

Christmas 2015

My dear friend,

Julie is studying in form 3 in a school in the New Territories. She looks just like most other 15 year old girls, dressed in what locally is known as the “Mong Kok look” – skinny jeans and T-shirt or shorts and T-shirt depending on the weather.

I said that she is “studying”. In fact she shows up in school when she feels like it or when she wants to catch up with her friends. As you can imagine her performance in school is hardly ideal. She sleeps during class; sometimes hands in homework, sometimes doesn’t. The teachers seem to have given up and so long as she doesn’t actually cause any problems in the classroom they leave her alone.

Being left alone seems to summarize her life-style. Her parents are rarely at home and she is left to fix her own meals and sort out her own comings and goings. It’s not that her parents treat her badly. They just don’t seem to care. They don’t know where she is most of the time. They don’t know what she does outside of school hours. They don’t know who her friends are and where she hangs out in her spare time. Some parents try to keep in touch with their children on their mobile phones – not Julie’s. It took us a while to find out the details but then we only met her from time to time.

But everybody needs to belong somewhere. Everyone needs to be wanted and loved by someone. Julie used to hang out in the evenings and late into the night with a group of friends in the estate where she lived. Some of them seem to have had a triad background. She considered one of them to be her “boyfriend” but as is usual in cases like Julie’s he treated her more like his personal property than a partner and although she never said so, we suspect that they were already intimate even though she was only 15 years old. He seemed to be quite a few years older and he funded her social life.

Our outreaching team first met her together with her gang of friends in the park in the housing estate of her estate late one night. They were hanging out, chatting and drinking beer. We met them again a couple of times in the following weeks. Since they already knew us, they were a bit more forthcoming in the conversation and we began to know them as individuals rather than just a gang.

It turned out that we knew Julies’ school quite well. We had been there to run some Adventure Based Counselling activities and Hip Hop dance classes as extra-curricular activities and there were a group of students in the school who were very enthusiastic about these programs, particularly hip hop. Indeed the school itself seemed very happy to have these students, who had previously shown no interest in school life suddenly come alive. The members of the hip hop class in the school were regularly asked to perform at major school events and they always walked onto the stage with a certain air of casual indifference. In fact they were very proud of their achievements and felt they were a select group – which in fact they were. We too were proud of their success.

It seemed that Julie didn't know anything about the programs we had run in her school. I guess that indicates just how much attention she paid when she did show up in school! So our social workers described what we had been doing and made an appointment to meet her after school one day. She showed up for the appointment but it turned out that she hadn't been in to class that day. So first of all we had to persuade the discipline teacher not to take action.

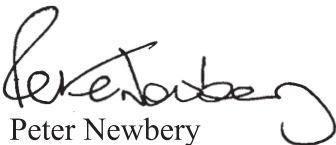
She said that she was interested in the hip hop crew and their program and so we arranged for her to join them. She still skipped class from time to time but she never missed the hip hop sessions. We were making progress.

One piece of good luck was that one of the instructors of the hip hop crew had actually graduated from this school and Julie knew her even though she had been several years ahead of her. This girl too had been totally disinterested in school, hanging out late at night and skipping class but after getting into the hip hop crew had completely changed and became an outstanding leader in the school. She organized the other students into a dance crew and they won competitions around town. After she graduated we employed her at Youth Outreach as a dancing instructor and this is how she came to be back in the school teaching.

Julie told us later that she saw this girl as her idol and model. She was a beam of light that showed a way ahead which did not involve the drudgery of daily school work. To be honest, Julie's school work has not improved very much! She isn't the type to study English, Maths, Physics etc... But now she at least goes to class and struggles with assignments. Now she is the leader of the hip hop group and has organized her own crew to go around doing public performances. Her life is fuller and she is much happier and content within herself. We can see that she will eventually step out on the road of life with confidence, no matter what she chooses to do.

At Christmas please keep Julie, her friends and all the other young people who are looking for someone who cares in your heart. I appeal to you to make a generous gift that will help us to let these young people know that we care; they are part of our family. May the peace and joy of Christmas be with you and your family during this special season.

Sincerely



Peter Newbery
Executive Director