

UNICEF'S impact on OVC under the Family Youth and Children at Risk Project

Just under four years ago, 11 year old Reshma Ramkissoon of East Canje Berbice was in dire straits. Her mother had left their home (for the last time), leaving the 11 year old to face the verbal and physical abuse of an alcoholic father, who in retaliation for what he perceived to be his wife's betrayal – made the lives of his three daughters aged, 11, 8 2, and a son then aged 9, a living hell.

Reshma recalls “since me know meself, me mudda and me fadda does fight and quarrel – then she does go way, sometime fuh three months and so” .

According to Reshma after her mother first left the home it became her responsibility to clean cook and wash, and take care of her sisters, Rebecca aged 8 and two year old Radha. Her 38 year old father Ritchie, had been laid off because of his heavy drinking – and things began to get worse for Reshma and her sibling.

“After he nah wuk, he start drink mo – and when he come home, he use to beat we fuh nuttin – me lil brotha use to get mo licks dan me – so he use to run away steady” “me had to lef school fuh look after me sista dem – cause plenty days we nah had no food, ...ting de really hard”

In recounting her ordeal, Reshma recalled some reprieves enjoyed whenever her mother came back to the home to try reconciliation with her husband – but these never lasted for any length of time – the abuse would start again and she would leave, again. In 2002, Rita, the 33 year old mother, left the home for the last time – taking up a live home arrangement with another young man at Port Mourant.

“After mammy left this time, me sista Rebecca had to stop go school cause we nah had no school clothes, and sometime we had fuh drink water and go to bed. I stated to go by the neighbour and help she wash and so, an when she give me money I would buy lil tings to eat.”

The daily beatings and verbal abuse continued for the next year and a half- the youngest sibling, Radha had long since given up trying to speak, and would spend most of her days hiding in a corner of the home. Then one morning, Reshma woke up to find her father hanging from a rope.

“Me wake up a marning and see me father a hang from a rope on the roof, so me climb up quick and cut de rope – and we carry he hospital”.

Her father survived the suicide attempt, and was given treatment for what was deemed a mental condition. However, he resumed his drinking running up a debt of \$35,000 at the

neighborhood bar and then to cover his debt, handed over 9 year old Rebecca to the shop owner to “work off” his debt.

The constant struggle to make ends meet, and having to put up with an abusive father proved more than Reshma could bear. He had apparently taken to visiting her bed at nights – was what she told the shop owner shortly before she drank all the medication that had been given to her father after his suicide attempt.

“Me was weary punishing, so me take all Daddy tablets and drink dem and them I lie down... and sleep. When me wake up, me was in the hospital”

Reshma’s suicide attempted prompted the shop owner to call in to the St. Francis Community Developers where he spoke to its president, Alex Foster. The Shop owner then explained that he had seen a television programme hosted by Alex, in which he had been speaking of the many services offered under the **Family, Youth and Children at Risk project, (FYCR)** which had been launched a few years earlier, in collaboration with **UNICEF**. He then related the plight of the children.

With funding by UNICEF, the FYCR project provides assistance to families, individuals and even communities with basic necessities to ensure a better standard of living. In several cases individuals, groups or communities are provided with the tools with which they are able to provide for themselves on a sustainable basis. The FYCR project is administered by the St. Francis Developers Club, a NGO which also offers a comprehensive range of social services to support children and families at risk, such as counseling, remedial education, child friendly spaces and other empowerment opportunities. The club has some 16 sub stations spread out throughout two administrative regions. Sub stations are located in several far flung areas, including Islington, on the East Bank of Berbice, Black Bush on the Corentyne, Corriverton and in the Corentyne River at Orealla and Siparuta.

In recalling the initial contact, Alex Foster said he was moved by the story recounted to him, and was particularly disturbed at the suspected incestuous relationship between the man and his daughter.

“I decided to go and see fuh myself” Alex recalls. He said the conditions he found prompted him to immediately take action, getting in touch with Ms Carmen Kissoon, the founder and house mother for the **Carmel Foster Care Home** at Albion, on the Corentyne.

All three girls and the little boy, who had by then taken to stealing anything he could get his hands on, were moved to the Carmel Home – where with the exception of the boy, they are to this day.

Under the family, youth and Children at Risk, project the girls flourished. They were enrolled in schools on the Corentyne and have been doing extremely well.

Carmel Kissoon is proud of the three young ladies, “You should have seen these girls when they first came here – the little girl didn’t speak and was afraid of everybody – and the other two, they were skinny and withdrawn – Reshma never mixed and so on – but look at them today”



From Left Rebecca, Radha and Reshma With House Mother Carmen Kissoon

Reshma is now fifteen years old, her sister Rebecca is eleven while Radha is 7. according to Ms. Kissoon the girls have adjusted well to the routine of the home and with the support of the UNICEF funded Project Family, Youth and Children at Risk, and more recently the UNICEF funded Orphans and Vulnerable Children Project, have now got a chance at enjoying equal opportunity in making a success of their lives.

Rebecca is now a very calm and forthright young lady – answering all my questions with her shy smile – she says things are so much better now.

“we life just change since we come here and is part of the Family, Youth and Children at Risk hey, we get plenty food, and we does all go to school. Me an Rebecca goes to Port Mourant Junior High and me sister Radha going to Croppa Primary”

None of the three girls claim to miss their father – but all three were devastated a year ago, when they learnt that their mother had set herself alight and had died. They all attended her funeral.

“ Me ent know wha woulda happen to we if Mr. Foster did not come an take we out a dat house, we might a dead by now” Rebecca is smiling as she says this, her two sisters who have been sitting with her throughout the interview, have shy but mischievous smiles on

their faces. The little one, Radha is now a chatter box, and shakes her head in the negative when asked if she remembers her father – Reshma is now in the top three in her class – “ I never get anything lower than third in class, I does mostly get first and second”



TV Time At The Camal Home

In the case of Reshma and her two sisters, a good education and a decent standard of living will provide them with the tools with which they can have a chance a making a better life for themselves.

According to Alex Foster – this is one the success stories of the project Family, Youth and Children at Risk project Funded by UNICEF to the tune of some \$6 million dollars annually.