

The HUB – a Haven for Underprivileged Children

By Mabel Sieh



Like many businessmen, David Boehm feels very fortunate about his own success. But at the same time, he is aware that many families and children in the city can barely make ends. That is the idea behind The HUB Hong Kong Children and Youth Centre, a local charity established in 2012 with the support of The Bill Crews Foundation and Rotary Club of Kowloon North.

Together with Reverend Bill Crews, Chairman of the Exodus Foundation in Australia, and Bruce Stinson, another

businessman based in Hong Kong, the three Australian founders have transformed a 5,000-square-foot former church into a spacious haven for underprivileged children and their families in Sham Shui Po.

"We want to create a safe environment where children can come to learn and play, and just be children again," says Boehm, Chairman of The HUB Hong Kong and a permanent resident who has been living in Hong Kong for over 20 years.

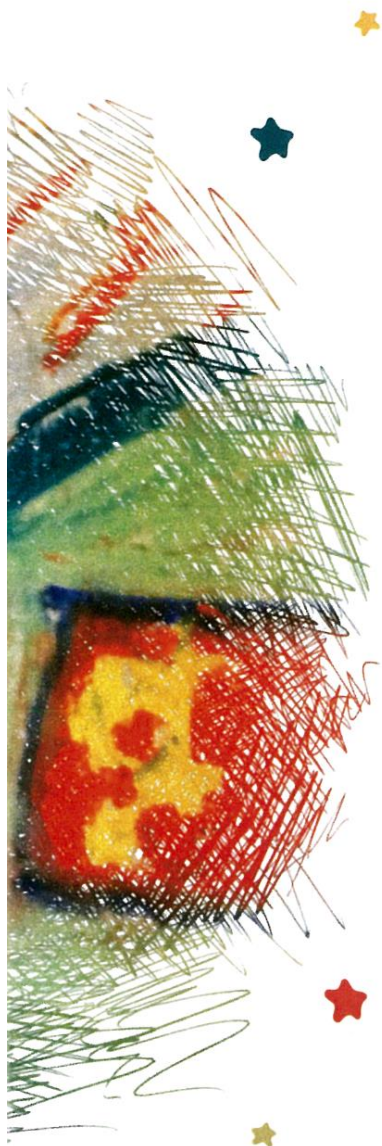
"I feel very fortunate of my success and I like Hong Kong and its people. I

want to give back to the community," he says.

The HUB Hong Kong

Officially launched in July last year, The HUB Hong Kong provides not just a huge space – a luxury for the underprivileged in Hong Kong, but also a variety of classes offering academic support, personal and leisure development for children aged between six and 18.

Living on Hong Kong Island, Boehm was shocked how some families



been identified by the Hong Kong government as having the largest number of children living below the poverty line,” Boehm explains.

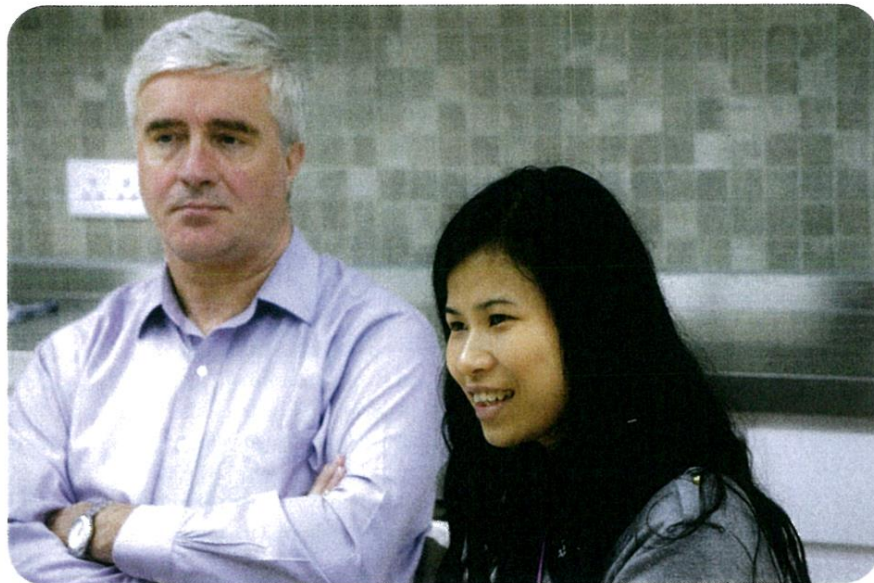
200,000 children below poverty

Last year, the government announced that 1.3 million people, or 19.6 percent of the city’s population,

members. There are also 120 registered parents.

“When we asked the parents what they most wanted for their children, they said education. They believe education can change their children’s lives. So we provide them with tuition and English classes,” Boehm says.

But it is not just homework or study skills that Boehm and his team would like to help these children learn. “We also want



Kevin O'Shaughnessy and Vancy Pang

are struggling under appalling living conditions in some parts of the city. “We visited the families in the Sham Shui Po neighborhood in their subdivided flats,” he says. “In the tiny space, there is a bunk bed and a cooker on a small table. They have to share a dirty toilet with other people on the same floor. The children have no space to study, let alone play.”

