



The Writing's on the Wall

By Laura M Thompson (US)

GRAFFITI IS CONSIDERED by some to be a community eyesore, while others see it as street art. The Hong Kong-based support group KELY, hopes that providing cans of spray paint, paint brushes and modeling clay are tools to opening communication, providing education and mentorship while combating stress, depression and peer pressure for some of Hong Kong's most vulnerable teens. KELY's innovative Keeping It R.E.A.L Program – Refuse, Explain, Avoid and Leave – funded exclusively by the AWA from August 2014 to July 2015, gave a group of Hong Kong teenagers who face isolation, lack of motivation and/or support a program that opened the dialogue, while shedding light on the dangers of alcohol and drug use.

Over the past five years, Hong Kong has seen a steady increase in drug use among people under the age of 21. KELY is working to stem that growth by empowering young people to reach their potential through peer support, leadership development and mentorship, and has worked with over 40,000 teens and young people each year hosting over 500 workshops and training sessions.

KELY's innovative programming provides education and support, targeting Hong Kong's most vulnerable population of young people. With a charitable contribution of HK\$85,000 from the AWA in 2014, KELY recruited 36 F.4 students from Sir Ellis Kadoorie Secondary School in West Kowloon, which has about 700 students, of that number, 50 per cent Ethnic

Minority/Non-Chinese. Many of these students talked about the stress of peer pressure, but also showed a lack of understanding – either from no education or cultural differences – about the dangers of drug use.

Employing various strategies, KELY, along with its team of mentors and facilitators created a ten-session program to reach students through art and action. Students took part in seven graffiti sessions with local group Street Poppy and painted five walls of the school corridors promoting a drug free life; they met with recovered drug users to learn first-hand about the consequences of abuse; and also hosted two successful art exhibitions at the Ka Kee Gallery in Sai Ying Pun, showing art that illustrated the common factors that contribute to drug use among young people.

"Graffiti was something I have never done before and I was asked to create a piece with my teammate on the topic 'drug-free,'" said Rajita, a student in the group. "I feel very accomplished now that the wall is painted – the whole school will be able to receive the messages we are trying to share with them."

While many of the 36 students involved began the program with poor or low self-esteem, the overwhelming majority of them claimed their self-esteem had improved greatly.

One of the students said: "This program has helped me to understand myself better and I am sure in the future I will make better life decisions because of it."