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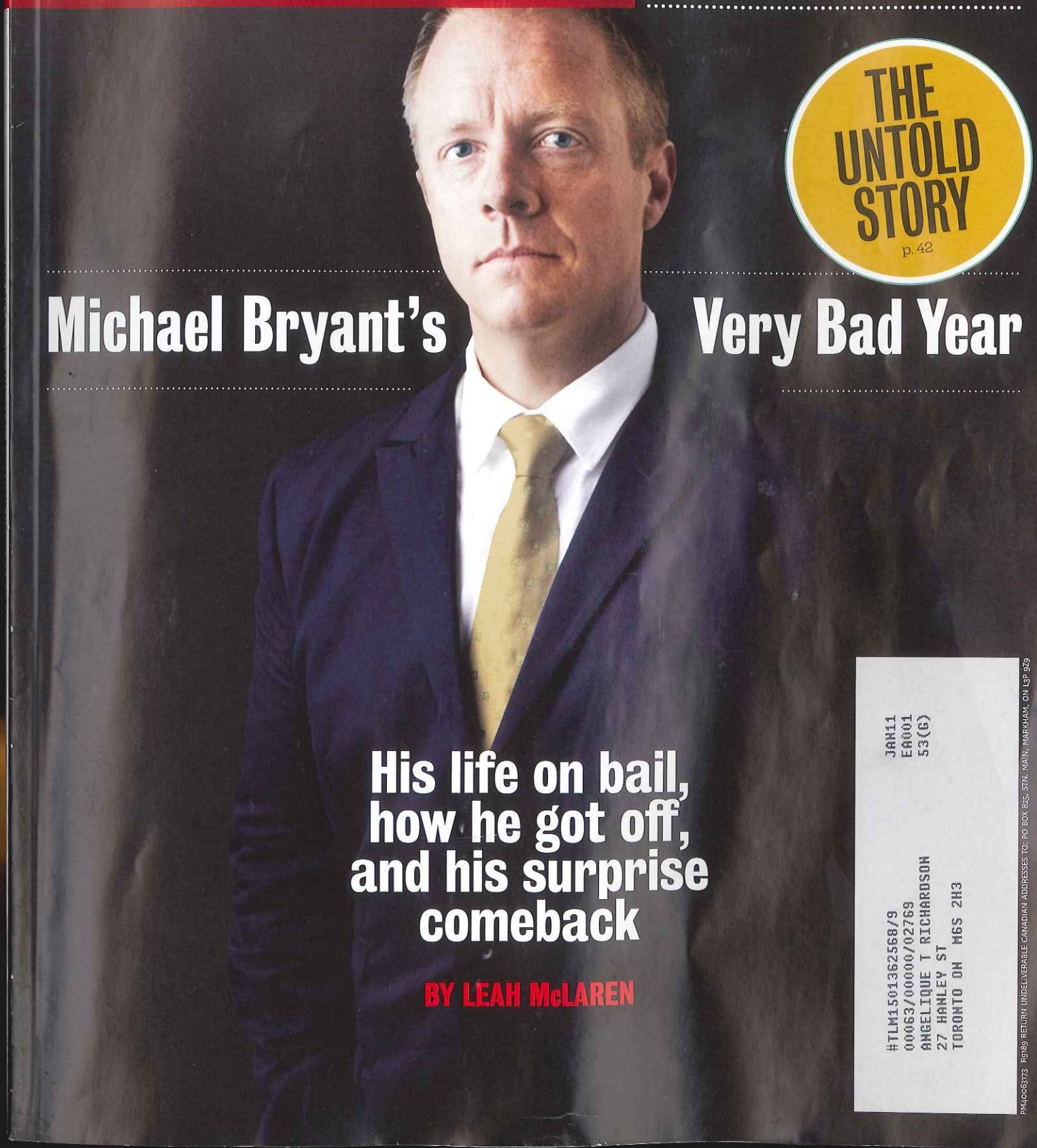


