

SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW & HOME AFFAIRS AT THE TRUE HEARTS CONNECTION & BP SINGAPORE APPRECIATION CEREMONY TUESDAY, 1 JUNE 1999 AT 7 PM AT Ngee Ann Polytechnic

Mr Koh Kim Wah, President, BP Singapore

Mr Mathew Yap, Chairman, National Mentoring Network

Distinguished Guests

Mentors and mentees

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am happy to witness this award and investiture ceremony for mentors under the BP partnership mentoring schemes. It is always a pleasure to meet Singaporean mentors, especially younger ones, who put in personal time and effort to uplift the lives of others around them. This people-to-people touch is by no means a small and insignificant process in our efforts to build a more cohesive nation. Indeed, it emphasises how a simple but personal approach can mean so much for the mentees, the mentors themselves, as well as society at large.

2 Of late, the media has focused on youth violence. There is misperception that the situation has worsened. The number of youths involved in recent cases, their proximity in time and extensive media coverage may have caused this misperception. Let me assure Singaporeans that the situation is under control.

There is no cause for alarm. There is no trend of rising youth violence. In fact, the number of rioting and serious hurt cases committed by youths up to 19 years from January to mid-May this year decreased by 27 % from 91 to 66 cases compared to the same period last year. As a few recent incidents involved many youths, the number of youths arrested increased slightly by 11 or 9% from 129 to 140 during this period. The larger backdrop is that the number of youths arrested for rioting dropped 46% from 539 in 1997 to 291 in 1998.

3 Whilst Singaporeans should not be alarmed, it is good that we have collectively sat up and taken notice of the problem. Indeed, this is the silver lining here. The present publicity is a timely reminder that, despite the lower number of cases, the problem is still with us. Everyone can and must do his or her part to address it. One fight is a fight too many. Every youth crime is a crime too many. Continuing concerted efforts by all, including parents, schools, police, voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) and the Courts - will reduce the number of cases even more and ensure that a spate of incidents will not recur. It will do well for parents to know who their children mix with and where they spend their time out of home. On its part, Police will increase its presence on the ground, especially in areas where youths congregate.

4 Let me share the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime or IMYC's approach to reducing youth crime and outline concrete measures it has co-ordinated so far. IMYC takes a comprehensive approach embracing prevention, enforcement and deterrence, and rehabilitation. The many wide-ranging measures

it has co-ordinated involve many partners, and have long-term and short-term objectives. Some, like the Honorary VSC scheme, spearheaded by Police, have an immediate focus. The VSC scheme addresses a specific phenomenon ie street corner gangs infiltrating schools, as a quick, decisive counter-measure. The scheme also enhances Police-School networking. Others, like the Peer Mediation Scheme, spearheaded by the Courts and MOE, have wider and longer-term objectives. They do not target wayward youths. All youths benefit. For example, the Peer Mediation Scheme addresses an underlying cause ie the inability of some youths to manage their anger and settle their disputes without resorting to violence. This new National Mentoring Network is another such effort with a wider focus. The Peer Mediation Scheme and National Mentoring Network shape character, inculcate values and nurture skills and have an indirect impact on reducing youth crime.

5 Other programmes already in place which target wayward youths are showing positive results. Examples are the Streetwise Programme, spearheaded by the National Youth Council and the Police Caution Cases Guidance Programme, spearheaded by MCD. Both programmes seek to rehabilitate wayward youths and involve many committed VWOs. They offer a second chance to youths who genuinely want to turn over a new leaf. The Streetwise Programme recently launched a hotline, in conjunction with Teen Challenge. The number is 440-1865, a number which youths who wish to get out of street corner gangs or parents with such children can easily call.

