



Give them a second chance

Planting hope

From theft to gangsterism to teenage pregnancy. Mrs Jane Ng, Principal of TOUCH Youth Learning Centre (TYLC), has seen them all. Being a veteran in the education service for the past 16 years, including nine years as the vice-principal of a secondary school, Jane has seen wayward youths quitting school and ruining their future.

"Whenever I meet parents due to disciplinary problems, I realised many of these youths come from dysfunctional families and have low self-esteem. Many also suffer from inner conflicts arising from difficulties in relating to their single parent's boyfriend or girlfriend," said Jane.

Jane recalled a case where a wayward student, Kai Seng, in the Normal Stream, was constantly reprimanded for his rude and disruptive behaviour. His parents were separated since he was young and his grandmother supported the family, leaving Kai Seng alone at home. One day, due to his disruptive behaviour, he was brought by his class teacher to see Jane who was then the vice principal. After a counselling session, Kai Seng felt remorseful and broke down. Tears filled his eyes. "I was moved to see a tough boy like him break down; it shows he has feelings, just like any one of us. I fought hard to hide my tears. It was then that I felt I just had to do something to help this group of troubled youths. I wanted to change and touch lives. If there is a boy like Kai Seng, there must be many more like him out there too," said Jane.

With this mission in mind, Jane gave up her government education career. In August 1999, TYLC was formed to offer out-of-school youths a second chance in education. It also serves as a preventive measure against new and repeat offenders by keeping them off the streets and helping them continue schooling. TYLC has now grown to 50, compared to just four students when it first started. The students, aged 15 to 21, were mainly expelled or had quit school, probationers or early release residents monitored by aftercare officers. They come from places like Grace Haven, Singapore Boys' Home, Toa Payoh Girls' Home and Kaki Bukit Centre (Prison School). At TYLC, the

students take a two-year course to prepare them for the GCE 'O' Level examination.

Changing lanes

The initial years were challenging as the centre only had a small pool of volunteers to plan the curriculum. One of the main challenges was to restore the ability to learn and narrow the learning gap. Many of the students also seriously lacked reading and writing skills, and had short attention span.

"I am excited to see youths coming to school to study," said Jane. "Their greatest struggle is to get out of bed to be in school. When I see each of them turning up in school each morning, I tell myself, I just witnessed a miracle. With a captive audience, there is so much we as teachers can do."

To help students enhance their learning abilities, motivational programmes like *Jump Start* were introduced to inspire students to become better learners. Students are also taught lifeskills to strengthen character and help them make good decisions in life. As part of TYLC's non-academic programme, eight hours are also set aside for service learning to inculcate in students the compassion for the needy and to be grateful for what they have. To further reach out to troubled youths, TYLC partnered the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) last year to run youth programmes.

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TYLC: Helping at-risk youths clear the decks and start on a clean slate.

Potential unleashed

The results have been encouraging with more students qualifying for polytechnics. For the past two years, more than 90% of TYLC students obtained at least one GCE 'O' Level pass, out of which 33% qualified for polytechnics.

The work at TYLC has also borne fruits. For example, Jason, an ex-student of TYLC who was expelled from his previous school for disruptive behaviour managed to complete his GCE 'O' levels at TYLC and is currently studying at the Institute of Technical Education. Another student, Henry, an ex-gangster, is now excelling in his final year at a polytechnic. Nothing is more fulfilling than hearing a student exclaiming, "Now I begin to like Maths" and another commenting, "I know now that life is what you make it to be; it's never too late to start your life afresh!". Two other ex-students even returned as volunteers to raise funds for TYLC by participating in a cupboard auction with their project – "Singapore River on a Cupboard" – and raised \$2,000 for TYLC. One grateful mother even made a bottle of rice wine and donated \$100 even though she was receiving financial help – all because she was happy that her daughter completed school.

"I believe that if a child – no matter what his background – can succeed in school, he has an excellent chance for success in life. If he fails at any stage of his primary or secondary education, his chances of life are greatly diminished," said Jane.

For more information, please call TYLC at 6270 0897.