THE UNTOLD STORY
p. 42

Michael Bryant's Very Bad Year

His life on bail, how he got off, and his surprise comeback

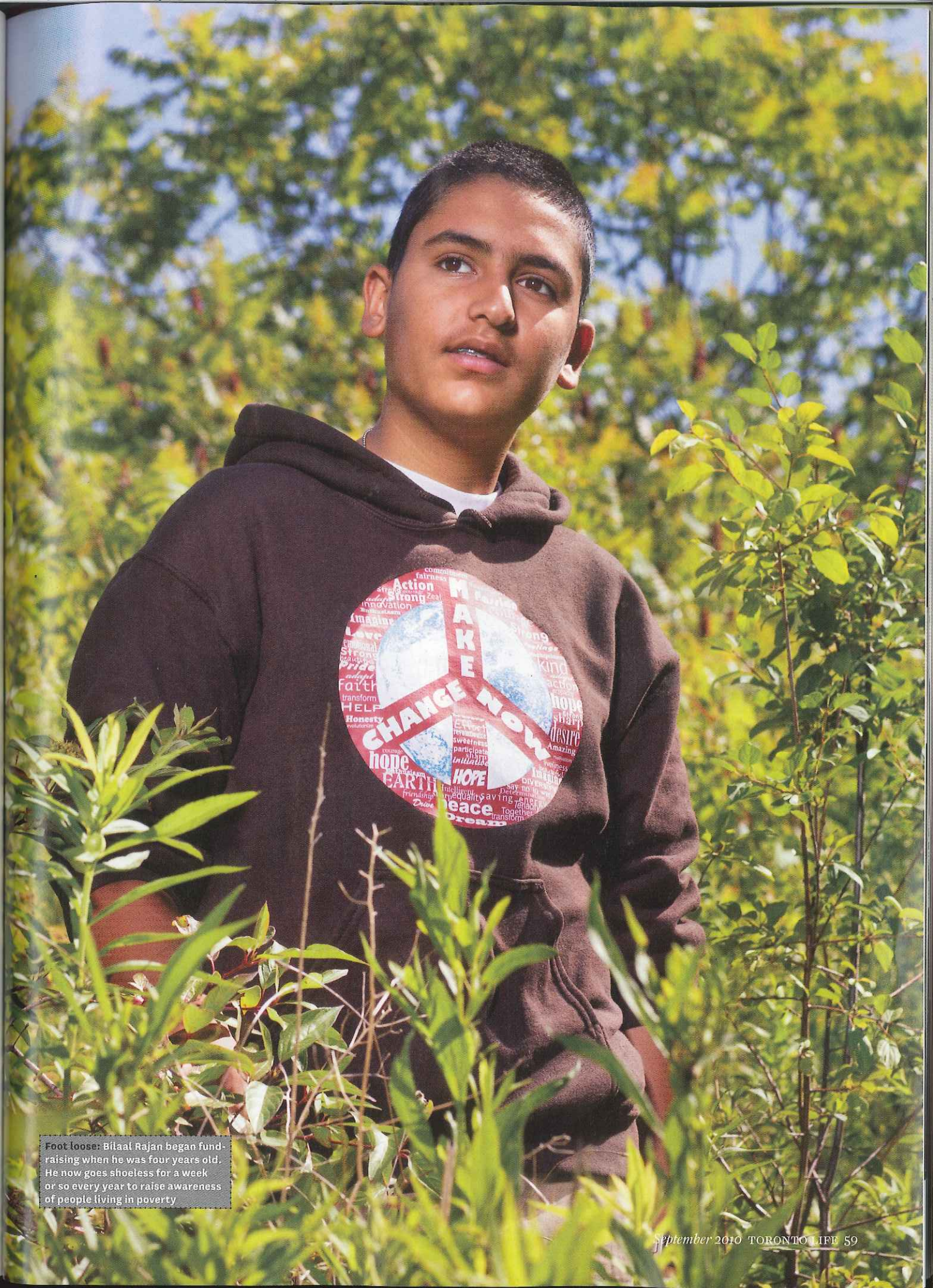
BY LEAH McLAREN

KID POWER

Richmond Hill's 13-year-old best-selling author and motivational speaker has raised millions for his pet causes—Haiti, HIV/AIDS and child poverty. Why no one says no to Bilaal Rajan

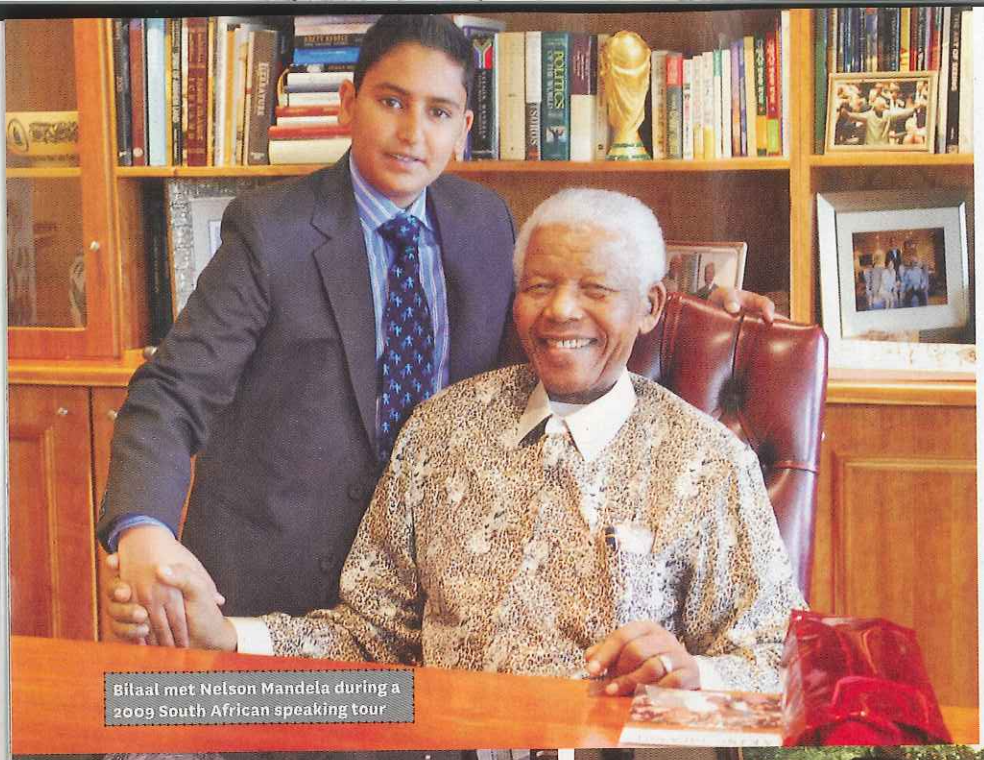
BY ROBERT HOUGH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FINN O'HARA

