

## *Igniting the Fires of Hope*

### A CASE STUDY OF THE SERVOL INTEGRATED EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By Sister Ruth Montrichard, Father Gerard Pantin

#### *Introduction*

Three months after the founder of SERVOL, Father Gerard Pantin, walked into the ghetto area called Laventille in 1970 he confessed to one of the residents called Chaca that he was getting nowhere and was thinking of giving up and returning to his teaching post at St. Mary's College. Chaca was vehement in his protest: "You cannot do that! It is true that you have done nothing more than get jobs for a few dozen kids; but what you have really done is to bring HOPE to the area. Every morning you walk up the hill, those watching you think: maybe tomorrow it will be my turn to get a job. And once people have hope they will continue the struggle."

These words made a lasting impression on SERVOL's founder to the extent that they have been officially incorporated into the SERVOL Mission Statement which reads as follows:

*SERVOL is an organisation of weak, frail, ordinary, imperfect yet hope-filled and committed people, seeking to help weak, frail, ordinary, imperfect, hope-drained people become agents of attitudinal and social change in a journey which leads to total human development.*

Today SERVOL still "walks up the hill" every day, but the original two hill climbers have been replaced by thousands of adolescents who bear the emblem of SERVOL on their shirts, hundreds of early childhood educators who journey to their pre-schools, scores of parent outreach workers who visit parents: this little army of trainees, instructors and even pre-school children proclaim silently to people all over Trinidad and Tobago "we are SERVOL and we bring with us a message of hope."

In the ghetto, Fr. Pantin was immediately confronted by the social problems of the area: unemployment, poverty, low self esteem; but he quickly realised that a main cause of these problems was a total breakdown of family relationships in the area, coupled with poor parenting skills. The only problem was that he did not have a clue how to deal with the situation so he decided to begin by listening to the people and helping them to start their own tiny projects.

#### *Setting up of early childhood programmes*

He discovered that communities had set up child-minding centres in community centres in which working parents placed their children. The people were asked: "would you like us to help you transform these centres into high quality Early Childhood Centres by training the members and supplying educational materials?" They said "Yes". The result is that today SERVOL administers 154 Early Childhood Centres, which are managed by a community board of education and staffed by teachers who have received two years of intensive training culminating in their being awarded a certificate validated by the prestigious Oxford University.

*AMANDA (parent): At first I thought that all this SERVOL talk about small children learning through play was a lot of nonsense. But when I saw how my child fitted so well into primary school I realised that they were right not to insist on bookwork.*

By now the SERVOL staff had grown from one man to a group of 28 people, 16 of whom were middle class women who had volunteered to help with the clerical work while the others were 12 soldiers and sailors who had been "loaned" to SERVOL by the Government which continued to pay their salaries and who SERVOL trained to be a special type of social worker whose job it was to LISTEN to the various community groups and who were destined to work with SERVOL for eight years.

Apart from this, only token help was given by the public sector for the first seventeen years of the initiative; financial help was obtained from the private sector and from overseas foundations in the U.S.A., Germany, Switzerland and Canada and in a very special way Bernard Van Leer Foundation of Holland. Without this financial help and the opportunity that these foundations gave of visiting other projects and sharing ideas and experiences with others, one wonders if our fledgling organisation would ever have grown to what it is today.

### ***Helping adolescents***

Listening to the wisdom of the grassroots communities, SERVOL shifted its focus from dialoguing with 25-35 year olds to offering skills earlier in life, namely training programmes for 16-19 year olds.

The majority of them had not benefited from the education system and all demonstrated an interest in acquiring a vocational skill. Since neither the public nor the public sector were offering help to this particular group, SERVOL responded by setting up training programmes in carpentry, tailoring, practical nursing, plumbing, electrical installation, food preparation and other allied skills which prepared the trainees to enter the job market.

Evaluation of the outcome of these programmes revealed that only fifty per cent of the trainees sought or found jobs and SERVOL, always attentive to the outcome of its programmes, realised that the self-esteem of many of its trainees was so low that it

effectively prevented them from becoming employable, even though they had the necessary skills.

The result was that SERVOL built into its adolescent programme, a human development course which was intended to boost self-esteem and to make the trainees aware of the causes of their problems. The result of all this is that today, everyone who enrolls in the SERVOL adolescent training programme begins with a 14 week human development programme which involves courses in self-awareness, spirituality, the role that the subconscious plays in our lives, an understanding of FEELINGS, particularly that of repressed anger, how complexes and prejudices are born and how to boost self-esteem.

*AMELIA (a former trainee): "If the ADP were not there, I don't know how I would be looking at life today. The ADP made me aware of who I am. Every youth in the educational system should be exposed to the ADP."*

How much of this stays with them? We do not know for sure, but subsequent evaluations have indicated that the basics are remembered.

