

Second Place Winner
Division I – 7-9th Grades
Still A Child
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If you've ever had a bite of chocolate, or stepped on an ornate rug, or bought any number of products, chances are that you have helped child labor. Today, there are enough child slaves to replace the population of South Carolina. Many think that slavery has been eradicated, but there a large number of children working for little to no pay. This sounds awful, but this is drastically better than the situation was in the 1980's. How did this happen? Iqbal Masih.

Iqbal Masih was born into a family that was struggling. This was not uncommon in Pakistan, and they were not alone. Iqbal's father left the family when Iqbal was very young, leaving his mother to work and care for him and his family. When he was 4 years old, in 1986, Iqbal's brother was to be married. As weddings are very important in Pakistan, they needed money to pay for it. Iqbal, like millions of other children, was sent to make carpets to pay for the loan. When Iqbal's usually absent father signed a document for a loan of twelve dollars, or 600 rupees, from the thekedar, the town's carpet maker, he was unknowingly signing his son into bondage. What starts out as a small loan multiplies exponentially with undisclosed interest and ridiculous costs. Iqbal worked for one rupee a day, so he would have to work for six hundred days to pay off his loan. Iqbal ended up working in the carpet factory for around 6 years, still trying to make twelve dollars.

Iqbal faced severe conditions every day. As one of the better carpet makers, he did not have it as bad as some of the other kids. Iqbal told the story of Salim, another carpet maker who was not so lucky. "Once, after he made a terrible mistake, the foreman took a shearing knife and made a deep cut between Salim's thumb and index finger. The boy was so terrified of the foreman that he did not dare raise complaint." (solidaridad.net) Iqbal was given a small bowl of rice and lentils every day, which cost more than he was paid. Once, Iqbal was so tired that he cut himself. The thekedar told him not to drip it on the wool, then took his hand and poured hot oil on it to seal the wound. Iqbal screamed, and then was beaten for distracting the other children. Many children like this grow up with bone problems from crouching all day. He grew up in the carpet factory.

When Iqbal was ten, he discovered that bonded labor was illegal in Pakistan. After escaping, which was punishable by being dropped in boiling oil, Iqbal went to the police to report his thekedar. Iqbal learned that everyone was in the pocket of the carpet mafia when he was returned to the carpet factory and was beaten for escaping. Iqbal said, "they also hung children upside down until they became sicker. Children were beaten" (solidaridad.net). Iqbal, determined not to remain a slave for the rest of his life, escaped again, but this time went to the Bonded Labor Liberation front and received an education for two years.

By the time Iqbal was twelve, he had traveled all over the world, and spoken out about child slavery. He won the Reebok award, among numerous others for speaking out and helping

children everywhere. Iqbal changed the lives of thousands of children, all before becoming a teenager. Iqbal shook the hornet's nest, and sadly ended up paying for it with his life. When Iqbal was twelve, he was fatally shot in a field in his hometown while riding a bike. The carpet mafia had to eliminate him because of his courage to stand up for what was right. Iqbal's memory has inspired several foundations devoted to stopping child slavery.

Iqbal has inspired me to stand up for what's right. Iqbal tried to help people who couldn't help themselves. While there is a much lower chance of danger, it can be uncomfortable to go against the norms of society. At school every day there are people being bullied. I realize now that if Iqbal could face death for standing up for what's right, I can face peer pressure. Because of Iqbal, I've been able to stand up for other people when they are being ridiculed and tormented by people who think they're better. I challenge you to help someone who is being bullied. Iqbal helped save thousands of people, so you can help better the life of one.

Iqbal demonstrated moral courage by standing up for what is right, even though it could and did cost him his life. He worked to help those who could not help themselves, all before turning 13. He was still a child, but created a legacy that still lives on today. Iqbal has inspired me to help others that are being bullied. To me, Iqbal demonstrated extreme moral courage.

Works Cited

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