

COMMUNITY

A decade of helping youth at risk pays off

Beautiful People helps 100 girls and women each year, launches mentorship for teen boys

Royanne Ng

Ms Nurhayati Abu Bakar was placed under probation and sent to a youth home after getting into a fight when she was 15.

Before that, under the influence of friends, she had also picked up smoking and taken drugs.

Ms Nurhayati is now a different person. The nurse is happily married with a child, and speaks of having a positive outlook on life.

The 26-year-old is one of many girls whom Beautiful People, a volunteer group that reaches out to at-risk youth, has helped over the past 10 years.

Beautiful People now supports 100 girls and women each year through their programmes, up from around 10 a year when it first started in 2006.

The group will celebrate its 10th anniversary during its annual Family Day event on Saturday.

Said its founder, Ms Melissa Kwee: "To be honest, we never set

out to achieve anything other than to be a place where girls, whose homes were not the happiest places, would feel welcome and cared for. I called it Beautiful People... because the point was to see the best in others."

The group plans to go into school-based mentorship programmes.

Ms Kwee, 44, is also the chief executive officer of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre.

Beautiful People began as a mentorship programme for at-risk teenage girls under Beyond Social Services, an organisation that works with disadvantaged youth.

It has since gone into programmes with an emphasis on the family, such as Baby Reader, which focuses on supporting teenage mothers by teaching them parenting skills and budgeting.

There is also Free for Good, a programme that helps female inmates reintegrate into society upon their release.

In March, Beautiful People started Heroes' Journey, a mentorship pro-



Ms Nurhayati (left, with her daughter Amelia Isha Sharma) still keeps in touch with former mentor Ms Wong even though the mentorship ended more than four years ago. (Below) Mr Albert King is one of the co-leads for Heroes' Journey, a mentorship programme for teen boys. PHOTOS: LAU FOOK KONG, ALBERT KING

gramme for teenage boys, its first for males. "(Heroes' Journey) was obviously a big shift for us, but we see it as a natural extension of building a family culture that builds supportive relationships," said Ms Kwee.

Mentorship programmes for teenagers run officially for a year at Beautiful People's partner homes such as Gracehaven and Pertapis Centre for Women and Girls. They are assigned mentors, who are volunteers with Beautiful People.

Said Mr Albert King, 54, one of the co-leads for Heroes' Journey: "These mentors look to support these youth. They do not force



them to do anything, but strive to help them make good decisions.

"They hope to care for them and be people whom the mentees can trust."

Added Mr King, a leadership coach and facilitator: "Even after the mentorship ends, the relationship continues. It is a lifelong one."

Indeed, Ms Nurhayati, whose mentorship officially ended more than four years ago, still keeps in touch with her mentor, Ms Wong Kwei Ming, 49, a marketing manager at a bank.

Referring to her mentor, Ms Nurhayati said: "In the past, I was very

negative. But Ming isn't judgemental. She encouraged me to see things from a different perspective and not just give up."

Said Ms Wong: "From being a mentee, she is now assigned to look after kids (at camps organised by the group) and maintain discipline. I am very proud of her."

She added: "We recently celebrated Mother's Day, her baby's first month, her birthday and her wedding anniversary together. I can see myself celebrating more milestones with her in the future."

royannen@sph.com.sg