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Left or Right? Conservative or Liberal?

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One of our favourite columnists, Tapu Misa, writes for the NZ Herald. Her articles appear on the Op Ed page, and are always thoughtful and balanced, yet they provide sometimes pointed commentary on the important issues facing our society. I wanted to include sections from her Nov 14, '07 article, as it pertains to the debates that we often have at "I Have a Dream" – both internally and externally!

She was writing about the polarization of debate in today's society.

"Left or right? Conservative or liberal? Capitalist or socialist? Religious or secular? This is about as far as inquiring minds want to go these days.

What we really want is a confirmation of our prejudices by people who think exactly as we do. The world wide web may have opened up endless possibilities for searching out knowledge and opinion that might challenge our thinking, but most of us aren't venturing beyond our like-minded circles, where we can be assured of hearing only what we want. Unless, of course, we're spoiling for a fight.

Forget real debates, where we can pick the bones of an argument until we've cleaned it of the last bit of meat; we pick an ideological camp with which to side, and stick with it come hell or high water.

No wonder we make such slow progress when it comes to big ticket issues like education, poverty, social breakdown and crime. We reduce complex social questions to black and white issues, and then wonder why we keep failing to find the right answers.

The more I tune in to so-called debates, many of them played endlessly on talkback radio, the blogosphere or talkback-in-print, as one reader describes the Herald Online's readers' views, the more convinced I am that the way we argue isn't helping us.

The so-called poverty debate is a point in case. As American pastor, Jim Wallis, has written, the poor aren't trapped in poverty - they're trapped in the debate about poverty. Thus, the right talks about personal responsibility and ignores both the extent of the problem and the role the state plays in policy decisions that make it harder to climb out of poverty; while the left, equally mistakenly, talks only of government responsibility and leaves personal responsibility out.

In the ideological battleground, solving the problem comes a distant second to winning the political battle.

Of course, real life and human beings seldom fall into such neat divisions, so I'm not sure why we're always surprised when we find that people and issues aren't as easily pigeon-holed as we'd imagined."

We are constantly deliberating on this issue at our project in Mt Roskill. It especially comes to the fore when we are on our public speaking rounds, for example with groups such as Rotary. Although the public reaction to our story is generally positive, we often get questioned about the "downsides" of our programme, such as "letting parents off the hook," "doing what the government should be doing," etc. Please see the next two articles for analysis of how the "I Have a Dream" programme moves beyond debate to concrete action, which is having a huge effect on many lives -- and not just of the Dreamers!

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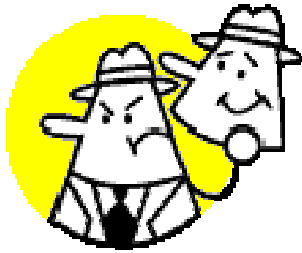
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How a Negative becomes a Positive:

It would be foolish to read all the good news stories in our newsletters and assume that "all is well" in the lives of all our Dreamers in the "I Have a Dream" programme. The truth of the matter is that on a day to day basis there are quite a few negative issues that are arising with our Dreamers, and obviously those issues are consistently influencing the daily running of our programme and consume a huge amount of our time and resources. Behind all those good news stories you hear about we are often working overtime dealing with some Dreamers who, in their moments of weakness, make bad choices and decisions, or their lives are affected by a circumstance beyond their control which manifests itself as a negative situation. The issues vary from wagging school, smoking, drinking alcohol, shoplifting, damaging property, fighting, disobeying school rules, and many other teenage delinquencies or circumstantial issues.

The issue facing us as a society is how do we deal with such instances?

One approach may be to sit back and ignore it, or blame someone else, write it off, or make excuses for the behaviour. It's easy to blame the behaviours on wider societal influences such as family issues, lack of good role models, peer pressure or negative influences such as TV, music, internet and today's youth culture. The trouble with this approach is we wash our hands of any responsibility or action and therefore for our troubled youth a downward spiral begins and the fire begins to rage – the end result "chaos."

