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March 2018

My dear friend

We first met Ah-Lan when she was 14 years old. Our outreaching workers met her on the street at night not far from the Youth Outreach Center. She was wearing a loose T-shirt, baggy trousers and had a very short haircut. It was hardly surprising that at first we thought she was a boy. It turned out that this was part of her strategy for surviving on the street.

She told us that she usually slept in the nearby park until daytime then hung about doing nothing. She absolutely refused to go to school. She never smiled. She never gave any information about herself, her background or what she wanted.

Our workers took her back to the Hangout and tried to get interested in some of the activities with a view to eventually getting her to open up about herself. They tried computer games, Karaoke, basketball Ah-Lan tried them all but showed little real interest in any of them. If anything she seemed quite bored. It goes without saying that she still revealed very little about herself. The workers were taking her along to our "Cyber Café" to get something to eat and on the way, they passed by the room where our Hip Hop crew was preparing for a show. She stopped and watched as if glued to the window.

Our social workers said nothing but waited hopefully to see what would happen. She stood there for quite a while as our crew practiced some of the more difficult moves and eventually she asked, very quietly, if should could try. This was the very first time that we could see her real self, her personal interest, her own wishes.

We were delighted, of course. It was about four o'clock in the morning then and she stayed until after six o'clock. The Hip Hop crew showed her all kinds of moves and helped her to try them out. Some were easy; some were difficult but she tried. Not all her moves were perfect but she had an obvious talent.

Then she said she wanted to leave. Before she left she quietly said "I am very happy tonight. Originally, before I met you, I was going to commit suicide tonight. Now I do not want to die. I will come back again later to learn how to dance."

It was a miracle. Our workers breathed a deep sigh of relief. All that had been hidden inside. Now there was the opportunity to set Ah-Lan back on

the road to life. They all kept their fingers crossed that she would indeed come back that night. And she did! Shortly after midnight she came in and asked for the Hip Hop Crew. After that it became a regular visit.

Eventually she began to open up about herself. Her parents had split up when she was small. She went to live with her mother but life seemed a long succession of arguments, fights and temper tantrums. She said that when she was 10 years old she decided she had had enough and started living alone on the street. We were shocked to say the least and seriously worried.

She continued with the Hip Hop and we eventually persuaded her to move her activities to late evening rather than after midnight. She moved into our residential center but still refused to go to school. And since she was not yet 15 years old she could not get a job.

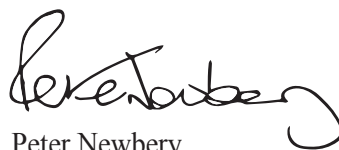
The dancing filled the gap. She became more confident in herself and set herself a goal. She would perform on the stage and teach others to dance. We felt that we had hit the jackpot. Her self-confidence and ability to relate to others developed by leaps and bounds.

Another surprising development for us was that the “cold war” which had existed between her and her family gradually ceased and she moved back to living at home – an unusual girl! It was a little bit tough in the beginning but things seem to have worked out in the end.

When she reached 15 years old she asked if we would employ her as a Program Assistant in the School of Hip Hop. We were more than happy to do so. Time passed and she set herself a new goal. She was determined to leave Youth Outreach, get a job “outside” and set up her own family – an “iron lady” indeed. From suicide to building her own life to setting up a family.

We are still in touch and give her all the support we can. The road she has chosen is not easy but she is a very talented and capable young woman and we are optimistic that the way ahead of her is bright. Keep her in your heart.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Newbery". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Peter Newbery