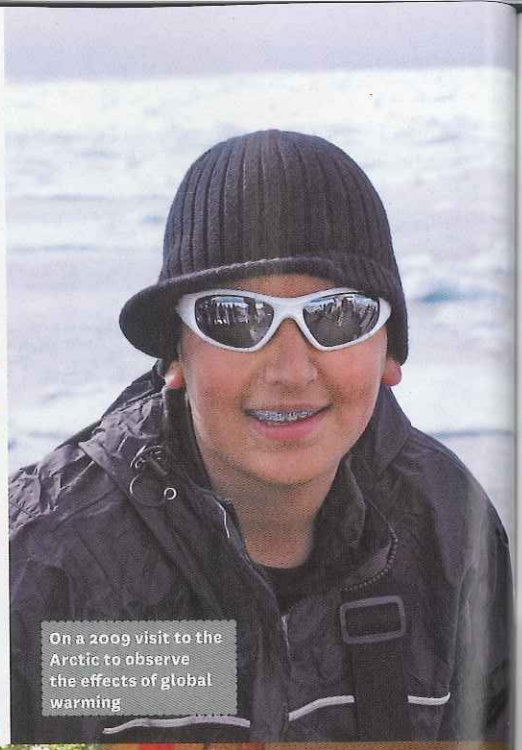


Foot loose: Bilaal Rajan began fund-raising when he was four years old. He now goes shoeless for a week or so every year to raise awareness of people living in poverty

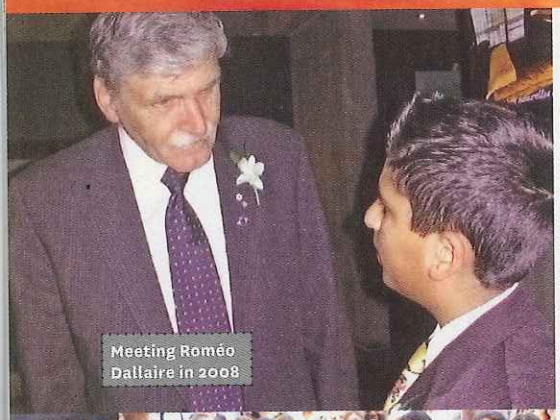
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **FINN O'HARA**



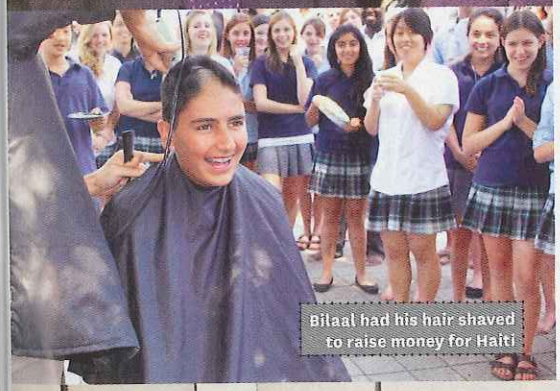
Bilaal met Nelson Mandela during a 2009 South African speaking tour



