

Published: 1 July 2013

Country: UK, London

*By Sue Caro**



Within the UK context, age is one of the areas covered by the Equality Act and as such is known as a 'protected characteristic' You are probably familiar with the issue of age discrimination against older people – which often goes hand in hand with gender discrimination – but what about the other end of the age spectrum, young people?

According to Press4Change, 76 per cent of UK media coverage of young people is negative resulting in many young people (who represent the UK's future), feeling demonised and alienated whilst also creating suspicion and fear of young people in other sections of the population, particularly amongst the elderly, causing divisions and worsening social cohesion. When David Cameron and his fellow travellers claim that 'Britain is broken' maybe they should be examining media practices more closely as opposed to blaming 'feral youths' for all society's ills? [The Octavia Foundation](#) , the charitable arm of Octavia Housing, decided it was time to flip the script and tackle this issue, delivering an all day event at the Tabernacle in Ladbroke Grove entitled **Reprazent – Does Britain Hate Young People?**

A team of young volunteers supported by experienced Youth Workers and other Octavia Foundation staff worked for several months to deliver a packed out, high impact, engaging, youth-led event that celebrated the talent, creativity, energy, commitment and passion of young people as well as addressing the central theme. The target audience was young people themselves, those that work with them and media practitioners.

A series of workshops in the afternoon, culminating in a panel discussion followed by a sparky Q&A covered the serious stuff. Running alongside the workshops were a number of other activities – an art exhibition by young artists, an Inspiration Room showing films made by young people.

First up workshop wise was Suli Breaks, one of the hottest spoken word artists around with almost 3,5 million YouTube hits for his poem, **Why I Hate School but Love Education** and appropriately enough, his workshop was about education. Suli believes that our minds are our campus, that we need to learn to educate ourselves before looking for someone else to do it for us and that people need an understanding that just because you're not good at a subject, doesn't mean you're not going to succeed in life.

"There's so much potential which people never really realise because they're stuck in the constraints of society's thinking. My emphasis is on the mentality."

This was a theme that was returned to more than once throughout the day's proceedings.

Suli delivered his spoken word piece **'I will not let an exam result decide my fate'** and virtually brought the house down. Mr Gove would not have approved!

Next up, David Akinsanya, a Broadcaster, Journalist and campaigner for social care and ex-offenders. David shared his experience of growing up in the UK care system and how he ended up in prison before managing to turn his life around. He spoke passionately about the extra disadvantages and problems children and young people in the care system experience,

both in care and when they leave, about the need to give these young people additional chances and opportunities because of the inherent disadvantages they had already suffered as a result of being 'in care'. It costs more per year to keep a child in the care system than it does to attend Eton but the outcomes couldn't be more different.



Twenty one year old Matt who, as a teenager, spent time in the care system accompanied David and told the audience what happened to him when he reached the age of 18 whilst in care. He was left at the local council housing office with all his worldly goods, only to be told that there was nothing they could do to help him and he should sleep on the streets. Unfortunately this is an all too familiar story and, unsurprisingly, Matt soon found himself in prison. A boy growing up in care in the UK is 66 times more likely to end up in prison than his peers outside the care system.

David is also a dedicated foster parent and mentor, one of his key messages for those present was to consider becoming a foster parent - there is a huge need for good, well-motivated foster parents because adoption is a reality for just 6% of children in care. His passion, empathy and personal experience resonated with many in the audience, inspiring a number of people to commit to taking the first steps to becoming foster parents.

The key-note speech was delivered by composer and artist Paul Gladstone Reid, MBE and explored the idea of a Love Based Society replacing the current, predominant social management system – conspicuous consumption. In a wide ranging and intellectually challenging speech, Paul referenced the education system, where it came from, how it evolved and that rather than being taught how to think, children and young people are taught what to think. His message to the audience was to manifest your values, don't be limited by the media, build your networks, the UK has many multi-ethnic connections that can connect with people and markets around the world. A Love Based Society will recognise the inherent value of everyone around us, the environment and the bio-sphere, we can be more productive if we co-operate and collaborate. Powerful, energising stuff.

A brief musical interlude featuring the amazing African drumming of Heru aged 10 and his father Niles, set the scene for the main event of the day, the panel discussion and Q&A. Actor Tameka Empson, well known for her regular appearances in one of UK TV's most popular soaps; in groundbreaking TV comedy series, Three Non Blondes and a whole raft of other stage and screen work, chaired with humour and passion. The members of the panel were rap artist and founder of the Hip Hop Shakespeare Company, Akala, journalist Jess Salter, young social entrepreneur and founder of Aspire to Inspire, Moktar Alatas and film-maker Asmita Chauhan.

The panel discussion reinforced the earlier messages – don't allow others to define you, don't limit your dreams and aspirations, know yourself and what you are capable of, you are powerful. Akala was his usual inspirational self, describing his own journey to consciousness and self-empowerment whilst sharing insights into how to avoid becoming the media stereo-type of a young person. Moktar talked about the benefit of peer-to-peer support, young people helping fellow young people remove barriers. Jess Salter told the audience 'everyone can write, get out and do it'. Asmita explained why she chose to be a film-maker – 'I wanted to study media because it's a weapon to reach people with and to challenge issues that matter to me'.

The ensuing Q&A illustrated just how engaged young people from all ethnic backgrounds are; how angry they are about the unfair media portrayal of themselves and their peers, with the media focus on a relatively small and unrepresentative group of young people; on minor misdeeds and the disproportionate sentences handed out to those involved in either the riots or the tuition fee and Occupy demonstrations. Comparisons were drawn with the treatment of the bankers and others responsible for the financial crash who appear to have not only escaped without sanction but are once again receiving obscene bonus pay outs.

The energy and passion was tangible, the desire for change immense, the need to get out and do something to improve life prospects, to defy the consensus, to be heard and to be fairly represented, overwhelming. So much so that the Octavia Foundation have committed to working with any of the young people and others present who want to try and build on the energy generated to bring about positive change.

The thought-provoking and uplifting day was rounded off with a selection of musical and spoken word performances from a diverse range of young people, demonstrating just how much they have to offer the UK and the wider world. What a shame most mainstream media outlets weren't present.

* *Sue Caro* is Diversity Expert and Octavia Foundation Board member