



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## Giving boys at risk a chance to shine

*The programme at Boys' Town is geared to bring out the best in boys from disadvantaged or troubled backgrounds.*

**A** CASUAL observer might not associate Boys' Town, best-known as a home for troubled youths, with a rigorous emphasis on education.

But Dr Roland Yeow, its deputy director, says: "Our promise is, you'll get an education... we're hopeful these kids can go back to school to be successful."

Dr Yeow is himself an example of this ethos. A former secondary school drop-out, he spent two years at Boys' Town. Now 35, he returned to work there eight years ago, after obtaining his doctorate in organisational management.

Boys' Town, a charitable institution founded by the Brothers of St Gabriel in 1948, is a member organisation of Caritas Singapore.

Apart from working closely with schools like Assumption English School and Assumption Pathway School, Boys' Town has its own alternative schooling scheme.

This has seen 100 per cent success in terms of returning boys who are at risk to the education system, said Boys' Town's executive director Irene Loi. Since 2009 the programme has taken on nearly 40 such students and some have turned around dramatically to become top students in the schools they returned to, said Ms Loi.

There are now about 50 boys in the residential home, but the organisation serves about 1,400 in total through wide-ranging services which include street outreach schemes, school and community-based programmes, counselling and working with families.

The home takes in boys aged between 11 and 18 who usually have experienced neglect or abuse, or have behavioural or learning-related problems. Many come from financially disadvantaged families and just over half are from single-parent homes. Some boys' parents are missing or unable to care for them; others come from broken homes.

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boy in residential care provides a break to both parties, said Dr Yeow. "Over time, they appreciate the process and both sides can focus on their own healing process," he said. "Initially, our kids' motivation to learn is very low, over two or three years, when they are about to graduate from Boys' Town, they want to learn and start to appreciate learning."

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— Dr Roland Yeow, deputy director of Boys' Town and a former resident himself.

Discipline is important at Boys' Town. Among the most effective means of discipline, Ms Loi said, is withdrawing privileges such as home visits or the use of the computer. The institution has a "very low tolerance of bullying", she said, recalling how one boy with severe anger management issues, who had threatened the staff and other residents, was asked to leave.

Most boys stay on average two to three years, said Dr Yeow. "We have been seeing kids who do not stay long enough, for example, the parents take them out of Boys' Town after three months. Kids like that generally go back to old problems," he said.

Problems such as abuse, low self-esteem, trauma and struggling to cope at school and at home take time to resolve.

Counselling and therapy help, and these can take unconventional forms. A few years ago, Ms Loi, who is trained in a form of therapy called expressive therapy, was counselling a teenager in Boys' Town's school outreach programme. His parents had found him rebellious and argumentative, and his grades were borderline.

Expressive therapy, using creative art and symbols that can take the form of figurines, images or masks, helped the boy articulate his emotions. He kept looking at the shelves where the symbols and figurines were

displayed during her session with him, Ms Loi recounted. Finally he took a figurine from the shelf - it was a bust of the superhero Spider-man.

The 15-year-old looked at the Spider-man head in his grasp and suddenly broke down and cried. "I'm exactly like this - I'm forever in a mask, I can never be myself," Ms Loi recalled him saying. "My parents never allow me to be in anything but a mask."

Working with the families of youths at risk is crucial.

A research paper, co-authored by Dr Yeow and published in August 2011, surveyed 468 young people of similar profiles, comparing the attitudes of youths in residential care and those not in residential care.

As most of the youth in residential settings tended to be from dysfunctional family backgrounds, it was assumed that those living with their families would have a better perception of family bonding.

Instead, the study found that those in residential care had a better perception of their families compared to those living at home. Dr Yeow noted those in residential care longed to return to live with their loved ones, regardless of their complicated family situations.

"An emphasis on family integration needs careful planning and preparation," he said.

### ABOUT BOYS' TOWN

The mission of Boys' Town is to work especially with youth at risk between the ages of 11 and 18, to provide holistic services for them and their families so that they can become socially integrated, responsible and contributing members of society.

Boys' Town is a member of Caritas Singapore and the National Council of Social Services.

Boys' Town invites individuals and organisations with a passion for the challenges of youth to partner us in our work by:

#### Donating to our cause.

To make a donation, you can:

- Go online and make a donation via credit card at <http://www.sgives.org/boystown>
- Make a crossed cheque payable to Boys' Town. Please provide your name, NRIC or UEN number (for tax exemption), address and contact number, and send to: Boys' Town, Bukit Panjang PO Box 27, Singapore 916801.

#### Becoming a volunteer.

To find out more about Boys' Town and how you can help, visit our website at <http://www.boystown.org.sg>, or contact us at 6769 1618 or email us at [info@boystown.org.sg](mailto:info@boystown.org.sg).

