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PASSAIC

World traveler urges teens to help poor

By **ERIK ORTIZ**
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When Joe Opatowski first meets someone, he offers a hug. Some people find it odd, but it's his way of connecting with a new face.

"You're no longer strangers," Opatowski, 21, said Tuesday to 50 students enrolled in Lincoln Middle School's Quality of Life after-school program. "In some countries, strangers don't exist."

As part of the Me to We Tour, Opatowski is crisscrossing North America this school year to talk to students about the plight of youngsters in poor countries and the importance of being socially responsible.

He told the seventh- and eighth-grade students in Passaic that "making a difference" is as simple as opening a door for someone or giving a stranger a smile, or even a hug.

"People think about doing something, but how often do they take that next step?" asked Opatowski, a Toronto native.

As a speaker with Leaders Today and Free the Children, a non-profit organization whose founder is a three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Opatowski has traveled the globe, visiting children in Thailand with AIDS and youngsters in India laboring in sewing factories.

On Tuesday, he talked about

how children in poor nations like Sierra Leone are forced to fight as soldiers and how even the countries that attract tourism can suffer from poverty.

On a visit to Jamaica four years ago, Opatowski taught English and math to children who lived surrounded by mounds of garbage.

He first became involved with social activism when he was 17. At first, it was a way to escape "inner-city" Toronto and a broken home. Now it's become a full-time job.

While he acknowledged that many youngsters aren't keen on social activism right away, he encouraged the children to start by holding fund-raisers for schools in poor countries or, if they go trick-or-treating on Halloween, to collect canned foods for local food pantries.

After the presentation, some students told Sandy Shevack, youth supervisor of Quality of Life at Lincoln Middle School, that they will help him collect money for school supplies for an elementary school in Guatemala.

"I really want to help," said Jacqueline Mercado, 13, as other children said goodbye to Opatowski — some with a hug.

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