

The boy who plants Trees

BY PETER HUMMEL
PHOTOGRAPHED
BY HEINZ HEISS

Felix Finkbeiner is trying to save the planet by planting millions of trees. He is our 20th Reader's Digest European of the Year—and the youngest, joining an exclusive group whose work is making the world a better place



*Felix Finkbeiner
planted his first tree
at the age of nine*



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HE VOLKSWAGEN boardrooms in Wolfsburg are no place for the faint-hearted. This is where the company's managers take decisions worth billions of euros and determine the fate of hundreds of thousands of employees all over the world. It is a place inhabited by men in suits.

But one day in June 2013, a 15-year-old boy wearing jeans and a T-shirt stands up in front of the group management and 18,000 employees at a VW staff meeting and has the nerve to start making demands.

"You know perfectly well that the cars made by you and other manufacturers use too much petrol," says Felix Finkbeiner. "Where's the sense in that?"

Sustainability isn't an optional extra, it's a children's right. Do you have a plan for how you're going to put things right? I certainly do!"

The teenager goes on to tell Volkswagen that he wants them to donate a billion trees. He looks each of the board members in the eye—not one of them appears willing to argue with him. The assembled workforce give a loud and sustained round of applause.

Felix is fully conscious of how

persuasive he can be with adults. And he has all the key facts and figures about the climate crisis at his fingertips. Trees break down CO₂, convert it into oxygen and store carbon. In other words, they are exactly what is desperately needed by an environment so badly abused by humankind.

The hope of the children and young people who belong to Plant-for-the-Planet—the environmental initiative founded by Felix—is that one trillion trees will be planted across the globe by 2020. That's 150 for every single person on the planet.

"The Earth has plenty of room for all those extra trees without needing to encroach on farmland or the places where people live, and they would absorb a quarter of global CO₂ emissions," he says.

Hundreds of millions of saplings have been planted since Plant-for-the-Planet took over the management of the United Nations Environment Programme's Billion Tree Campaign in 2011. They are shooting up all over the globe, cleansing the air and protecting the soil. And, lest we forget, Felix Finkbeiner is a 17-year-old schoolboy.

TREE NUMBER ONE, THE ONE THAT started it all off, now stands more than three metres tall at the entrance to his

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STOP TALKING START PLANTING



Felix is a persuasive speaker—aged 13 he addressed the UN

the world and planting a million trees in every country on Earth. Thus began a mass tree planting movement.

Felix's gift for talking so persuasively and inspiring others with his enthusiasm led to several trips around the globe. As well as attending global climate summits and giving presentations, he also founded several "academies"—organised training events where children bring each other up to speed on

school in Bavaria. At the age of nine, Felix had to give a presentation about the climate crisis to his classmates. He found an online article about Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan Nobel Prize winner who helped get 30 million trees planted in Africa over 30 years.

"I got it into my head that me and my classmates could do something similar," says Felix. "So we planted a tree." The children's parents stumped up the money for it. It made such an impression on the other pupils and teachers at his school that they too started planting trees.

Before long, they were in the newspapers and on the radio and other schools had started joining in. The children created a website and founded the Plant-for-the-Planet children's initiative with the aim of bringing together kids from all over

climate protection issues.

AGED JUST 13, FELIX GAVE A SPEECH that he had written himself to the United Nations in New York. "We children don't trust your words any more. You are destroying our future," he told the delegates. "And never forget: one mosquito cannot do anything against a rhino, but a thousand mosquitos can make a rhino change its direction. Stop talking. Start planting!"

Felix went on to meet with Nobel Peace Prize winners such as Kofi Annan and Al Gore, while the global press feted him as an environmental superstar.

He has drawn praise from Prince Albert II of Monaco whom he met at a Climate Action conference in Durban, South Africa. "Felix is an extraordinary young man. I admire him deeply,"

the Prince says. "His initiative has been followed by thousands of young people all over the world and has created a real wave of solidarity. To see a new generation who fights for sustainable development is a great hope for the future."