On a 2009 visit to the Arctic to observe the effects of global warming

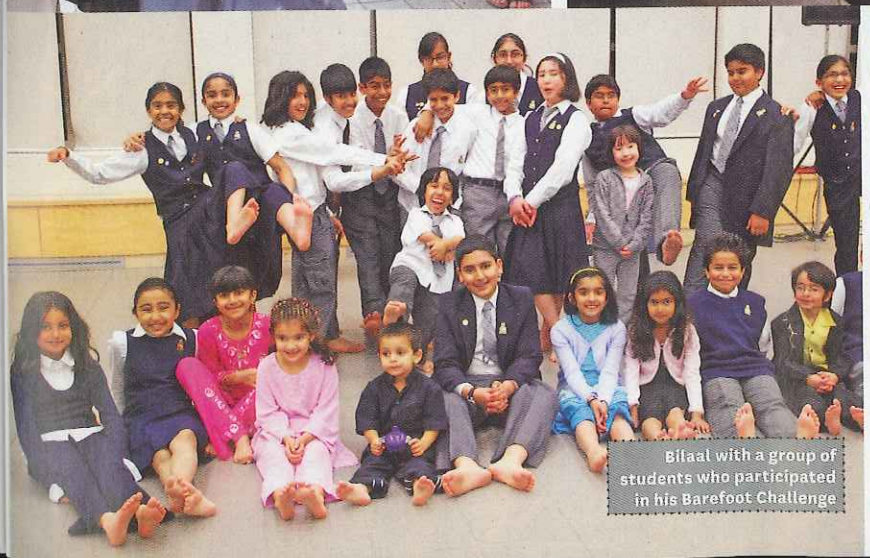


Meeting Roméo Dallaire in 2008

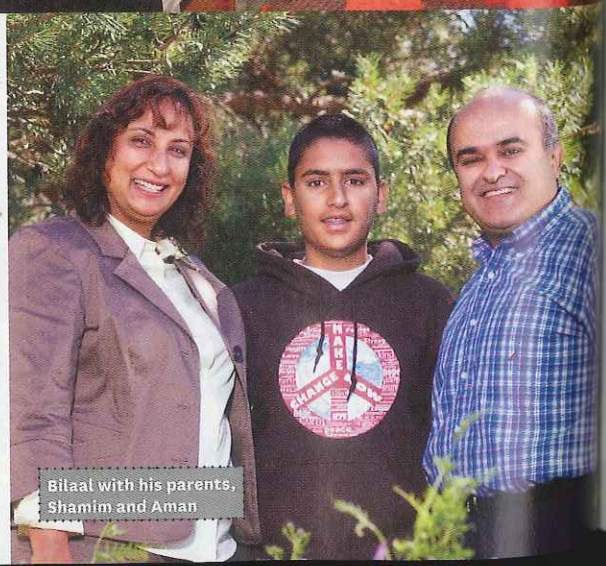


Bilaal had his hair shaved to raise money for Haiti

On a 2007 visit to Tanzania, where he helped administer HIV tests



Bilaal with a group of students who participated in his Barefoot Challenge



Bilaal with his parents, Shamim and Aman

It is 8:30 a.m. on June 1, otherwise known as International Children's Day. I'm waiting in the chapel at Lakefield College, a co-ed private school about 15 minutes northeast of Peterborough. Settled within a few hundred acres of woods on the banks of the Trent-Severn waterway, Lakefield exudes the verdant sumptuousness for which private schools are known: boarding students pay annual fees of $46,000 to enjoy the use of tennis courts, a hockey rink, their own boathouse, a literary journal, an in-house theatre, a gallery filled with their own canvases, and a $13.8-million rec centre with a climbing wall. Prince Andrew spent two terms here in the '70s and enjoyed it so thoroughly he has visited many times since. After short speeches from the chaplain and two members of township council, the headmaster introduces that day's main speaker, a Lakefield boarder named Bilaal Rajan, who also happens to be the best-known child activist in Canada and, quite possibly, the world.

Bilaal stands and walks toward the lectern. At 13, he could pass for 11, and has the soft, round features of his parents, who are in the chapel that day, as well. He wears braces, has eyes so dark you cannot distinguish his pupils and, curiously, is the only student wearing the green, crested jacket that is part of the Lakefield uniform. He is also not wearing any shoes, which is the primary reason for his address to the student body: Bilaal Rajan is promoting his second annual Barefoot Challenge, in which he calls upon others to go shoeless to create empathy for those around the world who are forced by poverty to do so. Last year, he went barefoot for a whole week, granting interviews throughout. This year, with the rigour of high-school exams coming up, his parents were adamant: *Bilaal, we're sorry. One day only.* Bilaal apparently half-listened. He has already been doing without shoes for two days, the underside of each foot rendered black.

Bilaal wanted to see what was being done with the money he'd raised, so he toured Southeast Asia's tsunami-ravaged areas.

"What amazed me most were the cemeteries," he says. "There were so many dead they had to bury them vertically"

I had seen Bilaal speak once before, at a function for a group called the Canadian Federation of University Women. On that day, he was as calm as a medicated yogi. Today, however, he seems a little breathless, a possible consequence of having to speak before his peers. Or it could be that he is just tired. In the previous few months, he has given motivational speeches in Baltimore, San Francisco, Edmonton, Washington, Vancouver, Boston, Toronto, Kitchener, Hamilton and New York, lecturing to groups as large as 5,000 about his pet issues: child poverty, disaster relief, HIV/AIDS and the environment. Then, in the two days leading up to the Challenge, Bilaal spoke to National Public Radio; to an Australian radio show called *The Wire*; to CFLY in Kingston; to the *Times of India*; to the Special Broadcasting Service of Australia; to the CBC, to the BBC World News, to Montreal's *La Presse*. He also met with visiting relatives, and he stopped by the Toronto offices of UNICEF, where staff took a plaster cast of his feet. I'm told they plan to use this monument as a foyer decoration.

Bilaal's address is brief. Mostly, he thanks his teachers and fellow students for participating in his Challenge, and he lauds them for their drive and commitment to global issues. Bilaal then sits, at which point the headmaster returns to the lectern and asks the students to remove their footwear. They all do so and file out chatting, depositing their sneakers, sandals and loafers in an anteroom next to the chapel. Now barefoot myself, I offer to walk Bilaal to his first class, which he says is drama. Yet when we get there—Bilaal is the last to arrive—the rest of the students turn and exclaim, "Bilaal! What're you doing here? You've got English!"

