

Dear Team

26 students from the College of Alice & Peter Tan in the NUS University Town spent an evening with us visiting families in 2 of the neighbourhoods we work in. We believe that a confident and competent community is able to welcome guests hospitably and graciously and so we asked 6 families if they were willing to host these students. We explained that these university students wanted to understand the challenges they faced and the joys they lived for. We added that the visit was part of their educational programme. None of these families hesitated and told us that they would be glad to help if we thought that they could be helpful.

The students were participating in a programme entitled "Hidden Communities" which was designed to help them understand global issues in a local context. "Glocalisation" (globalisation + localisation) was the term the programme coined and they had initially asked us give them a run-down on the work we do and the people that benefitted. However, we thought that it would be more beneficial for all concerned if students and these families spent an hour or so in conversation. We felt that it would be most empowering for these families to realise that despite their humble backgrounds, they were no less as people and were even able to play a part in these students' learning.

"I admire how courageous these people remain despite their circumstances. How they manage to persevere despite the obstacles they faced," one of the students reflected. Another added that she only had respect for "the mother whose sole purpose in life was her children." It was really heartening for me to hear these reflections as the people they have described are the very same people who are sometimes regarded as "dysfunctional and problematic" by the helping system. I was thinking that I would never have been able to advocate for them in the same manner that they apparently have advocated for themselves.

All the students appreciated the candid manner in which our members spoke about their personal experiences and how they persevered and made the best of whatever they had. The homes though small were clean and decorated with much love. Though it was really crowded, no one seemed to mind. In fact, the students were struck by "the immense forgiveness and warmth there was in these families." They noticed how friendly and cooperative neighbours were and one student reflected that "the people have little money but there are definitely rich in many ways."

Personally, the one student reflection that assured me that the exercise was meaningful for all was this "I am confused. I always thought that I should pity these people but this is not right. It seems like I should learn to appreciate them." When this student was sharing, his words came out in spurts as he was really thinking hard but I have put together the essence of what he was saying.

Social services are generally organised like a perpetual rescue mission. This has the unintended effect of implying that those who give are strong and those who receive are weak. Of course it is only right for those who have to share but true sharing is mutual. We are grateful for this evening of sharing among people who have come together as members of one Singapore community.

Enjoy your weekend.

Gerard

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbour into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. – Henri Nouwen

Gerard Ee
Executive Director
BEYOND SOCIAL SERVICES
26 Jalan Klinik #01-42/52
Singapore 160026
DID: (65) 6664-8571
Fax: (65) 6274-0633
HP : (65) 9788-5700
www.beyond.org.sg
ged@beyond.org.sg