

Ship of Dreams

By Beth Rubenstein

This summer I worked for Adventure-Ship, a small non-profit organization that provides sail-training trips for youth and adults in Hong Kong, regardless of the physical or mental ability of the participants. For the past 10 weeks, I commuted an hour and a half to a bare container “office” in the shipyards of Aberdeen. I didn’t receive any salary. Yet my friends who were interning for the big Investment banking firms, with window offices in Central, housing on the Peak, and thousands of dollars in salary were jealous of me. Though my benefits were not as obvious as those of most of my friends, they were much more valuable. Everyday that I worked for Adventure-Ship I learned something new. I live and attend university in America, and this was my first visit to Hong Kong. Both on and off the job, I was grateful to meet many generous people who shared with me the beauty and culture of Hong Kong. Still, even more precious are the many lessons I learned about life, especially about what it is like to have a physical or mental disability, and all of the discrimination that people with disabilities confront.

My main duty for the summer was to design a debriefing kit for Adventure-Ship. The challenging activities that people participate in on the ship have been proven to significantly increase confidence and self-esteem. However, feedback from teachers and social workers (especially from schools for children with disabilities) expressed that these benefits often quickly fade with time. The objective of the kit I prepared is to provide a method for extending the benefits of Adventure-Ship to make a permanent impact on ALL participants. The kit includes more than ten different activities to encourage people to incorporate Adventure-Ship into their daily lives by fostering teacher/student and parent/child communication. Thus, participants will hopefully be able to adopt a positive attitude towards themselves that can lead to improved motivation in school and beyond.

Before I actually designed the kit, I spent a lot of time researching the causes behind the diminishing returns of Adventure-Ship. There are many barriers that prevent people from easily incorporating Adventure-Ship into their daily lives. These include the barrier of association and the barrier of memory. Nonetheless, the barrier of attitude is by far the most detrimental obstacle in the development of people with disabilities. Parents, teachers, and society in general place many limits on people simply because they are “different”. After time, people with disabilities begin to accept these imposed limits, regardless of their accuracy. The most extraordinary aspect of Adventure-Ship is that on the ship, these limits disappear. Everyone swings on a trapeze and swims in the sea. But when participants return to their homes and schools, they continue to receive messages about what they are and are not capable of. Most participants are denied the opportunity to even try the latter. In fact, several students have told us that their parents were hesitant to believe that they accomplished the training program on Adventure-Ship. While the debriefing kit will mitigate this problem, it also illustrates the need for broader-based interventions to change the overall perceptions and treatment of disabled people throughout Hong Kong. Adventure-Ship is the first step in a long line of improvement.

In addition to the difficult external factors that I faced, I was also challenged on a personal level. Making the kit effective required me to be aware and sensitive to the culture of Hong Kong. Subtle cultural differences accumulated and really influenced my behavior and work. For example, one activity that I included in the kit is based around writing down children’s accomplishments and placing these accomplishments inside a container. I had intended for parents and teachers to use empty metal soup cans for this purpose. However, because people in Hong Kong put such value on using fresh ingredients, canned goods are not easily available. I adjusted the activity by recommending that any type of small plastic container be used. Another activity that I created involved discussion during an informal dinner

party. Because space is so limited in Hong Kong, people rarely entertain guest in to their homes. I amended the activity by changing the context of the discussion.

As a result of all my varied experiences, I can bring a clearer understanding of Hong Kong back to the United States. I also plan to become involved in some type of project to empower people with disabilities. Still, I know that no other organization that I work with will be comparable to Adventure-Ship in its sincerity or commitment to people with disabilities. I will never forget my summer in Hong Kong, and I can honestly say that my job was the best part of my trip. I am extraordinary grateful to the Hong Kong Jockey Club for its contributions.