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Christmas 2019

My dear friend

Most of our young people have dropped out of school – or perhaps I should say that we adults say that they “dropped out of school.” But if you talk to the young people themselves you will often hear them say that they were “pushed out” of school. Teachers told them they were no good; wasting their time; they should go out and get a job and earn some money.

In the face of this constant barrage of discouragement, they eventually give up. They leave school and go out looking for work. But they have no qualifications or skills and so finish up in poorly paid, menial jobs with no prospects of anything better. Some of the young people who come to us eventually get back into the education system through the Diploma “Yi Jin” program (毅進文憑) – which means that students can at least claim they have passed five subjects and so can apply for the next step in the educational system.

Sometimes when we begin to suggest that they should finish their studies they show very strong resistance, a result of the negative treatment they have received at their secondary schools. One of our boys said “I prefer to die” when the subject of continuing to study was raised. But some of them do very well. One of our superstars, Ah-Fei, is now a qualified social worker. We suggested he should move to another agency to expand his experience with a view to his long-term career development.

Others who do not wish to return to school will stay with us for a year working as a “Program Assistant.” At the end of the year we help them with outplacement. This is what we call the “Youth Employment Startup Program”. We do not aim to train them up in a particular field but want them to develop good working habits and when they enter the labor market they can slowly build up a position for themselves. There are jobs with reasonable prospects that do not require advanced academic qualifications and we help our young people to locate these opportunities and encourage and support them as they move ahead.

In fact, often enough we ourselves choose the best of these Program Assistants and they become our full-time staff whom we encourage to take up related part-time training for the tasks they must carry out at Youth Outreach. They will stay for several years but we encourage them to investigate opportunities outside YO and eventually they will move on.

At the moment, we are hopeful about one of our youngsters who much to our surprise has begun to blossom like the flowers in spring. In the beginning, we did not pay much attention but, looking back, we can see that every time we have given him some responsibility or some task to do, he has grown just a little bit more.

We first knew him because he liked to play billiards and came into the Hangout to play several nights a week. But he did not like to be social with others and tended to have a rather surly expression. In the beginning, our social workers said getting him to talk was like trying to get blood out of a stone. They got one-syllable answers to any questions. Then one of our workers had a bright idea and asked him to “look after” the billiard tables whenever he was in the Hangout. After that, he came in almost every night. And it wasn’t long before the social worker manage to coax his story out of him – although it came out in bits and pieces.

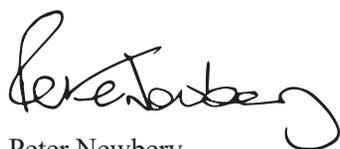
He had a very violent father who beat him often. As a result, he himself tended to be surly and rough and got a reputation in school for always being involved in fights. One outcome of this was not only that he was constantly being punished but had no friends. As could be expected this situation resulted in him constantly skipping school and his school work deteriorated. The teachers left him in no doubt that they would prefer him to go somewhere else and so at the end of form four he dropped out and that is when we began to see him at the Hangout. Unfortunately, with no friends in school he began to make friends on the street – mostly triad connected. He said that he himself was not a triad but he know a lot who were.

He had done a good job “looking after” the billiard tables and so when a position for a Program Assistant became available, the social worker suggested he try for it. In the beginning he didn’t want to because, as he said, he was “no good” and would make a mess. But the worker encouraged him and so he said he would try. His first job interview was a disaster because he had not realized that he would have to prepare. After that, he set to and practiced job interviews every day until we were all getting a little tired. Next time round he got the job. In the beginning he was not accustomed to the culture of the Hangout since it is not only a question of enjoying games but also doing the cleaning, attending meetings etc... But he was obviously making an effort and that was what counted.

After several weeks, he was asked to join the group which was responsible for the Thai Boxing program. He said later that he felt so proud that we would give him such a responsibility. It was not long after that, he said he sat down for a chat with his favourite social worker and asked about the Yi Jun Program. We were so surprised but also very pleased. He had made this move himself – it was really what he wanted. The encouragement and trust we had given him was certainly not wasted. He is still working as a Program Assistant but wants to start the Yi Jun Program next September. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that this young man, with a reputation for being non-social, surly and violent, with triad friends now wants to be a social worker! He will certainly have our full support.

As we approach Christmas, may I make an appeal to you to make a gift to our young people and all those other youngsters who need our encouragement and support so that they can grow into tall, strong trees and carve out a position for themselves and their future families in our society.

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 of the last name.

Peter Newbery