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Poesy Liang
tells her story

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CILLA FOONG
tells all!



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Face front for *charity*

Poesy Liang was a TV presenter, model and aspiring singer when tragedy struck. In a life-changing moment, she shunned the glitzy life and started an online community of do-gooders – through Facebook!

It's a Thursday night and a children's shelter in Petaling Jaya is quiet save for the sounds of rustling paper and audible whispers. The kids diligently do their homework while a number of 'teachers' help them figure out the more difficult questions. The latter are men and women from all ages, comprising homemakers, students and executives, among others. They are all part of a volunteer group called Helping Angels whose members were roped in through a Facebook group started by one gutsy young lady: 34-year-old Poesy Liang.

A DIFFERENT LIFE THEN
Pretty as a picture, the young Poesy was a talent in TV commercials, emcee at events and host of a television music chart show. In the midst of her popularity, tragedy reared its ugly head. "I was walking with my friends when I suddenly collapsed. The girls turned around to find me sitting on the floor. After that incident, I kept on falling more and more, spraining my ankles which I thought was the reason why I was not able to walk properly. After six months, I lost the ability to walk

without support." Poesy was only 17 at the time.
Her family took Poesy to the KL General Hospital to find out what was wrong with their daughter. After a series of tests, the cause of this physical disadvantage became clear. A rare benign tumour was pressing against her spinal cord.
"Ironically, as helpless as I was, I was at peace in the hospital. I wasn't rushing all the time like I used to when I was out there," says Poesy, referring to the world outside of her four walls. "I had time to

"Many people who have everything are unhappy because they don't realise how lucky they really are."

reflect on life and figure out the reasons why I felt unhappy. I started writing my thoughts and expressions. There was a rumour that I had died from the illness. At that point, I realised who my true friends were. I could tell who were sincere and who were not. Thank God, I received strong support from my family and friends."

After open surgery and physiotherapy, she recovered the use of her limbs, but she wasn't the same as when she was living the fast life. A private person and only 18 then, the real world jarred her sensitive senses. Still, she continued her television work and even tried singing in Hong Kong and Taiwan. She recollects, "That didn't work out, so I came home and decided to go back to school and do my MBA."

MORE CHALLENGES

After she completed her studies, Poesy started an interior design business with a partner but fate dealt her another blow. At 28, she found herself paralysed again. Having gone through the ordeal of the healing process once, this time she found her situation harder to swallow. "The idea of going through surgery and the pain all over again just crushed me. My body couldn't heal as efficiently and quickly like I did in my teens."

Work-wise, things became more challenging for Poesy. Her movements were constricted to where the wheelchair would allow. "It was more difficult to visit work sites. I had to hire a driver to take me around. I had to make adjustments around the house." Once again, Poesy recovered through surgery and rehabilitation, "...but I knew that this

ordeal wasn't going to be the last. So I decided to work where there is the least chance of harm. I started a home-based business designing jewellery."

Three years later, mercilessly, the tumour did strike again. And so round three began. Poesy went through the same motion of undergoing surgery, and then recovered. This time, advanced medical science assured that the tumour will not return. All these experiences and a lesser person would definitely be broken. But Poesy had other plans. She took a step back and reflected on her life's priorities, then channelled her focus on things she deemed more important – helping others.



Top: Poesy (middle row, right) with her 'angels' at the KL Bird Park in 2007; The face of a cup noodle advertisement in Singapore, at 15.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS


The idea of Helping Angels came while Poesy was navigating Facebook in August 2007. She saw its potential and quickly registered the new group. "I sent out about 200 invites. In a single week, 400 members had signed up."

In that same week, the group managed to organise a movie outing for 47 orphans

from Stepping Stones Home, a home for neglected children in Taman Seputeh, KL. Everything from the movie tickets to Happy Meals, were fully sponsored by an anonymous donor and McDonalds respectively. The success egged on other projects like the Thursday Tutoring Programme they currently run in Trinity and Precious Children's Homes.

The tutoring programme is starting to expand to other shelters in PJ. Other ongoing Helping Angels projects include the Back to School Project for children from poor families, paying college fees for four high achievers from low income families and supporting pet rescuers with Kempen Kembiri SPCA. These activities are run by volunteer teams and recorded on their Facebook site as well as their official website at www.helpingangels.net.

"Many volunteers go all out for a few months, then leave. That's natural," she says, "People do what they can, when they can. When their priorities change, they drift away. All I hope is that they will start again later on." Helping Angels now have close to 2000 members on Facebook. The group has spread its wings to Bangkok, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Each chapter has its own list of community projects from funding students to distributing much-needed winter supplies.

"At the end of the day, Helping Angels is not about me, it's about the volunteers themselves. Volunteering can be a form of therapy. Many people who have everything are unhappy because they don't realise how lucky they really are. By helping the less fortunate, hopefully they will see how much better off they are and change the way they perceive happiness. Eventually, they heal themselves." As for Poesy, she has found the balance that she needed. Whatever comes her way, she'll be ready. 

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