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Helping hand for at-risk teen girls

A group of young professional women, called Beautiful People, runs programmes and workshops to help troubled teenage girls

By Tanya Fong

DEPUTY public prosecutor Gillian Koh Tan has seen many a young girl trapped on the wrong side of life - pregnant teens who had abortions, those caught shoplifting and others tangled up with gangs.

By the time their case gets to the courts, it is almost too late and many end up in detention homes and jail.

So when Mrs Tan, 28, heard about a group called Beautiful People, she jumped at the chance to become a 'big sister'.

Founded by social activist Melissa Kwee, 34, Beautiful People is a volunteer project that enables professionals to help troubled teenage girls who are referred to youth and family service centres.

The group of young professional women conduct workshops and camps for teen girls at-risk - on their own time and with their own money.

Set up in 2005, it is believed to be the first volunteer group to devise programmes specifically to help troubled teenage girls.

Mrs Tan said: 'I've come across many cases where things have gone wrong and family structures have collapsed. I kept wondering if this could have been prevented and how I could help.'

The project has four core members and 20 active volunteers.

Miss Kwee, a business consultant, first approached voluntary welfare organisation Beyond Social Services for support.

'I noticed there was a rising trend in girl gangs and teenage pregnancies, and not many programmes focused on girls.

'The idea is to reach out to them, not as social workers, but as people who can be their role models,' she said.

The number of girls aged between seven and 19 arrested for crimes has been on the rise. In 2005, 1,373 girls were arrested compared to 1,321 in 2004 and 1,310 in 2003. Girls represented between 25 and 30 per cent of all youths arrested.

In June, 20 girls attended a two-day camp and learnt about legal rights, budgeting and boy-girl relationships.

The second camp, held at Raffles Girls' Secondary last month, was attended by 43 girls from Beyond Social Services, Andrew & Grace Home, and Pertapis, a Muslim welfare and education organisation.

This time, they heard from a gynaecologist about menstrual wellness and learnt self-defence techniques from a taekwondo instructor. The camp programmes are devised by volunteers, who share the cost of about \$2,000 for each camp, and draw on their business and social networks to attract speakers.

Said Mrs Tan: 'What struck me about these girls is that when you ask them what they aspire to be, they look a little lost, a little stunned, and say they have no dreams.

'I realised it's because they don't have role models in their lives.'

This is why the project group is called Beautiful People - to help these teenage girls realise the potential in