

Didi, ma'am and aunty: a role model for all

MOHUA DAS



Jillian (left) hugs a girl overcome by emotion after her speech at Piyali Learning Centre, a school for underprivileged children (right), which invited her for a motivational talk

Jillian Haslam, a 42-year-old British millionaire who grew up in the slums of Calcutta, took time out to spend a week in her birthplace and meet almost everyone wishing to talk to the wonderful woman after reading about her exceptional life story in **Metro** on July 20.

Metro accompanied her as she toured Piyali Learning Centre, a school for underprivileged girls; and met a boy suffering from cerebral palsy and another one who she helped in the treatment for his cancer.

Day One

The motivational speaker interacts with children at Calcutta International School

September 3: If some were at a loss for words, others had a lot to say at Piyali Learning Centre. The girls queued up, most with moist eyes, to greet Jillian in the afternoon. The motivational speaker connected with the likes of Bill and Hillary Clinton was invited to Piyali to "meet the girls and motivate them".

This was her third stop for the day after an emotional visit to her alma mater St. Thomas' Girls' School in the morning, followed by a session at Auxilium Convent where the girls welcomed her with a parade. "I wanted to meet the teachers and the principal to show them that I was worth every minute of the time they spent on me and I want to inspire all students to do the same," she said.

At Piyali, she made an instant connection. "When I walked into your school, I might have looked different from you because of the way I look or the clothes I wear but the truth is we're no different from you. I'll tell you the story why..."



Simon William meets 'Aunty Jillian', who helped with money for his leukaemia treatment, at Park Circus

Jillian smiled and narrated her "story" — how from living under a staircase in a lane off Prinsep Street and a one-room tenement in a Kidderpore slum, she walked herself out of poverty. Her sister Donna, who still lives in Calcutta, played interpreter and translated every word into Bengali for nearly 200 underprivileged girls listening to Jillian with their eyes wide open.

"We had taken the girls on a field trip to Rabindra Sarobar a month ago to see the water show. When we got into the Metro, everybody was reading her story on the front page," said Kristine Pederson, an American who heads the learning centre.

"We were touched by the story and shared it with our students. This woman has come from a similar, if not worse, background and she's been able to overcome it. I thought it would resonate with the girls if Jillian came and met them."

It was heartening to see shy girls grab their chance to express what they felt about Jillian. "If *dididi* could tolerate all the sufferings and rise to such heights, I also want to study hard and do well like her," said 17-year-old Kakoli before her eyes welled up with tears.

"I don't think our teachers or I could make the connection that Jillian has. It wasn't about 'you can do it' but 'I did it so you can do it too'," Kristine said.

A member of the institution's management requested Jillian to talk to girls about child marriage, apparently the "greatest challenge the school has been facing". Only six or seven girls from a class of 25 in the junior section "reach the higher classes".



Lunch with Mohit Mehta, who has overcome cerebral palsy, at his Chakraberia home. Pictures by Sanjoy Ghosh and Arnab Mondal

"We saw the impact Jillian had on the girls. So we thought it would be great if they heard it from her. Jillian told the girls: 'There is a time for everything or else you lose out on a lot of good things you could do to your life'," Kristine said.

Later, the teachers of Piyali circled around Jillian. "Do you believe in luck?" one of them asked while another teacher requested her to write them a message.

"I've been restless since the day we heard that she would be visiting our school," said teacher Bandana Mullick.

Her colleague Chandrika Hore said: "This piece of paper will remain an inspiration and asset for the rest of my life. Not everything goes well in our lives and whenever I feel down, I will look at this message and bounce back."

Day Two

September 4: Lunch with 22-year-old Mohit Mehta, who wrote to Jillian after reading her story in **Metro**.

Mehta is special. He has overcome cerebral palsy to keep pace, stride for stride, with his peers in academic pursuits.

After a leisurely meal and three-hour chat at his Chakraberia home, Jillian was "shocked at the number of similarities" she discovered in her new "friend", including their common "dislike for paneer".

Mehta promised to join her in a charity that she plans to launch in Calcutta. "I would be delighted to have him on board once Mohit will be through with his education next year. He will be an asset," she said.

"I used to complain that I was the only one struggling. After reading the article (about Jillian), I felt my struggle is nothing in front of hers. When I requested our school principal to help me reach ma'am, I was given her email address. I was confident that ma'am would respond to my email," said the youth currently doing his masters in business law.

"I wanted to meet her because she has been helping the needy and I too want to help those... like me. They need psychological support apart from financial help," he said.

Then he asked Jillian what she thought of him. "Truly inspirational with tremendous courage and strength. It's our own strength and choices that take us forward. I've made one of the strongest friends ever," Jillian replied with a reassuring smile.

After saying their byes, Jillian ran to the next appointment — 10-year-old Simon William — on Dargah Road at Park Circus. An "old acquaintance", he greeted "Aunty Jillian" with the cutest of smiles. "So how will you make us proud when you grow up?" Jillian asked with her arms around Simon.

"I want to be a cricketer!" announced the St. Mary's School student with a kind of confidence rarely seen in children of his age suffering from leukaemia.

Jillian has a hand in stimulating that confidence. His father Peter, a single parent of three children, had written to her for help when an eight-month-old Simon was detected with leukaemia.

"I was running from door to door for help and then I heard about Jillian's charity. I faxed her the papers and she helped my son without knowing us. She was the first donor for Simon's treatment," said Peter, who was a jockey in horse races and now a captain in a hotel.

"When her story appeared in **The Telegraph**, I was sure this was the lady who helped my son. I was very keen on meeting her and thanking her," he added.