

All too happy to help

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LIFESTYLE

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In this age of materialism, it is refreshing to find youths who devote their lives to helping others.

THREE years ago, Itland Anuar could barely speak English, let alone carry on a conversation in the language. She had completed her secondary education and was thinking about working as a waitress in her hometown in Temerloh, Pahang.

She had considered the job as a big step-up as most of the people in her orang asli community were only doing menial jobs in factories. Her father was a rubber tapper who did his best to provide for the family.

"I thought I would end up as a waitress, working in a restaurant and supporting my parents and two siblings," said Itland, 22.

However, things turned out differently.

Today, Itland is not wiping tables or taking orders in a bustling restaurant. Instead, she is in Kuala Lumpur teaching a class full of students and earning money to support herself and her family.

She speaks confidently in English and teaches her students how to speak the language. More importantly, she is changing lives one day at a time.

"I want underprivileged youths, especially from the orang asli community, to be bold and be able to converse in English – a language that I believe is crucial for personal growth and development. I want to help improve their lives," said Itland.

Itland found her calling in life, thanks to a relative who introduced her to SOLS 24/7, an organisation that provides non-formal education to underprivileged youths in several Asian countries.

The organisation provides free education and accommodation for students aged between 16 and 28 in countries such as Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (East Timor), Laos, Japan, Thailand and Singapore. SOLS also equips these students with life skills.

"When I first got to a SOLS school in Malacca, I couldn't speak English at all. I was afraid of everyone and hesitated to try anything new," said Itland.

Five months into the programme, she saw vast improvements in herself and became more confident. Her ability to lead other students convinced the people from SOLS that she was ready to take charge of one of its schools in East Timor. This is part of SOLS' non-formal education programme in which good students are sent overseas to work in other schools and help the locals improve their lot.

"I was really scared as the students were older than me. They looked intimidating, but soon I figured that they were just like me and my people back home; they didn't have much opportunity in life. I decided I had to help them," she said.

In the end, Itland realised that she had nothing to fear as the students turned out to be some of the most fun-loving and inquisitive people she had ever met.

She taught the locals in East Timor basic English and other subjects, and helped run the school for over a year. During her stint there, Itland learnt about the importance of helping others.

"They were underprivileged people who had a thirst for knowledge; language posed a barrier for them. Together with my team members (there were eight of them), we worked to improve their lives and language skills. You do not know how much impact you can make in someone's life until you have done it," said Itland.

Making a difference

While most people may have forgotten the things they learned in school, William Koong lives by one of the moral values he was taught as a child.

"Tolong-menolong was the first nilai murni we learned in school. I'm just doing what I was taught to do," said Koong, 26.

Although his parents were initially against him working for an NGO, they eventually accepted his decision.

"They wanted to see me as my own boss, running my own company. They thought I would not achieve much in this field but I have proven them wrong," said Koong.

He is currently working as a PR and marketing executive at SOLS; part of his duty is to scour the nation in search of young people in need of assistance.

"I look for orang asli settlements and try to find as many new villages as I can. Then I talk to the tok batin (village head) and seek their permission to take the young ones out of the village to the city where they can pick up new skills.

"We try to find jobs for the youths at hotels and shopping malls to help build their confidence and enable them to earn some pocket money," said Koong. He is really proud of the work he has done so far.

"This is something that I get to do all the time. It's not a project that we do during the festive season where we go and help a community and forget about them at other times. We get to help people every day here," said Koong. While most guys his age may be looking for materialistic gains, Koong is happiest when he is out there helping young people.

"The kids apply the things they learnt at the centre, in their everyday lives. This is something to be proud of," said Koong.

While the young people who joined SOLS may come from different backgrounds, programme director Danutcha Catriona Singh wants them to return to society as well-balanced people.

"We have had students who were into gangsterism prior to entering the school. It's hard to believe but now they are leading other students in the school and are doing such a good job of it," said Danutcha, 28.

She remembers her days as a teacher at the school; she encountered students who misbehaved and gave her a hard time.

"I thought I was a patient person, that is, until I volunteered as a teacher," said Danutcha with a laugh.

Danutcha's father-in-law, Madenjit Singh, was the visionary behind SOLS.

"He visited Cambodia in 2000 and was struck by the poverty there and the people's lack of communication skills in English. He moved over to Cambodia and opened his house for underprivileged kids to come and learn everything they could," she explained.

SOLS is now the largest non-formal education provider in Cambodia and has expanded to places where young people are most in need.

"I joined the SOLS family in 2009. I quit my job as a journalist and went to East Timor where I stayed for over a year. I loved what I did there. After being part of this team, I cannot imagine being part of something else. This is personal development at its max," said Danutcha.

This is something that Itland agrees with wholeheartedly. The once quiet young woman is now capable of handling projects on her own.

"I am different now and my family and village people notice that. I am more confident and am sure of what I want in life – to help others. I want other orang asli youths to be like me, too," she said.

"Journalism may have been the more glamorous career choice, but the satisfaction of knowing you've helped underprivileged youths trumps it all," said Danutcha.

"We have lots of success stories here. We have youths who have turned their lives around and returned to their families. There are mothers who are surprised that their sons are making their own beds now," she said.

Of course, like any job in the world, it also comes with its own challenges, like dealing with difficult students and finding ways to sustain the organisation financially. SOLS has several projects that help generate money to fund the schools and the team often comes up with novel ways to make money.

"We have public donors and are currently funded by Hong Leong Foundation but we don't want to survive on grants and donations as these will eventually run out. We want to be sustainable so that we can help the students for a long, long time," added Danutcha.

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