

SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW & HOME AFFAIRS, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE NATIONAL MENTORING CAMP, ON 17 NOV 98 AT 9.30 AM AT TEMASEK POLYTECHNIC

Distinguished Speakers

Guests

Participants and trainers

Mentors

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me start by telling you a story about a man who was born the youngest of four children. His family was not wealthy. His father, a struggling singer, was an abusive alcoholic who often came home drunk and beat him when he was a young boy. At the age of 12, the boy had to work to support his mother, two brothers and a sister. He grew up very much alone, with no support from his family.

2 As this young man approached adulthood, he met an older man, through a close friend. This older man proved to be a strong influence in the young man's life. He soon became the young man's 'mentor' – befriending, supporting and guiding him through his formative years. The mentor recognised that the young man had great musical talent and helped launch his musical career by introducing

him to wealthy and noble patrons, who supported and encouraged him to write some of the greatest musical masterpieces of our time. The person that I am referring to is none other Ludwig van Beethoven, possibly the world's greatest musical composer of our time.

3 Beethoven's life story is powerful testimony that mentoring can be an effective tool. Maximised fully, it can help a young person realise his full potential, talents and abilities. This is just one of the many success stories about mentoring. Obviously, the 'right' mentor will not make us all great composers, musicians, artists or scientists. But a mentor can create a nurturing environment that will allow a young person to develop a positive, personal vision of his future.

4 Mentoring is not something new. Business circles, the education system and social welfare organisations are embracing mentoring programmes as a means of helping individuals cope through stages of significant transition. In Singapore, committed youth agencies such as Care Corner and Student Care Service and private sector companies such as BP Singapore have been in the forefront promoting youth mentoring services over the past few years.

5 Mentees can benefit immensely from their mentors' experiences. By being a patient and receptive listener, mentors can connect with their mentees to guide them in resolving problems and tackling any challenges they may face. Mentors can transmit precious first-hand insights and their protégés in developing lifelong

skills, habits and principles of life. In other words, they can help their mentees help themselves, strengthening resilience and focusing on their strengths.

6 Mentoring programmes come in various forms. Currently, the most common are school-based peer support programmes between fellow students and mentoring programmes run by self-motivated volunteers from our tertiary institutions for younger students. Some of these mentoring schemes centre around tutoring services. Others are befriending programmes. Recently, cross-age mentoring between retirees and our young was introduced. This approach reinforces the effectiveness of parenting functions within our nuclear families with dual-career parents. In fact, the age difference need not be so wide. An excellent choice of mentors for our youths are young working adults who have just experienced some of the growing up adjustments that our youths are facing. School alumni can provide the backbone to this model. This is an excellent way former students can repay their alma mater.

7 This idea of a "University of Life", connecting young Singaporeans to mentors from outside the educational system should be more actively pursued. While I applaud the efforts of many tertiary students who are volunteer-mentors, we should also explore opportunities for more one-to-one relationships between the generations, whether they be retirees, volunteers from the business sector or alumni members. Singaporeans who eschew high visibility voluntary work, can opt for this very personal, behind-the-scheme but life-changing contribution to society.

8 The Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime (IMYC) has identified mentoring as a key platform to keep youths on the straight and narrow path. Besides being beneficial to youths in general, mentoring can also play a specific role in reaching out to youths-at-risk.

9 Hence, the National Youth Council (NYC), a key driving force co-ordinating IMYC's programmes, will work with the community to develop mentoring programmes as a basic intervention strategy to meet the needs of youths in general as well as youths at risk. NYC will galvanise the many outreaches of existing and potential youth agencies to promote mentoring programmes in Singapore.

10 In this regard, in view of requests for more training opportunities for mentors from participants of our mentoring seminar last year, NYC commissioned the Family Resource and Training Centre to develop a National Basic Training Package for Mentors. This package provides basic skills training to complement the training workshops organisations are already conducting. It also ensures minimum standards and best practices in the various mentoring programmes. Designed as a user-friendly kit, the package includes the use of videotapes and group and individual exercises as workshop tools, and can be easily adapted to suit the needs of different organisations, from schools to voluntary welfare organisations.

11 To test its effectiveness on the ground, NYC decided to hold this National Mentoring Camp to test-pilot it. Based on feedback from trainers and participants, NYC will refine the package before making it available early next year. For new mentors, the aim is to provide a simple guide for existing mentoring service-providers to train them in basic mentoring skills. For existing mentors, the package will come in handy in sharpening their skills. NYC will also look into organising more "train the trainers" workshops.

12 Organising a camp at national level for youths from such diverse backgrounds has been a major endeavour for NYC. I am pleased that response from community organisations, schools and tertiary institutions has been overwhelming. 230 youths, with ages ranging from as young as 14 years to late 20's, have registered. I am especially pleased that the camp has the support of social workers, youth workers, teachers and other professional volunteers from the community who are doing their part as trainers. I thank them for their contribution. I also thank the Police and PAYM for their help in organising the camp's recreational activities.

13 NYC's role has always been to serve as a catalyst to stimulate programmes that maximise our youths' potential. NYC therefore, considers collaborating with like-minded organisations to develop a National Mentoring Network as an important next step for mentoring schemes in Singapore. The basic objectives of this Network will be to promote mentoring by stimulating new mentoring initiatives and encouraging the sharing of resources and success stories among its

members. There will also be a need to maintain national standards as more mentoring schemes are set up in the years to come. Indeed, this Network can go beyond raising public awareness of mentoring, to helping to recruit and match mentors with mentees. NYC welcomes all existing and interested mentoring service-providers to join this National Mentoring Network.

14 To the camp participants, I hope you will use this opportunity to learn as much as you can with an open mind, to develop lasting friendships and, as importantly, to have an enjoyable and memorable time. The training package is only a prototype. Your feedback can help make it even better.

15 Let me end by reiterating the vision that NYC has set for promoting mentoring in Singapore:

"Without proper guidance, some youths are like canoes floating in the open sea, drifting aimlessly. Responsible mentoring can make the difference between success and failure for them. It is like providing a compass to them, a guide to chart their direction in life, instilling resilience in them to cope with the vicissitudes of life and confidence in the future."

This morning, I am launching the first-of-its-kind National Mentoring Training Package. In time, I hope this package will become the magnetic field that will make these "compasses" more effective. The National Mentoring Network will be a lighthouse around which the "compass manufacturers" can gather to illuminate

the path for the mentors, which are the compasses, and the mentees, which are the canoes.

16 So I say, "Yes, there will be strong currents, even some storms. But let's row on. And more importantly, let's row together." I wish all of you every success in your mentoring efforts.

17 Thank you.