

September 2013

My dear friend,

In a sense, Tommy's story is the standard story of many of our young people who just seem to drift around in life without much thought. Drop out of school; hang around doing dead-end jobs; get friendly with a gang of similar young people; get involved in petty crime; get arrested and finish up in prison.

The up side of this particular story is that Tommy is genuinely sorry for what he has done and wants to get his life back on track. The downside is that he still has to pay off his "debt to society" for the crimes he has in fact committed.

Tommy was by his own admission a "terrible student". He hated school and failed all the exams. He was told almost on a daily basis by his teachers that he was useless. It seems that he learned this particular lesson well because when he came to us one of the first things he said was "I am no good."

Although theoretically he was supposed to stay in school until he was 15 years old, in fact he stayed away more often than he attended. It seems that the teachers considered he was more trouble when he came to school and so didn't bother to follow up his case. They seemed to reckon that their lives would be less complicated without him being present.

He hung around at home and on the streets playing computer games, watching TV and getting involved in fighting and petty delinquency. When he reached 15 years old, his mother more or less kicked him out and told him to get a job. After that he drifted around from one dead-end job to another; never staying in any one job longer than a few weeks. Any money that he might have earned certainly did not make it back to his family. He spent it with his friends on the streets at night. This is how he got to know the triads and how he originally began to take Ketamine.

It goes without saying that when they suggested that he "Hang the Blue Lantern" or begin to follow a triad big brother. He joined up without even thinking about it. He was just 16 years old.

Life seemed to go on as before – working in dead end jobs, hanging out on the streets, taking drugs. But he was gradually being drawn deeper and deeper into the delinquent culture. His friends asked him to show up when they wanted extra "muscle" in a fight. He was present when they mugged passers-by on the streets and then he was involved in going around collecting protection money together with an older triad member.

He had already received a Police Supt.'s warning and was eventually arrested in a gang fight on the street. When the case came to court he was put on probation and his probation officer referred him to our hostel for working youth. He was seventeen.

When he came to us, it seemed that his arrest, appearance in court and sentencing had been a wakeup call for him. He said that he could see that his life was going nowhere and he could not just continue drifting along. He appreciated the encouragement and support of our social worker and seemed ready to get his life back on track.

The first thing we tried to do was re-establish relationships with his parents. He felt ashamed that that he had caused his parents to lose face and apologized to them. This seemed to be the key because after that both his mother and father kept in regular touch with him. This was a great help.

The next thing was to get him off drugs. Ketamine is not addictive in the same sense as heroin. Young people usually take this kind of drug under the influence of their peers and because it is an accepted part of their social circle. It is our belief that if we can provide an alternative social circle together with some kind of meaningful and satisfying occupation then the young people will stop taking drugs themselves.

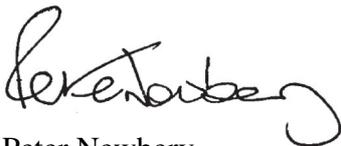
We sat down with Tommy and discussed what kind of job he would be interested in. He said that this was the first time in his life anyone had suggested that he could choose a job that he liked rather than just take up any job that was available. He said that he would like to learn how to be a Hair Dresser. And so it was. He lived in our Transitional Housing and shared the life and activities of all the young people there and worked in our Hair Salon. As we had guessed he gradually stopped hanging out with the triads and once hanging out with the triads stopped so did the use of drugs.

Unfortunately, while he was with us, the Police had been investigating other crimes which he, together with the other members of his gang, had been involved in. And his history eventually caught up with him. He was charged with two counts of robbery which pre-dated his sentencing for fighting. Given his record of delinquency, it was pretty obvious that he would probably be given a custodial sentence. Our social workers appeared on his behalf in court to describe the efforts he had made to turn his life around. He was sentenced to a training center.

The up-side is that even though he is now in a training center he does not seem to have lost his determination to change his life-style. His parents visit him regularly and our social workers exchange regular letters with him and visit from time to time. Hopefully, he will be released in a year or so and we will continue to support and encourage him.

With our young people, the fact that they are at risk does not mean that they will necessarily turn out badly; the fact their present behavior is not acceptable does not mean that they do not have the capacity to do better. It is only when we can stand by them, encourage them and support them that they can find within themselves the strength to pick themselves up when they fall and start all over again. Tommy and all the other young people like him out there depend on us to be there when they need us.

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
Executive Director