

# Fostering Civic Responsibility in Disadvantaged Youth

*Mae Parreño (United Kingdom)*

*Mae Parreño is the Manager of the Baytree Centre in London, a social integration project of Dawcliffe Hall Educational Foundation. Prior to coming Baytree, Mae worked at the Kenya High Commission in London after having taught for 10 years at the University of the Philippines. She also cooperated in marine research programmes in conjunction with the National Science and Technology Authority. Mae lives in the United Kingdom with her husband and their three children aged 6, 11 and 12.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Amidst the affluence of London, lie pockets of deprivation. The Baytree Centre is located in Brixton, one of the most deprived areas. Brixton, which is within the Borough of Lambeth, has a multicultural population. Movement of ethnic groups in and out of Brixton is dynamic. The problems that plague Brixton are characteristic of inner cities: riots, crimes, drugs, poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, school dropouts, etc. A recent survey showed that residents of the Borough of Lambeth live in neighbourhoods scarred by educational failure, crime, unemployment, poor health and poor public services. The government is calling for strategies to not only improve infrastructure and the physical environment, but also to respond to these deeper problems.

The Baytree Centre is a non-governmental community project that has been running for the past 10 years. Currently it employs 26 staff assisted by an average of 100 volunteers per year. The staff and volunteers are multicultural women with ages ranging between 16 and 70. Together we help more than a thousand disadvantaged women, girls and children each year. Over the past 10 years, the beneficiaries of the Baytree Centre have been Brixton residents of all ages originating from the U.K. and 99 other nations.

Our Baytree Mission? Creating integrated pathways towards social inclusion for inner city families, through supportive training and educational programmes for women and girls in accordance with Christian values and ideals.

Baytree attempts to help its beneficiaries break the cycle of government dependency and facilitates their road to social integration. The Centre's services cater for various generations. We provide, for example, a Crèche Service, Youth Service, Training for Unemployed Persons, a Volunteer Service, a Personal & Social Development Service, and a Conference Service.

The Youth Service focuses on young people who have not yet been expelled from school or fallen into crime or drugs. In the year 2000-2001, Baytree's Youth Service register totalled over 400 participants whose ages generally ranged between 5 and 16. Our work with youth is a very important part of our intergenerational approach to breaking the cycle of social exclusion and disadvantage in inner city families. While another service is run to help minimize or break already established cycles among adults, the Youth Service aims to prevent the cycle developing or progressing in the younger generation.

Three services in particular play an important part in this preventative task. The emphasis in each of these services is on fostering positive ideals among young people and equipping them with the personal and educational skills to realise them.

1) The *Youth Service* facilitates access to mainstream education; assists families and schools in keeping children at school; and challenges young people to discover and develop their character and talents.

2) In the *Volunteer Service*, young volunteers share their skills and talents with disadvantaged young people. The service develops the volunteers' professional and personal competence in the delivery of services to disadvantaged youth; and provides a progressive way for Baytree young people to learn to help other young people.

3) The *Personal and Social Development Service* aims at the development of the whole person and the raising of standards and aspirations among volunteers and disadvantaged youth, complementing the Youth and Volunteer Services.

## 2. INSPIRATION FROM BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ

The goals and activities of the Baytree Centre were inspired by the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá on education and the family. Blessed Josemaría taught young people that they have a duty to take advantage of the means offered to them to acquire a good education, that a student who shirks study, or

studies carelessly is being unjust with his or her family and country<sup>1</sup>, and that study needs to be work well done.

Blessed Josemaría's teachings also remind us that young people are like uncultivated terrain. I saw clearly, working with disadvantaged adults at Baytree, that poor literacy and poor employability were major factors contributing to their situation. Furthermore, I saw that attempting to intervene at this stage requires vast human and material resources, not lessened by the fact that by this stage adults frequently also had dependents who, depending on them, were drawn into the same situation. Adults, too, particularly those with dependent children, had less time. It became abundantly clear to me that one of the keys to development lay in investing in a good education for young people.

Baytree's approach to helping disadvantaged youth begins with creating a genuine family environment such as that described by Blessed Josemaría. In such an atmosphere young people are attracted to stay rather than go astray. It is an environment in which young people begin to hope, take opportunities and aspire to standards reflecting Christian ideals — to live as children of a loving God. Together we bring out what is beautiful and lovable in people rather than allowing the roughness of Brixton to dictate the quality of our personal lives and behaviour.

