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Jillian spreads Christmas cheer

- Santa for street kids

Jhinuk Mazumdar and Trina Chaudhuri



Jillian Haslam with children at Uttarpara. (Anup Bhattacharya)

Jillian Haslam can identify herself with children living on streets. For, she herself had grown up on the streets of Calcutta and under staircases to become a globetrotting motivational speaker and author.

On Thursday, she was with 150 such children in Uttarpara, about 15km from the city, chatting with them, sharing their joy and spreading Christmas cheer.

These children, whose parents are either daily labourers or vegetable vendors or domestic help, are students at one of the three study centres run by the Remedia Trust Foundation in Uttarpara.

Children between two and 18 study at these centres twice a week. The first one was started in 2010 and the fourth is in the offing. Apart from regular teachers, engineering and Class XI students voluntarily teach at these centres.

Subhashish Chakraborty, a fourth-year engineering student at the Hooghly Engineering & Technology College, is one such volunteer. "It's not much if we spare some time for these kids. Anyway, we waste a lot of time doing nothing."

Jillian said she has "expanded" the foundation, which had been started by her in-laws.

Anita Paswan, a Class VI student of Uttarpara Union Girls' High School, said she wanted to "become like Jillian Ma'am" when she grew up.

Her father doesn't have a steady income. He ferries bamboos to pandals. And her mother works as a domestic help.

Anita said the coaching at the centre helped her secure the "fourth rank in class".

Every year, Jillian makes it a point to meet these children, have meetings with the teachers of these centres and chalk out various programmes.

"Many of them have seven, eight or 10 siblings like we have... if you can inspire one kid and change his/her life, the family's destiny would change," Jillian said.

The foundation also runs two food banks - one on Middleton Row and another at Picnic Garden - for the aged and the disabled who mostly live on the streets.

Jillian had asked the foundation to organise a Christmas "bash" for people who rely on the food bank for their monthly ration.

On Wednesday, she spent the evening with the aged at the Church of Our Lady of Vailankanni at Picnic Garden.

Mary Pereira, 60, who mustered the courage to get on the stage and sing *Aandhar gelo dube* in honour of Jillian, said she and her husband did not have to go without food because of the ration from Remedia Trust.

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