

Community crusader

After over 15 years in the communications industry, Joycelyn Lee decided to give up the corporate life for one of social work. She speaks to *Priya Kulasagaran* about running a social enterprise, and her philosophy of reaching out to the marginalised.



trailblazer



It is mid-evening, and the Pit Stop Community Cafe is a bustle of activity. The chef barks out an order for more carrots, as young university students grapple with dicing their vegetables into proportional cubes. Veteran volunteers pitch in, clearing the simple wooden tables of clutter and carrying huge pots of rice porridge, vegetable stew, and bubur chacha to the buffet line.

As the queue outside starts forming for the 5:30pm dinner service, volunteers serving food are given a briefing: be polite to customers, make eye-contact, ask customers for their choice of the food available, be firm with queue-cutters. Someone places a box at the head of the buffet table, for the incoming customers to drop in payment if they so

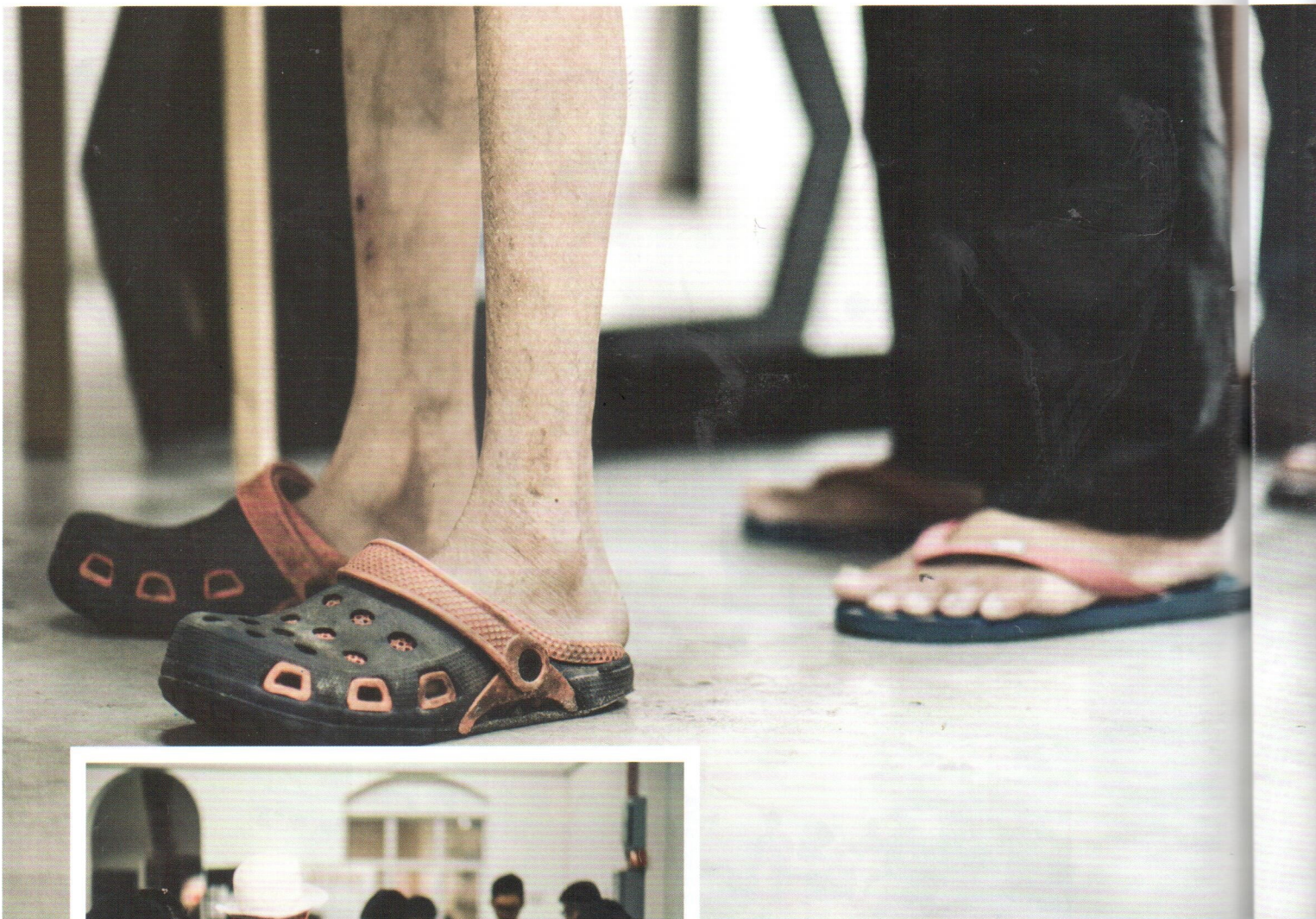
wished to. The clock strikes, and the crowd arrives – around 200 to 300 of Kuala Lumpur’s homeless community.

This scene replays itself six times a week at Pit Stop’s premises in a colonial shoplot along Jalan Tun H.S. Lee. Being a social enterprise, the cafe operates commercially during the day, runs as a soup kitchen in the evenings. It also offers job opportunities for underprivileged youth, by way of hospitality and culinary training.

The enterprise was co-founded by Joycelyn Lee, a former journalist and public relations expert, as well as a passionate foodie. As dinner service winds down, she finally emerges from the kitchen for a much-needed

break. Before I can interview her however, she enthusiastically quizzes me instead about what I had observed from the day’s service.

