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A Seminar of Hope for the Future

At the end of every school year in Singapore, Ravenahl Study Centre organises a seminar for Secondary-school boys between 13 to 16 years old. Entitled “The Bigger Picture”, this seminar strives to ignite a spark of passion in Singaporean youths, and to provide them with ideas to dream big about the future.

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Ravenahl is a centre that provides formation and organises activities

for young men. The boys meet regularly for activities that help them acquire the virtues, which enables them to achieve worthwhile goals throughout their lives. Through the activities organised by Ravenahl, young men are taught to be men of character who aim to acquire self-discipline, self-knowledge, responsibility, magnanimity, leadership, service and perseverance in commitments. Participants in the activities can benefit from spiritual counselling and doctrinal classes offered by Opus Dei.

What is the “Bigger Picture”?

In its seventh edition this year, the Bigger Picture Seminar continued to grow with more participants, youth volunteers, collaborators and new organisations. Just like its title, the seminar exposes its participants to the world beyond their textbooks and classrooms, bringing them on

visits to companies, educational institutions and cultural sites.

“The whole idea of exposing youths to the variety of jobs waiting for them in the future sparks a sense of inspiration and also ambition”, says Dillen Tan, one of our youth volunteers. During the visits to participating organisations, the boys attend presentations by experts in their field. If it is a company, the boys will usually be treated to a tour of the company’s facilities and meet the staff. Some companies provided a mini workshop for the boys to get hands-on experience and challenged the participants to come up with solutions to typical problems in their line of work. There was also time made for a session on the importance of prayer led by Fr Damien Lim, targeted at provoking deeper reflection in their young minds. In this seminar, boys are given a chance to learn more about the working

world and themselves, and to bring them reassurance that their future can be bright and exciting.

The road ahead is not linear

The boys were delighted about the opportunity to visit a famous Big Tech company here. During the tour of the office area, there were stops to take iconic or rather 'Instagrammable' photo shots.

However, the most inspiring take-away from the visit was not just the attractive modern design concept of the office, but the career journeys and messages of the four staff from the company who gave the boys a talk. In the talk, some of the staff made it known that they were not very bright or gifted students when they were young and had their fair share of struggles. There was even one who said he could not enter any of the local Junior Colleges but with a lot of hard-work and perseverance,

he succeeded in his working career. Their advice to the boys was not to expect everything to go according to plan, and to not give up hope, believing in themselves no matter what.

Singapore prides itself as a country leading in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), so it came as a surprise that the four staff that presented to the boys were not engineers or technically trained persons in this famous big Tech company. This instils a sense of hope, knowing that there are opportunities for those who excel in other fields like Mathematics, History, or Languages and not just those who are good in computing or coding.

While the road ahead may not be linear, it is certainly helpful to have an idea of what the future might hold. This proved true when the

group visited two other engineering companies later in the week, where 16-year-old Keagan Sng, who had just completed his Secondary school education, found a sense of direction. Keagan said “Visiting companies and meeting some of the employees has helped me to learn about the stories and paths that were taken by those in the industry. By knowing the skills required for these jobs, it will help me choose the right courses or subjects to take at the tertiary level for me to follow the career path that I desire.”

The road ahead is also sustainable

One of the parents suggested searching for companies or experts who could expose the boys in the area of sustainability. The Bigger Picture organising team contacted Terence Siew, who worked for Singapore's National Environment Agency (NEA). Terence arranged a

guided tour of the Sustainable Singapore Gallery housed at Marina Barrage, where there were informative and interactive presentations and digital displays, including a model of the Marina Barrage dam, complete with an actual water system to simulate the dam's capabilities as a water source and a flood mitigation measure.

Terence Siew talking to the boys in Marina Barrage

It was encouraging for the boys to learn that there will be many job opportunities in the field of sustainability. Not only engineers and scientists are needed, but also mathematicians, economists, people in finance and even people skilled in art and design for marketing and communicating by way of educational graphics. This was very encouraging for the boys as they discovered that their various talents

and skills can be applied to help build a common, sustainable future.

Boys with their self-watering planted vegetable pots

More exposure to sustainable business ideas came when the boys visited Agritisan, a local start-up urban farming company. Alexander Raphael Tan, the founder of Agritisan, shared with the boys about the bright future in urban farming. An entrepreneur at heart, Alex designed an automated system for growing vegetables on rooftops. His team brought the boys up to the roof to showcase Alex's patented food pod, which is a tower-like structure capable of housing up to 432 planted vegetables at once. The boys were not only given a tour, they also had a hands-on activity of planting vegetable saplings into the pod.

A traditionally laborious trade, farming has evolved in combination

with technology to become a futuristic business and a place for engineers, data-scientists, mathematicians and digital marketers. At the end of the session, the boys were most delighted when they were taught how to make a self-watering planter pot and got to take home their own vegetables.

“We share our future with our community”

Boys preparing food at Willing Hearts, a soup kitchen

“We share our future with our community” was the sentiment shared by Dillen Tan. Apart from visiting companies, the Bigger Picture brought boys to visit non-profit organisations where they learnt more about social work. Half of them visited a teen pregnancy crisis agency and another half visited a soup kitchen. In both places, the boys were given a talk about the

organisations and their values, who they helped, the nature of social work, and what it meant to be a social worker. It was another eye-opening experience for the boys, working alongside regular people who sought to make a difference in society. At the soup kitchen, the boys worked as volunteers, spending a whole morning packing food for delivery. One of the boys, Jonah Goh, said, “Although it was tiring, it was worth it because I know my efforts would help someone have their meals.” When asked if he would return to help out, without skipping a beat, he said, “Yes, definitely! Because it is fun too!”

