



Bridge the gap Break the cycle

For 30 years, Mother's Choice has been placing children with loving families. *Angela Baura* introduces the charities' Bridge Programme

Three months ago, long-term residents Mark and Wika Rawson temporarily opened their home to a one-month old baby girl. Mark (father of three grown-up children) and Wika (mother of two sons living at home) had considered adopting a child but felt the long-term commitment might be too much for them right now. Instead, they signed up for Project Bridge – a programme created by local charity Mother's Choice that connects volunteer families to children in need of temporary care.

"Mother's Choice and the Bridge Programme are great for new foster parents – they make it less daunting and we liked the concept of providing temporary shelter and support to youngsters. We recently took in our first child and she is an absolute delight! As Rudy [Wika's 15 year old son] puts it, she has brought us all together with a common purpose. We truly hope she moves on to new permanent parents who can enjoy what we have and we then look forward

to welcoming a new youngster into our home," Mark and Wika share.

The Rawsons are part of a growing movement of Project Bridge families temporarily opening their homes and hearts to children living without a safe family. While the children are being cared for, Mother's Choice works hard to make sure they can join a safe, loving, and permanent family as soon as possible.

Alia Eyres, CEO of the charity, which has served 1000s of pregnant teens and babies without families, shares that there is a pressing need for more families to open their homes through Project Bridge.

"For every child we take in, there are several more that need our help. The number of girls facing crisis pregnancy, and families in need of support, continue to grow. We're looking for more families to open their homes through Project Bridge, to provide safe, temporary, and loving care to a child in need. I believe that many of us have the capacity to give more," says Alia.





Phyllis Marwah plays with children in the Child Care Home

Break the cycle

Every year, over 7,000 girls face crisis pregnancies in Hong Kong, according to the HKSAR Census and Statistics Department.

“All too often, these girls - some as young as age 12 - have been forced into something they don’t understand, and they’re not equipped with the decision-making tools to step away from the situation they’re in. Many come from broken families. Crisis pregnancy is often a generational, cyclical problem that is hard to break,” says Phyllis Marwah, who co-founded Mother’s Choice 30 years ago in response to the alarming number of pregnant teenagers facing the darkest crisis of their lives alone.

Meanwhile, there are over 3,600 children living in residential care, and at least another 600 waiting in at-risk situations for a residential care placement. These children are far more likely to experience physical, mental and emotional issues, according to worldwide research. The girls are more likely to face a crisis pregnancy. “Without the support and resources pregnant teens



One of the earliest teams of Child Care Home volunteers

need, they are more likely to place their child in residential care,” warns Phyllis.

Through Project Bridge, the charity is determined to put an end to this vicious cycle and ensure residential care remains strictly a temporary solution.

“We have seen children thrive in volunteer families, and significant improvements in all areas of their development compared to the outcomes for children who live in residential care. In a safe and loving family environment that matches the child’s needs and family’s strengths, children have the opportunity to build trust and attachment, despite the crises at home,” Alia observes.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT PROJECT BRIDGE?

Mother’s Choice runs Project Bridge Info Sessions throughout the year. The next session will take place on Wednesday, October 18th 2017, 7pm-8:30pm at Mother’s Choice Child Care Home (5 Bowen Road, Mid-Levels, Hong Kong).

For more information, call Mother’s Choice Foster Care Services on +852 2313 5648 or email foster@motherschoice.com.

Thriving children, thriving families

KookHee Andersson’s experience as a Bridge Parent bears testament to Alia’s theory. Her son, Lucas, was born with Down Syndrome seven years ago. Grateful for the overwhelming support she received from Hong Kong’s special needs community, the yoga instructor says she was

keen to give back.

In 2014, she signed up to be a foster parent. Two months later, a thirteen-month old boy with Down Syndrome, who had been living at a large local orphanage, joined her family through the Project Bridge program.

