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From: Stanley FONG (PA)

Subject: RE: Invitation to CampVision June 26th at 10am

This morning, I was back in action visiting a camp by our partner **Camp Vision**. It was at Camp Christine, in a far flung corner of Singapore that I call 鸟不生蛋的地方 (translate: "where birds don't even go to lay eggs". Actually I am exaggerating. This is near Sungei Buloh, arguably the best sanctuary for birds to live and lay eggs ☺).

Camp Vision comprises a group of working adults who are not affiliated to any organization. All are volunteers with full-time day jobs, mostly PMET. They don't have to do this, and the only reason they are is for the passion.

Their passion is to give troubled youths a 2nd (or 3rd, or 4th etc.) chance, and to empower them to break out of their situations. The participants are troubled youths nominated by the homes (boys, girls home) and centres (FSCs). Most have had wrong brushes with the law, and are the sort of people that the rest of society excludes. The type of youths that are "notoriously difficult", "hard to engage", and "lost cause".

So I was at this far flung camp, not exactly the best thing to look forward to on the morning after DM. But I was so glad that I went, as I saw these "lost kids" engaged in a community where they feel a strong sense of belonging. Past participants (some with so much "artwork" on them you can hardly see clear skin e.g. full-body tattoos and dollar-coin sized ear-holes!) come back to share their experiences and urge their juniors not to stray down the wrong paths, and to provide hope that the future can be brighter if one is determined to change.

This was the last day of a 3-Day camp, and the finale activity involved breaking wooden planks. On one side of the plank are drawings of a better future they hope for. For some, it is the hope of an intact family, to pass their studies, to go to university, or to stay away from bad influences. On the other side of the plank are all the problems they face, their fears, the obstacles.

It was an intense experience. In my group, a girl shared her wish to pass her 'O' levels and not to waste any more time. But sadly, her family is on the verge of break-up and her parents are going through divorce. It must have been very tough facing up to such realities and to share them with others. But the bonding in the past 2 days have prepared them for this moment. In this group there are no strangers (except for me), only friends who wish the best for one another and are there to support one another in their personal challenges.

Breaking through a wooden plank is physically demanding. But nowhere as difficult as breaking through a mental challenge, and surmounting the obstacles in one's way. But it is the first important step, and for many of the youths it is one of the most empowering things they've done. Many broke down (I was close to as well). But the experience was cathartic, and it made many of them stronger to face and surmount the challenges in their lives. And I'm sure they will.

It saddens me to see these troubled youths. On surface many of them look like any other youths. But beneath the normalcy hides a sad past filled with missed opportunities and wrong turns. As each shared their past, and the life they really wish to live, it's like a dam breaking. With each story, I tried to picture in my mind the cute young babies and kids they once were, the happiness and hope that their families had in them, and I wonder where along the line, everything just went downhill.

As I listen to more stories, some pattern emerges, that many of these youths did not have a happy childhood. Many lacked the love and warmth of a close family. Some were from broken families. Some were from large families where no one had time or attention for them.

Strong families and strong communities are what we need, but increasingly, are also what we are seeing less and less of.

It is a pain and shame, that amid the development and successes of Singapore, there are so many untold stories, of the people that the rest of society would rather lock up in homes or behind bars. A group of working adults have chosen to undertake this as their cause and passion. I'm glad that we support them, in funding though not much, but for which they are appreciative and enough for them to do their good work. And we will continue to support them in their silent but crucial work.

Today, I saw broken hearts and shattered dreams. I also saw passion and commitment. And when both were put together, I saw glimmers of hope and sprouts of a new beginning. Sometimes, I feel I have the best job in the world! ☺ And I hope that you will see yours in a similar way too.

Cheers and have a great week ahead!

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