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DANCE

Troubled teens find purpose and confidence through dancing

One step at a time

Since 2014, the annual dance-musical production organised by Youth Outreach has helped hundreds of troubled youngsters stand back on their own feet, writes **Kate Lok**

Being a teenager in Hong Kong today isn't easy. You have to juggle school work, family expectations, peer pressure and new relationships, all while going through a range of physical and emotional upheavals.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this sometime leads to psychological pressures, which some individuals can find hard to handle. It is linked to the worrying rise in teen suicide cases in Hong Kong in recent years, a tragic development which has prompted questions about the lack of support and attention for the issue of teen mental health.

For those affected - and those around them - it is a difficult and isolating experience, requiring a great deal of courage to face up to the problem and find a way through.

Youth Outreach, a non-profit organisation dedicated to helping at-risk youngsters become responsible members of the community, is

doing all it can to make a positive difference. For 26 years now, it has been running programmes which help teens rebuild their self-assurance through dancing, most recently at their own School of Hip-hop.

The basic aim is to use dance to give those labelled underachievers, including school dropouts and former triad members, the chance to find new meaning and purpose in life.

The annual Youth Outreach "YO! Dancical" production has just been staged for the fifth time, allowing young dancers to take to the stage and showcase their talents in front of a very appreciative audience. Each performer has a different story and has taken a different path. But together, they put on a slick and inspiring show, and their sense of self-worth and personal achievement really shines through.

The event is brainchild of Leonie Ki Man-fung, a member of the

organisation's executive committee, as well as producer and creative force. She has been actively involved in community work for young people since 2009, when she took part in the government's teen-targeted narcotics prevention programme.

She was inspired to do more after seeing *The Way We Dance*, a film about street dance, which was very popular among teens, and came up with the idea of helping troubled kids participate and perform in a dance-musical.

"I was amazed by the talent we found and the way they lit up on stage when they danced," Ki says. "Their confidence really shone through. They were kids who had been on drugs and involved with gangs, which meant they were always the focus of criticism. But through dance, they became the focus of praise."

Chow Tai Fook Jewellery has been the main sponsor of the event since it began in 2014, and their deputy general manager Vivian Hui is full of

praise for what Youth Outreach has done.

"They had the vision to support these teens, helping them develop a talent, find their own way, and making a positive difference in their lives," Hui says. "You can see from their faces that they truly enjoy what they're doing on stage. They are from different backgrounds, but come together to put on a great show."

The title of this year's performance, *Save the Moment*, had special resonance. The story centred on recent concerns about youth mental health in Hong Kong.

"Tragedy can happen in a flash," Ki says. "I truly believe that group therapy can help, because friends affect young people a lot. The support of peers and meeting like-minded people can make all the difference."

The show conveyed a message which was powerful, simple and positive. It told young people that "it's OK not to be OK" and that it's normal to feel out



Photo: Edmond So



I was amazed by the talent we found and the way they lit up on stage when they danced

KI MAN-FUNG, PRODUCER AND SCRIPTWRITER OF *SAVE THE MOMENT*



Save the Moment is staged entirely by youngsters from the School of Hip Hop.

of place sometimes. However, it's also important not to let that negativity build up in you.

To illustrate this, the main character was a girl caught between two boys, one from an affluent family, the other poor and less privileged. The performance then showed how everybody has to face hardships in life, regardless of their background. The two boys represented how conflict can arise and, since there are two sides to every story, how there may be no definite answer to a particular problem. It's a matter of assessing the choices and making the right decision.

Cheung Lai-yi, a 16-year-old from Our Lady's College, was the leading lady. She's been dancing since she was young, but the combination of hip-hop and musical was a completely new form for her.

"My biggest challenge wasn't learning the moves; that can be done with continuous practice," she says. "The

most challenging part was adapting to the way musicals work—how moves and expressions have to be highly exaggerated. I'd never done a dance-musical before and I'm not a very expressive person."

Cheung, along with fellow performer 16-year-old Wong Sze-nga from The Yuen Yuen Institute MFBM Nei Ming Chan Lui Chung Tak Memorial College, have now set their eyes on something even bigger: the 2018 Summer Youth Olympics in Buenos Aires.

Wong started dancing three years ago after watching older kids at school and thinking they looked "really cool". That prompted her to take lessons with the School of Hip Hop, which led to landing a role in the dance-musical. "Dancing has really pushed my limits and forced me out of my comfort zone," she says. "I'd like to continue hip-hop dancing and learning more about its culture."

The two will head to Japan in May for the qualifiers for the 2018 Youth Olympics, where breakdancing will make its debut.

Emphasising the message of equality and inclusion, this year's "YO! Dancical" performers also included two students with special educational needs. Leung Chun-fai, a 14-year-old from the Buddhist To Chi Fat She Yeung Yat Lam Memorial School, has autism, but is known to his schoolmates as the "dancing king".

"I have been dancing for two years and really enjoy it," he says. "And I liked making a lot of new friends through taking part in the dance-musical."

Fellow student Wong Wai-chun, who has mild intellectual impairment, admits to being nervous initially about performing in front of a crowd, but the 16-year-old now "really looks forward to being on stage".

Their principal Chan Keung-kai is delighted to see the positive changes in his students since they discovered the joy of dancing.

"This is the first year our students took part in the musical, but Leung and Wong had both been dancing at school for a while," Chan says. "They used to be really timid, but dancing really changed them as individuals. They are now a lot more confident and expressive, and they really enjoy what they do, which is what matters most."

He notes that Wong has also joined the Hong Kong Adventure Corps, where he communicates confidently with kids from mainstream schools. He used to be very reticent, but now constantly tries to push his own limits. Leung, too, has really matured and become much more open since joining "YO! Dancical", and will even take the initiative in caring for other people.

"This just goes to show that academic excellence is not the only way to succeed in life," Chan says. "Our students have found a sense of accomplishment and purpose in dancing, something they truly enjoy." ■



Photo: Sam Tsang



They are from different backgrounds, but come together to put on a great show

VIVIAN HUI, DEPUTY GENERAL MANAGER OF CHOW TAI FOOK JEWELLERY

(From left to right) Leung Chun-fai, Wong Sze-nga, Cheung Lai-yi and Wong Wai-chun.