

The caring man from uncle

By Ruth Ostrow

OLIVER shuffles his feet nervously as people start climbing ladders and jumping on to a trapeze-net hanging high above the ground. "I'm not going up," the eight-year-old shakes his head in fear, while busy men climb poles and hoist themselves on to the trapeze, readying the bars and ropes for play.

A dark-haired man, Michael Light, takes Oliver tenderly in his arms and whispers to him while his mother Elisabeth looks on.

Within a few moments Oliver is climbing the ladder and springing with glee on the net. As his hair bobs up and falls, Michael is beaming with pride. Like any father would.

Except Michael is not Oliver's father. He is no blood relative. He is the founder of a group of carers on Australia's east coast known as The Uncle Project -- men who volunteer a few hours each week to "father" children from single-parent families and provide disadvantaged kids with fun time.

Today he is taking a group of boys to a makeshift circus. During the past few weeks he and his volunteers have taken them mountain climbing, bike-riding, and canoeing. The project has recently been awarded a grant by the Department of Health and Aged Care.

Elisabeth explains that Oliver's father has remarried and now has new children. "He is not interested in Oliver at all," she says simply, before explaining the impact. The happy child on the trapeze was often violent, hitting out at teachers, and withdrawn.

Now after two years of having a father figure in his life, he is beginning to behave like any normal boy his age.

"He is more able to show affection, to cuddle, to laugh and reach out. It's been wonderful for him to have a male role model around," says Elisabeth. "If it weren't for Michael I would probably have had to foster him out."

The story of Oliver and the work Michael Light is doing for boys such as him is uplifting. It is certainly a tribute to Michael, his fellow volunteers and other groups around Australia with names like Big Sister-Big Brother and Aunties & Uncles Co-op Family Project, that more young boys and girls from unhappy homes are not ending up on the wrong side of the law.

But the real story is the sheer number of children who need to be loved, but who are being abandoned by society because most people are so focused on having and rearing their own children.

For instance, a friend of mine recently wanted to adopt a child but her mother was vehemently against it. "Have your own. You are still young enough to," the mother argued when my friend pointed out that she was sick of IVF treatment and really wanted to foster-parent or adopt children.

"There are so many kids that need to be looked after and loved. Of course I'd like to have my own child but it is taking so long and I just want to give love to a child who needs love," said my girlfriend, while her mum recited the list of problems she would encounter bringing a damaged or troubled child from a different culture into her world.

While my friend, like many career women her age, has so much maternal love to give, the great fantasy of the Western world remains having one's own perfect child and grandchildren. To own everything: houses, cars and children. There is a possessiveness that pervades our world, unlike more tribal cultures who share resources.

Of course we don't ever own anything, not even our own lives. Everything is transient. But that doesn't stop us from trying desperately. And while we fixate so intensely on rearing our own child or children, we have neither the time, energy or resources to help with anyone else's.

Before he died, the American futurist Robert Theobald spoke of returning to a sense of community where children could be reared communally, particularly in these days of single-parent families and broken homes.

This cause is being picked up by The Uncle Project and similar groups around the world. People with bona fide records volunteer to spend time every week with orphans or children from disadvantaged backgrounds, mentoring them or just giving them pleasure.

"It's hard for people to go to the full extent of fostering children, particularly difficult ones or those with a criminal background. What we do is provide an alternative," says Michael, who specialises in helping male children, although his Uncles will also mentor the boys' sisters if it is appropriate.

"We don't take children into our homes to live. But we make sure we spend a few hours each week with them, helping them to become happier, feel loved, and see loving male role models.

"Our volunteers can contribute without feeling under huge obligation. Some only do it once, others make a more permanent commitment to a child, but it all counts."

Many children never see happy emotions at home, he says, and don't understand themselves. They lash out and become violent. "Jails are full of them. And once a child is in the system, he or she is on the slippery slope to an early grave. We try to catch them before Humpty Dumpty has fallen off the wall, to heal them so that they can be good role models to their kids, and break the cycle.

"Their anger is hurt. They are deeply hurt."

Michael describes his own background as disadvantaged. Aboriginal on his mother's side and part Italian, he says the dynamics in his home were "dysfunctional" and in the end he became a social worker in his quest to heal others like himself. The boys helped by his volunteers include an 11-year-old who has been involved in break-and-enter, and a boy whose father died recently.

Back to the trapeze, and Oliver is growing curious. "Why are you photographing me?" he asks, as our photographer hangs from a ladder. When we explain, Oliver gets excited.

"Will my dad see this?" he asks, obviously hoping to have some relevance to his father's life.

It is a sad, poignant moment and one that has Michael hoisting himself up via the ladder to be with Oliver.

"Only by nurturing children do we break the cycle of neglect in society," he says, looking down at us through the holes in the safety net -- a fragile net that he and his peers are working so hard to preserve.

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