Lessons from Legends at One Young World

By Marian Salzman
Feb. 10, 2010

The inaugural One Young World summit under way this week in London is a next-generation Davos: a gathering of hundreds of future leaders from the world’s 192 countries. All under age 30, they’re bringing youthful energy, passion, optimism and creativity to the most challenging issues facing people around the globe today. I have no doubt that the best among them will alter the world for the better, inspire positive change in others and solve problems that today seem like intractable challenges.

In other words, some of them will become legends.

In that regard, One Young World can be seen as a passing of the torch. The summit’s delegates are being guided by the current generation of legendary leaders as they’re exchanging ideas, engaging in debate and drafting resolutions on pressing issues including global business, interfaith dialogue, climate change, corporate social responsibility and economic justice. Leading the sessions are such legends as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Sir Bob Geldof, Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, Sen. John Kerry and former President of Peru Alejandro Toledo.

At the opening ceremonies on Feb. 8, the counselors and delegates set the scene for the work ahead of them by stating the One Young World pledge: “One world. One people. One future. Our destiny: to make the world a better place for each other. Let us begin.”

The mayor of London, Boris Johnson, welcomed delegates to his city and congratulated them on being nominated for One Young World. He said, “Science, I think, is the future, and technology is what’s going to bring us together,” then talked about his youth: worries that Russia would invade Poland, and campaigning against apartheid in South Africa—a struggle that that generation’s 20-somethings saw turn around. They campaigned against poverty and injustice around the world, launching initiatives such as Bob Geldof’s Live Aid, a seminal moment in the ‘80s for the organizers and many presenters at the One Young World summit, but something most delegates weren’t alive to remember.

To put Live Aid in perspective: The 1985 concert assembled the best pop stars from around the world to raise money for Ethiopia. “Today, in 2010,” said Johnson, “it took one London 7-year-old—I’m not kidding—to get on the Internet and raise £72,000 for Haiti. That is the difference between now and then.”

He went on: “I believe passionately we are closer than ever to being one world, closer than ever before to having a global consciousness, a global ability to solve our problems together.”

Bob Geldof, whose incredibly significant achievements in the ‘80s, before the Internet enabled instantaneous global reach, also addressed the delegates. He said: “What we’re here for is important and poses a great responsibility on you. I think us counselors can abdicate that responsibility. The suggestion is almost that whatever it is we’ve managed to do...
there’s increasingly little we can do to influence the affairs, except to possibly pass it on, somehow, by influencing you.” He then quoted George Bernard Shaw and said: “All progress in the world is made by unreasonable people. The reasonable person adapts to the world, whereas the unreasonable person persists in adapting the world to himself and therefore all progress moves through the unreasonable person.” He asked delegates to be completely unreasonable as they went through the summit.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose name is synonymous with overturning apartheid in South Africa, told the delegates, “I want to salute you, for you are a fantastic bunch of human beings.” He went on to say: “Young people are such a fantastic group of people who dream dreams, dreams of a world that is without war. You dream dreams and you say, ‘Let us make poverty history.’... I was in Copenhagen, and most of the people there who were demonstrating, who were passionate, were young people. A hundred thousand young people went out on the streets of Copenhagen.”

Then he offered a theological context for his arguments: “God has been using young people—Joseph, David kills Goliath, Francis of Assisi. And God is using youth to say to us oldies, ‘Hey, when are you going to get it into your head? Just look at how much you’re spending on guns.’... We oldies, how many wars have we started? They were not started by young people. And most of those who start the wars, will you find them on the front line? No, no, no. They’re sitting comfortably at home and watching other people’s children die.

“So I come to you and say, ‘Hey, just go on being idealistic. Just go on dreaming that we are going to have a different kind of world.’ When we come back...we may be ghosts...and look at the world, we’ll say, ‘There’s no longer any poverty. There’s no longer any hunger. There’s no longer any war.’ You are going to make this a beautiful, beautiful world. I look around and I can see Nobel Peace laureates in here.”

As for the future legends, David Jones, a founder and organizer of One Young World, explained 20-somethings’ potential in his address to the delegates. “You really are a very unique generation,” he began. “We say a lot that things are different, and a lot of the time, it’s actually not the case. But I think you are dramatically different. The reason for that is the digital revolution.... That has probably made you the smartest generation that has ever existed.... The second thing that’s really unique about you is your ability to really impact and effect positive change, again because of the digital revolution, the power of social media....

“Our belief is quite simple: If the world’s leaders can’t make the right decisions, and I think Copenhagen was a fantastic example of not delivering what the world’s people wanted, then maybe if we brought together some of the smartest young people in the world, then they could actually help the world’s leaders make the right decisions.”