Another approach might be to stomp it out, refusing to accept such behaviours, inflicting punishment in the hope that the young person might be sent a strong fast message about such activities by kicking them out of school, or locking them up and throwing away the key, so to speak. The issue with this approach is it often leaves the troubled youth with an "us versus them" mentality. The troubled youth forms a negative impression of some parts of society and rebels against authority or the system for many years to come.

So where do the solutions to such problems lie?

One of the great privileges of having the "I Have a Dream" programme in place in a troubled youths life is that due to its 10-15 year approach of "walking and talking" with each Dreamer, and its "once a dreamer, always a dreamer" philosophy, by the time they hit their teenage years we have already earned the right to speak into their lives. The issues are dealt with through "Relationship" and a holistic approach is taken to turn a negative situation into a positive outcome.

For example, a number of situations came to our attention late last year and earlier this year involving Dreamers getting into mischief at school, Dreamers disrespecting property or people at our After School Programme, and Dreamers facing circumstances at home which created a negative situation for them.

The programme's approach to resolving such issues involved us spending a lot of time talking with the Dreamer to help them understand where they may have overstepped a boundary, helping them to think through better choices, and helping to create alternatives in their head for next time they are faced with a similar situation. The process also saw us involved in meetings with the schools and families to make sure everyone was on board with the process and was supportive in finding a solution for the Dreamer to ensure a positive turnaround was achieved. In situations involving Dreamers behaving badly, it was important the Dreamer understood the life long lesson that "actions have consequences" and a consequence was handed out by either the school or our programme that was appropriate for the wrong doing.

How a Negative becomes a Positive Continued.....

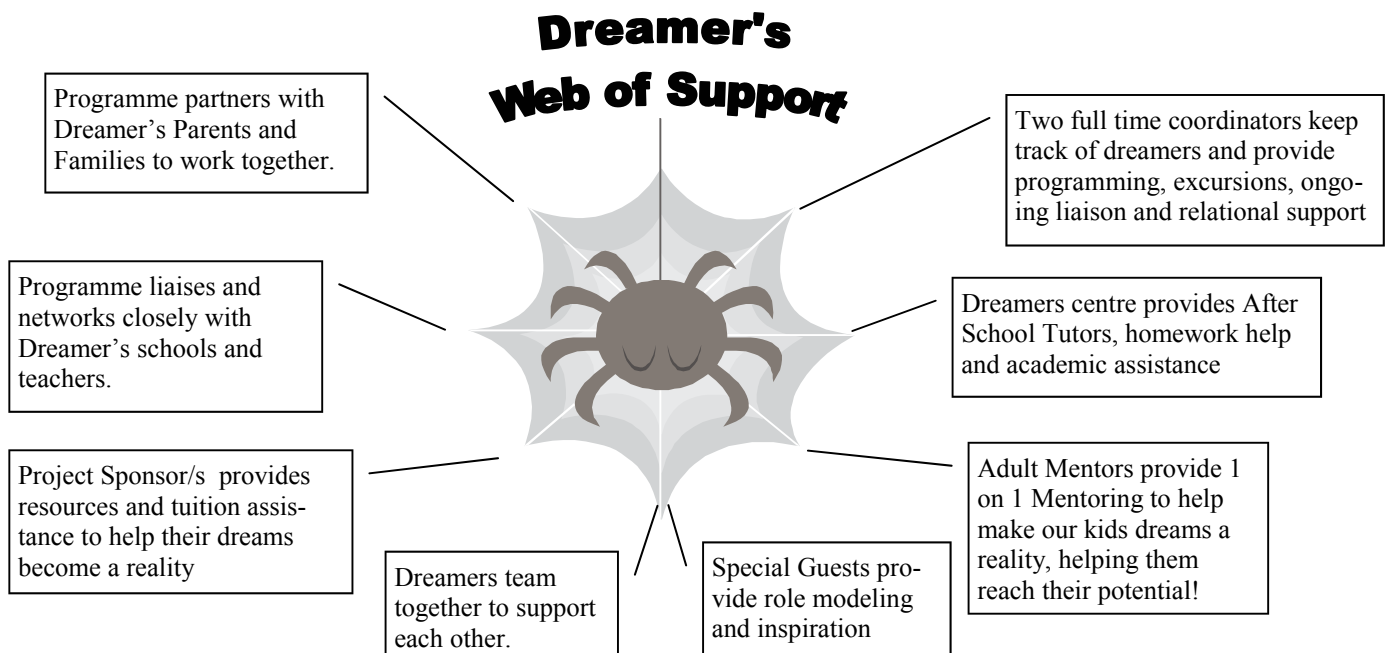
For a small number of Dreamers involved in intentionally damaging property at the Dreamer Centre the consequence meant being stood down from participating in the activities of our programme for a period of time – but that was not where it ended! Throughout the stand-down period our programme followed through with its “once a Dreamer always a Dreamer” philosophy by staying in contact with the Dreamers to ensure that they understood the message “you’ve done wrong – but we still love you”. IHAD staff, mentors and parents were all aware of the issue and supported each Dreamer, providing guidance to understand where they went wrong and to help them get back on the right path. Upon the completion of the stand-down period a re-instatement meeting was held between IHAD, the Dreamer and their parents to hear from the Dreamer about what they had learnt in the process and set new boundaries and expectations in moving forward together – in affect forming a contract of agreement together. NOTE: This not only involved the Dreamer changing, but us also changing the programme environment to make sure our Dreamers had clearer expectations and clearer boundaries in place. Then once this had all taken place they were “welcomed back with open arms” – no labels, no negative vibes, but treated equally again as one of the team.

