

Making a difference!

Written by Cecilia Thomas for Carol Service 2016 Address

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, welcome to The Lottie Betts-Priddy Education Trust carol service. Each year the trustees invite someone to give a brief address that they think will pick up one of the themes that were important to Lottie during her life.

This year I have been invited to talk about my work with disadvantaged and vulnerable adolescents in the London area and I will be trying to tie it in with one of Lottie's most passionately held beliefs: that education has the power to transform lives.

Over the past thirty years, I have run an organization that works mostly on a category of young people known as "Care Leavers": in other words, persons aged 25 or under, who have been looked after by a local authority for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14; and who were looked after by the local authority at school-leaving age or after that date; a young man or woman who may officially be an adult but because of the separation from their birth families still need additional support to take the place of the guidance and advice that would normally be provided by family members.

As we all know children and young people (like the rest of us) need love, nurturing, positive reinforcement and the assurance of knowing that they belong. This they usually get from their families and those immediately around them. I am sure we can all recall going through photo albums and proudly relating to friends and family members, both alive and dead. I hope it will not surprise you to know that even in this 21st century many children in the UK and around the world do not have family photos and some do not even know their roots. Civil unrest and war, family breakup, drug addiction and extreme poverty are just a few of the factors that can separate children from their families, memories, and a sense of belonging to a particular heritage. In Sierra Leone, the Civil War created untold damage and unfortunately, the Ebola outbreak through its impact on family groups and the rejection of survivors has created a similar effect.

The role of my organization is to help young people in London reach maturity in different spheres – through education, moving into employment or simply moving into healthy adult relationships. As you can imagine it is challenging. I could stand here all day and tell you many amazing stories but I have selected one success story which I hope ties in with the saying "teach a person to fish and they can feed themselves for life".

My story is about a young girl, "Maria," whom I met when she was aged 16 with a three-month-old little girl. As the child of a drug dealer and an alcoholic mother, she was disadvantaged from birth. Tragically, at 8 her father was gunned down right in front of her and at 12 she returned home from school to find her mother dead in the living from a sleeping pill overdose. Now orphaned, she was put in the care of the local authority. Desperate to find somewhere she belonged after the death of her parents, she got into a relationship with a young man who was a known criminal -- dealing in drugs and involved in robbery. Unfortunately, she clung on to this young man and his relatives as a substitute for the family she had lost.

I met her after she had been attending a mother and baby assessment centre for three months. She did well and was given an opportunity to be supported in the community. Her boyfriend was in a youth

offending centre when the baby was born so she bonded well with her key workers and was doing very well as a teenage mother. We were hopeful that she would start making more positive choices in her life.

Unfortunately, no sooner was her boyfriend released from prison than he was back in her life. Her life style deteriorated and she no longer related well with her key workers. Social services began the process of taking her young baby into care as she was no longer prioritising the child's care and needs as she had before.

In recognition of the pressure Maria was under from both her boyfriend and his family to continue the relationship, she was moved to a new address and warned not to reveal the address to anyone from her old life. The boyfriend's mother got the information out of her and the boyfriend turned up on her doorstep almost immediately. She stopped going to college and failed to be entered for exams because her attendance was so poor. He moved in and ended up beating her up so badly that she was hospitalised and in a coma for a week. On her discharge from hospital the local authority moved her away from her council flat to another area in the borough. As she was no longer in my geographical area of responsibility, we lost touch.

Thankfully, she reached out to me a few years after she had moved away. She told me that, as she lay in her hospital bed, all that went through her head was "Cecilia told me if I do not leave this man he will kill me." She made up her mind, then and there, to keep away from him and his family and start afresh.

I was overwhelmed when she told me she was doing a foundation degree with the view to training to become a teacher. I was overjoyed that she had seen the light and was doing something positive that would give her children and herself a better life.

The children in the Hamilton village school have been given an opportunity through the partnership agreement between the school management team and the Trustees of TLBPET. As a result, each class has a complete stock of textbooks; they now have classroom libraries with supplementary books for reading for pleasure; a water supply system. This is opening them to new worlds. They are using it to access books parents cannot afford to buy.

This year for the first time every single child passed the primary school leaving examination. While the school head-teacher appreciates the contribution of the textbooks, TLBPET recognizes the contribution of the village headman, who donated the timber needed for construction, the hard work of the teachers and the foresight of the senior management team in identifying the textbooks as an important resource they needed to improve performance.

Both the story of Maria and that of the Hamilton school illustrate the importance of key interventions. It may have taken several years for Maria to recover from her childhood tragedies and for the school to finally reap the benefits of TLBPET support but eventually, both Maria and the children of Hamilton School have moved to the next level making efforts and decisions that will make significant differences to their futures.

My organization and others like it are fortunate to be funded by the UK government. The work that TLBPET does can be supported by Sierra Leoneans in the Diaspora. Standing orders of £10, £20 or £25 a month can make a tremendous difference to this and other schools.

Construction of one lockable library cabinet -- £45

Skills upgrading for one teacher --- £300

Wiring and light fittings for one classroom -- £100 (estimated)

But we need other kinds of help as well. If you are on a gap year, a mid-career break or have just retired – why not consider spending a few weeks or month working in Sierra Leone with a school and sharing your academic knowledge, administrative experience or fundraising skills. TLBPET can help facilitate this experience.

If you can't travel, those skills can be used to help the Trustees source donations, raise funds and develop links with other charities or businesses and institutions that can promote the work of The Lottie Betts-Priddy Education Trust. If you have any ideas, talk to one of the Trustees about them. Even if you cannot work directly with TLBPET, the Trustees can suggest other charities that can use your help.

Thank you for your attention and I urge to consider regular support to TLBPET.