

SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW & HOME AFFAIRS, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE NATIONAL MENTORING CAMP, ON WEDNESDAY, 24 MAY 2000, 9.30 AM, AT SINGAPORE POLYTECHNICS' AUDITORIUM

Good Morning

Members and Partners of IMYC

Mentors

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Prevention is the Key

Since 1995, the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime or IMYC, which I chair, has been synergising the resources of key agencies to tackle trends and problems relating to juvenile delinquency and youth crime. A comprehensive package of measures encompassing prevention, enforcement and rehabilitation has been mounted. Our shared vision is simple yet poignant. We aim to keep young Singaporeans on the right path in life so that they will become confident and socially responsible citizens.

2 IMYC agencies including MCDS, MOE, Police, NYC, NCSS and the Courts, have initiated many rehabilitative and enforcement measures to help youth offenders turn over a new leaf. Joint collaborations have resulted in the

implementation of innovative and ground-breaking second-chance programmes such as the Guidance Programme for minor youth offenders and StreetWise Programme for street-corner gang members.

3 We have also begun focusing on upstream issues and challenges. In this vein, over the last two to three years, new preventive measures have been launched. Some notable examples are the Mentoring movement, spearheaded by the National Mentoring Network and NYC, and the Peer Mediation programme, spearheaded by the Courts and MOE. We want to address the root causes of juvenile delinquency and youth crime. To effectively tackle youth crime trends, we must reach out and help our youths before they get into trouble. We should address negative environmental factors and influences that cause our youths to take early wrong steps.

4 As part of our preventive focus, we are in the process of looking at how to reach out to out-of-school youths. IMYC is working closely with local agencies such as CDCs and VWOs to sharpen our preventive radar to reach out to them early. At the same time, we also realise the need to work more closely with families and schools.

5 The concerted efforts of the multi-agency approach has brought about a heartening decrease in the number of juveniles aged below 16, arrested for crimes. In 1995, the number of juveniles arrested peaked at about 2500. In 1999, the number dropped by more than one third, with about 1500 juveniles arrested. As for

arrests involving youths below the age of 20, there was a decline of 33% from 1998 to 1999. 4720 youths were arrested in 1998 compared to 3100 in 1999.

6 Our first quarter result this year is also encouraging. Compared to the 1st quarter last year, the number of youths arrested fell nearly 17%, from 784 to 653. Our strategies are working.

7 Nevertheless, to the IMYC, and I am sure to all of us gathered here today, each case of youth crime is one case too many. For every case, the life of a young Singaporean has been put on hold, the hopes of his parents shattered, the trust of his friends and love ones betrayed and a possible talent for his community and Singapore lost. So, we cannot celebrate just yet.

Mentoring makes a Difference

8 Mentoring is a key preventive strategy for youth crime. Mentoring originates from the Greek word meaning enduring and can be described as a sustained, close, developmental relationship between a more experienced individual, who could be an adult or an older youth, and a younger person. A mentor can offer support, guidance and assistance as his mentee goes through difficult periods and faces new challenges in life. In the process, the mentor and mentee build a bond which facilitates the transfer of good values and attitudes. Mentors, through their personal behaviour and moral and social attitudes, serve as powerful examples for their mentees to emulate. They are a role model, a trusted guide, a friend and a good companion.

9 Through the sharing of experiences, fears and desires, mentees will come to know that their mentors, like them, are also human and vulnerable. Mentees will also come to realise that what they are experiencing are natural obstacles in life that their mentors had successfully navigated before. It is so much easier for one to go through the low periods in life knowing that someone else understands how you feel. Indeed, we have many touching real-life accounts of how committed mentors have touched lives. A mentee in the Student Mentorship Programme, a joint project of NUS, NUSS, Tanjong Pagar CDC and Student Care Service, shares this: " For the past few months, you have changed my thinking to life. You have been so helpful and patient. It is only when you are about to leave me that I know how important you are to my life. Well, thank you and wish you all the best in your exams."

10 Simple words yet powerful ones. It came from the bottom of her heart. We can see the impact a good mentor can have on another person's life. It can make all the difference. It is IMYC's belief that mentoring can effectively prevent juvenile delinquency. Studies in the US have shown that youths who have good mentors relate better to friends and family; they achieve better results in school; they also have higher self-esteem and are less likely to experiment with health-risk behaviour involving drugs, cigarettes and alcohol. NYC's survey has also shown that friends remain the most important influence in young people's life. Thus, peer mentors have great potential to provide the extra support that our youths need to make it through difficult periods in their lives.

11 It is with this powerful role of mentors in mind that the National Mentoring Network (NMN) and NYC decided to organise this national mentoring camp to equip our youth mentors with the know-how to fulfil their roles effectively. This is the second such camp. The National Mentoring Network intends to reach out to more mentors and train them on a regular basis. Besides training, I understand that the Network, a bottom-up initiative by schools, mentoring organisations and government agencies, will continue to find ways to encourage more Singaporeans to become mentors and to help promote good mentoring practices. I thank the Network for all its hard work and positive inputs.

Celebrating Mentoring

12 In recognising the hard work of mentors from the secondary schools and tertiary institutions, I am pleased to announce that the National Mentoring Network, NYC and MOE have joined hands to introduce a new mentoring service badge to be awarded to these peer mentors for serving at least 50 hours in an academic year. This badge is a symbolic gesture to recognise our mentors' hard work and commitment. Of course, the real joy is derived from their actual interaction with their mentees.

13 Finally, let me quote, this time from a mentor involved in the True Heart Connection Mentoring Programme, to provide an additional insight into the sense of achievement and satisfaction a mentor can feel. She said: "I was touched by her recent note to me. She was beginning to accept me as a friend. Things are falling

into place and we have become good friends. More importantly, she was beginning to reciprocate the care and concern that I showed her."

14 From her words, we can sense her joy and pride in touching a fellow human being. As mentor, she had gained tremendously from the learning process of mentoring a younger person. This is the experience that we want to share with more young Singaporeans in our quest to nurture active citizens. Remember, service from the heart need not be something groundbreaking. It is not the good deed alone that counts. It is also the personal realisation of joy and fellowship that results from the connection of lives between mentor and mentee. You have the opportunity, indeed privilege, to touch lives. Please grasp it.

15 I wish all of you a very good training workshop in the next three days ahead. And, most importantly, I hope that all of you will gain similar life-transforming experiences in your mentoring services in the years ahead.

Thank you.