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My dear friend

The at-risk youth approached by the Youth Outreach (YO) more often than not were in different types of crises such as family, school, bullying, peer relationship and mental health problems which could be harmful to them anytime. However we strongly believe each youngster is unique in their own way and able to grow up healthily and contribute to society as long as a suitable environment and opportunities are available to them.

I want to introduce you one of our youngsters, Shirley, who serves as youth volunteer at YO City Challenge - Adventure Professionals. City Challenge is an adventure based training programme to enhance youth's motivation to learn and guide them in developing positive thinking so they can grow. Shirley, who lives in Yuen Long district, is always eager to come all the way to Sai Wan Ho to do volunteer work in her free time. Although travelling long distances, Shirley arrives YO earlier than expected and sometimes even earlier than our colleagues, who feel guilty for seeing Shirley waiting outside the office. From this it can be seen that Shirley is serious and dedicated to volunteer work. What's more remarkable and admirable is that Shirley is only an 11 year old primary six student who is polite and smart filled with positive energy. It is beyond our imagination that Shirley was grew up in a difficult family environment.

Due to a conflict with her grandmother, Shirley was sent to YO Crisis Residential Centre — Girl's Centre (YOG) immediately. Shirley's parents were separated since childhood as her mother left the family when she was two, therefore she never had a concept of having a "mother" and received motherly warmth and care. Likewise, her father in the Mainland hardly spent time with her and looked after her. She was then taken into care and brought up by her ageing grandparents who could hardly take care of her. Shirley's sister, who lives with her father, is three years older than her but they are not in a good relationship and seldom contact each other. Shirley's family situation is the typical skip-generation that outreaching work encounters: carers and young people have a huge generation gap, little effective communication and misunderstanding of ideas and values which lead to complicated family problems as seen by the bad relationship between Shirley and her grandmother. Shirley had been running away from home for a number of times before YOG received her case and a school social worker sought help from YO and had Shirley sent to YOG so she and her grandmother could have some breathing space while allowing our colleagues to deal with their family conflicts.

During Shirley's stay at YOG, our colleagues found that she was well-behaved, polite and her school grades were among the best. It is hard to imagine she was at great risk after understanding her background. Shirley did not always come home after school and wandered around the streets and parks in Tin Shui Wai until midnight. She was only 11 year old but often misunderstood as a secondary school student due to her elegant look and therefore very popular among the youth gang. Since Shirley could not find love and recognition at home, she could

only go out to seek from the new friends she made on the streets. Being young and lacking of self-defense skills, Shirley did not realize she was in danger. Luckily, there were no unfortunate things happened to her and our staff believed it was just luck not riskless. Through counselling, the social workers understood the reason why Shirley did not want to stay home was that she felt bored at home where she could not had deep communications with her grandparents due to generation difference and lack of parental care and role model to teach her the correct values. Therefore, YOG's social workers introduced Shirley to a volunteer position at another service unit, City Challenge, giving her a new environment and opportunity to utilize her talents and grow.

Although Shirley always smiled to people, she seemed preoccupied from time to time. Whenever our colleagues asked how she was doing, she would always say "I am fine". She performed very well volunteering at City Challenge by properly completing all tasks assigned to her including handling of office documents and received many compliments. One day her grandmother called our colleagues saying that money always went missing at home and our colleagues later found out that Shirley stole the money to pay for her daily expenditure such as textbook and living expenses because she could not communicate but only argue with her grandparents. Shirley's father had been going into debt for a long time and living in Mainland whilst her grandparents could only rely on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance for living. Seeing her grandmother having financial worries and taking care of her daily needs at the same time, Shirley felt she was adding pressure to her grandmother and more reluctant to stay home.

At City Challenge, Shirley utilized her talents and happily collaborated with her colleagues and peers who appreciated her efficient work. Shirley built a positive relationship with colleagues, programme assistants and other volunteers and by recognizing each other, she felt that she was valuable and capable to serve others at YO where she believed she belonged. Shirley was furthermore involved in leading trainings for primary school students and inter-generational harmony events for the elderly which she really enjoyed and started to feel the importance of role modelling, togetherness and sharing. During the process, she also learned how to interact with the elders. As a result, Shirley slowly opened herself up and tried to share her tiny bits of happiness, worries and thoughts to her grandmother. Once there was communication between generations, Shirley felt the love and care from her grandmother and their relationship starts improving since.

Sincerely



Lawrence Tse



Translated by Jonathan Ho