

Reintegration in Society - A Child's Vision for A Better Future

By Carina Olthof and Leslyn Thompson

Still a child, Carletta at the age of 16 has already been confronted with many challenges and brutalities in life, which some adults may never have experienced throughout their lives. Attempting to escape from her harsh life, Carletta ran away from home several times and sought refuge with her “boyfriend” in whom she said she found love and security. Her father, a single parent since 2001 was not able to cope with her behavior so he made what he thought was the right decision - a radical one. He requested police officers to help to place his daughter in the juvenile rehabilitation centre - the New Opportunity Corps (NOC). According to him it was only temporary to ‘correct’ her behavior.



Children at the NOC whose identities may not be revealed to protect their privacy

Only a year ago Carletta became immersed into her new life at NOC. Since then she has adjusted extremely well as she “plays games and sports with friends in the yard”, and learns practical skills that will make her more marketable after leaving the institution. With gleaming eyes Carletta enthusiastically announced “right now I’m learning to knit a towel: creamy with pink tints and lace on the outside!”. Her eager little face drops however, and her

shoulders slump when mentioning her parents as she recalls, “I didn’t hear from my father, my mother, no one, for the whole year I been here at NOC”. In that moment she was transformed from a young woman to a vulnerable child as she recalled the “many nights I lay in bed wond’rin if father is still work’in, or if he is still alive”

However, time is passing by quickly for Carletta, and in October 2009 she will be one of 62 students being released from NOC this year, although her biggest wish is “to go home right now”. Then, she said, she can apologize to her father and because she is so extremely ashamed of her behavior she prefers to live with her mother instead because she doesn’t want to cause her father anymore pain. Carletta’s continues to speak eagerly about having a better life which she plans to do by enrolling in a school because she “wants to learn more and go to computer classes! I really want to make a better life for my self, and now that I spent some time here I know just how to do that”, she concluded.”

The integration programme at the NOC, supported by UNICEF will guide Carletta through the process of reuniting her with her parents and reintegration into her community. Though she is still feeling the thorns of her intricate past, they have also helped her in becoming the matured teenager she is today. Yet the flame of youth is still flickering, and the vibrant child inside believes she has a second chance. Mastering her circumstances, building a life and looking forward to the future.

Carletta's story only highlights one facet in UNICEF's support in the area of Juvenile Justice for Guyana. UNICEF aims to ensure that by 2010, there is a juvenile justice system that protects children (at least 50%) as witnesses and in conflict with the law, which is in accordance with the CRC and other international standards.

This is translated into action on legal reform (the Juvenile Justice Bill of 2008), institutional reform, supporting access to quality social services (including health education, psychosocial support, legal aid), promoting the use of alternatives to sentencing (restorative justice, diversion cautions, mediation, family group conferencing and the provision of non-custodial sentences especially for girls), prevention (working with communities and solidifying the link with sports for development and other adolescent development activities), facilitating multi-sectoral coordination, training and ensuring that all children are fully reintegrated.

The New Opportunity Corps (NOC) has existed since the colonial days when it was initially known as the “Essequibo Boys School”. Only in 1979 it received the name NOC, and much later in 1982 it became co-educational as a result of the policy being changed by the government. The NOC attempts to guide children in conflict with the law, providing the services and support necessary for them to be fully reintegrated into their communities.

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