The result? More than you could imagine! Already the benefits are visible within the first few months as each of those Dreamers have had their own personal success story worth telling, and it’s obvious that they have taken away an important lesson from the negative situation – not to forget the deeper relationships that were also developed throughout the process between IHAD, the parents, the school and the Dreamers concerned.

It is this type of approach that validates the need for such programmes as “I Have a Dream” in the lives of these young people. because this type of approach takes a lot of time, and a lot of unconditional love – two things that many parts of society lack these days!

So rest assured folks, that between all our “good news” stories in our newsletters, there is often a “bad news” story taking place – after all our Dreamers are now teenagers, and I’m sure any parent of a teenager would agree, it’s a rocky road. But the simple fact is that here at “I Have a Dream” we really just view those “bad news” stories as another “good news” story in the making! After all that’s what we’re here for; to provide a web of support to make sure the negatives in our Dreamers lives become positives.

(Check out the diagram below which illustrates the web of community support our Dreamers have when we bring the “I Have a Dream” programme into their lives)



Depth of Support for Dreamers

The power and impact of our mentors and volunteers is demonstrated to us on an almost daily basis. This following report is from Sam Williams (mentor) about his experience with Kenese Samia (Dreamer).

When Kenese and I did our first outing together (we went to see Alvin and the Chipmunks at the movies), he said one of his teachers had told him that he was good at design and he could be an architect if he wanted.

I explored that with him and we discussed some of the features of the Sylvia Park mall where the cinema is located. He particularly liked the glass awnings overhanging the footpaths.

For Kenese's birthday (8th Feb) I got him a book on modern New Zealand architecture. I must admit that I thought he'd probably think it was a boring present, but it appears he told Ant about it at the tutoring evening and Ant decided to give him an assignment to identify his favourite NZ architects.

I arrived at tutoring a little later and gave Kenese some assistance on the task. I, too, love architecture (at a very amateur level) so it was fun looking at some of the buildings we found via Google.

As we looked at some house designs, Kenese said the first house he designs and builds will be for his parents.

The building that most captured Kenese's attention was the Burj Tower in Dubai - this will be the tallest man-made structure ever (over 800m high). The architect of the tower is Adrian Smith.

I hope to arrange a visit to fellow mentor, Ken Crosson's workplace, to show Kenese what is involved in architecture and to provide him with some more inspiration.

