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Book Review

Kids at the Door[1] & Kids at the Door Revisited[2]

By Bob Holman

Publisher: [1]Basil Blackwell, [2]Russell House Publishing

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When James Anglin challenged the *SJRCC* community to contribute reviews of 'classic' books, I knew instantly that I would review a book by Bob Holman, or, as it turns out, two. Bob had such a prodigious output - of academic papers and research reports; books (on poverty, social welfare, Christianity, and an acclaimed biography of Keir Hardie); and journalism (particularly in *The Guardian* and *The [Glasgow] Herald*) – that it is hard to choose. I have selected *Kids at the Door*, and its follow-up volume, *Kids at the Door Revisited*, because these books encapsulate so well the values that Bob advocated, and lived, as a community social worker, and because they serve as a model of reflective practice in action.

Robert (Bob) Holman, 1936-2016, qualified as a social worker and worked as a child care officer for Hertfordshire Council in England, before holding academic appointments at the universities of Birmingham and Glasgow. He resigned his professorship at the University of Bath in 1975 – because, as he wrote, 'I believed that the affluence of a professor's life-style was inconsistent with Christian teaching on sharing' (1981, p.2) – to practise 'preventive social work' with young people in the peripheral housing estate of Southdown in Bath.

Kids at the Door is an account of the project which Bob carried out with fellow social worker Dave Wiles and student Sandie Lewis. Bob, his wife Annette, and children Ruth and David, had moved to a former doctor's

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house on the edge of the estate, which had large rooms suitable for groups. With no great plan, other than a conviction that helping begins with forming relationships, Bob 'began to linger in the shop, making contacts, picking up tips about the area' (p.6). The book is based on Bob's detailed diary entries, including ten case studies of young people which allow the reader to get a real sense of their everday concerns – relationships with parents, school attendance problems, and involvement with petty crime – and the power of being available to them, demonstrating understanding and warmth, offering practical help with homework and job applications, and providing activities and camping holidays to counter boredom. The project was underpinned not by any particular social theory but by four values: belief in the young people, even in the face of contrary evidence and their own low-esteem; belief in families, evidenced by avoiding becoming a barrier between children and their families; belief in the expression of honesty, for example, in asking young people to return stolen goods, including when these were brought with good intention for use by the project; and a belief in attending school, shown by developing good relations with teachers and offering practical support to encourage attendance.

One chapter includes four very detailed accounts of work with parents. While the circumstances of the 1970s may seem quite different from today's world, these accounts are worth reading I think for three reasons: the graphic portrayal of the difficulties faced by parents and children living in conditions of grinding poverty, by day and by night, which are timeless; the superb illustrations of non-judgemental interactions and practical support given; and Bob's ever-present positivity and humour. Describing a situation where a young mother asked him to drive her to meet her estranged husband in a fish and chip restaurant, and stay initially in case the man became violent, Bob writes: 'I couldn't understand why people had this belief that I could stop violence […] Perhaps the idea was that in the 30 seconds it took to hammer me the other victim could run away' (pp.114-115).

It was typical of Bob that he also included in the book a chapter written by a university student, whose research involved an evaluation of the project and interviews with those helped by it and who had come into contact with it, as well as extracts from the project's community newspaper of accounts written by local young people and adults. Reading these accounts took me back many years to a train journey during which

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Bob encouraged me to write. Towards the end of the book, Bob reflected upon something that was a common thread in all his writing: his firm belief that the source of the problems faced by families lay in inequality – income inequality but also inequality before the law.

> I know a man with four small children and no money who broke into his meter to steal a few pounds. He was jailed for six months. By contrast, I read of an aristocrat receiving a suspended sentence after obtaining £13,000 by false pretences (p.200).

While *Kids at the Door* was written contemporaneously, in the rare quiet moments of the work, the follow-up volume, *Kids at the Door Revisited*, follows a more familiar research reporting style, though Bob shied away from calling it 'research' and was aware of the limitations of subjective reporting. It was written after Bob and Annette had moved away but had characteristically kept in touch with many people they had previously interacted with daily. It is also based on the diaries kept by Bob and Dave Wiles, but with the advantage of time for reflection, and follow-up interviews with 51 of those helped by the projects, including their own reflections on how their involvement had influenced their own life courses. In Bob's own words:

> Both the statistics and the interviews reveal a heartening picture. They show that young people who start life with the kind of disadvantages that could put them on the track for crime, unemployment and social distress can turn the tables. Those from broken families do not have to repeat the pattern. Those with parents who were unemployed do find work. Those who were juvenile delinquents can break the habit (p.38).

Why am I recommending these books, now decades old? Not to advocate making one's family life and home the centre of a community helping project, something I haven't done myself. But I think there is much to learn from the accounts of interactions with people in adversity that is timeless, like the descriptions of simple acts – such as accompanying a young person to court and speaking about their positive side, leading to a community order instead of custody – of making time to listen to people, of keeping the project administration light to maximise helping time, and of the value of keeping a diary.

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I had my own copy of *Kids at the Door Revisited*, and tracked down a copy of the first volume in the University of Glasgow library. I had to rejoin the library after very many years' absence in order to borrow the book, and felt grateful to Bob for reuniting me with the familiar old book smell among the shelves. Then there was an unexpected delight in finding a dedication in Bob's own handwriting on the inside cover: 'To David: Hope you can stimulate a similar project in Glasgow'. The David referred to is the late David Donnison, professor emeritus of social policy at the University of Glasgow, and an ex libris in the book shows that Professor Donnison had gifted the book to the library. Bob himself later stimulated a project in Glasgow, which lives on after his death, but that is another story.

About the review author

Dr Graham Connelly has an honorary post in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde and CELCIS, is editor-in-chief of the *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care* and a member of the editorial board of *Youth*. He wrote an obituary of Bob Holman which can be found on the CELCIS website here.

The review author was reviewing a library copy of *Kids at the Door* and his own copy of *Kids at the Door Revisited*.

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