



Print Edition

[HOME](#) [NATIONAL](#) [WORLD](#) [REPORT ON BUSINESS](#) [SPORTS](#) [OPINIONS](#) [ARTS](#) [TECHNOLOGY](#) [LIFE](#) [BOOKS](#)**INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK**

Going barefoot to raise awareness about poverty

Bilaal Rajan, 12, hopes to recruit others

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April 15, 2009

At least one pair of tired black dress shoes will get a rest next week, as 12-year-old Bilaal Rajan intends to go barefoot.

And he hopes to recruit others, not in a protest against his school's dress code, but instead to raise awareness about children and poverty during International Volunteer Week, which begins Sunday.

The initiative, dubbed the Walk a Mile Barefoot Challenge, stems from the adage about understanding another person's perspective by walking a mile in his or her shoes.

"It's simply to raise awareness to the fact that really there are so many children in other parts of the world that don't have something simple like shoes," Bilaal said in an interview yesterday from his home in Richmond Hill, Ont.

"It's really about awareness, I realize that money is important and another way we'd be able to help, but how is anyone going to be able to help when they don't know what they're supporting, when they don't know the dire situation that other people are in?"

Bilaal's foray into fundraising began at the age of four with a box of clementines. Going door to door selling the small, sweet fruit, he raised \$350 for earthquake victims in India.

He was eight years old when he was appointed as a child ambassador for UNICEF Canada and recently published a book, *Making Change: Tips from an Underage Overachiever*.

Throughout his young life, Bilaal has raised nearly \$5-million for various children's causes, and last year he was named one of the country's Top 20 Under 20 by not-for-profit organization Youth in Motion.

Bilaal will kick off the barefoot challenge Sunday at the Sprockets film festival in Toronto, where he is the subject of a documentary set to premier at the event.

The idea for the barefoot challenge was hatched during a five-kilometre walk and

fundraiser that Bilaal said was "pretty difficult, but I began to wonder how hard it would be to walk five kilometres without shoes."

The eighth grader has recruited nearly 500 participants through his Facebook page, and 150 students from his middle school at St. Andrew's College in Aurora, Ont., to abandon footwear for at least a day next week.

His parents, who own and operate a wholesale food distribution service, will be more reluctant participants: His mother, Shamim Rajan, has pledged to spend a day at home without shoes, but intends to have a box of bandages at the ready.

"I am concerned, he's going to play tennis in bare feet!" she said, referring to Bilaal's Wednesday practise with the school's tennis team.

Asked if he was hoping for good weather next week, Bilaal said he actually hoped for snow and ice.

"Then it'll be even better, because even more will we see how hard it is to live the life of others," he said.