We return to his locker. As he hunts around for the correct textbook, I tell him I'm surprised that, with only a week left of school, he still hasn't memorized his schedule. He explains that he has eight subjects that rotate over five periods per day, meaning that there is no such thing as a typical day at Lakefield.

"Plus," he tells me, "we've got a half day on Wednesdays, which always throws things out of whack. Plus, after all the media I did yesterday, I got back really, really late."

He then pauses and looks up at me, his eyes plaintive.

"It's confusing. It really is."

When discussing the phenomenon that is Bilaal Rajan, I was presented, again and again, with a caveat. I heard it from his father, from his headmaster, from those he's worked with, and from contacts he's had in the corporate world: *Yes, he's all that, but the thing you must understand is that he's also just a normal kid.* The children's author Eric Walters, who profiled Bilaal in one of his books, perhaps explained it best: "He'll be playing by the pool, talking about his dog, and the topic of, say, HIV/AIDS will come up. Boom, he'll starting talking knowledgeably about the topic, and you'll be just looking up at him and think, OK, you're, like, 13, right? With Bilaal, it's almost like there's a switch that goes off, changing him from a kid to an adult." Even Bilaal himself adheres to this notion of two Bilaals: one a regular kid, and one anything but. When I asked him why he attended Lakefield, he answered, as if by rote, "It has the right mixture of serious and recreational activities for a kid like me. It's true that I like to work hard and play hard."

And while this claim may or may not be true (it had a way of popping up without my having posed the question), I do know one thing. It is the adult Bilaal that greets the world. Bilaal's curriculum vitae, which runs eight pages, lists his goals and accomplishments: "Author, internationally known motivational speaker, children's rights and environmental activist, UNICEF Ambassador and fundraiser aiming to be accepted into Harvard University in medical sciences. Long-term personal goals include publishing a number of books, becoming a neurosurgeon and astronaut, and being a leading member of the Canadian Parliament."

The next two pages or so are devoted to his academic achievements: the honour roll placements, the science fair wins, the math competition triumphs, his 150-plus IQ. His CV also mentions that Bilaal, due to his "exceptional grasp of grade-level curriculum," skipped Grade 3, which explains why, late in Grade 9, he is still only 13. The next six pages (minus one listing references) detail his philanthropic work. He has raised millions of dollars for hurricane victims in Haiti and tsunami victims in Southeast Asia. He has raised funds for HIV/AIDS research in Tanzania and provided electrical lights for a village in rural Mexico. (During a family trip to Mexico, he was saddened by reports of children who had to do their homework by kerosene lamp.) He has founded his own

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF RAJAN FAMILY; BOTTOM RIGHT BY FINN O'HARA

charitable organization called Making Change Now, has helped build a school in Ecuador, and has tutored Afghan refugees in English and math. He has investigated global warming during trips to both the Arctic and the Antarctic, and, on a speaking tour throughout South Africa, has chatted with the likes of Nelson Mandela. An avowed Liberal—"When it comes to issues," he told me, "I'm always smack dab in the middle"—he has met with David Miller, Dalton McGuinty, Michaëlle Jean and Paul Martin.

In October 2008, Bilaal published a 150-page treatise on making the world a better place; it is entitled, appropriately enough, *Making Change: Tips From an Underage Overachiever*. (According to Bilaal's publisher, Orca Books, sales have surpassed 6,000, reviews have been positive, and recently the rights to the book sold in, of all places, South Korea.) In his spare time, Bilaal enjoys tennis and skiing, plays with Bobby, his Scottish terrier, and listens to classic rock. He also hosts a Sudoku Web site in which players compete for Plumpy'nut packages, an emergency food ration distributed by UNICEF to malnourished children.

When he's not at Lakefield, Bilaal lives in a three-bedroom house in a new subdivision in Richmond Hill. The house is not grand, at least not by Lakefield standards, and his parents drive an aging Honda. The living room is completely bare of furniture; instead, it houses Bilaal's drum kit, Bilaal's xylophone and Bilaal's electronic keyboard. (He is an only child.) The dining room, meanwhile, contains only four pillows, Bilaal's mother, Shamim, being a practitioner of yoga and meditation. "People always ask us why we don't have any furniture," Bilaal's father, an amiable gentleman named Aman, told me shortly after inviting me into the house. "And I answer that this is our home. I answer that this is supposed to be where we do our living."

"People always ask us what the secret is to raising a superchild," says Bilaal's father.

"There is no secret. Since he was a little kid, we've always tried not to say no"

There are other Bilaal touches. On the wall leading up to the bedrooms is a collage entitled "Family Vision Board" that Bilaal made the previous year. It contains various cut-out magazine photographs, which he has adorned with subtitles. For instance, over a photo of a family from sub-Saharan Africa, he has scrawled "Charity: Orphanages Around the World." On a picture of a sunset, he has written "Travel, Hawaii." On a photo of a large Spanish villa, "Rajan Dream House." There are about 30 photos in all, and another collage in his bedroom. This one, entitled "Bilaal's Vision Board," sports such contradictory images as David Suzuki and a *Fortune* cover. (Seeing these, I couldn't help but think of something I was told by a special education teacher I interviewed: "Gifted children don't think like you and I. When they think, they think in cascades.")