John* had been very sick in the orphanage and spent most of his time lying down in his crib, says KookHee. As a result, he wasn't able to sit up when he joined her family. He was unresponsive, unhappy, and avoided eye contact.

"But love changes people's lives every day! Two months later, he was smiling, responding, and later on belly laughing! He was able to stand up with just a bit of support before he left and was in general really, really happy and trusting. It was honestly one of the best things I have ever done and the most beautiful and rewarding experience," KookHee recalls.

It takes a village

Mother's Choice provides 24/7 support to Bridge families. Each family gets a dedicated caseworker, training before and during the child's stay, a tailored child development plan and a multi-disciplinary team of medical and therapy professionals to support parents, as well as respite care and emergency care.

The support provided by Mother's Choice and the Bridge project throughout John's eighteen-month stay was incredible, KookHee says.

"Mother's Choice social workers came once a month for a home visit and checked in by phone at least once a week. Whenever possible, they also attended doctor appointments. He hadn't gotten much, if any, physiotherapy and speech therapy in the orphanage and Bridge Project made sure that he got it once a week after he came into our care. They organised get-togethers with other foster parents, Christmas lunches and other event gatherings. They held workshops and talks on fostering, attachment and trauma and any time there was any issue or doubt, they were available and helpful," she comments.

Letting go

Letting go of a child she loved and still loves was heart breaking, KookHee admits but, again, Mother's Choice prepared her with workshops and support.

"The absolute hardest part was knowing he had a forever family but not knowing them. Would they love and care for him? Were they nice people? It was very hard to see him go but I can honestly say that he is exactly where he should be – in an incredible family that love, love, love him," says KookHee, who receives regular updates and photos from John's family.

Whilst letting go is hard, KookHee welcomes the opportunity to be a Bridge Parent again.

"I have come to realise that this isn't about us. Yes, we give a lot but we get tenfold more back. If you can let go gracefully knowing that the foster child is on his or her way to something even better and that, in the meantime, you could help and teach that child to love, to trust and to grow, then do it. Would I do it again? Absolutely, yes!" 🍷

30 YEARS OF CHANGING LIFE STORIES

It all began in 1986 when long-time resident Phyllis Marwah, who had just given birth to her sixth child, read a series of articles in the South China Morning Post reporting the disturbing number of teenage pregnancies in Hong Kong. Girls as young as thirteen were terminating their pregnancies as late as their ninth month and around 100 girls were going to Shenzhen every weekend to have unsafe abortions.

Shunned by family and friends, pregnant teens were often left to face the darkest crisis of their lives alone. Appalled by the facts, Phyllis felt compelled to change their life trajectory: she knew she couldn't turn her back on these vulnerable girls too. Together with Ranjan Marwah, and their friends Helen and Gary Stephens, she committed to open a home where pregnant girls would feel safe, accepted, and were given hope and courage.

Overcoming many challenges, the founders opened the doors to Mother's Choice in 1987. The charity has since evolved to serve not only pregnant teens but also children without families. It has served 53,000 girls by providing support systems that include counselling, a safe place to live, pre-natal support, parenting training, adoption support, and a post-abortion healing journey. Over 2,000 babies and children - many with special needs - have been cared for in the Child Care Home; and over 860 children and youth have received temporary care through the charity's support of foster families, while advocating for each to join a permanent family. The charity has also delivered sexuality education to over half a million youth across Hong Kong, particularly in high-risk areas of crisis pregnancy and to youth in foster care.

"The past 30 years have been a journey I could never have imagined. Thirty years later, I have more hope than ever before, and I see so much potential in what we can do for our city," says Phyllis, mother of seven, who applauds Hong Kong's community and the hundreds of volunteers who work tirelessly week in, week out to fulfil the charity's vision. "Our heritage is important, but we have to keep thinking of the future. We're here to change life stories, and if we do our jobs right, we hope that our girls, children, and families will never return to the crisis that they previously walked through."