
Ryan helps change the world, one child at a time



Ryan Hreljac is amazed at how far the Ryan's Well Foundation has come since its inception in 1998.

**Kelly Egan, The Ottawa Citizen
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The Ryan's Well Foundation has grown like a magic beanstalk since 1998, when a little boy, only six, raised \$70 in a Grade 1 project.

So too has Ryan. Today, he is six-foot-three. His voice is changing. His hair is darkening. He wears size 13 shoes.

The little kid who wanted to change the world is now the young man who did. And yet the story retains its magnetism, because the theme, at heart, never tires: David shattering this Goliath we call the impossible.

In January 1998, when Ryan was six, he began to raise money to drill a clean-water well in Africa, a place he had never visited and perhaps couldn't even spell. His mother, Susan, kept a running total on a hand-drawn thermometer on the fridge, just one more school project in a house with three kids.

When Ryan reached the goal -- 70 bucks is not a whole lot, is it? -- she did what every parent does with stray scraps of paper that lose their immediacy: she threw it out. Three years later, Oprah's people were sorry to hear about that.

Yes, he made Oprah. And took communion from the Pope. And met the prime minister and the premier. And travelled to 15 or more countries. And raised \$1.3 million. And help finance 187

water wells. And helped 320,000 people have access to clean water. And won the Order of Ontario. And he grew up.

On Friday, Ryan was at Charles H. Hulse Public School in Alta Vista, speaking to students during an assembly that was part of a day-long focus on the vital importance of clean drinking water around the world.

Charles Hulse, the man (1899-1987, white, anglo, Christian, school trustee, civic-builder, funeral home director), is the Ottawa that was. Charles H. Hulse, the school, is the Ottawa that is. The school population of 450 is about 60 per cent Muslim and, at rough count, consists of 75 countries of origin. On the gym floor sat roughly 400 of the students. Hijabs outnumbered kerchiefs. A quick inspection found eight heads of blond hair. It is indeed a different world.

"I am not a hero," Ryan told the students. "I am just a kid who cares, like millions of others in the world."

The students at Hulse have caught the spirit. This year, they've formalized a Global Response Team, which mobilizes a reaction to disasters around the world. The children have raised about \$1,500 this year for causes such as the Pakistani earthquake, the Guatemala mudslides and Hurricane Katrina. Ryan's Well is their new target.

Ryan told the children he is, in large part, an ordinary teenager. He likes hockey, basketball and Xbox. He is not beyond sarcasm. "It really tears me apart to miss school," he said after his speech, a sly grin on his face.

The foundation has evolved, too. It is now less about a single boy-wonder and more about the power of education and inspiration. "What we're trying to stick into these kids' heads is they don't need to be prime minister or some multi-millionaire to make a difference in the world," Ryan said. "They just need to do their part. Do what they think is right."

His mother, Susan, said the foundation now aims to create other little Ryans across the country and around the world. "What we'd like to do is continue with the water and sanitation work but expand to the point where we are creating other young ambassadors in the world."

Mrs. Hreljac said she's constantly amazed at how one little school project put the entire family on a different path in life. "Every day. Every day. Every single day," she said, when asked if she ever marvels at the chain of events.

She is now the volunteer executive-director of the organization, which has two paid, part-time employees and, finally, an office of its own.

The family, too, has fundamentally changed. Ryan's one-time penpal, Jimmy, a Ugandan with a troubled home life, now lives with the family in Kemptville. "A gift," Mrs. Hreljac calls the boy, now 16 and in Grade 11.

Ryan, meanwhile, says he has no idea what he will be when he grows up. "No clue. Not a clue in the world. We'll see where the river flows."

My, where it has gone already. Of course one person can make a difference. Children, in particular, need to hear this over and over. "It's a simple message that says you can do anything," concluded Ryan. "I'm sure everyone hears that all the time. 'I know, if I try hard, I can do this, I

know, I know, I know.' But when you really think about it, it's true."

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