

Eleven Years On ...

Never would I expect my life to intersect with three men while taking a relaxing stroll with my wife. It had been 11 years since I last saw them together. They are the brothers 31 years old Sam (alias) & 26 years old (alias: Tim). And 30 year old Joe (alias) who has six other siblings.

It is hard to imagine when my wife first met Sam & Tim back in December 1992. My wife was on social work field placement with Bukit Ho Swee Social Service Centre, affectionately known by the community as N.C. (now called "Beyond Social Services). Sam was just 6 years old! Their father was in prison for drugs. The boys were potential school drop outs, & my wife was tasked to keep them in school. So every day she faithfully made sure they attended school daily, & brought them to N.C. to play at the center after school, making sure they had a stable routine.

I first met Sam & Joe in December 1994 at an outing to Sentosa. Sam's father was still in prison. Both of Joe's parents were in prison for drug offences. These two boys were left to fend for themselves at the tender ages of 13 & 12 respectively. It was tough. They performed poorly in school & their attendance was irregular. They were perceived as rebellious, labeled as "delinquent".

By the beginning of 1995, Sam & Joe were school drop-outs. Sam was a lanky socially awkward teenager, spending his days aimlessly on his bike with a small gang of boys. They desired to be "gangster", full of angst, paying back the unfair judgmental society that had labeled them as "no hope" & "unmotivated". Yet, these boys had the creativity to modify their bikes, lowering the seats, placing motorbike storage boxes at the back of their bikes. They spray painted their bikes with nice bright colors, placed stickers on them. They rode together in neat formations, looking tough with their punk hair, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, riding topless attempting to show muscles, but in reality, they were rib showing skinny guys with emerging biceps.

Sam was the most friendly in his gang. He tried to act tough, but he always wore a sheepish grin on his face. He was pleasant, especially when I spoke to him on his own. His eyes told his story. They were sad & tired. He never liked to talk about home. But he always wanted to tell me about his gang & the adventures on their bikes, racing around the Bukit Ho Swee streets & alley-ways, shouting out intimidation to the old men drinking coffee & wolf whistling at pretty girls.

Joe was the joker & playful. He was always making the other boys laugh. He was very intelligent & quick witted, but troubled. His background was tough. He was third in a family of seven children with both parents in prison. He walked with confidence, but somehow I always suspected he was emotionally fragile. He masked his inner pain with humor. He was a talented footballer. One year he was invited to try out for an S-league football reserve team. The coach said he was impressive, saying he could be the next Fandi Ahmad, but added a comment: "But I think he would prefer to be with his friends." Basically a nice way of saying: "Joe won't make it because he does not have the discipline to be a professional at anything." Joe could play the guitar. My boss & I chipped in to pay for his guitar lessons at Yamaha. But after two lessons, Joe dropped out saying: "*Lazy la.*" At that time, all I said in response was: "Wasted!"

I remember when I first met Tim. It was a muggy Tuesday evening mid-1995. He was dragged in by my chirpy colleague to join an English class called: "E.F.G." (English is Fun & Great). I had 11 young children in that class, all seated on the hard tiled floor facing my blackboard & I. Tim sat in front on my right. He had just bathed, his wet hair neatly combed parted to the right, covered in white talcum powder on his face, neck & arms. I could smell him a mile away. Tim sat in awe as the class started to recite the alphabet & the phonetic sounds of the letters. We learnt the vowels, & sang songs like:

The vowel makes the sound.

The vowel makes the sound.

A – E – I – O – U

The vowel makes the sound.

Tim became an enthusiastic active participant. When I asked for volunteers, Tim would always raise his hand up quickly, with that desperate posture of "PICK ME! PLEASE PICK ME!" – sitting cross legged with every part of his body extended out toward the ceiling! From a young age he displayed leadership qualities, helping me keep the class quiet, offering to help pack up & always getting at least two other children to stay behind to help me.

Life at N.C. for those boys was special. They were there most days. Sam adored my colleague, a carpenter, & gradually took up apprenticeship with him. Everyday Sam faithfully showed up for work, sawing wood, carving signs.

Joe was into everything the center offered – carpentry, football, music, lion dance. He was like a talented gypsy moving from one activity to another, but never able to sustain any one thing.