The founders have chosen Sham Shui Po as their first location for an establishment in Hong Kong for a reason. “We wanted to start where help is most needed, and Sham Shui Po has

were officially living under the poverty line. It means one in three elderly people and one in five children, are poor. Under a 2012 guideline, a one-person household with an income of less than HK\$3,600 per month is considered “poor.” For two- and four-person households, the amounts are \$7,700 and \$14,300, respectively.

“It’s hard to believe that more than 200,000 children are living in poverty in a developed, well-off city like Hong Kong,” says Boehm. “Children are being placed in [horrible] circumstances that they are not responsible for. It’s not their fault that they come from poor families.”

Helping children – a cause close to the three founders’ hearts – is the key mission of The HUB Hong Kong. At present, The HUB has about 150 primary children and 30 teenagers as

to help them develop their confidence,” says Kevin O'Shaughnessy who is the finance director of the organization.

“Poor children usually have low self-esteem because of their family background; they are shy due to lack of experience and exposure,” he adds. “We want to help them see their potential and to feel they are the same as other children.”

Education and exposure

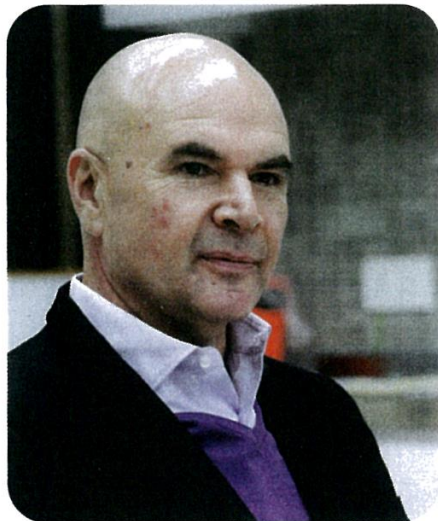
Service manager Vancy Pang agrees that confidence building is crucial in a child’s development. A registered social worker, she has previously worked with youth and families in NGOs for 10 years before joining the charity last year.

“Many of the families we serve here are from the mainland. They don’t have

the educational level to teach their children homework or the resources to send them to tuition classes,” Pang describes. “So their children aren’t doing well in school, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t good in other things.

“In our art classes, I’ve seen some children can draw and they take pride in their artwork with a sense of achievement. We can certainly help them build their confidence through our interest groups like music and arts, and also sports.”

Most of the classes are offered for free while some require a small fee. The homework assistance class – which runs five days a week – costs \$300-400 per month. However, fees can be waived by half or totally for families with special financial needs. There are also nutrition programs such as a fruit scheme for children. Apart from three full-time staff, all the other instructors are volunteers.



David Boehm

To expose children to the outside world and induce a sense of belonging in the city among them, Pang and her team have also organized regular outings for them.

“During the Chinese New Year, we’ve taken some families and children to the flower market in Victoria Park in Causeway Bay,” Pang says. “We’ve also arranged a visit to the Legislative Council building in Central, while some others have been to a cooking class on pasta and learn from a chef in a Michelin-star restaurant in Wan Chai.”



Exposing children to the outside world through regular outings including a visit to Hong Kong's Legislative Council.

Photo courtesy: The HUE

Being able to see the outside world is an inspiration for these children, Boehm believes. “These kids have probably never been to anywhere outside Sham Shui Po,” he says. “By letting them meet someone who shares his job passion will inspire them to think about their future.”

How you can help

This is also a reason that Boehm invites companies to support them not just through funding, but by offering their time and expertise. A company, for example, can send their technical staff to teach children how to use a computer or open up its factory for children to see how something is manufactured in a behind-the-scenes tour. Another idea is to run vocational workshops for teenagers who could then benefit from learning to write a good resume or a job application letter.

“If they can see the outside world more, they will be inspired and become ambitious,” Boehm stresses. “We want to give them a vision that they can be a productive member of the society.”

Boehm is pleased with the feedback he has received so far. “A lot of companies in Hong Kong are keen to engage their staff in meaningful volunteer

work. It’s a rewarding experience for them to get to know these children and to help them,” he adds.

Six months after the opening, things are settling in and operation has been smooth. On average, there are 20 to 30 children coming to the center and enjoying the facilities on the weekday, with more visiting children on the weekend.

Next in the pipeline is to provide more services for parents, especially those with younger children. “We want them to come here to break away from their routines,” Boehm says. “They can also learn something useful by taking our classes. Some of them have even indicated an interest in learning English.”

“We would also like to expand and set up more HUBs in other areas in Hong Kong,” he also says. “As for outside of Hong Kong, we already have a center in Bangkok and will be looking into opening another one in Cambodia and Myanmar.

“And we will continue to listen to the needs of the poor families and children so that what we do can make a real impact on their lives.”

Editor’s note: For more information, please visit: www.thehubhk.org or arrange a visit to the centre at 1st floor, Greenrich Mansion, 100 Castle Peak Road, Sham Shui Po.

