

**Redefining youth stereotypes –
*Trouble-makers or change-makers?***

*Address given by Steve Carter, Volunteering Canterbury Board Member
at Youth Volunteer Awards 2006*

Lazy. Drink and drug-addled. Violent. Antisocial. No respect for authority.

For those of you who do not know me, let me assure you that those are not labels that are attached to me – not any more anyway! But they are, of course, words that are commonly used to denigrate young people. If you believed everything you heard in the news, you would think that all young people were constantly to be found drinking themselves insensible, popping countless party pills and doing untold damage to people and property. Just consider the apoplectic reporting that we have seen in our own Press over recent weeks. Of course, if you believed everything you read in the paper, every dark corner would harbour an Al Qaeda terrorist waiting to blow themselves up and every chicken would be a bird flu epidemic waiting to happen. Scare-mongering just seems to be their stock-in-trade.

The reality is clearly very different, and that is the value of an event like today's. We have the opportunity to recognise and promote the positive achievements of the young people in our community.....and they exist so much more than we are led to believe.

In a survey (*of young people*) carried out by Volunteering Canterbury in 1996, over two thirds of respondents said that they had carried out voluntary work since the age of 14 and more than half had volunteered in the previous 12 months. Of those who had volunteered, more than three-quarters cited their major motivation as giving to others or altruism.

In the United States (a country it is fashionable to deride as socially unaware), a similar survey from 1998 suggested that 70% of young people between the ages of 15 and 21 had participated in activities to strengthen their community at some point and that youth volunteering continues to increase. In fact 73% of America's young people believed they had the power to make a difference in their communities.

In the UK in 2001 the Home Office Citizenship Survey found that 40% of 16-24 year olds had been involved in formal volunteering and 73% had been involved in informal volunteering in the 12 months before interview.

So, contrary to those stereotypes, young people around the world *are* making changes, *are* involved and *are* connected in positive ways.

I grew up during a time of great social division in the UK, the much-lamented Thatcher years and in total nearly two decades of Conservative Government. Those years were characterised by protest, much of it driven by young people eager to challenge the prevailing opinion. The Freedom to Party movement confronted the increasing restrictions on youth culture; Reclaim the Streets questioned the stranglehold the motor car has on our cities; and in 1990 the continuing demonstrations against the injustices of the Poll Tax saw over two hundred thousand people fill the centre of London. What was common across those protests and others was the way the antisocial stereotype that I alluded to earlier was used in the media to scorn the protesters as anarchists and trouble-makers spoiling for a fight, neatly justifying the use of police with riot shields and batons to control the 'mob'.

Nowadays we see similar responses whenever protesters (again, often younger people) gather to confront the World Trade Organisation or similar 'free trade' bodies. People challenging sweat-shop culture, the devastation of the environment and the exploitation of the Developing World are routinely dismissed as anti-capitalist or anti-authority and are set about with tear gas and water cannons for having the temerity to exercise their right to free speech.

But eventually the passion to make change does have an effect. In time, people start to listen. Maybe there is a problem with global warming. Maybe it is fundamentally wrong that the shirt on my back, which costs \$50 to buy, is made in China by a worker earning 10 cents a day.

Consider the following people:

Martin Luther King. By the age of 24 he was pastor of the most important black church in Montgomery, Alabama. By 26, he had been instrumental in the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott – a protest fired by the Rosa Parks case (you may well recall that she was the woman who broke the law by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger).

Steve Biko. Alongside Nelson Mandela, one of the most important figures in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. At 22 he founded the South African Students Association and at 26 he was President of the Black People's Convention. By 31, he was dead, most likely murdered in a police cell.

And what about that awesome young Chinese student who stood in front of the tanks in Tianenmen Square in 1989? He was named by Time Magazine as one of the '100 most influential people of the Twentieth Century.'

And here's a great one.

Craig Kielburger was 12 years old when child labour activist Iqbal Masih was killed in Pakistan. That event changed Craig's life forever. He went on a seven-week trip to South Asia to learn everything he could about child labourers. He is now a passionate, articulate, and effective advocate on their behalf. With a group of his peers, Craig founded "Free the Children," an advocacy organisation that has 10,000 members in 20 countries.

Anti-social trouble-makers or agents for social and political change? Well, I would contend that history has largely made that decision.

You may be wondering where I am going with this, so let's bring it back to a local perspective and the reason for today's celebration.

Volunteering is all about taking action. It is about making changes and it is about making a difference. Volunteers are a vital part of the sporting movement in this country. They carry out important work in the environment and in our green spaces. They have key roles in heritage and the arts, without which many museums and galleries would close. And of course they are the lynchpins of the social and community care sector.

The value of volunteering is almost impossible to measure – though many have tried. In 2002, the Value Added by Voluntary Agencies project conservatively estimated the economic contribution of volunteers to New Zealand society to be \$126 million. But many people, and I am among them, would strenuously argue that that figure vastly undervalues the contribution. For a start, there is a huge amount of invisible social action that goes on out there, not coordinated through any sort of formal group and not measurable by economists. But in essence, it isn't about dollar values, because the activity itself is not about money or reward.

It is about the notion of a society and of communities that are self-supporting and that are able to respond to needs as they arise. It is about a gift that is freely given. *Aroha ki te tangata a rohe*. To get a better idea of the value of volunteering I ask you to contemplate what would happen if every person carrying out some work in their community without payment were to 'down tools' tomorrow. Society, quite frankly, would collapse in chaos. Volunteering goes to the heart of who we are as a country, who we are as a community and who we are as human beings.

And the young people honoured today are out there doing it, making a real difference where it is needed, translating their passions into activities that benefit the people they serve, and, in the long run, benefit us all. They are working, for free remember, in a range of areas, including counselling, heritage, the environment and social care, and along the way they are developing in themselves skills and qualities that will ensure that they will become the leaders of tomorrow in a wide variety of fields.

Of course, by the time they become leaders, there will be a new generation of dissenters younger than them, saying 'No! This is wrong! This is not the world we want to grow up in! You must do things differently!'

And that is how it should be. That is how communities and societies develop and evolve. Our young people drive a new paradigm, fearlessly building the world they want to inherit.

I'll leave you with a story of a sign posted in a shop window in the UK, which read "Employers: Hire a young person while they still know everything."

That may be a somewhat cynical view, but while young people have the passion to see wrongs and strive to right them; to see gaps and work to fill them; and to see needs and press on to meet them, then we surely have the responsibility to nurture and support that whenever and wherever we can.

I, for one, am proud to add my voice to the chorus that celebrates the achievements of the young people here today and I am sure that you will join me and my colleagues at Volunteering Canterbury in that celebration.