

From Borstal kid to author to trainer in anger management

Valerie Mason-John has had a varied career, from working as an International Correspondent, a performer on stage and TV, writing five books and now working with young people as a trainer in anger management and conflict resolution. More details about Valerie's life and her current books, 'Borrowed Body', and 'Detox Your Heart', can be found at www.valeriemason-john.co.uk

I was one of those young people that society wrote off aged 15. I had been in and out of court for shop lifting and I was labelled as uncontrollable. Social Services threw the towel in and recommended Borstal. I ended up spending 18 months of my adolescence inside, coming out aged 17.

Since then, people who are aware of my past, say: "You're the best person to work with young people with challenging behaviour". I question this. I think that young people today, need to be around adults who have had a reasonably healthy childhood, because they have another side of the picture to offer. I believe it is important for those of us who have had tough childhoods to work in the field of youth work, anger management and conflict resolution. But we need to have gone through some self development so that we are living life as a healthy functioning adult.

Good fun but little help

If I had begun working with young people in my early 20s, I may have been good fun, but I think I would have been of little help. I did not understand or know what that journey is like - to try and change your life and heal. It wasn't until I became aged 29, that I really began to turn my life around. Before then I had exchanged my juvenile life of shop lifting and running away, to a young adult life of being anorexic/bulimic, taking recreational drugs and going out clubbing most nights. I was in denial of my past, trying very hard to avoid my pain.

Detox Your Heart

In my most recent book, 'Detox Your Heart', as featured on Richard and Judy's TV show, I write: "One morning, at the age of twenty-nine, I woke up, held my head in my hands and cried. I want my mind back". I couldn't deny any longer that I was unhappy, I couldn't convince myself anymore that I had a happy childhood. This realisation put me on my path of self development, and it's as if working with young people in YOTs, Prus, EBDs, the mainstream education system and social services fell into my lap.

Challenging behaviour

I had been working in the theatre world, and was asked by Oval House Education department to put together a programme

with three other practitioners, aimed at young people with challenging behaviour. This request was in response from local schools in the Lambeth Area who were experiencing muggings, gangs, and incidences with knives. We spent several weeks sharing practise, and came up with a programme that was so successful, that in 1998 we received a grant to deliver more of this work in other local boroughs.

Many questions

I found the work inspiring but it left me with many questions. What have we got our selves into? What am I doing with my own life? Have I forgiven myself for my past actions as a young person? Until this point I had trained in Mime and Physical Theatre, exploring emotions, vulnerabilities and human behaviour. I had also taken a telephone counselling course. My questioning lead me to seek out more specific training.

I studied in the field of conflict resolution with the Unit for the Arts and Offenders and I am now a trainer with 'Leap Confronting Conflict' (www.leaplinx.com). I also trained with 'Clean Break' (www.cleanbreak.org.uk) and Augusto Boal.

Empowering

I learnt from all these courses that if I was to help empower the lives of young people, I had to empower myself. I had to look at my own challenging behaviour and reflect. I had to do the work too. I couldn't be there saying to young people you shouldn't drink, smoke dope if I was too. I couldn't be saying to young people, try something different in conflict, when I wasn't trying something different in my own life. And so the work really helped to empower me. While my young people were learning I was too. This is supposed to be the mark of a good teacher.

Half the problem

I also realised that while delivering courses on anger management and conflict resolution that I was only dealing with half the problem. I had to be able to work with the adults, the professionals, the parents who were raising them. Working with teachers and other professionals has been tough, as there is often a resistance, to somebody

coming in from the outside, telling them what they should be doing. But once they realise that the sessions aren't about telling them what to do, but more of an opportunity to reflect on what is hard for them in their jobs, the real work can be done.

However the likelihood of parents attending a course on anger management is slim. So I decided to write 'Detox Your Heart', a book which is less threatening than a course, aimed at helping adults to reflect on their own conflicts in life, and how to deal with them.

Borrowed Body

Lasts year I had my debut novel, 'Borrowed Body', published. It was named as the 'British Color Purple' by the Black Media. It was also shortlisted for the Young Minds 2005 Book Award for a novel which best demonstrates the inner life of a child or young person (www.youngminds.org.uk). This nomination was so inspiring as this was my intention while writing. I really wanted the reader to see what happens to a child's mind when it experiences distress, loss, physical and sexual abuse. I wanted to show how the young person makes sense of their harsh world and how they manage to cope.

The story of Pauline in this novel is the story of many of the young people I work with, black or white. In my own personal story nobody asked me if I was all right as a child, instead I was labelled as a difficult child. Nobody asked why I ran away from kids homes, truanting from school, why I tried to take my life. Instead I was excluded and this is exactly what happens to our children today. We don't ask, instead we see anti-social behaviour and we exclude. The reality is that where there is anger, there is a person who is feeling very hurt, who has needs and has fears.

Take the time

When working with young people who present challenging behaviour we must try to look behind it and see what it is they are trying to express, rather than writing them off, excluding them or locking them up. Young people often vote with their feet, protest with their anger. Therefore exclusion should be our last option, we need to take the time to investigate what is the cause of a child's distress rather than punish them.