Bilaal's parents are of Indian origin, though both were born in Africa—Aman in Kenya and Shamim in Tanzania. (Shamim Rajan rarely speaks to reporters, preferring to let her husband and son handle media interviews.) Aman's family moved to Canada in 1974 to escape the threat of Asian expulsions in East Africa. Shamim enrolled in a pharmacy program in Buffalo at age 18, then joined her brother in Toronto when she graduated. The pair met as volunteers at an event hosting a visit of the Aga Khan, the Ismaili spiritual leader and one of Bilaal's heroes. Today, both remain serious, though not devout, Ismaili Muslims; while they attend mosque (or jamatkhana, as it is known in the Ismaili faith), they don't do it daily. Yet both volunteer extensively and participate each year in the World Partnership Walk, a fundraising event conducted by Ismaili communities across Canada. "In all of the Aga Khan's speeches," Aman told me, "he says that it is our responsibility to leave the world a better place than the one we came into. That's the ethic. That's the gist of it. The world is not for us; it's for the people who come after us. We've tried hard to instill that ethic in Bilaal."

At the time of Bilaal's birth, Aman was operating a Country Style franchise, and Shamim was working as a pharmacist. "When Bilaal came along, we made a very important decision," says Aman. "We decided that we would both design our work lives to create as much time as possible with him." When Shamim returned to her job, she did so working flex hours. Aman, meanwhile, sold his franchise and bought a wholesaling business that supplies snacks and drinks to schools, so that he could make his own schedule.

In this way, whenever Bilaal was home, be it after school, weekends or summer, both of his parents were with him. Today, when Bilaal travels—he missed a full quarter of Grade 9 due to his public speaking schedule—Aman goes with him. "We never say no," Aman told me. "Others are always asking us, 'What is your secret to raising a superchild?' And there is no secret. Since Bilaal was a little kid, we've always tried not to say no. You know how it is these days: No, Johnny, don't do this, don't do that, don't ride your bike or you might scrape your knee. We're not like that. We love our child, and we protect him, but we also let him learn by doing. When he was really little he wanted to learn to cook. We just told him, 'Look, be careful. The stove is hot, now go to it.' And if he makes a mess in the kitchen? Well, that's OK, too." In his public speaking, Bilaal often quotes a favourite expression of his mother's: "Don't ever let your song go unsung."

It's three hours after Bilaal's speech, and the students at Lakefield have gathered for a lunch of subs flavoured with pesto aïoli in a treed area behind the chapel called the courtyard. (Most, I notice, have put their shoes back on, while the teachers are still dutifully leaving theirs off.) At one o'clock, Bilaal emerges and sits in a chair placed in the middle of the courtyard, an act that deserves explanation. Four months ago, Bilaal travelled around the country promoting another campaign, called Hands for Haiti, to raise money for victims of the latest hurricane. The pitch was simple: whichever school raised the most money earned the privilege of watching Bilaal get his head shaved. Perhaps not surprisingly, Bilaal's own school won, raising close to $30,000 through the usual combination of bake sales, dunk tanks and raffles.

Of the 350 students who attend Lakefield, about 40 to 50 have remained to watch as a barber from town named Adriano wraps a salon cape around Bilaal's shoulders. He then runs a swath down the middle of Bilaal's head with an electric razor, momentarily leaving him with an inverse mohawk. As Bilaal's hair falls, his mother picks a thicket of it off the flagstone patio, to keep for posterity. Around me, I hear chatter both in Spanish and in heavily accented English, a testament to the school's international reputation. One excitable teen with braces announces, "Oh, man, this is the greatest thing ever."

When the job is done, a few students rub Bilaal's head, each commenting on how soft it is. The inevitable photos are taken, mostly by a reporter with the *Lakefield Herald*, who also happens to be one of the township council members who spoke earlier in the chapel. ("Basically," she told me, "we're a bit small to worry about conflict of interest.") And then, it's over. Bilaal and I walk over to the shade cast by a maple, and he tells me about his first fundraising effort. Despite having told the story many times, he has an orator's ability to make it sound heartfelt and fresh.

When Bilaal was just four years old, there was an earthquake in Gujarat, India, the state his parents' families are from. "I remember," Bilaal says, "that I was eating a clementine when my parents let me know that a jamatkhana had collapsed in the earthquake, burying the minister in rubble. Now, at the time, my dad was doing volunteer work at our jamatkhana, and I thought about what my life would be like without my father."

It was at this moment that something momentous, at least in the world of anti-poverty activism, occurred. Bilaal Rajan looked down at the clementine he was eating and had an idea. He would go door to door in his neighbourhood, selling clementines that his father purchased at a grocery store. "I couldn't believe it! I raised $350! To a little kid, that's a fortune." He donated the money to the Aga Khan Foundation.