One of the activities of the seminar was to bring some of the boys to St Vincent’s Home, a shelter home for elderly persons. Eight boys befriended eight elderly persons by teaching them how to make miniature nativity scenes with clay.

This was not only therapeutic for the elderly, it also brought them joy and companionship. Throughout the activity, the boys were sitting beside each person, interacting with them and listening to their stories.

At the end of the session, each elderly person got to take home a colorful hand-molded nativity scene of their own. The administrative team of St Vincent's Home was very happy and thanked the boys for bringing so much joy to the seniors.

Everyone has a part to play in a nation's future

It is important that we let parents have a stake in their children's development. Ravenahl's Youth Club has always kept a close partnership with the parents of the boys. In fact, a chat group was set up just to make announcements to prepare parents before the event and also to keep

them updated of the sessions their sons had attended with many photos.

The seminar also provided opportunities for parents to support the activities. Gabriel Kok, a father who has two sons in the club and works for the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), gave an interesting and insightful talk. Titled 'Giving Strength to our Nation', Gabriel's talk touched on his work, and shared about the importance of Singapore's Armed Forces, where all males are required to enlist to serve when they turn 18.

Gabriel also ran an activity which allowed the boys to put on their thinking caps, coming up with defensive and offensive military strategies. The activity was indeed challenging, but it was a lot of fun for the boys to learn about the deployment of military assets.

By discussing Singapore's defences and sharing about their importance,

it gives the boys a stake in their island's sovereignty, and gets them interested in how Singapore has remained independent, and can continue to be independent.

The future begins now

It was not just about giving the boys ideas of what they could be in the future, another important element of the seminar was also to inspire them about the great things they could do presently. There were two sessions to spark creativity and to get boys interested in a hobby they could pick up during the school holidays.

The first was led by Eric Valles, a school teacher in NUS High School. He presented a session on Instapoetry, which is a style of written and visual poetry that emerged after the advent of social media. It has since spawned the rise of trending artists such as the famous Rupi Kaur. Eric, being an expert poet,

gave the boys 10 tips on how to write Instapoetry. This broke down the barriers to creative writing for them when they realised how easy it was to write captivating lines with meaning and purpose.

On the same day, Joel Seow, a newly graduated art student from Rhode Island School of Design, USA, led a session on art. He showed the boys that almost anybody can create art and could enjoy it. Joel spoke first about his journey to art school and debunked the myth that art was only for those who were not very academic. He then showed them some of his beautiful works and slowly piqued the interest of the boys to do art.

Joel taught the boys a technique known as acetone printing, a way to copy a laser printed image to paper by applying acetone. It was a simple technique which all the boys

managed to perform, producing personal pieces of art which they were proud of. To have a productive and expressive hobby does wonders for the boys, Having a creative outlet helps them to be in touch with other types of expressions and ideas .

These sessions also implicitly conveyed to them that there is no singular, fixed path towards future fulfilment, and that a creative career can be just as fulfilling.

Joel teaching boys the acetone printing technique

Building a future together

A seminar would not be complete without recreational activities. There was a day the group played futsal and celebrated the birthday of Rafael Loh, one of the older boys in the seminar. He was overjoyed to be able to celebrate his birthday in the seminar with all his friends.

Friendship is a beautiful byproduct of the seminar, a consequence of being together, interacting with one another, sharing in their moments of joy and tiredness, and dreaming of what they could one day become.

13-year-old Othneil Lau, a first timer, said that he had learn valuable insights from the seminar and that the seminar gave him a wonderful opportunity to make friends.

David Ng, a 15-year-old boy who is joining the seminar for the third time, said he liked the Bigger Picture Seminars because they broaden his perspective of various jobs and help him discover new avenues of jobs to help people in need. Visiting the teen pregnancy crisis agency made him understand better the mothers and children they support, and how with the help of the community people can grow and be happy despite the challenges they face.

The future starts with you

During the seminar, the boys were given a reflection sheet with questions to help them set clear goals, and reflect on areas for improvement. 14-year-old Jeremy Kolenchery said that the seminar has helped to motivate him to achieve his dreams.

One of the areas he realised that he could do better was to “detox” from his phone. He learnt that there really was more to life than just being on his phone, because “true friendship is developed when you are able to bond with your friends, laugh with them and spread happy vibes”.

He was impressed by the experience of listening to all the speakers as they knew how to adapt their information to young students, making it useful to them and engaging them with the lively and interactive sessions. Overall, he said the seminar has had

a strong impact on him as well as his friends, especially those who are deciding their future career pathways. Jeremy Kolenchery mentioned that he would definitely join next year's seminar because he knows he will meet and hear from interesting speakers that will continue to inspire him.

Jeremy Kolenchery was not the only one who felt the positive impact of the seminar. All of the boys had enjoyed themselves tremendously. One of them even wished the seminar was a month long! However, it seems that the parents of the participants were the ones most pleased with the seminar. One parent said that every evening after the boys returned from the seminar, they would share many wonderful moments of the day. Another parent said that what the boys learnt in this seminar could not have been learnt

in schools and that was why the Bigger Seminar is a great program!

Nicholas Ng, 14-year-old, said the most memorable aspect for him was Fr Damien Lim's talk on the importance of prayer. "Prayer should be the starting point for all our goals in life" was his main takeaway. That is something he hopes will guide him through his adolescence.

The future of our world belongs to our youth. We have a responsibility to teach them that in a land of opportunities, what matters most is to remain passionate and to seize the opportunities that bring them fulfilment. In that regard, the 2022 Bigger Picture Seminar had been a major success.

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