# How One Teen's Silent Courage Inspired a Movement to Recognize Those With No Voice

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Joe Opatowski was a young man of many words -- so many, in fact, that people paid him to stop talking.

He survived a broken childhood in north Toronto, striving without always succeeding to resist the violence, drugs and despair around him. To escape his fate, Joe joined one of our first youth conferences in 1999, and later traveled overseas to volunteer in poor communities. So he had a lot of stories and insight to share. He was also a hip-hop poet, shameless idealist and practical joker, whose friends regularly teased that he couldn't stay quiet for a minute.

One day he asked if we would pay him to stay silent. For a whole week. We emphatically agreed.

Of course, in his silence Joe saw an opportunity to make a point. He remembered his neighborhood friends who had succumbed to their dysfunctional environment, and the street children he met in Jamaica who lived without many of life's basics. He decided he would be silent in recognition of those without a voice, and donate the funds he raised to a scholarship fund for at-risk North American teens to volunteer overseas.

The movement Joe inspired, now known as [#WeAreSilent](http://www.freethechildren.com/get-involved/campaigns/we-are-silent/), marks its twelfth year on April 17.

Around the world, millions of people have no say in their lives or their future. They are slave laborers forced to work in horrific conditions for little or no pay. They are children who are prevented by poverty or other factors from going to school; illiterate adults who can't fight for their basic human rights; or whole populations living under repressive regimes. Closer to home, they are students in our schools or adults in our workplaces who are bullied, or neighbors suffering from crippling mental health problems.

In a loud world filled with background noise, politics and distraction, the quiet are too often ignored or forgotten. So we, who have the privilege of free speech, will clear the air of our voices on April 17, so that the plight of those without a voice may be heard.

That may sound naive, but it worked for Joe. He was alone that first year, before the age of texting and social media -- a silent deviant in the noisy chaos of high school. He wrote a message on a laminated business card to explain his campaign to the confused people he encountered -- the peers, teachers, bus drivers, restaurant servers and other adults who derided him for being impolite until they read his note, understood and often offered a small donation. Joe raised $5,000 that week and inspired a silent, enduring movement.

In 2013 -- a decade later -- 160,000 young people were silent for a combined 1.2 million hours, equal to 137 years.

This year, the extraordinary girls' rights and education activist [Malala Yousafzai](http://malalafund.org/) will lead the silence on April 17, for the 31 million girls around the world who are not in school. The campaign has attracted celebrity supporters like Selena Gomez, Orlando Bloom, Jennifer Hudson, Seth Rogen and Edward Norton. Youth from over 40 countries will be participating in silence.

It's not easy -- we've both taken the vow of silence since Joe's extraordinary week, taking twenty minutes to order a restaurant meal and having hour-long conversations in mime. One year, the musical genius Jason Mraz joined our campaign and stood frozen at an airport check-in that day, wondering how to silently answer the question, "What's your destination, sir?"

As for Joe, he died in a tragic car accident in October 2004, at age 21. We miss him deeply, but we can fortunately still hear his voice in our memory, and in the campaign he inspired.

What Joe showed us is that being silent raises our own awareness of voicelessness as much as it does for the people to whom we wordlessly explain ourselves. How does it feel to not speak the language of a new place? How does it feel to not be able to read signs, write your name or communicate your needs? How does it feel to not be heard by the people around you?

If you're curious about the answers to these questions, take the vow on April 17. Join [#WeAreSilent](http://www.freethechildren.com/get-involved/campaigns/we-are-silent/) in recognition of those millions of our fellow human beings who have no voice in their lives or future. If enough of us are silent, maybe the noise will subside enough for their stories and their needs to finally be heard.

*Craig and Marc Kielburger are co-founders of international charity and educational partner, Free The Children. Its youth empowerment event, We Day, is in 11 cities across North America this year, inspiring more than 160,000 attendees from over 4,000 schools. For more information, visit* [*www.weday.com*](http://www.weday.com/)*.*