Isn't it encouraging to read about Kenese's intentions with his first project? It also demonstrates the powerful influence that teachers have on their pupils!

But the "I Have a Dream" programme is never about just one individual. Our goal is to bring a number of caring adults into the lives of each child, working closely with the family, teachers and other people who are already providing guidance to each child.

Andrew Patterson is one of our adult tutors who help with the After School Programme. Kenese is one of the Dreamers that Andrew has struck a special bond with, and he is also helping to nurture Kenese's dream of becoming an architect. A recent note from Andrew was a welcome reinforcement of all that we are doing:

Just an observation: I thought last night was by far the most productive session I've seen since I started at Dreamers. The homework session was very focused, everyone was "on task," there was no mucking around or time wasting and the 5-6 pm session was equally as good. Maybe that pep talk you gave them at the start of the year is showing dividends....

I very much enjoy working with Kenese. Interesting to see that he has really "stepped up" this year....Our homework sessions are much more focused and he seems to be taking school a lot more seriously than last year....I think now that he has set a goal he really has something to aim for....





A Generous Society

We wrote in Issue 20 of our newsletter about the tremendous generosity of so many people and organisations that have supported our programme over the past 5 years. Further instances of this giving spirit have occurred recently:

- A donation of \$400 from a recent immigrant to NZ, who lives in the Mt Roskill neighbourhood, and had noticed the Dreamer Centre and van. He did some online research, and decided to make this contribution to our goal of starting a second project.
- An anonymous donation of over \$4,000! This was from a family who decide twice a year to make a donation to a worthwhile cause in the community. Each member of the family made a donation, with the total being a very welcome addition to our fund-raising!
- Other anonymous donations of \$150 from Wellington and \$400 from Auckland.
- One generous contributor that we neglected to mention in the previous newsletter is Scott's local bike shop, who kindly donated a brand new bike for us to use in our reward scheme.

We wish that we could personally thank these anonymous benefactors, but we understand that there is a strong Kiwi desire for privacy. The good news is that our fund for starting up a second project has now reached a balance of over \$7,000. We still have a way to go, but every bit helps!



Movie Review

OK, we admit it; we're suckers for the "inspirational" type of movie that the Americans are so good at producing. Some people think of them as a bit schmaltzy, but we think that they're a wonderful antidote to some of the rubbish that Hollywood produces. The most recent movie that floated our boat was "Freedom Writers". This is based on a true story of an idealistic young woman who takes a job in an inner city school that is riven by ethnic disputes, poverty, etc. She manages to encourage these kids to overcome their prejudices by learning how destructive they can become, through reading the "Diary of Anne Frank", and then by writing their own diaries.

Not only is this a wonderful story, but it's pretty hard to not enjoy a movie starring Hilary Swank ☺

If you're like us, and favour these uplifting movies, you might like to also check out "Remember the Titans", "Rudy", "Coach Carter" and "Glory Road". You might detect a theme here, of the power of education to change lives!

Quote of The Day

All of New Zealand, and many others around the world, mourned the recent death of Sir Edmund Hilary. He was widely known as a pioneer, an explorer, a leader and a philanthropist. Our newspapers were full of stories about his life and achievements for a number of weeks after the sad event. Although his ascent of Mt Everest catapulted him to international fame, it was his tireless work building schools, medical clinics and hospitals in Nepal that both provided him greater satisfaction and earned him even greater acclaim. He will be fondly remembered for his many qualities, chief among them his bravery, determination, humility, modesty, compassion and generosity.

He made many worthwhile comments during his 80 years, but these two summed up his life admirably, and resonated with us at the "I Have a Dream" programme:



"It's not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves."
- Sir Edmund Hilary

"If you have plenty – more than enough – and someone else has nothing, then you should do something about it."
- Sir Edmund Hilary

"The "I Have a Dream"® Programme helps children from low-income areas reach their education and career goals by providing a long-term program of mentoring, tutoring, and enrichment, with an assured opportunity for higher education."