Tim was the loyal user of the center. He was the chubby little boy who made N.C. his home. Every day after school, he would show up at the center at 1.40pm with his neatly parted wet hair, covered in white talcum powder. He came bursting into our office, breathless, exhausted from his 800 meter journey from his home to our center on foot. He would collapse on the office sofa & say: "*Wa. I need aircon. Outside very hot you know. I so tired.*"

There used to be a Peace Café on Tuesday & Thursday evenings, where we would sell cheap food. A burnt hotdog for 50 cents. A crispy burnt chicken nugget for 50 cents. We had rock & disco music blasting, & we even tried out Karaoke! We never made money, because volunteers would either get hassled by youth to give them free food, or money would be stolen. The children received free food Peace café coupons for good behavior during the English classes, which also contributed to the café making a loss. But profit was never the aim of the café. It was atmosphere & creating community.

Chinese New Year was Lion Dance season. Each boy was involved. Sam - the star drummer. Joe who could do everything (drummer, cymbals, lion head, lion backside). Tim wanted so badly to be part of it, & was best at cymbals. At the end of Chinese New Year, the boys would always be so dark because they rode in the lorry under the hot sun.

Holidays was taking a ride in the N.C. van to “go rounding”. I remember taking them to the beach. Changi beach was the popular spot, soaking in the water, beach football, playing guitar, relaxing before sundown smoking cigarettes.

Other days it was either carpentry, picking up wood from the factory, going Japanese drum rehearsals, watching TV at the youth corner, jamming in our jam room (where the instruments & amps would constantly spoil), “Ho Swee Knights” football training on Tuesdays & Thursdays at 5pm.

There were many characters that came through the doors. And many stories to tell.

It was not always rosy or happy at N.C. There were plenty of fights & conflicts. Sometimes the children & youth would get violent towards each other, as well as aggressive toward the staff, shouting vulgarities & even punching staff. The center could be very noisy, & staff would find it impossible to work because of the commotion the youth would intentionally create to “disturb staff”. I had my fair share of conflicts, & unfortunately lost my temper many times. I remember I did not manage my emotions very well, & would shout forcefully at the children when I was angry. Looking back now, it was an awful demonstration of immaturity & pride.

There were many other activities, adventures & memories.

I fondly remember a five day trip to Mt. Ophir, Malaysia. Sam & Joe qualified to go, but Tim was too young to join, so the night we left, he cried. It was an unforgettable adventure, & makes for a wonderful story – but not in this article.

Each boy took different paths down the years.

Sam served as a fire fighter for his National Service, & he was so proud. I remember him coming to the center in his uniform & would share about his adventures battling fires. One day we organized the children to visit him at his fire station on Jurong Island. Sam assisted in the arrangements. I remember him coming down the fire man pole. He was grinning with tremendous pride! He tried to sign on, but was rejected despite appeals because he did not obtain his Primary School Leaving Exam certificate. He was devastated ...

Joe evolved into a brilliant electric guitarist. He participated in recording an album we did called “True Stories” – a CD with songs that told stories about our clients & their plight. There was one gig at a hotel we did for a counseling center, & the band was very anxious. We gathered at the pool side to chill & there a fellow youth who offered Joe a cigarette to calm his nerves. Up to that point Joe managed to avoid the temptation to smoke, but he succumbed that evening. Over the months, Joe would fall to further peer pressure, & it led to a dangerous game with drugs & crime. It led him to youth detention. It was a sad day the boys went in ...

Tim continued as the loyal user of the center. He completed primary school, & proudly went to secondary school. His daily routine was to be at the center promptly at 1.40pm, & one of the staff sending him home at 10.00pm. His favorite activity was helping around. He was sensitive & hated to be teased about his

weight. The other boys & girls knew his vulnerability & took advantage of it. Tim was no angel & created conflicts as well. But somehow as Tim grew older he knew to stay out of trouble ...

My wife had worked at N.C. for four great years. She left when we had our son ...

I stopped work at N.C. on the last day of October, 2001. I admit, when I said good-bye to the children, youth & my colleagues, I contained my emotions very well, but as I walked to the bus stop carrying my box of office possessions, I cried. I had served seven years, gave my best years there ...

