

March 2016

My dear friend,

This year we celebrate the 25th anniversary of Youth Outreach. It is hard to believe that we actually started working with young people all those years ago. Time flies!

We began with a single residential center for boys as a response to the increasing numbers of young people running away from home and hanging around on the streets. We designed it as a crisis intervention service which was able to accept young people any time of the day or night. We also began to use a mobile phone sponsored by one of the local networks to serve as a hotline. At that time there was no other similar service in Hong Kong.

In the beginning we had no money and so began own fund raising program which has continued until the present day. We still believe that the best approach is to see what needs to be done and then find the resources to do it. Many generous benefactors have helped by donating equipment as well as money. I can still remember one who donated 12 industrial fans! One alone was enough to keep the whole place cool. We later donated them all to an old people's home.

Our first center was rented from the Land Development Corporation (now the Urban Renewal Authority) at the nominal rate of one dollar a year. It was situated in an old tenement building on Nathan Rd. and had previously been a "Fish Ball Stall." The building was awaiting demolition and the place was filthy dirty and smelled terrible. Our first Chairman told me many months later that the first time I took him up to see the place, he thought I was crazy! The LDC gutted the place, changed the electric wiring, put in aluminum window frames and it was ready for use. The water from the taps came out yellow but it was our own place. It was only when we moved out a year later and looked back up at the old place from the street did we realize that the sign for the "dance hall" was still painted under the windows!

It soon became apparent that a similar center was also needed for girls. Fortunately we were able to lease a large apartment from the Govt. Property Agency for them in the grounds of the Eastern Hospital. We later leased a second apartment and moved the boys over there too.

After about six months I invited a priest who was working with street kids in Los Angeles to act as a consultant. He wrote twenty pages of very useful advice. The first item was that "if you don't go out and look for these "street kids" you will never see them." And so began one of our flagship services – the all-night outreaching program. Once again it was a unique and cutting edge service in Hong Kong.

It was obvious that there was need for some kind of employment program. Younger kids were supposed to be in school and so it was possible to get them home. But many of the older kids were school dropouts or unemployed and just spent their time on the streets. We thought that the best thing we could do would be to give them a work record to show potential employers. And so we started our own "social enterprises" where they could work with real pay and real conditions. If they did well we gave them a testimonial and helped with job placement. This has developed into a multi-faceted project including 7-Eleven, Hair Salon, restaurant and others... which are under the aegis of Youth Outreach but are run like self-supporting businesses. Any profits are ploughed back into our services.

We also set up hostels (different from the crisis centers) for these working youth, both boys and girls. Our goal was to help them set themselves up in independent living. So they stayed longer with us but had to get a job and take care of their own daily living with support from our staff who taught them "life skills." In more recent years we have been happy to be able to accept young people who have been sentenced to a period of probation by the courts.

In 2002, the Director of Social Welfare asked us to set up another of our unique services by opening a 24-hour Drop in Center (The Hangout) which is still the only one in Hong Kong today. She offered us a building in Kwun Tong and so all our services, with the exception of the two centers in Chaiwan moved there. It was here that our famous "School of Hip Hop" sprang up. Again – one of a kind!

In 1993 our Chairman at that time said he thought we should have our own place. And so began the project of putting up our own building. The first letter was sent to the Lands Dept. in February 1994 asking for a piece of land. It never occurred to me that the whole process of getting the land, obtaining funding from the Jockey Club, putting up the building and moving in would take ten years. But it did. We moved in in June 2004. Many thanks to our Chairman who was the prime mover behind this herculean task.

All our services have been unique startups and so we have had to experiment with various models until we were sure that we were really meeting the needs of the young people. Likewise if we want to keep up with the constantly changing lifestyle of young people, we must be ready to change and adapt our services. To stay at the cutting edge of youth work we must always be together with the young people and listen to them. These days, new services are often initiated by frontline staff who are very much in tune with current youth culture.

We never imagined that we would grow from a single room in an old building in Mongkok with half a dozen staff to what we are now – a large organization with our own center, 150 staff and 17 different services. Over the last 25 years, we have tried to help young people who have fallen between the cracks to see their own talents and abilities and grow into responsible young adults. These will still be our goals as we move into the next 25 years adapting our services as we go.

Youth Outreach would not be what it is today, without many wonderful people who, over the last 25 years, have given of their time, energy and money to help us develop and serve so many young people. On behalf of all the young people at Youth Outreach I can only offer all these generous hearted benefactors my heartfelt thanks.



Peter Newbery
Executive Director