For the next couple of years, he took part in the World Partnership Walk, an experience that, he says, deepened his interest in fundraising and poverty awareness. When a hurricane hit Haiti in 2004, Bilaal, eight years old at the time, asked his father to provide him with boxes of the cookies that his company sold to schools. Armed with these, he went door to door again, seducing neighbours with a homemade poster and a disarming smile. He raised $6,387 and donated it to UNICEF. This time, however, he was not as satisfied; when it was all over, he looked up from the money sitting on the kitchen table and said to his father, "We need to do more."

"So in walks this kid," says an Apotex exec. "He describes the situation in Haiti, and then he asks if we would donate some product. We couldn't believe how mature he was. It was like talking to a mini-adult"

Bilaal picked up the phone, called the Haitian consulate, and asked what the beleaguered country needed most. He was told they needed medicine and food. Bilaal hung up and promptly started calling major food and drug companies. "I kept calling and calling and calling," he told me. "Most paid no attention. I finally got 10 to call me back, and of these there were two who were sincerely interested."

One of the two was Apotex, the Toronto-based pharmaceutical giant; Bilaal left a voice message on the CEO's line. That message bounced around a bit, finally landing on the desk of Elie Betito, the company's director of public and government affairs. It was Betito's decision to invite the caller in. "So in walks this little kid with his mother," says Betito. "He describes the situation in Haiti, and then he asks if we would be willing to donate some product. We couldn't believe how mature he was, or how well informed he was. Really, it was like talking to a mini-adult."

Apotex sent $350,000 worth of medicine to Haiti. Heinz Corporation, also a recipient of Bilaal's pitch, sent 2,000 cases of baby food. "And you know what?" Betito says. "After it was all over, Bilaal came up and presented us with a plaque commending our donation. Can you believe that? And then, for years after, he kept us informed about what he was doing, and he sent us any newspaper clippings in which he was mentioned. I mean, we give to huge multinational charities, and the majority of them don't service us as well as Bilaal did." Soon after, Bilaal began decorating and selling ceramic plates to raise money for HIV/AIDS research. He chose Union Station, thinking he could target commuters. When security guards told him he couldn't peddle inside the station, he complied and, Bilaal being Bilaal, began selling them outside. It was mid-December.

Later that month, the worst tsunami in recorded history hit Southeast Asia. Bilaal walked the streets with his cookies again. Then he toured schools around Toronto on behalf of UNICEF to promote a program called the Canada Kids' Earthquake Challenge, giving speeches and encouraging students to raise $100 each for tsunami victims.

Bilaal, by his own estimation, has given more than 500 speeches. He has mastered the breezy, confident directness of a professional speaker. ("When are we going to make change?" he is apt to say, a hand cupped to one ear until the audience provides a sufficiently fervent "Now!") He writes all his own material, using a core speech about the virtues of activism that he tailors for each audience. He has never been coached, his prowess before a microphone seemingly innate. "I don't get nervous," he says, "because I'm not trying to impress anyone with myself. You see what I mean? I don't care how my talks reflect on me: I'm only out there delivering a message. Yet when I have to do a play before my class...yeah, I'm a mess." Nobody was more surprised than Bilaal when the Canada Kids' Earthquake Challenge, in large part because of Bilaal's efforts, raised $1.8 million.

UNICEF responded by making him a UNICEF Canada Youth Representative. In a profile of Bilaal that CNN aired, UNICEF Canada's president, Nigel Fisher, justified his decision this way: "I'm an old guy. I can talk to young people. I have been around the world; I can tell them stories, and they might even be interested. But when they see someone their own age who is already making a difference, I think it really causes an 11-year-old or a 12-year-old to think, Wow, I can do something, too."

Bilaal wanted to see what was being done with the money he'd raised, so his parents accompanied him to tsunami-ravaged areas in Thailand, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Indonesia. Seeing the impact of aid in these countries made Bilaal all the more committed. "Within seven days," he says, "we had temporary housing built, we had clean water supplies, water treatment tablets and desalination machines. We had IDP camps—internally displaced people camps—where parents could visit and find a child or relative. Yet the thing that amazed me the most were the cemeteries. It was just a massive area of dirt, and there were so many dead they had to bury them vertically. That really stuck with me."

It was following this trip that Bilaal reconsidered his modus operandi. "At that point, I realized that fundraising is good, but it's really all about inspiring others to make a difference." With this in mind, Bilaal took the next two years to write *Making Change*, mostly by reciting his thoughts into a hand-held recorder. ("To this day, I really don't like writing. I do, however, love the physical act of talking.") Littered with inspirational quotes—everyone from Goethe to Ella Fitzgerald has something to say in *Making Change*—

the book reflects Bilaal's interest in positive thinking, visualizations, and something he calls gratitude lists. (A few examples from the book: "You have a good school to go to"; "You have a really knowledgeable teacher this year"; "Your parents are very helpful and supportive.") Needless to say, if there is one recurring theme in *Making Change,* it's Bilaal's almost blinkered optimism. "It takes ten nos to get a yes," he writes on page 37. "When you look at it this way, it can help to think of every 'no' as being one 'no' closer to the next 'yes.'"