The 'family bond' between the young people and staff at Baytree is the stimulus for creative solutions which benefit the individual, the family, and society.

### 3. PROBLEMS, SOLUTIONS, AND CONSEQUENCES OF BLESSED JOSEMARÍA'S TEACHINGS

#### *a) Problems*

A broad profile of the environment of the young people who come to Baytree would be as follows:

— *Asylum seekers, refugees, newly arrived immigrants* generally cannot speak or write English well; they may feel overwhelmed or lost amidst new systems and British culture, particularly with respect to education; they may be traumatized by war; they may have nothing to do if they have not yet been offered

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. *The Way*, 336; cfr. *Furrow*, 522.

a place in school; like all young people they are in need of peer acceptance and vulnerable to bad influences or bullying.

— *Girls born in Inner City London* may come across as uncouth, aggressive, unmotivated, complacent, fickle-minded, irresponsible, individualistic; lacking basic good manners and interpersonal skills; lacking respect for authority, peers, elderly people or the general public; careless with their personal possessions; involved in vandalism or disregard of public or private property; and with absolutely no interest in serious study.

— *Schoolgirls up to age 11* are generally not given homework and therefore have no opportunity to practise good study habits. Instead they acquire negative habits such as watching television or aimless wandering after school. Many girls unaccustomed to study have a maximum concentration span averaging 10 minutes. The advantage of reaching girls at this age is that they are still open, not yet having developed the ‘tough layer’ defence mechanism.

— *Schoolgirls aged 12-15* are in secondary schools and suddenly faced with heavy loads of homework. By this time too, they have developed ‘extra-curricular’ interests which include heightened awareness of their physical appearance, boyfriends, being part of a group, hang-outs, entertainments, shopping, and acquiring fashionable accessories such as mobile phones. Students have much more difficulty achieving in school if good study habits have not been acquired prior to this age.

— *All girls up to age 16* have literacy and numeracy problems.

— *Girls over the age of 16* may decide not to continue their education and fall into a culture of aimlessness outside; around this age they are also more difficult to help as they are afraid to reveal their real selves.

— *Girls have a wide spread of needs* ranging between the needs of non-English speakers not in school; non-English speakers in school; English speakers who are at school but have literacy problems; and students who need help with their homework or who simply need a quiet place to study.

— *Girls have a wide spread of study habits and abilities* ranging between ‘No interest in studies at all’, ‘interested in trial study time only’, and ‘interested in regular study time. (Those interested in regular study time fall into 4 broad categories — those needing 100% help; those needing occasional help;

those able to study on their own but with no quiet place to do so; those who can spare time to help others).

— *Well-behaved girls* are vulnerable to bullying or unprovoked physical attacks, particularly by gangs of other girls.

— *Schoolgirls are used to easy solutions* — For Baytree girls who reach the stage of studying regularly this is already a '*big deal*'. They don't allow their classmates to copy their work and instead convince their classmates to come to Baytree so they can learn how to do their homework themselves. Some schoolmates say *NO* because study means hard work and they are used to easy solutions.

— *Some girls don't have a family life at home*, for instance they may regularly go home to an empty house; some are even left to spend Christmas by themselves.

— *Some girls seemed to have missed their childhoods*. They seem to have missed the joys of childhood, needing to live as adults in order to survive the effects of family breakdown and the harshness of the inner city environment.

### *b) Solutions*

— *The Family Environment* is warm and affectionate and the staff accommodating. The surroundings are clean, bright and tidy, well maintained, austere but with good taste.

— *Structured Programmes* involve meeting with the young people and parent/s, agreeing on a plan of delivery, and maintaining the high standards of performance and behaviour expected. The programmes offer regular monitoring and evaluation, and are tailored to respond to the evolving needs of the young people. Baytree aims, for instance, to offer a taste of what life can be like when lived with a Christian family environment and outlook; and to offer creative activities for those who are not ready to study, building into the activities exercises to develop their capacity for concentration. The staff and facilities dedicated to each activity are high quality.

— *Mentoring* complements the activities. The mentor builds a friendship with the girl and her family, allowing her to speak personally and confidentially, 'looking out' for her and listening to what she wants to say; complimenting some

good deeds she has done; believing in what she can achieve even if she doesn't think she can; challenging her to beat her personal best; supporting and standing by her during trying times; teaching her how to reflect and helping her to see where she needs to change to be a better person; teaching her how to look to the future; pulling her aside and correcting in private rather than in front of her peers whenever the need arises.

