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Saving earth at young age

By Keya Acharya

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Very young boys and girls committed to green movement are making an unforeseen impact on the world.



Felix Finkbeiner is aiming for a greener earth

He has something of the child star in him but for two main features that set him apart: he seems unaware of the impression he's making on his audience of adults and his face is exceptionally bright. He also exudes an innocent self-confidence that comes from probably knowing this early that he can always rely on his intelligence. Whatever the aura though, Felix Finkbeiner is an extraordinary kid. He is 13 years old and in the last four years has led the planting of more than one million trees around the world.

"For many of us, the year 2100 is in our lifetime," Felix tells his audience of over 100 journalists from around the globe, gathered together in Cuneo, in northern Italy, by invitation from one of Italy's most influential media organizations, the Rome-based Greenaccord.

"For adults, the year 2100 is an academic question," says Felix, "but for us it is actually about our survival."

He also reels out figures, sounding suspiciously like he's been coached, though figures such as these are easy to access on the web: 180 species of plants and animals becoming extinct each day around the planet, 180 thousand hectares of land become desert every day, and so on.

It also seems a bit unlikely to hear a young adolescent speak about the Kyoto Protocol and its political goings-on. That is, until he makes it as lucid as talking to a child: if we do not want to exceed the two-degree temperature rise limit by 2050, says Felix, we have to bring carbon dioxide emissions under control, which means we are limited to an emission of 15 billion tonnes per year.

"Our goal is to plant one trillion trees," says Felix, "which will absorb 10 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. This will help our CO2 control policy."

"It is possible, we have enough space in the world for this", he says.

Felix is German, lives in a typical, staid town called Pocking near Munich and goes to school like most kids his age do. When he was nine, a school Plant for the Planet project he had to do on climate change got him on to the internet and he got 'hooked', not to the Net, but to the late Kenyan nobel laureate Wangari Maathai's tree-planting Green Belt campaign. Her achievements so motivated the young boy that his class project-presentation stirred first his class, his teachers, his whole school, and then spread to other schools. Two months after his first presentation, Felix planted his first tree.

Soon, he had young kids from Germany phoning him to ask if they could join up. The idea snowballed from there without looking back. The kids grouped together, held meetings in various towns and sent letters to heads of state, asking them to collaborate with their tree-planting campaigns. By 2008, UNEP had invited him to their junior board, by 2009 he had addressed the EU Parliament and UNEP conferences. And by 2010, Plant for the Planet became a non-governmental organization with a 'stop talking, start planting campaign' that has now spread to children in over 31 countries.

"We know we have to take our future in our own hands because it doesn't look like adults will solve the problem", says Felix.

"How do you manage your schoolwork in all of this", I ask the young boy. Felix looks slightly discomfited, but replies smartly, "I do it. Yesterday evening, for example, I sat and did my homework instead of watching a football match", he says, the disappointment of missing the match still in his voice.

The group has an online 'world café' where the kids collect various ideas, such as on how to plant trees or learn how to make presentations. They elect justice ambassadors from various regions of the world who then have to take the initiative in their own spheres and countries.

The group's vice president and 'climate justice ambassador is another 'teen star', an Indian girl from Lucknow thirteen-year-old Yugratna Srivastava. Extraordinarily collected and composed and with impeccable courtesy handling queries from an adult, 15-year-old Yugratna, already the Asia Pacific goodwill ambassador for UNEP junior board, met her European counterpart Felix in 2008.

Elected to UNEP's junior board by 107 junior representatives, Yugratna has helped spread the planting of trees in schools, junior campuses and localities through the Patna-based NGO Tarumitra. The NGO, a student movement group with over 2 lakh members in around 1000 schools and colleges planted 10,000 trees in 2010-11. "Our target was one million trees, but we will now have to cross even that number", says Yugratna.



Yugratna Srivastava is an inspiring young campaigner

Yugratna says she gives talks and presentations to children in Tarumitra's network and in schools. The saplings are nurtured by the children at Tarumitra, taught how to look after them and then distributed.

"Our first initiative is to motivate the distributors to look after the planted saplings. As far as I know it's working", she says.

In Lucknow, the young teen has now begun speaking to kids at organized events on occasions such as Environment or Children's Day. She says she has also collaborated to 'make students aware' through the Hindustan Times' environmental campaign.

Like Felix, Yugratna deals with frequent international travel: Indonesia last month, Abu Dhabi the next month and comments with mature wryness to the same question posed to Felix on how she copes with her schoolwork. "It somehow gets managed", she grins.

Flashes of childlike innocence then beam through all the practicality of explanations.

“Did you see the presentation made by an Indian girl at the UN COP summit in Copenhagen in 2009 ?” she asks me. I reply that I remembered, but not very clearly.

“That was me !” she says with glee.

Background:

I met Felix Finkbeiner at Cuneo, Italy in late October 2011 at an international journalists' convention. And I spoke with Yugratna several times on the phone.

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