6 IMYC agencies together with many committed VWOs and volunteers have pressed on over the past few years to reduce juvenile delinquency and youth crimes. Its efforts have shown results. As mentioned earlier, the number of rioting and serious hurt case committed by youths has declined. Also, two specific areas of concern which IMYC focused on has shown positive results. The first is shoplifting which saw significant increases from 1997 to 1998. When IMYC took cognizance of the trend early last year, counter-measures were introduced. In particular, Police worked with the Retailers' Association of Singapore to install CCTVs and re-arrange the display of items popular with shoplifters. School talks were also intensified. Media publicity also alerted parents to the problem. I am pleased that the figures for this year are promising. From January to May, the number of youths arrested for shoplifting has almost halved – from 888 to 459. We are cheered by the improved situation. But, IMYC agencies, especially Police and the schools, will not rest on their laurels and continue to press on to reduce these figures even further. The same improved situation is also noted for female youth offenders. Total female youths arrested between January and April this year dropped 40% from 404 to 291, with those arrested for serious offences such as rioting, unlawful assembly and causing serious hurt down from 21 to 14.

7 Whilst these figures are re-assuring, we must never be lured into complacency. Besides quantitative yardsticks, IMYC checks itself against qualitative yardsticks as well. Here, IMYC's contribution is of lasting impact. It has inculcated a collaborative mindset where every player contributes where its is

strongest; developed a practical network where continuing collaboration and dialogue takes place; and devised specific programmes in prevention, enforcement, and rehabilitation. IMYC is always looking for new partners who can contribute. In this regard, we will reach out to Community Development Councils, which are natural partners for our programmes. In particular, we will tap CDC resources and leadership to work with schools in their respective Districts to mount parenting workshops, reach out to out-of-school youths to help them pursue academic and skills upgrading and follow-up on youths after they complete the 6-month Streetwise Programme.

8 Let me address youths directly. To those involved in street corner gang activities, let me warn them to desist. The law will catch up with you. Don't throw away your lives which are before you. Seek help on the Streetwise Programme Hotline at 440-1865. The Courts have already warned that they will deal severely with youth offenders who commit serious crimes. To other youths who may think that their group is not a street corner gang, I urge them to remain alert and wary. Don't be fooled or misled. Don't drift into trouble. Avoid situations which can get you into trouble.

9 I appreciate that youths need friends and positive role models in life. They will not find them in gangster heads. Instead, the BP mentoring scheme points to a good approach, which is that youths can help other youths. Often in life, we need a listening ear and an understanding and sympathetic friend to help us in times of stress. The friendship offered by someone close to us in age can be a source of

encouragement and strength. More importantly, our mentors can be inspiring role models. After all, they have walked similar paths as those of their mentees not too long before. They can thus provide relevant life experience and guidance.

10 Riding on the success of mentoring schemes such as the BP mentoring scheme, our local mentoring movement gained much momentum in the last few years. More community-based organisations and schools have adopted youth mentoring as a key strategy to nurture youth potential. One main motivation is because mentoring has been found to be effective in improving academic and life-skills of socially disadvantaged children and youth. A survey research done by BP in November last year covering 275 mentees from 24 schools found that 90 percent or more became more interested in their school work, improved in their academic results and displayed greater self-confidence and optimism in their outlook.

11 BP's 5-year experience in mentoring has motivated us to create a culture of youth mentoring in Singapore. The BP scheme has about 1,500 mentors recruited from tertiary institutions, post-secondary and secondary schools each year, to help mentees in various settings such as schools, youth clubs and self-help groups. To many of our mentors, mentoring becomes a part of their lives too. I am told that some of them spend about 50 hours each year on mentoring. I am sure the learning opportunity must be very enriching for these mentors too.

12 Hence, IMYC has invited a group of professionals from different fields of expertise to form a *National Mentoring Network*. Led by Mr Mathew Yap, who

had spearheaded the BP mentoring scheme 4 years ago, this network will form a bottom-up approach to consolidate their collective mentoring success in their respective organisations over the years. They can then chart their own directions in promoting mentoring as a way of life in Singapore in the years to come.

13 I urge the new Network to reach out to as many youths as possible. Many will benefit from having a mentor, who takes a positive interest in their development and progress in life. This is an adventurous University of Life concept. I also urge the Network to explore nurturing mentoring relationships across generations. Some young people lack a variety of adult role models. It can be hard for them to form a realistic view of life ahead from just their peers.

14 Well, much work lies ahead. But strong foundations have been laid. It leaves me to commend BP and True Heart Connection for all your hard work and effort. I would like to personally commend and congratulate all mentors and participating institutions and schools for their involvement and commitment in realising our S21 vision of an active citizenry where every Singaporean counts.

15 Thank you.