### ***Training adolescents in parenting skills***

Despite all of this, SERVOL continued to be haunted by the breakdown of family relationships and poor parenting skills.

SERVOL had always had a passion for integration, for pulling things together rather than keeping them apart. That is why we call all our Adolescent centres, LIFE CENTRES, because they are all about life and life is an integrated process. That explains why SERVOL built its largest Life Centre in 1978 and under the same roof included the following: training in welding, practical nursing, plumbing, sewing, auto-mechanics, food preparation, electrical installation, tailoring, woodwork, a day care centre for children from three months to two years and an Early childhood Programme for three to five year old children.

We noticed with increasing interest, the tendency of the male trainees to drift over to these children's units and to gaze curiously at the antics of the babies and toddlers.

We capitalised on this phenomenon by introducing into our adolescent programme a parenting programme taught by trained instructors, in effect an ADOLESCENT PARENTING PROGRAMME. This was especially relevant as most first pregnancies occur between the ages of 17 and 20. Perhaps the vicious cycle of child abuse and neglect could be halted by focusing on adolescents. In this program adolescents study child development. They learn the importance of how poor nutrition, emotional traumas and alcohol and drug abuse by a woman during pregnancy can cause serious physical and psychological damage to the child.

Regarding the practical aspects of parenting, each trainee, boys as well as girls, spend time in the day nursery learning how to interact with and care for babies and toddlers, as well as three to five year olds. And, surprise, they love it; especially the male trainees. Accordingly, attention is given to the male image in the home and the father's role in bringing up children.

As a result of introducing this human development programme into the adolescent training programme, the drop-out rate has fallen from 47% to 4%.

*CHARLIE (former trainee): "The ADP made me aware of particular areas in my life. It made me realise that a person has the power to instil knowledge in another person's life. I consider parenting to be an honour and a privilege."*

### ***The evolution of POP: Parent Outreach Programme***

Based on the educational and psychological research stressing the importance of early child development, SERVOL realized that we cannot wait for children to come to school to begin our assault on the cycle of poverty and deprivation; this must begin with the pregnant mother.

We have found that a significant number of these mothers are single parents who are under enormous financial and psychological stress which often leads to neglect or battering of children. For SERVOL, to think is to act. The result was that we selected our most gifted teachers, gave them additional training in how to dialogue with adults and initiated our POP programme.

To reach out to these under-served people, twenty five (25) trained POP facilitators go into the remote villages and ghettos of Trinidad and Tobago each day, going from house to house, making friends with the parents and helping them to deal with the problems they are having with their small children and life in general. In these encounters the parents are praised for what they have accomplished and advice given on the importance of proper nutrition, vaccinations, sanitation, and suggestions for alternatives to physical punishment.

Subsequent to these one-to-one encounters, parents and the POP facilitators meet in small groups in which they share common problems and possible solutions, and learn how to produce marketable items which enables them to earn an income while staying at home with their children.

*MARVA (parent): "My life has completely changed since my POP facilitator began to visit me. I have now doubled my income by the handicraft and clothes I produce and best of all I can look after my children while working."*

To say that POP has been enthusiastically received by thousands of parents is an understatement. What is particularly heart warming is to witness the growth in self confidence of so many parents and how many of them have become successful entrepreneurs in handicraft and other products while remaining at home to care for their children.

*YVONNE (single parent): "I was beaten as a child and so naturally I beat my children. It was only when my POP facilitator taught me the harm this could do and showed me other ways of discipline that I stopped beating."*

### ***Expansion, funding and sustainability***

For the period 1970-1986, SERVOL was a relatively small organisation administering a total of eleven (11) Early Childhood Centres (ECCE), two Adolescent Life Centres and a school for mentally challenged children.

In 1987, a newly elected Government appointed SERVOL as its agent for ECCE and Adolescent Programmes and asked the organisation to expand its programmes all over Trinidad and Tobago. In response to this challenge, SERVOL initiated a drive to establish an endowment fund fuelled by generous contributions from the local community and the Bernard Van Lear Foundation which has now reached a total of U.S. \$3.8 million. Currently, the Trinidad Government gives an annual subvention to pay the salaries of all teachers and administrative staff of the ECCE and Adolescent programmes, with SERVOL continuing to bear the cost of infrastructure development through the interest obtained from the endowment fund. SERVOL presently serves over 4,000 adolescents and 5000 young children in these two programmes and has expanded its programmes to practically every island in the Eastern Caribbean as well as South Africa and Ireland.

