger, poverty, child labor, child illiteracy and infants and children dying because they couldn't obtain life saving vaccines cheaper than a dollar. Over the years, Lil' MDGs has grown with me, and the feeling that we're having a huge impact on developing awareness and mobilizing kids to help solve global problems is rewarding. The progress I've made in the past four years inspires me to continue. The number of children we've engaged and inspired and the support we receive from companies, organizations, individuals, schools, and communities tells me they believe and have confidence in our mission.

What are the goals of Lil MDGs?

Dylan: Currently, I am learning how to use the latest in technology, digital media, games, and just about anything to do with the Internet. I realize that the best approach for Lil' MDGs is to attract and engage children and young people in our work to further leverage the power of the Internet and make it fun, easy, exciting, and inspiring, all at the same time!

Lil MDG workers are spread all across the globe. How do you work?

Dylan: We get notifications about projects needing help by e-mail or word of mouth. I head weekly



Dylan Mahalingam founder and CEO of Lil' MDGs, a nonprofit organization.

group meetings of the 11 youth members online and decide project details.

We also have occasional online meetings with other youth members on project basis if needed. We receive requests for grants and this youth group discusses and votes on them. We also have secure forums for individual projects and utilize the services of networking sites, webinars etc. We receive invitations to speak at various events where we engage children.

Every six weeks, we have a board meeting which includes adult board members. Recently, as we have grown monitoring and responding to e-mails has been extremely difficult. Therefore, we recently set up different e-mail groups that are monitored and responded to by different individuals.

How easy or difficult was it to mobilize children?

Dylan: I've discovered children are, by nature, empathetic. Many children around the world are concerned about global issues, but don't know how to help or get involved, or don't find exciting and interesting avenues to get involved. Our aim is to further leverage the power of the Internet to mobilize young children as a driving force behind the efforts to achieve MDGs.

We expand our network by connecting with children, schools, and teachers in other countries at various conferences we attend, through families and friends living abroad.

The biggest obstacle I faced initially was trying to convince others to take me seriously. It was discouraging but my sister, Ammu Irivinti, taught me about perseverance and how to overcome it.

What are your current projects?

Dylan: We are currently working on a couple of meaningful and exciting projects. We had the opportunity to host the Speak Truth to Power exhibition in New Hampshire in spring 2008.

Speak Truth to Power is the human rights organization that Kerry Kennedy established after completing a book that included interviews and photographs of 50 human rights defenders from around the world. Based on the book, playwright Ariel Dorfman wrote the Speak Truth to Power play, a dramatic reading of the play.

As a result of the positive response we had to the exhibition, we are planning on bringing the exhibition back to the area and organizing a major event that would include the Speak Truth to Power play. I am fortunate to be working with Dana Myskowski and Woody Woodland who are volunteering their time and are committed to producing the play. They along with other volunteers are dedicated to developing a top notch event that will educate and inspire the audience to reflect on these issues. The play is scheduled for Saturday, October 17, 2009 and currently I'm in pursuit for an all star cast to read the parts.

I am also working on co-organizing our upcoming benefit concert (by John Pizzarelli) in April. We're also working on starting two Lil' MDGs operations, in Argentina and Japan. The Japan operation, called Kodomo MDGs, has already begun. **Apart from running Lil MDGs I believe you have plenty of other activities on your plate and are excelling at your studies as well. How do you manage to do all of it?**

Dylan: I often get asked this question; in reality, I spend an average of 15 hrs/week on Lil' MDGs although I do work more during our fundraisers, benefit concerts, awareness events, holidays, vacation, and summer. I used to have a lot of difficulty in the beginning because juggling school, extra-curricular activities, enjoy time with my friends, and still run Lil' MDGs. I wanted to be able to do all of it and did not really want to give up much. My sister

helped me tremendously; she taught me to be more organized and showed me ways to stick to schedules that I put in my organizer. My calendar is shared with her and she still helps me with scheduling and suggestions as I need.

In addition, when I work on Lil' MDGs activities/events, it is mostly a group effort that involves a number of other youth - this makes our work fun, fast, easy, and exciting. If I ever find that I am too busy with school and need a hand, I always can find another volunteer to pitch in.

How did your parents react when you talked about starting something like the Lil MDGs?

Dylan: My parents were in several ways my motivation for doing this. When I was four, I used to waste a lot of food and they used to tell me that there were people in some parts of the world who



Children in an Iraqi school showcasing school supplies sent by the MDGs; they were coordinated through American soldiers stationed in Iraq.

can feed an entire family, for a day, with the food I wasted. It used to confuse me a lot and I didn't know how I could get the food from my plate onto the plate of someone else who needed it. Four years later, I witnessed first-hand what they were talking about during a trip overseas.

When I returned and talked to my cousins and came up with the idea of Lil' MDGs they were very supportive. They are still very involved with the organization and my work and I could not have done any of what I have done without their complete support.

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