Since the publication of *Making Change,* Bilaal has travelled to Haiti, South Africa and South America, along with his sojourns to both the Arctic and the Antarctic with a group called Students on Ice. (During the Antarctic expedition, students were encouraged to create blogs on the organization's Web site, in which they wrote about their experiences. Bilaal, predictably, was the first to do so.) His agenda is so packed Bilaal himself can't keep it all straight in his head. ("Myanmar was a...typhoon? Yeah, I think so. It was last year, I believe...") To help, Bilaal's parents have hired an Oakville-based publicist named Sean Cain to book his speaking engagements, issue press releases and do design work for Bilaal's Web site, makingchangenow.com. In an average week, Cain devotes about six hours to Bilaal, though during the Barefoot Challenge and Hands for Haiti, that figure is much higher.

Bilaal has travelled to the Arctic, the Antarctic, Haiti, South Africa and South America. His schedule is so packed, he can't keep it all straight in his head. To help, his parents have hired a publicist

As far as I can tell, Bilaal's future is governed by two tenets, both of them Ismaili in origin. The first is that committing an act of charity should be its own reward. For this reason, he has no desire to follow the path of other high-profile youth activists—Craig Kielburger being the most obvious example—and become a full-time professional fundraiser. "I'm not saying that what Craig does is wrong," he told me. "It's not at all. I'm just saying that it isn't for me." The second is the idea that to be in a position to help others, you must help yourself first. Though Bilaal is an avowed admirer of Gandhi, he does not share his belief that genuine altruism necessitates a rejection of material wealth. In other words, when he says in his talks that he would like to drive an Infiniti G35 with red racing stripes, he is not in any way joking.

Toward the end of the school year, a few of Bilaal's subjects at Lakefield, most notably French and math, slipped below a 90 per cent average. This, he told me, caused him to be disappointed with himself; his next challenge is to learn how to juggle his philanthropic activities with the demands of high school. It was at this point that I asked him if he ever thought he might be spreading himself too thin.

"Meaning?" he asked.

"Well, I mean, you want to be a neurosurgeon and an astronaut. Do you ever worry that by trying to attain both you risk attaining neither?"

"Well if you don't try, you'll never succeed. I think it's better to say that you actually tried to do your best and failed than do nothing at all."

"But that's my point. You might have to choose one in order to do your best. I'm pretty sure that accepting any decent neurosurgery internship would preclude you from also training to be an astronaut."

This time, he hesitated for four or five heartbeats, a lengthy pause for Bilaal Rajan. "I guess," he finally admitted, "that recently I've been thinking that I could become a neurosurgeon or an astronaut."

There was another pause.

"In fact, I've definitely been thinking 'or' for a long time now."

After his school day ends, Bilaal does another interview by telephone with a Montreal radio station. Following an early dinner, he gets into his father's car, and they drive all the way to Toronto, where he is scheduled to appear on CP24. The three of us meet at the station at 9 p.m. and are given seats in the green room. Here, we wait for Bilaal to be interviewed by Stephen LeDrew, CP24's tirelessly mugging political analyst. Also waiting for their interviews are '80s balladeer Dan Hill and a chiselled athlete named Andre Durie, who, I glean from the conversation, plays for the Argonauts.

As soon as we sit down, Bilaal is taken away, only to return a few seconds later.

"Sorry," he explains to his dad. "They wanted to do a quick bumper shot."

Everyone, his father included, laughs at Bilaal's precociousness. "You know," he clarifies, "where they pan out as I walk away."

About five minutes later, Bilaal is invited on set again. Here, he says hello to anchor Farah Nasser, a fellow Ismaili whom he first met on a World Partnership Walk.

"Bilaal," she says, "how old are you now?"

"Thirteen."

"Really? I first interviewed you when you were, what? Six?"

A few seconds later, Bilaal's interview with LeDrew goes live. In it, he describes his Barefoot Challenge and the head shaving that was the climax of his Hands for Haiti campaign. He tells the obligatory four-year-old-kid-selling-clementines-door-to-door story, and he appeals to the youth of the world to not only create change but to create it now. (Bilaal is a fervent opponent of the notion that patience is a virtue.) At one point, LeDrew removes his own shoes and socks and asks to press the sole of his left foot against the dirtied sole of Bilaal's right foot. Bilaal uncomfortably complies.

After a flurry of compliments from the show's producer, Aman takes Bilaal's picture with both Dan Hill and the football player. A minute later, Aman, Bilaal and I are outside of the station. It's 9:30, and Bilaal still has to return to Lakefield tonight so he won't miss his classes in the morning. This means another two hours of driving, and that's only if his father ignores the speed limit. Aman will then have to turn around and drive back to the family home in Richmond Hill.

"I'm heading to the highway," Aman tells me. "Can I drop you off somewhere?"

I decline and ask Bilaal how he thinks his day went. He answers immediately, without any of the professional jauntiness he summoned for the CP24 interview.

"I'm just glad that I talked to a lot of people today. I'm just glad I could get my message of awareness out there. I think it was a very successful day."

He turns and walks away, just another shorn, shoeless boy in a private school jacket, ambling across a lamplit parking lot. ■