

A Bullet Can't Kill a Dream
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Contributing Editor

On April 16, The U.S. Department of Labor honored the students of Broad Meadows Middle School in Quincy, Mass., with an award citing their campaign to fight child labor around the world. The date was no accident: It marked the two-year anniversary of Iqbal Masih's murder and beginning of the students' campaign to make sure his dream didn't die with him.

Iqbal, a 12-year-old boy from Pakistan, had visited their school in December 1994 and left an impression that will last a lifetime.

They were touched by his slight figure, stunted by malnutrition, and by his story. At 4, he was sold by his father into slavery for what amounts to \$12. He spent long days chained to his loom, knotting carpets under conditions unimaginable to his American friends. At 10, he stole away to a freedom day celebration and gave an impromptu speech, which was published by local newspapers. Thus began his rise as a powerful speaker against child labor, which eventually brought him to the United States in 1994 to receive the Reebok Human Rights Youth in Action Award. That award included \$15,000 in prize money, which Iqbal pledged to use toward becoming a lawyer. As an adult, he wanted to continue fighting for the freedom of Pakistan's estimated 7.5 million enslaved children.

On Easter Day, April 16, 1995, only months after receiving the Reebok award, Iqbal was killed in his native town of Muridke, Pakistan. He and his family had received death threats for his activism against bonded labor, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported two months after Iqbal was killed. But the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan concluded his death was not political. Iqbal's friends around the world continue to call for a thorough and independent investigation.

"It was Iqbal's dream for children to be free and to be educated," Amy Papile told the *Christian Science Monitor*. Amy, now a ninth-grader, and Nicole Ferris, 12, represented their classmates in receiving the U.S. Labor Department award.

Iqbal's death shocked the Broad Meadows students into even more vigorous action, using the Internet and traditional letter-writing. According to Ron Adams, their teacher advisor, people of all ages from 50 states and 24 nations eventually were involved in the campaign to build a school in Pakistan dedicated to Iqbal. In February, they accomplished the dream: Iqbal's school in Kasur City opened with 278 poor working children, ages 4 to 12, who are getting their first chance at an education.

As of April 16, Broad Meadows students had raised \$147,000. The Kasur City school now is guaranteed to be in business for at least eight years, Adams said, under the wing of Sudhaar, a small, grass-roots non-governmental organization based in Pakistan.

"So you see," the students loudly proclaim on the web site they created for their campaign, "there is a school for Iqbal, thanks to big-hearted people like you! A BULLET CAN'T KILL A DREAM. Spread the word!"

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The SGI-USA's Children's Rights Exhibit, which will continue its tour this year, is unofficially dedicated to Iqbal Masih.