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ATTENTIVE LISTENING AND RESPECTFUL INTERVENTION

THE SERVOL STORY

Sister Ruth Montrichard, SJC

A native of Trinidad and Sister of St. Joseph of Cluny, Sr. Ruth Montrichard has worked with Fr. Gerry Pantin, C.S.Sp., for the past thirty five years and is now Chairman of the SERVOL organization. She obtained her Teacher's Diploma in Trinidad and Tobago in 1965 and a certificate in Education (with distinction) at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, England, in 1976. For twelve years Sr. Ruth taught in schools in Trinidad and Tobago and Grenada. Since 1975 she has worked with SERVOL where she has helped to develop and direct the educational programs for children and young people, and the teacher and management training programs for instructors and coordinators of the project. In 1993, she was appointed Executive Director of SERVOL and, in 2008, Chairman of the Board. She is also the National Coordinator of the Christian Meditation movement in Trinidad and served as Vicar Provincial of her Congregation.

THE BEGINNING

It all began in September 1970 in the wake of the so-called Black Power riots that threatened to overthrow the elected government of Trinidad and Tobago. These riots were led by activists who were enraged at the huge gap between the rich and the poor and who demanded a more equitable sharing of the country's resources. Many of those who took part were from the lower income group living in the Laventille community of the capital city, Port-of-Spain.

At the time, Fr. Gerry Pantin¹ of the Spiritan community was a science teacher at St. Mary's College, one of the most prestigious high schools in the country. The riots made him keenly aware that, though many of those involved lived only two blocks from where he lived and taught, he could not put a name on a single individual. His mission in the college was to the middle and upper class children of the society and not to the poor and the disadvantaged who were crying out for help. In a moment of 'divine madness,' as he often referred to it later, he resigned from his teaching post and, together with well-known cricketer, Wesley Hall, walked up the hill to the Laventille community where the riots began. With no idea as to how they could assist and no resources at their disposal, they approached groups in the area to ask the now famous SERVOL question: "How can I help you?"

This simple gesture was ultimately to give rise to the birth of SERVOL (Service Volunteered for All) with its philosophy of attentive listening and respectful intervention. Although initial reactions were skeptical, and to some extent even hostile, a small group of people gradually gathered around and sought help to build a basketball court and set up a medical clinic for the people of the area. Then came a plea to do something for the children. Realizing that poor children lack opportunities for quality education, the newcomers began to work with community groups to set up Early Childhood Centers and to train young people from the communities as teachers for the two to five-year-old age group. With funding from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation of Holland, this initial project grew and developed and SERVOL became for many years the lone voice championing the importance of early childhood development, especially in poverty-stricken areas.

The elders of the Laventille society, who had been observing these activities in silence, finally came to Fr. Pantin and told him bluntly: “If you really want to help us, you need to help our 17 to 19-year-olds who are still open to change and teach them a marketable skill that will enable them to obtain employment.”

A FUNDAMENTAL INSIGHT

By then SERVOL had established itself as a familiar presence in Laventille, or “the Hill” as it is known locally, and began setting up small skill-training programs for the youth of the depressed area. After about five years experience of running programs in welding, plumbing, woodwork, and other trades, we realized in SERVOL that we needed to address another issue: many of the young people who began with enthusiasm failed to complete the programs and went back to a life of idleness on the streets. It became clear to us that we needed to do more than simply teach a skill to young people who emerged from the formal system of education functionally illiterate, with low self esteem and a sense of hopelessness. Many of the female students had been sexually abused from their earliest years and almost all of the young males had never known their father. Something had to be done to make up for what was lacking in their family life and education; the innovative SERVOL Adolescent Development Program was created and proved to be extraordinarily successful in the years that followed.

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Today, fifteen hundred young people between 16 and 19 years of age enroll annually in one of the twenty SERVOL Centers. They come to learn a skill but, much to their surprise, they discover that they must first be exposed to SERVOL’s three-month intensive attitudinal development course. Their instructors are largely from the grassroots; they are chosen not because of their academic qualifications but because of their ability to reach out to these bruised and wounded adolescents and transform them by the strength and power of their love and dedication.