It should be emphasised that all of SERVOL's programmes are COMMUNITY BASED AND PARENT ORIENTED. Every one of the SERVOL based centres is managed by a Community Board of Education which is the official employer of teachers and instructors. These Boards of Education are responsible for paying teachers' salaries as well as National Insurance and Health Surcharge contributions from the funds that are transferred to their account by SERVOL each month. In addition, they monitor attendance, punctuality and performance of teachers and in a number of instances have dismissed delinquent teachers after consultation with SERVOL.

The importance of the community-based nature of the programme was vividly demonstrated in 1992 when another Government was elected and one of their first acts in cost cutting was to slash the SERVOL subvention by forty percent (40%). Since the subvention covered the salaries of teachers, this would have resulted in the closure of many of our centres. The government backed down as a result of community mobilization, which included demonstrating in front of parliament. It is clear that once

SERVOL continues to elicit this type of support from Government that the programme will be sustainable

Sustainability was further ensured in 1997 when the government of Trinidad and Tobago through the Ministry of Education appointed SERVOL as its agent for non-formal education and took over the payment of salaries of teachers and instructors who were formerly paid by grants from overseas foundations.

The SERVOL programmes are now recognised as a life-line to children at risk by the public sector and to quote the words of a Prime Minister: "It would be impossible to think of educational programmes in Trinidad and Tobago without SERVOL."

In 1995, SERVOL felt that it was fully involved in the national educational thrust by training over 4,000 adolescents every year and providing early care and education for more than 6,000 children and their parents on an annual basis.

However, the communities were not finished with us and they challenged us to build one final bridge between the ghetto and the world of high technology. They told us, in effect, that while they were more than grateful for the efforts of SERVOL through which more than 50,000 adolescents had been trained, the majority of whom had secured employment, there was a whole world of high technology sweeping over Trinidad and Tobago to which our graduates had no access. Were the adolescents who come from poverty areas condemned forever to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water" or could we raise our hope for them a notch higher and open up this world to them?

The Inter-American Development Bank, after careful examination, agreed to fund the project; the result is that today we have three (3) Hi-Tech Centres in North, Central and South Trinidad in which our craftsmen follow post graduate courses in Computer Technology, Digital Electronics and Computer Control Electronics and which turn out 400 graduates a year, many of whom are snapped up by local industry.

There is a tracking system in place to chart the outcome of all HI-TECH graduates; the statistics for the 1998/99 class reads as follows:

Placed in jobs	:	53.0%
Opting for further education	:	20.7%
Not placed (inappropriate, dropouts, migration, etc.)	:	11.2%
Could not be contacted	:	15.1%

### ***Reasons for the success of SERVOL***

It is quite difficult to dissect a living organism and to come up with a clear picture of what makes this specific life form survive in the struggle for existence which surrounds every NGO. However, it may be useful to pinpoint some of the more obvious characteristics which have helped in the struggle.

First and foremost is the IDEALISM that permeates the organisation. It has been said many times that SERVOL is one of the few places in this world where one can witness miracles on a daily basis, the miracle of the transformation of human lives. When you are in contact with small children, adolescents, the mentally challenged, parents, communities and you see them CHANGE and you realise that you are one of the instruments in this change, then you go home each evening exhausted but electrified. The reason is that in helping others to change, you yourself are transformed and there is nothing more satisfying in this world. The SERVOL staff often refer to SERVOL as a virus: once you are infected there is no cure, you are there for life.

Second, SERVOL is a very decentralised organisation in which each player has enough room to do their own thing within limits and everything is done to cut down a creeping bureaucracy as the organisation expands.

Third, there is the constant training and retraining of staff. It is doubtful that there is another NGO that invests so much time and money in the on-going training of staff and this means we can promote our own staff without having recourse to "outsiders". Staff have risen from the rank of instructors, to co-ordinators and even to the highest echelons of administration and some twenty five percent (25%) of SERVOL staff were once trainees in the adolescent or early childhood programmes.

Fourth, SERVOL exercises tight fiscal control of all its finances and vouchers and receipts are demanded for even minor financial transactions.

Yet, in final analysis, it must be admitted that in all the above we have not touched the soul of SERVOL and it could well be that it consists of rekindling the virtue of hope in a world that is beginning to despair.

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**A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T**

In 1998, helped by a grant from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, SERVOL engaged a company called Supreme Consulting Services to conduct an in depth assessment of the ADP by interviewing a cross

section of trainees who had graduated ten (10) years previously and comparing them with an equal number of individuals from a comparable group who had not attended SERVOL.

Most of the quotes used in this paper are drawn from this evaluation study which is now in its final stages.

Available: <http://www.paho.org/English/HPP/5thGlobalConf10.doc>

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