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ReachOut! in inner city Manchester

University Students have been working for ten years now, in one of the most disadvantaged areas of Manchester. The project consists of several educational programmes of a voluntary nature.

08/24/2003

People in Britain expect only bad news from Moss Side. It is one of those inner city suburbs condemned in the collective mind of the British public to failure — and certainly to a

bad press. Moss Side and neighbouring Hulme are not the only trouble spots of Manchester, in England's North-West, but they are probably the most highlighted, in a way that ignores the many positive changes achieved in these districts in recent years.

Just south of the city's commercial heart, Moss Side and Hulme are considered among the major centres of illicit drug dealing in the United Kingdom. A strong Afro-Caribbean population, fruit of immigration from the mid-century onwards, adds character to the neighbourhood. But with unemployment high so too are frustration and crime among black youths. An “almost unbearable pressure”, in the words of one youth leader, on local young people to take drugs completes the grim scenario. Major government investment and re-building are helping the area to

emerge from its dark tunnel but a lot remains to be done.

The challenge of education

In 1994 a group of young professionals connected with Greygarth Hall, a licensed hall of residence of the University of Manchester, got together to do something about this and to offer the young people of the area the positive challenge of education, not forced in a classroom but offered freely in a way they might want to benefit from. And so Reach Out! was born.

Reach Out!, the Inner City Youth Achievement Programme, is an initiative whereby university students and professionals work with young people in disadvantaged parts of Manchester to motivate them in their studies and help them discover that learning can be fun. Until last year the activities were based at city council youth centres in Moss Side

and Hulme. From the autumn of 2002, thanks to a generous grant from public funds, the program has begun working with schools and has started up in Wythenshawe, which shares similar violence, drug use and unemployment statistics with Moss Side and Hulme.

At present Reachout! Works with boys aged 8 to 14, but aims to keep guiding and working with these young people, and others who come along, to help as many as possible reach university in an area where, says Mukhtar Khares, Manchester City Council's Senior Neighbourhood Youth Worker for these communities, “going to university is seen as something people outside of Moss Side and Hulme do”.

Positive role models

ReachOut! Was born as a consequence of the teachings of St Josemaría Escrivá. The founder of

Opus Dei often encouraged the faithful of the Prelature to carry out social projects. However, Reach Out!, however, welcomes student tutors of all religions or none. What is stressed is that the students offer positive role models to youngsters who rarely know examples of success. “Many of our young people have seen parents, brothers, sisters unemployed for a long time and not getting anywhere. There was a need for educational support for young people and Reach Out! brought that into an area where it was needed,” says Mukhtar Khares.

Until recently Reach Out! consisted of two principal components. An intensive summer programme where children, led by the students, dedicate two to three weeks of their summer holidays to Mathematics, English and Science, mixed with sports, crafts and other fun activities, Monday to Friday, for most of the day. And the term-time programme

where students go down to the youth centres for a few hours each week to tutor the youngsters individually or in small groups in these core curriculum subjects. From early 2003 a mentoring programme was begun, rather like a tutorial scheme, in collaboration with local schools. It presently operates in three schools and in two youth centres. Each week more than 150 youths pass through one of the programmes. The team of students working as volunteers now numbers over sixty members, from all four of Manchester's universities.

The all-important lesson

The project begun in Greygarth Hall has now taken on a life of its own as an independent organization. Within ReachOut! a group of women students takes care of activities for girls and young females. Reach Out! puts stress on the elder-brother (or sister) philosophy, with the students

seeking to know, respect and win the respect of their young tutees, trying to form a real relationship with them.

For Shirley May, who has worked for years in young people's projects run by Manchester's public library service, this is one of the key aspects of the whole project. "I have watched how the students come to learn the all-important lesson: to listen to the kids and to respect them. Our young people have grown in respect for the students as the students have grown in respect for the young people", she says.

A remarkable achievement

It is remarkable what Reach Out! has achieved in such a short time, with the hard work of its leaders and the student tutors, with the active support of local youth workers, and the encouragement of both Manchester City Council and the

University of Manchester. Student helpers find the work satisfying. In the words of David, “helping these kids learn is one of the best things I have ever done. He walks in not knowing something, and then walks out knowing it. You get a great sense of achievement”.

However, there is still much to do. John O'Donnell, who joined the team directing the project nearly a year ago, after twenty year's experience as a solicitor, summarized the objective: “we want to reach a thousand young people with a hundred students”. Certainly an ambitious target when it was set, but soon it will fall short of the reality: this summer the project begins in Glasgow and London and the next academic year we plan to have more than a hundred volunteers in Manchester at least.

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information about ReachOut! or how
you can help, contact:

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