There are now 120,000 children around the world actively supporting Plant-for-the-Planet and 30,000 of them have been trained as Ambassadors for Climate Justice, passing on their knowledge to other children.

There are ambassadors all over the globe, in Malaysia, in Mexico, in the Ivory Coast, in Canada, as well as—of today—892 in Spain, 276 in Poland and 726 in Austria. Three years ago, democratic Global Children's and Youth Boards were

established, elected annually in an online ballot by members throughout the world. The right to vote for the boards is limited to those aged 21 and younger.

Fourteen-year-old Giovanni Atzeni from Sassari, Italy, sits on the Children's Board. "The first time I heard about Felix and Plant-for-the-Planet was reading a newspaper article about him planting the first millionth tree," Giovanni says. "His example made me see that we children have power, that we can actually

do something against climate change."

Giovanni decided to join Plant-for-the-Planet and last year he met Felix at the initiative's annual meeting in Possenhofen, Germany. "It was very exciting. In discussions Felix always comes up with ideas that inspire everyone," says Giovanni. "He has met all these important people and has done all these impressive things and yet he is a very normal guy and fun to be around."

Today the Boards make decisions for the entire organisation and set the focus of the movement. The salaries of the organisation's 17 full-time employees, who coordinate all its activities, are paid for entirely by donations.

LOOKING BACK AT
Plant-for-the-Planet's

humble beginnings, Felix can himself hardly believe that such a large movement grew out of his original idea. "But when a child says something to a grown-up, it has a very different impact compared to if another adult said it," he explains. "They have no choice but to listen to you and take your demands seriously."

Felix's father backs him up. Frithjof Finkbeiner, who scaled back his own involvement in the family's real estate business to volunteer for organisations that promote justice, says, "It's

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“He has met all these important people and has done all these impressive things, yet he is very normal”
 ”



*Felix meets
Prince Albert
II of Monaco
and his wife
Princess
Charlene*

really amazing. When it comes to the climate crisis, children have far more clout than we adults.”

The Finkbeiners—Felix has two sisters—live in what was once the railway station building in Uffing, a small village near Bavaria’s Staffelsee Lake. Felix is in his final year at Munich International School and is already planning his future.

“The world is facing two key crises. A climate crisis and a justice crisis,” says Felix, sounding every bit the politician, were it not for the fact that he is munching on a bar of chocolate as he speaks.

“A billion people have to survive on just one dollar a day, while 30,000 human beings die of starvation every 24 hours. Both of these crises are inextricably linked, since the people in the poorer countries, who have

contributed the least to climate change, will be the ones who suffer the most as a result of it.” People who are fighting for their own survival, he believes, often have no choice but, for example, to clear another patch of forest so they can grow food for their family and use the wood as fuel.

Felix breaks off another square of chocolate. He gets through a whole bar most days. He is of course eating “Die Gute Schokolade”, Plant-for-the-Planet’s very own

chocolate brand. Every five bars that are sold pay for a new tree. And just under four million bars have already flown off the shelves.

“You can’t solve the climate problem as long as the justice problem still exists and vice versa,” he continues.

ONE OF THE REASONS WHY FELIX wants to go to university in the US is so he can gather support for “his” cause there too. “Far too many people in America believe that there have always been extreme climate and weather events throughout Earth’s history,” he claims. They are entitled to their point of view, but that doesn’t necessarily make them right.

“Some 97 per cent of climate studies around the world conclude that climate change is man-made and is really happening,” he continues. “Just

three per cent disagree.” It’s up to us whether we believe the 97 per cent or the three per cent.

If we choose to believe the majority and follow their advice, he thinks, we won’t have lost anything if they ultimately prove to be wrong. But if we choose to side with the three per cent of climate sceptics and it is they who eventually turn out to be wrong, then it will be too late to avert disaster.

As a young person, he thinks that this is far too big a risk to take. Felix could go on, but it’s time for tea—sticky buns and custard are on the menu, his favourite.

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