Over the past eleven years, my wife & I would occasionally talk about our years at N.C. And we had often wondered what happened to boys like Sam, Joe & Tim ...

It is now Tuesday 20th March, 2012, 11am. My wife & I having our off day from work, taking a leisurely stroll by Changi beach. It is an overcast warm morning. The beach seemed quiet. Ahead were a bunch of men in their bright colorful uniforms that told us that they were from a major furniture store. They were playing football, obviously on a break. By the sea water I see one of the men staring intently at me. Suddenly he raises his right arm up with incredible excitement & shouts out my name: "MATTHEW. HEY, MATTHEW LAH!! ALAMAK! LAGI REBECCA!!"

He runs towards us, almost like a romantic movie where the man runs to the woman. (I said, "almost like"). It is Joe!

Behind him another man starts to walk rapidly to us. It was Sam!

Both men reach out their hands & shake it firmly. Sam shouts out: "HEY! MATTHEW LAH!" Emerging from the delivery truck is a chubby young man. It is Tim!

I walk up to Tim, & put my arm around him, shake his hand. Tim is all grown up!

And there, my wife & I have a one hour reunion. We are amazed, proud, happy. Amazed to see how far they have come. All three were now in a stable job. Unlike their parents, they have decided to keep the same job since 2007. They are electrical appliance installers. They have retained skills learnt during their years at N.C.

Although Tim is the youngest amongst these men, he is one of the employees in charge. He is one of the drivers. He has a vehicle license obtained during his National Service because he can read, thanks to E.F.G. club & early intervention at N.C. so many years ago. His leadership skills stand out a mile.

Sam & Joe have tattoos on their arms & body, like scars from a past life they wish to forget.

Tim is well groomed like the little boy he was with his wet parted hair & body covered in white talcum powder. He has no tattoos. He has stayed away from trouble.

Ironically, 100 meters from where we stand with Sam, Joe & Tim, a man is arrested by six policemen for illegal squatting. All three boys briefly glance, hang their heads & turn away. It is a life they acknowledge yet wish to avoid.

Sam is the same, updating us on different ones that my wife & I knew from N.C. He tells us who is successful, who went to prison, who passed away. He looks painfully sad when he informs us his mother passed away in 2008, but then he moves quickly to another story.

Joe is still the joker. I can tell he is no longer on drugs because his memory is phenomenal! He remembers lyrics from songs on the “True Stories” album, describes people’s behavior so well, recalls events with great detail. He expresses regret not completing guitar class or joining the S-league. He says: “*Wasted la!*”

Tim describes the work they do. He tells us that sometimes they carry washing machines & fridges up to people’s flats, and these are so heavy. He says: “*Wa! So heavy you know until my lower back got pain. Then I need to sit down one corner to rest you know. Very tired!*” We laugh together. Tim is just like years ago bursting into the office breathless, seeking relief on the office sofa under the air con!

We soon realize where we were. We are at Changi beach. Then each man recalls our times at N.C., playing at Changi beach, going for camps, hanging out at N.C. disturbing the staff, doing carpentry.

They explain how their current company will be taken over by new management, and their boss has advised them to keep their job under the new arrangement. They intend to take the boss’ advice. It reminded me of when they were youth, listening to advice from the youth leaders at N.C.

12pm. One hour has passed. We need to go. We shake hands & smile. We have all grown & moved on.

My wife & I marvel at how Sam, Joe & Tim have progressed. They have made a decision to find stability, to break out of the poverty & crime cycle.

We know they are not perfect. After all, who is?

They have found their way. They are prepared to work hard, yet enjoy life. Much of their lifestyle mimics the life they had lived at N.C. which they could reflect. Joe said: “*We still hang together. Like the old days at N.C. We work electrical, & then we go out. We are friends.*”

The fruits of our labor have paid off. We did it. I say again, **WE** did it. “We”, as in the family at N.C. (Beyond Social Services). “We”, as in the children, the youth, the Bukit Ho Swee community (the school, the police, the partners), the volunteers, the management committee, the staff.

We did it. And we **continue** to do it ...