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parents

Caring for



PROMISCUOUS SEX

Why Take the Risk?

JANET BAUER

Rebuilding Slum Kids' Confidence

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At Helm of AMWIK

Stabbed 3 Times

For Ignoring my 6th Sense!

“What Killed our Son?”

We Trusted Too Much

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RESPECT FOR MONEY
Key to 'The Golden Touch'

WE FOUND LOVE
Over the Phone

Dependability - Passport to Universal Esteem



JANET BAUER

// If I lived in Kenya, my lifeline would be in the slums where I would share with children an experience that transports me to a little heaven. I feel

joyful, fulfilled and inspired by slum kids," says Janet Bauer.

Janet is the project manager of US-based I'm A Great Child Worldwide, a global no-profit project that works with children facing environment-triggered trauma. The environment, for example, may be drenched with poverty, physical and emotional abuse, misuse of drugs, crime and murder. I'm A Great Child Worldwide helps restore the children's self-esteem and liven up hope for their future.

An only child of an abusive alcoholic father and a verbally abusive mother, Janet grew up a lonely child in her US home. "My father often came home drunk and kicked my mother and I out of the house," she says. School was no better, with her teachers constantly yelling at her. She felt unloved and cried a lot, prompting other children to make fun of her, with relentless jeers of, 'Cry baby cry, cry baby cry...' The teachers would then shout at and beat her to stop crying. If this failed, they segregated her in an 'isolation-room' where the cycle of loneliness continued.

"I did not want to end up like my mother, so I took charge of my life when I was about eleven-years-old," Janet says authoritatively. It is a chilly July morning yet she is dressed in a light blouse and a white pair of trousers, as if enjoying the summer sun. She does not appear to notice the biting cold, prompting me to ask. "The US has lower temperatures," she says, her love for Kenya evident when she adds, "I will be leaving for home in two days, where it will be summer."

Helping
children
reclaim
confidence

She picks from where she had stopped, before I interrupted her. "I was always very nervous because I didn't want to be yelled at. So I studied hard just so the teachers could stop yelling at me. I was glad when my grades improved because their frequent howling decreased. With impressive grades, I joined the University of Missouri in St. Louis and graduated with a degree in philosophy and political science. I then proceeded to study for a master's degree in public affairs and landed good jobs in the public relations and advertising departments of many corporations. Unfortunately I remained very nervous at work because I didn't want anyone to yell at me."

Alone...

"I doubted my capability to be a good mother when I got married because of how my mother had raised me. This inherent fear overwhelmed me when I conceived, and as fate would have it, my baby boy died in hospital soon after birth. Devastated, I vowed never to have another baby. At around the time I lost my baby, my parents were diagnosed with cancer and both died within a short time of each other. I was distraught about the unexpected multiple deaths, but the pain did not end there. Four years later, as I was finally overcoming the deaths of my child and parents, my husband was also diagnosed with the same rare cancer that had afflicted my parents and died. Beside myself with grief, I had to deal with the reality of having no immediate family. I felt alone and distressed.

The sorrow led me to seek professional counselling from a counsellor who, upon instantly noticing my constant edginess and anxiety, enquired about my childhood. He told me that people who don't get professional help following trauma suffered in childhood carry the trauma throughout adulthood. I resolved from then on to help children suffering trauma, if only to prevent them from enduring a fate similar to mine. I had a good job in the advertising and public relations department of a major corporation at the time. As a speechwriter, I learnt how to help people become better speakers. I started extending the public speaking principles to abused women, street children, delinquent teenagers and

homeless people living in US shelters.

I started off with teenagers who attended the sessions with their counsellors. Each got a chance to share their future dreams, after which other participants were urged to make them aware of their positive attributes. Hearing good things about themselves helped the teenagers feel appreciated for the first time. One eighteen-year-old girl's story was particularly touching. She was a third generation homeless child - her mother and grandmother having also been born and raised in the streets. She relieved the tragic memory of how she had watched two of her friends murdered, and moved everyone to tears. The young woman left the class a new person having heard about her positive attributes for the first time.

Her counsellor later built on the newly found confidence and told me several weeks later that she had regained self-confidence. Motivated by the positive feedback, I realised that God put me on earth for this purpose. I intensified my teachings with female prisoners, abused women, street children and teenagers and university students. This is what I have been doing for the last eight years. I have conducted over two hundred workshops for adults and children, with lessons I learnt while growing up coming handy. I wish somebody had done it for me when I was young."

Kenyan children

Janet visited Mathare slum, Mukuru Kwa Njenga, Dandora and Kambui School for the Deaf in Kiambu in 2007. "Majority of the children living in slums



experience unimaginable environment-triggered trauma. Most helpers give these children food, medical care, education and shelter. What is usually lacking, and which is equally important, is psychosocial support, which is supposed to restore their self-esteem and hope for a future, otherwise they may end up in further abuse, crime, murder and drugs," she says.