— *Talks to small groups* on topics such as responsibility, friendship, order, generosity, work, or how to welcome new girls.

— *All staff play an important role.* Without complaining in public or gossiping, staff mention misdemeanours to mentors. The girl's mentor then talks to her quietly and confidentially about the correct way to behave. If necessary, she is shown how to behave, particularly when correcting uncouth behaviour. The mentor may demonstrate what words and body language could have been used in a particular situation instead of that employed by the girl. If the receptionist noticed, for instance, that a child walked by without greeting her, the mentor finds a chance to affectionately show the girl how to smile and say hello. If a staff member mentions that someone has behaved well or shown signs of improvement, the mentor relays the feedback to the child.

This works wonders. To give an example, a group of girls were conducting their conversation in yells when a member of staff approached them and, with an amused smile, said "Thank you for talking to each other so quietly and politely!" It had the required effect: it raised a laugh, and the girls talked quietly again. Often girls don't realize that they are rude, or that they're in the wrong, or that their behaviour isn't appropriate — If we take time to explain to them quietly why their behaviour is wrong, they're usually willing to change. Another example is that of a group of girls who were laughing at a fat child during a rehearsal. A member of staff managed to pull one of them aside and speak to her privately and affectionately about this behaviour. Without the need to speak to the rest of the group, the problem was solved: the child who had been corrected made sure that the other girls learned the same lesson.

### *c) Consequences of Blessed Josemaría's teaching on Disadvantaged Young People*

— Learning responsibility and respect

One girl, aged 16, said that through Baytree she learned to be responsible for her studies, herself and others. She also learned to appreciate her own culture

and make friends with people of other nationalities. When she first came to Baytree at the age of 13, she did not want to do any homework or study. Now she has a timetable and adheres to it herself. She hopes to pass 10 GCSE's, then train in hospitality management and hopefully have spare time to come back to Baytree and help younger girls. After these preparations, her ambition is to get to Cambridge University to study languages. She now dreams of a career and travelling to other parts of the world. She used to be laughed at by her schoolmates because she told them what she wanted to be. She gained confidence in her decision to pursue a career when she learned that she should be proud of a career she has chosen because it is noble work. She also said she behaves positively at Baytree because, unlike at school, she is not shouted at. She says that at Baytree she has learned to correct her faults because someone takes her aside in private and teaches her right from wrong.

Girls who have undertaken Leadership Training have learned to respect privacy. In their dress, they now tend to choose clothing that is modest and at the same time brings out their good looks. They have also learned to listen, speak and use body language that elicits mutual respect.

After courses in Leadership Training we see the 14-16 year olds behaviour change from not taking responsibility to do things without being told (getting up, making their beds, cleaning their bathrooms, etc), to taking the initiative to do things themselves; we notice that they stop dropping litter on the road; acknowledge their prejudices; try to get on with peers from other cultures instead of forming closed groups from their own ethnic background; are willing to share jobs and cooperate with one another; help each other noticeably more; and cease criticising others. We see the girls realise that they are the ones who have to make their decisions in life.

— Producing better quality work

Another girl, aged 14, said she was helped to complete her homework early so as not to rush. She learned that the quality of her work was better when she worked in this way.

— Stopping aggression and vandalism

The girls say that they don't swear at Baytree because they don't hear anyone swearing. Girls who may fight outside stop doing so when they come to Baytree. Girls often begin the leadership programme fighting like cats and dogs — afterwards, they treat each other like buddies. They learn to be friends without a show.

One 16 year old has learned to control herself so as not to shout at her 8 year old sister. She used to be very rude and aggressive, thinking that this was the way to stop her younger sister from copying the irresponsible ways of her peers.

In 10 years, with the thousands of girls who have attended Baytree, we have had only 4 minor incidents of graffiti. No girl has repeated this offence.

— Understanding right from wrong

Outside Baytree some girls learn wrong ideas such as revenge through physical aggression, euthanasia, etc. Baytree helps them understand *why* these are wrong.

— Family life

The girls come to realise that they too can make a contribution to a family life. Many come with the idea that it is not their responsibility to make an effort and that it should be borne by their parents. The girls learn to adopt their experience of Christian family life at Baytree to their homes.

Loving the girls gives them hope; believing in them brings out the best they can muster; their self-esteem rises; they behave better when they discover they can give more. Girls improve when we give them responsibility and help to bring out their skills and talents, because they gain confidence when they achieve something.

