

COPPING ON

Sending out letters to parents in advance of a visit abroad is always an anxious moment. On the one hand there is the prospect of that empty evening when your invitation to anxious relations fails to find any takers. On the other hand, and of course worse still, is the risk that someone might actually come, or ask for you to visit them at home.

Noel Fulton was a large lad. He was what youth workers call 'lively', and social workers 'challenging'. In his leisure time he marauded the field on behalf of the local school rugby side, a collective whose less academically-minded members believed that Sent Off was an official position, sanctified in the by-laws of the Welsh Rugby Union.

Noel's mother asked someone to call. Physically, meeting Mrs Fulton explained a lot about Noel. Indeed, it put him in perspective. A message from Mrs Fulton, whatever it might be, would obviously need to be taken seriously. I assumed the visit had been requested to check that we knew what we were letting ourselves in for and to pass on hints about how to assist Noel in those many moments when his enthusiasm got the better of him. In fact it was to make sure that proper care of Noel was to be taken by those to whom he was to be entrusted. Here was a delicate boy; a sensitive boy; a boy who was not used to being away from home; a boy who would need to be looked after. He was not to be exposed to the sorts of experiences which might upset him, or which he was not used to while in the bosom of his own family. 'I shall worry about him' said Mrs Fulton meaningfully, 'all the time'.

My reassurances were as expansive as they were astonished. Of course he would be fine. Of course there was no need to worry. This was an International Youth Exchange, funded by the Committee. Dedicated to friendship, culture and understanding. Of course there would be nothing unsavoury. Of course he would be looked after. I would make sure of that. I'd need to now, I felt sure.

Several weeks later and four exhausting days into our visit, I stood outside the bright, new, prestigious youth centre in which our German hosts had thoughtfully placed us. Young people away from home are serial sleepers. They take it in turn to rest, in order

to make sure that staff are awake all the time. In this, Noel had played a full part. To the naked eye, at least, he had betrayed no signs of trauma at being ripped so rudely from the parental nest. More skillful workers might have identified his fondness for letting off fire extinguishers as some sort of cry for help. And while there were occasions when, in the pressure of the moment, I should have liked to have helped that boy a lot, the memory of Mrs Fulton reminded me that this was really, well, only being 'lively' or 'challenging'.

Standing outside that youth centre now Noel asked if I would post a card he had written to his mother. I am well aware of, if only barely competent, in the Good Practice Principles of respect, empowerment and confidentiality. So reading the card was an act of cowardice, motivated by self-preservation, both of which I possess with Distinction. It read:

*'Dear Mam,
Having a good time. Am pissed all night.
Have copped on, I like the Germans, but
could not manage a whole one - ha! ha!
Your loving son,
Noel'*

It is a tribute to the strength of youth work training in Wales that this card was ever posted - as it was. For the next eight days I contemplated various easy ways out. Resignation - sudden disappearance - application for political asylum. Only continuing lack of sleep prevented the clear thinking which would have put one of these options into practice.

Back home I knew the phone would ring. It was bound to happen and waiting only made it worse. But it never did. 'My mother says I can go again' said Noel alarmingly when we all met up on the following week. 'She liked the picture on that postcard, although she never could understand my writing. I told her I was tired when I wrote it. You lot kept on keeping me awake.'

Mark Drakeford is a sometime, somewhere, youth worker.

The names in this article have been changed in order to protect the guilty.

Do you have a humorous youth work story to tell?
If so, Ymlaen would like to hear from you. Contact Liz Sharp at the address on page two.