The young people are not the passive recipients of information but are challenged to think and to participate in the discussions. As this program was effectively a creation of SERVOL, we had to write our own textbooks, develop our own techniques, and introduce our own training course for instructors.

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SELF AWARENESS PROGRAM

Central to the program is the Self Awareness course which leads the trainees to reflect on all that happened to them from

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the time they were a fetus in their mother's womb and that could possibly have influenced their future life. They come up with the answers themselves: my mother may have been on drugs or not eating healthy food, or perhaps she was physically abused by my father.

They are then introduced to the role that the subconscious plays in their life and the twin processes of repression and projection. Gradually it dawns on them that the physical and psychological defects they carry were not inevitable but were the product of the circumstances of their early upbringing. An unimaginative and stereotyped educational system sought to give information about all sorts of things but did nothing to address these issues. Subconsciously they were crying out for answers: "Who am I? What made me so? And how can I reverse this?"

A well-known psychologist sat at the back of my class one day. He came up to me afterwards and exclaimed: "But you are teaching Freud to these grassroots children!"

I will always treasure the moment when a past trainee came to visit us with his young wife and two-year-old son. He pulled me aside and said very seriously: "You see this little child? I have made sure that his subconscious is absolutely clean." Somehow I think that old Freud, wherever he is, would have smiled his approval!

PRECIOUS MOMENTS

The climax of every term is graduation day for our trainees at the end of their three-month course. The students put on a performance for their parents and families, all of whom are present; they give speeches which they have composed, enact amusing sketches that celebrate their response to the program, all of which is intended to communicate one overwhelming message to their parents and dedicated teachers: "We have changed; we are not the same adolescents that we were three months ago. We are now ready to face skill training, to face relationships with the opposite sex, to face life with a sense of hope."

Earlier this year Jason "Mohammed Ali" graduated. He had remained very quiet throughout the program and in some ways we were not able to understand him very well. We felt that we had failed because he never seemed to respond. On the day in question, when we came to the end of the ceremony, the parents were invited to give their remarks. Quite unexpectedly, Mohammed Ali stood up and we wondered what would happen next. He took the microphone and announced in a loud voice: "I want all of you to know that since I began this course I have

*...since I began this course I
have changed.*

changed. I used to fight before, I was expelled from school, and I caused my mother pain. Today I am different and I want my mother sitting there to stand and I want to tell you that I love you!" Tears rolled down his face; he embraced his mother and all our tears mingled with his.

It is such moments that stimulate us to come back day after day and year after year with the message: We are SERVOL and we care.

...with a new sense of themselves and an enhanced self-esteem...

SKILLS TRAINING

At the end of this course, with a new sense of themselves and an enhanced self-esteem, the trainees then proceed to their skill-training programs. In twenty centers all over the country, skill-training is provided in construction skills (welding, plumbing, woodwork, masonry and electrical installation), service skills (home health aides, catering and food preparation, childcare, beauty culture and hospitality) and sound and video engineering. A period of job training is included in these programs where young people can test their ability in an actual work situation.

In 1994, realizing that our country was moving into the technological world and that we needed to bring our programs in line with this development, SERVOL ventured into the area of high technology. We were concerned that our trainees, who were already marginalized by the educational system, would forever be "hewers of wood and drawers of water" and restricted to the low paying jobs.

...to introduce programs in computer literacy, computer repairs, and electronics.

With some hesitancy we approached the Inter American Development Bank to help us set up three hi-tech centers with state-of-the-art technology to introduce programs in computer literacy, computer repairs, and electronics. To our surprise they took us very seriously and we were given a grant to establish the centers. This was followed in the year 2000 by the establishment of an advanced skill-training center allowing trainees to follow tertiary education courses in instrumentation, compressor mechanics, industrial electronics, computer-controlled electronics, and general industrial maintenance, giving them access to jobs in the oil and gas sectors in the country.