Girls (14-16 yrs) are hungry to learn home skills. They also enjoy learning how to do housekeeping if taught with enthusiasm. The girls do not know the processes but once they do housekeeping, they are pleased with the results of their work.

Girls (14-16 yrs) learn to think about others. For instance many notice if a friend stops coming, and show concern that she will not be doing her homework and might go astray. We see girls who have never shared anything begin to bring things they have baked to share with the others.

— Study habits

Many girls are keen to learn study techniques and have started using the library. Most of them now have career ambitions. Girls who used to switch on the radio when they did their homework no longer do so.

— Trust

Parents genuinely concerned about forming their daughters' characters well are happy to see their children come to Baytree because they trust us to reinforce the positive values being taught at home.

— Serving others

The activity that the girls generally like best in the Leadership Training programme is the visit to an aged people's home. The girls experience great joy in discovering that they can make others happy. One 15 year old, for example, used

her free time to go to the Home and visit ‘her’ old lady with some friends. She waited patiently for ‘her’ old lady to come out of the chapel where she was attending Holy Mass. When the lady came out, the girl and her friends enjoyed spending time with her.

— Cheerfulness

The girls on a Leadership Training course on an island far away from Brixton experienced that it is all right to smile (in Brixton smiling at strangers can be taken as an insult). The girls later discovered that it is enjoyable to smile, and then found out that they love laughing. They spent a lot of time laughing — but this time it was wholesome laughter rather than sarcasm or sneers.

*d) Consequences of Blessed Josemaría’s teaching on Volunteers*

— Love for the disadvantaged

University students doing volunteer work at Baytree have developed a love for disadvantaged young people. Elaine, for instance, taught a child with disabilities at Baytree, helping her with her homework, and decided to work in a school for children with special needs. Catherine has chosen a career in child care, having worked with younger girls in the study club. Liz, a medical student, has come to do her medical work placement at Brixton because she wants to continue working among the poor.

*e) Consequences of Blessed Josemaría’s teaching on other organisations*

— Prestige

“With thanks to Baytree Centre in recognition of your organisation’s contribution to raising the achievement and aspirations of Lambeth pupils”.

Executive Director of Education and Head of Education Business Partnership, Lambeth

“The girls were really loving and so obedient!”

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

— New Horizons

When young people are loved, loved consistently, and loved for who they are, they begin to accept themselves and begin building for their future. Baytree aims to:

— Create more occasions for the girls to experience Christian ‘family life’ to help them learn how to give.

— Challenge the youth to develop their potential and to actively choose not to be sucked into the local culture of aimlessness, under-achievement, expulsion from school, drugs, or crime. Building on the Leadership Training programme at Jersey Island, Baytree aims to draw out the girls’ potential further by challenging them to higher levels of achievement. From 2002, they will be able to work towards the bronze medal of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards covering all 4 areas of Community Service, Skills, Physical Recreation/Sports, and an Expedition. This structured approach is one way of measuring their achievements in personal and social development.

The Duke of Edinburgh Award achievements are recognized and appreciated by employers because the achievers have successfully worked their way through a structured process and have embarked on extra curricular activities that contribute to rounding their personalities. Study improvements can be measured by end-of-year grades.

— Strengthen the Mentoring Scheme. We need more trained mentors to deal with the large number of girls coming to Baytree. Group talks alone do not assist the girls as much as when complemented by individual mentoring as it is through individual mentoring that the girls learn how to apply what they hear to themselves and to find specific ways to put the ideas into practice in their own lives.

— Pilot our Fast Track to Literacy Scheme for both non-English speakers and English speakers who are falling behind national standards.

— Obtain funding to track the long-term progression of Baytree’s beneficiaries.

I’ll end my presentation with two quotations:

“Out there is madness (i.e. life of aggression and hopelessness in Brixton), and I was made to believe it is the normal world. When I came to Baytree I learned that in fact, this is the normal world. Thank you for treating me like family and urging me to make something of myself. I’ll get a career. One day, I hope to come back and help Baytree”. Baytree Beneficiary

A change of heart like this is one of the fruits of the sustained effort and love of the Baytree staff and volunteers. It happens by making reality of the following quotation:

“Your charity should be likeable. Without neglecting prudence and naturalness, try to have a smile on your lips for everyone at all times, though you may be weeping inside. The service you give to others should be unstinting too”<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *The Forge*, 699.