Janet returned to Kenya last month to continue with her campaign at St. Elizabeth Orphan and Support Centre in Dandora, Review Academy in Mathare, Jovial Joy School in Mukuru, and Kambui School for the Deaf in Kiambu. Her second visit was timely, given the post December 2007 election violence left many children with trauma of physical and emotional abuse, homelessness, displacement, orphaned and poverty, which calls for psychosocial support.

Janet approaches activities in and out of class simply and effectively. She has successfully applied it for the past eight years in the US, South Africa and Botswana. It is based on the realisation that children who do not have good



For people who are kuku about CHICKEN



self-esteem and fail to get psychosocial support to regain it, end up in vices such as drug abuse, violence and crime.

She explains: "I help boost children's self-esteem so they can believe in themselves regardless of their background. What I am doing is however just one small part of the larger psychosocial care they need, that includes counselling." Her approach enhances a child's self-esteem, happiness and nurtures their natural strength and hope. Based on one of the organisation's programmes, 'What's Great About You', it shows children what is special and unique about them. "I tell each child that he was born with a natural strength that no kind of situation can erase, whether through birth, nurturing, economic or social, for they will always have this natural strength in them," says Janet.

The idea behind Janet's teaching principle is simple. She realises that society is structured in such a way that reprimanding children and adults alike for mistakes - a situation that leads to low self-esteem - is the norm, as opposed to bringing out positive attributes. To counteract this, she concentrates on individuals' positive traits, while leaving out negative ones. She urges participants in her class sessions not to utter any negative word about others. Each class session lasts about one and half hours, and takes eight children, plus invited teachers, support staff, parents and other adults. Facilitators and other participants are instructed to give the child undivided attention because as Janet puts it, "listening without interrupting is the most important thing you can do for a child."

Any idea or topic the children are given to discuss are purposeful. For instance, each child may talk about: 'My dreams for my future', 'What makes me happy', or 'Who is my role model.' All the

participants are then given an opportunity to give the child positive feedback. A typical comment would go something like this: 'You are confident, creative, smart, very kind...' which an adult in class records on an easy to carry card for the child to read every time. This helps entrench the belief that what they hear about themselves is who they really are.

The children later take turns answering various questions from the session, such as what they felt being listened to by everybody. Some will exclaim, 'At first I was nervous but when I relaxed, it felt good.' The other question they may be asked is what they feel when hearing other people point out their strengths. Some responses Janet got from children in special care homes and schools she visited in Kenya last month include: 'I liked it very much because it has helped me to be open and courageous...'; 'It has helped me because I have known what other people think about me...'; 'I now see the other side of myself...'; 'I now talk freely with other people...'; 'The classes took away my shyness and I can now confidently talk in front of a crowd...'; 'I feel like a leader...'; and 'I know the real me and what all other people think about me...'

Nurturing a future dream

The children in Janet's programmes also participate in other confidence boosting activities. For instance, each child is asked to jot down and explain his dreams for the future, then read it out to the other children and adult participants, all of who respond with encouraging claps. The

purposes of these activities are various. First, each child gets an opportunity to be listened to without interruption by his parent(s) and teachers. Secondly, each child has an opportunity to speak openly about his future dreams. The parents and teachers can take up cue to nurture these dreams.

Mentioning inspirational achievers such as US President, Barrack Obama, Janet reminds the children that they can grow to become the most powerful, learned or gifted people, irrespective of their backgrounds. She aspires to make children feel better about themselves, want to learn more and stay in school, have a better life, believe in themselves and know that they are special. This helps work towards achieving their dream.

Janet also teaches parents simple ways of helping boost their children's self-image to ensure sustainability. She emphasises the fact that giving children psychosocial support costs nothing. According to her, busy parents who hardly find time for their children need only take a few minutes every day, for example, while having family dinner, to tell their children special things such as: 'You have beautiful eyes... I love your smile... you are such a kind girl...' or 'What I like about you is that you are smart, clever, hard working...' If the child is well behaved, tell him or even write on a piece of paper: 'I am impressed by the way you helped your sister.'

The idea is to have teachers, support staff, parents and other adults taking time to listen to children under their care. They are encouraged to set some time to tell a child a truthful and specific thing they like about them. For instance, telling a child she is good is not specific as opposed to telling her that she is confident, friendly, and creative, or has a sense of humour. □



Janet (third from left) during a motivational talk with some of her children contact: www.greatchildworldwide.org

Corrections:

- * “Children who live in slums” is preferred to “slum kids”
- * Bauer’s teachers hit slightly on occasions
- * Her parents died many years after her baby
- * Husband died of same cancer as her mother
- * Bauer worked for many years before attending college
- * She held classes for adults before beginning to teach children
- * Classes held in Dandora in 2009 only