

One late morning in 2006, Melissa Kwee a volunteer came by our office to discuss the possibility of doing something for girls. Her ideas sounded good to us as our programmes then were rather male-oriented. We had quite a good female football team then but that's probably the point. Anyway, just before lunch Beautiful People was born. www.beautifulpeople.org.sg

On Wednesday evening I had the privilege and pleasure of seeing Yati, who was once a "little sister" in the programme go on stage to receive the President's Volunteerism and Philanthropy Award on behalf of Beautiful People (Yati read this email earlier and wants me to use her real name ☺.) Beautiful People volunteers are "big sisters" who build valuable relationships with teenage girls through group activities and one-to-one mentoring, becoming a trusted friend and positive influence in their lives. The programme is now operating at the AG Home, Pertapis Centre for Women & Girls, The Salvation Army Gracehaven, The Tent and of course, Beyond Social Services. Currently, there are 94 big sisters looking out for 142 little sisters.

Yati came to us several years back. She had more than her fair share of challenges and she would gladly share them with us at any opportunity. Though we had pledged to support her father in caring for her, we were not always ready to receive the little "gifts" she offered us. I remember the enormous amount of self-doubt we had about our ability in caring for young people as well as the principles we built our work on. Thankfully, we held steady and persevered as we are now able to regard Yati as an important teacher in restorative justice, peace-making and forgiveness.

Forgiveness and peace-making is the essence of restorative justice, a philosophy and practice that guides our work. When someone behaves badly, we are more concerned with who has been hurt as a result and not so much with what rules have been broken. The emphasis of problem solving is the repairing of relationships rather than the enforcement of consequences for a broken rule. What are the needs presented and how can family; friends and volunteers do something to meet them?

Some would regard such an approach as being too soft on young people but we have seen that young people find it very hard to take responsibility for the hurt they have caused others. Many prefer to be simply punished and not confront the issue. By frequently challenging us to practice what we preach, Yati taught us that we should never waver on our principles. If we did, I would have probably regarded her as someone who "resisted" our support and she would not have been on stage meeting the President of the Republic of Singapore. Our actions always have a long-term impact and if we have to err, let us always err on the side of kindness, peace and forgiveness.

Enjoy your weekend.

Gerard

"Some who support [more] coercive strategies assume that children will run wild if they are not controlled. However, the children for whom this is true typically turn out to be those accustomed to being controlled— those who are not trusted, given explanations, encouraged to think for themselves, helped to develop and internalize good values, and so on. Control breeds the need for more control, which is used to justify the use of control."

— Alfie Kohn, Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A'S, Praise and Other Bribes