“This is a platform for people to open their eyes,” she says. “Many people just think, oh they’re on the street so they’re homeless. But there’s never a question of why they are on the streets. Homelessness and urban poverty are just symptoms of social issues – and people can only see that if they interact with those who have felt or are feeling the problem.”



Chance encounters

Lee started such similar interactions with the urban poor due a time-honoured affliction of many creatives – insomnia. In her case, the sleeplessness was partly caused by stress. “When I was in public relations, it was hectic; I was on call 24/7, but I was also struggling for a sense of meaning in what I was doing. I was good at it, but it was sucking up my soul,” she says. During these insomniac days, she would go on drives or walkabouts in the city in the wee hours of the morning. It’s worth noting that Lee also dabbled in seed bombing; packing little balls of soil and seeds

and planting them guerrilla-style in the urban landscape.

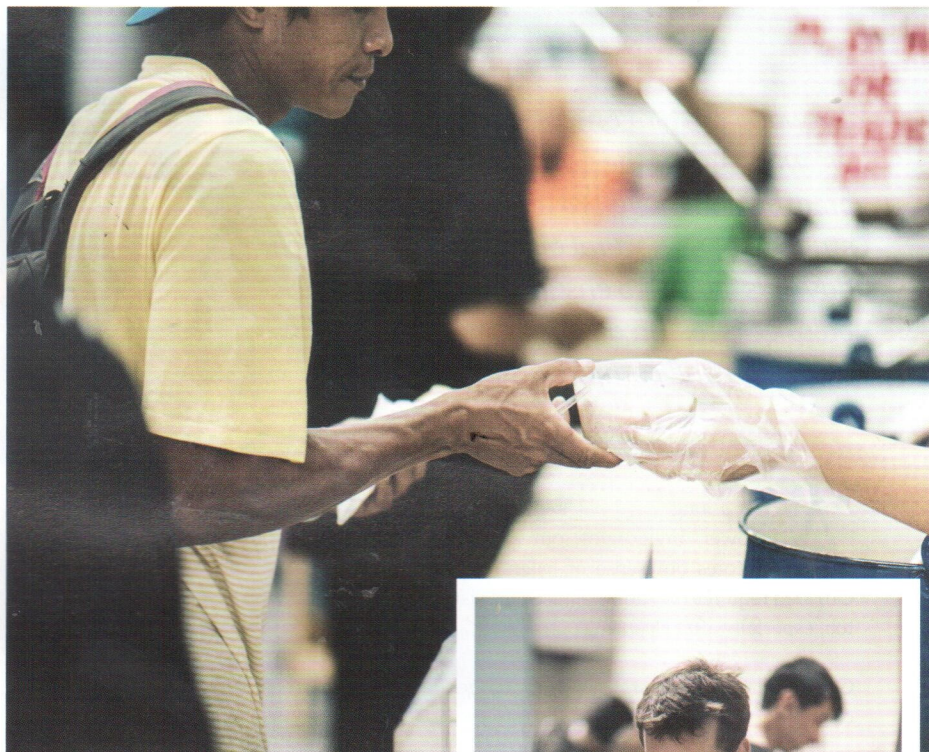
“So, I’d be hanging out by the 7-11, all grubby, and it felt natural to strike up conversations with the people around me including the homeless. It started with just sharing whatever I happened to have – a bottle of water or a bun,” says Lee. She soon realised that a sought-after item was the humble tikar, a rattan mat for a good night’s sleep.

So began Project Tikar, with Lee corralling like-minded people to contribute essential

goods and food to be distributed to the urban poor. As her apartment started to cram up with the donated items, Lee decided to leave her corporate job and focus on how she could improve the workings of her social cause. Thus, began the spark for setting up Pit Stop.

“We looked into successful existing models around the world,” explains Lee. “After a lot of thinking, and coffee, we realised that what we really need is a platform, a hub, for everyone including the marginalised, volunteers, and partners, to come together.”

Lee explains that Pit Stop has three key objectives: to be a hub for people who want to give back to the community; to reach out to marginalised communities such as the homeless and urban poor; and a way to minimise food wastage through food rescue, redistribution and reengineering.



The psychology of upliftment

After years of experience in communications, it's no surprise that Lee believes that "words and labels are important". "We call it 'dinner service'; if I say 'feeding time', it's like giving food to animals at the zoo. Words shape our realities and perceptions. And that box we put out in front, you do see people dropping in what they can - it might just be 50 sen, but it gives them the dignity of saying, I paid for my food and didn't have to rely on charity today. That's the first step towards reintegrating into conventional society," she says.

Lee stresses that uplifting the marginalised involves validating their humanity. "The longer you are on the streets, the more your lizard (primal) brain takes control - you're in survival mode, just thinking about your next meal. And before you know it, a human being has become feral," she says. In this sense, she

says that it is easy to spot a newcomer on the buffet line. "For one, they make as little eye contact as possible. And when they're offered a choice of which food they want, they might even just stand there and 'jam'; it's like sticking a spanner in the works, and they're panicking about having to think," says Lee.

Another facet to this process of 'rehumanising' people is offering them choices, chances and opportunities - rather than forcing 'help' down their throats. "If you force your 'help' on someone, even when they do want it, you might end up causing more harm than good," says Lee. "It comes back to another philosophy I have; everybody has to live their own lives."

Comfort zones are real, whether you're slaving in an office cubicle or living off the streets. "We offer opportunities to help them

climb out, if they choose to; and it is not an overnight thing," she says. "Sure, it's tiring, and sometimes frustrating, and sometimes it feels like change is happening so slowly; but as long as change is taking place, that gives me hope." ◊