These programs prove that poor people from disadvantaged backgrounds, given the opportunity to make up for what is lacking in their lives and given a ladder to climb out of the pit of poverty, can and do succeed.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

SERVOL has had many success stories but the journey of thirty-nine years has also had its challenges, its struggles, and its pain. The first and seemingly endless problem is finding the finances to run and sustain projects. In the early years we were fortunate to obtain funding from Europe and from the USA. Over the years this funding was no longer available as Trinidad and Tobago with its oil and gas reserves was not seen as a country in need of assistance. Today the world recession makes it even more difficult to obtain funding for programs.

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Unfortunately, the poverty continues and the wealth of our country does not trickle down. The Government provides some social programs but these tend for the most part to be handouts with little thought for training and development. Our educational system continues to be highly academic with the result that many young people drop out of school and turn to a life of crime. Today the crime situation in our country has reached alarming proportions; marches in the city call on the Government to do something concrete about the situation. So SERVOL continues to pick up the slack.

We also 'help ourselves,' as our philosophy demands. Each of our skill-training centers is a productive unit which provides goods and services for the general public and runs as a small business, training the young people as well as helping to sustain the project.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

In addition, each center is administered by a community board of education made up of people from the area. This board is responsible for monitoring the center, administering the finances of the center, raising funds and collecting the fees. Each center has its own bank account and the subvention given to SERVOL by the Government for salaries is given in turn to the board which pays the salaries of instructors and is responsible for the maintenance of the center.

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Thus the members of the community are drawn into taking responsibility for the children and the young people of their area. SERVOL continues to monitor the teaching standards, work with the various boards, and do regular financial audits. Involving the communities in this way is not without its problems but SERVOL sees this empowerment of people as its major role in helping poor people to help themselves.

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SERVOL TODAY

Today SERVOL also administers a Parent Outreach Program where facilitators reach out to the homes of the poor to partner young parents and assist them in developing good parenting practices; seventy-five Early Childhood Centers where some 4500 two to five-year-olds in depressed areas receive quality early childhood education; a Special School for one hundred “differently abled” children; ten Junior Life Centers providing a relevant education program for 500 twelve to fourteen-year-olds who are functionally illiterate and who cannot benefit from secondary education; twenty Adolescent and Skill-training Centers, three High Technology Centers, and an Advanced Skill-training Center, which provide training for some four thousand young people each year.

The SERVOL experience and educational approach is shared via an outreach program that offers training to teachers and instructors from similar projects in the Caribbean and beyond; the SERVOL model has been adopted in countries as far away as Ireland, South Africa and Israel.

The journey has been long and has had its ups and downs, but we try to continue to serve those most at risk, to make a difference in our country and in our world, and to live up to our Mission Statement which proclaims:

*SERVOL is an organization of weak, frail, ordinary, imperfect, yet **hope-filled** and committed people seeking to help weak, frail, ordinary, imperfect, **hope-drained** people become agents of attitudinal and social change in a journey which leads to total human development.*

*It does so through **respectful intervention** in the lives of others and seeks to **empower individuals and communities** to develop as role models for the nations.*

In truth, we have come a long way since those early tentative, unsure steps of a courageous Spiritana and an international cricketer who simply asked the question: “How can we help you?”

SISTER RUTH
MONTRICHARD, SJC

Endnotes

¹Fr. Gerry Pantin is a member of the Spiritan Province of Trinidad. He obtained a B.Sc. (Hons) and a Diploma in Education in University College Dublin, Ireland, and a Licentiate in Theology in Fribourg University, Switzerland, where he was ordained in 1958. After ordination he returned to his alma mater, St. Mary's College, where he taught science and was games master. He founded St. Anthony's College in 1968 and SERVOL in 1970. He was awarded an honorary degree by Duquesne University in 1987 and by the University of the West Indies in 1990. In 1995, he was given the country's highest award, the Trinity Cross. He retired as chairman of SERVOL in 2008.