

Braveheart tells city 'Yes, you can'

Jillian Haslam Uses Her Inspirational Life To Educate Streetkids In Kolkata

Rohit Khanna | TNN

Kolkata: As a child, she picked food from garbage bins in the dingy lanes of Kidderpore and licked chocolate wrappers thrown by schoolchildren. Today, she is a motivational speaker who travels around the world with her slogan 'If I can, you can'.

Jillian Haslam is now in Kolkata to prove her watchword true.

The 42-year-old Indian-English woman (as she prefers to call herself) is launching a project in Kolkata to provide education, employability and empowerment to street children. The first such centre will start in Habra and she plans to have at least one in each district of Bengal.

"My aim is support as many children as I can. Make them realize that if I can do it, they can do it too. I plan to start mobile medical units also to take care of the people living on the streets," Jillian told TOI. She is already working extensively among thalassaemic children through her NGO Remedia.

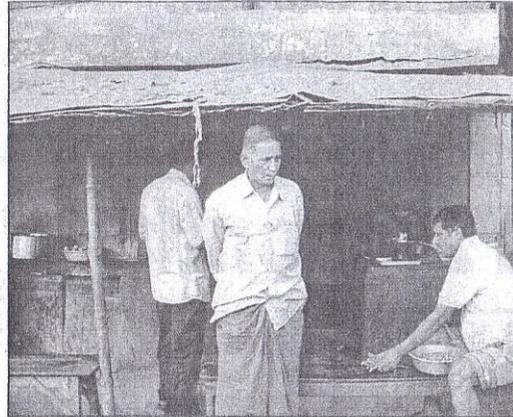
Jillian was born to British parents in a slum in Kidderpore. Her family could not afford a Rs 5 meal a day, let alone a rent of Rs 100. She picked up leftovers to eat and passed each day unsure of



whether she could see the next.

In school, friends would make fun of her torn clothes and white skin. "My first boyfriend would not hold hands with me because mine were rough from washing clothes and cleaning rooms," she recalls.

Although her childhood years were



The tea shop that gave milk for free to Jillian Haslam's family and saved her sister. The grocer who never asked for money. The staircase under which Jillian slept as a child

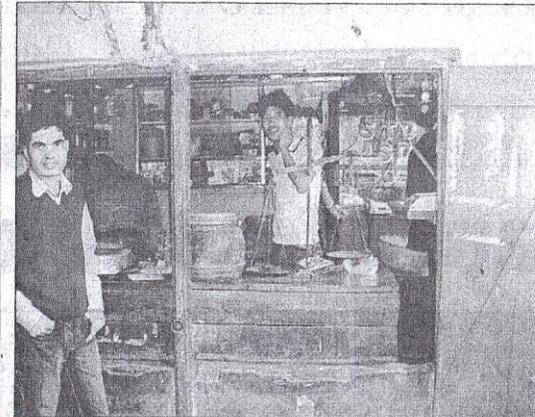
traumatic, she keeps coming back to her hometown Kolkata. "My mother always taught me to give more than I took. As in the Lion King song 'The circle of life', I decided to come back and work among the poor and needy," she said, sitting at a star hotel in the city.

Ask her what turned her life around and she says: "Education." "That and the love of my parents and god."

Jillian's parents managed to put her in a boarding school near Kidderpore. "As children, I and my sister Vanessa

found it hard to accept why other kids around us could buy and eat cakes and biscuits from the canteen and we couldn't. It hurt," Jillian recalls. But they found out a way to feed themselves. "We used to hang around some kids and pick up the wrapper of a cake or biscuit to pick off the morsels. It tasted so good."

Jillian was fortunate to have parents who taught them to look at the brighter side of things. "I clearly remember how our friends made fun of our patched coats. I and Vanessa would tell them that



it was 'our coat'. They would not understand how much love had gone into every stitch."

Her racial identity became a barrier when she fell in love. "He did like me, yet kept hesitating to tell his family about me. After a few months, I was told that his family would never agree to the match. I was just an Indian-English girl. An untouchable," she said.

After her mother died from cancer, Jillian found herself the sole breadwinner for the family. Eventually she got a break in Delhi and joined American Express Bank as executive assistant to the CEO. She was appointed president of Bank of America's Charity and Diversity Network in India, in charge of four metropolitan cities. Her career started taking one turn after another.

But what kept her spirit alive in spite of so much hardship? "My father once quoted a few lines: 'There is a compensation for every cross you bear/A secret consolation is hidden somewhere there/ If only you can find it; If only you can wait/ An angel comes to comfort the lost and desolate...' The moment you refuse to accept your situation and fight back, the magic starts," she said.

Jillian is now based in the UK. As a motivational speaker for corporate executives, Jillian often does not charge her clients and asks them to donate to her organization instead. "This is how I am trying to raise funds for the people in the city," she said.