

Decisions, decisions!

It wasn't easy deciding on the *Her World* Woman and Young Achiever. Our judges found our 2011 recipients after more than two hours of discussions.



It was a cool afternoon at the Piano Lounge of the Kuala Lumpur Golf and Country Club but the judges of the *Her World* Woman Awards were sweating it out in a debate over who would be most deserving of the Woman of the Year and Young Achiever of the Year titles. The awards and the gala night, held on May 4th this year, is an important annual event for the magazine. Every important criteria was taken into account by the judges – Datin Linda Ngiam, director of Star Publications and former group managing director and chief executive officer of Star Publications, Tay Ai Leen, director of Corporate Communication and Media Relations of L'Oréal Malaysia and Dato' Syed Faisal Albar, former group managing director and chief executive officer of Pos Malaysia Berhad – before they reached their final decision of selecting Poesy Liang and Juana Jaafar as the recipients. The judges considered

whether they were inspiring in the efforts they took to overcome their challenges. They also deliberated on whether they had made a difference to society, how far their wings spanned to create that difference, and as to whether they broke new ground with their efforts. For the Young Achiever nominees (all of whom were aged under 35), in particular, the judges discussed whether they would have great potential to make a difference in society, the positive efforts they had made that got everyone paying attention to them, and whether they have what it takes to become the next *Her World* Woman. The judges were joined in the deliberations by Datin Azliza Ahmad Tajuddin, chief executive officer of Blu Inc Media Sdn Bhd (the publisher of *Her World*), Aster Lim, group managing editor of Blu Inc, Seema Viswanathan, editor-in-chief of *Her World* and Sharifah Sakinah Aljunid, editor of *Her World*.

Sowing seeds of kindness

Despite being partially paralysed, this brainy beauty is active in promoting kindness and empathy. Her community of volunteers now spans over 20 countries. With more inspiring humanitarian causes under her wings, Poesy Liang is the *Her World Woman* 2011. By KIRANA ASTER.

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"The way I plan for my life now is that even if I have to be wheelchair-bound, I can still do the work I'm currently investing my heart and soul in." It's not a light, opening conversation line, but Poesy Liang has carried herself through various life obstacles to say it without any bitterness. In fact, it is the peace and positivity radiating from the 37-year old that strikes you instantly.

While her photogenic face has graced countless magazines and TV shows following her creative forays to tickle the imagination of many, it is her voice for her charity missions that echoes long after the spotlight fades. Founder of 'Helping Angels,' a Facebook group which gathers volunteers for welfare work and which has now grown into a global movement, Poesy explains it this way: "I see myself as a humanitarian before anything else."

BREAKING OUT OF THE SHELL

'Conventional' is not a word to best describe Poesy's formative years. From an early age, the Kuala Lumpur native trained in Chinese calligraphy, Chinese stone seals carving, Chinese landscape painting, Chinese watercolours, piano and ballet. At 14, she was 'discovered' and made her television debut by starring in a Levi's commercial as the '501 girl' for Malaysia and Singapore. Soon, she was in more commercials and television programmes until she decided to quit. During that time, Poesy was diagnosed with acute thoracic intradural meningioma, a condition which causes growths of benign tumours within her spinal cord. These tumours caused her to suffer from paralysis, but after surgery to remove them, she recovered miraculously and was able to walk again.

The condition recurred in 2003, but this time there were complications during the surgery and Poesy suffered irreversible damage to her spinal cord, causing her to be paralysed partially, relegated to her lower limbs but with permanent sensory loss. This caused problems of balance and Poesy had to learn how to walk all over again, this time relying only on visual cues.

This condition isolated the young Poesy, but whilst overcoming her pain, a remedy for life came her way. "There were a lot of lows at that point and being thrust in the limelight at such an early age, I often asked myself, 'I'm quite blessed with education, why am I not using it?'. I spent a lot of quiet time in the hospital and this allowed me to reinvent and discover myself. During this time too, I started writing as a form of catharsis."

Firstly, with her passion for design, she started an interior

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design business. In 2004, after getting her first interior designing job for a kitchen system, her business began to expand and she began gaining recognition for her work; life was starting to look good. Then another curveball came in 2006, when she suffered another appearance of the tumours, but this time with the aid of new technology, all the tumours were removed with no signs of re-growth since. Poesy soon found a new passion in jewellery and started a home-based business selling pieces she designed herself. Not satisfied with her efforts, Poesy decided to direct her energies to what she desires most: helping other people.

CARING SPIRIT

Her ensuing involvement in charity was a trail she naturally followed. "When I was a child, I was told I had this 'caretaker' tendency. In my teens, I got involved with the SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), and I met good examples along the way. I knew early on that I wanted to focus on the following: education, research on disease, animal welfare and old age."

On the eve of Merdeka 2007, she came up with the idea for Helping Angels, a network of volunteers committed to a movement of compassion based on random acts of kindness. The movement started with a simple gesture of taking 60 children to watch the movie *Ratatouille* and later, the 'Thursday Tutoring



Programme' in Kuala Lumpur at children's shelters. Helping Angels soon expanded its outreach globally with the 'Bald Empathy Movement', 'Bangkok Blankets' 'Concert Series Projects' and 'Random Acts of Kindness'. Material and monetary sponsorship are of least importance for the group; instead, it seeks to promote the donation of time and efforts.

Five years later, Helping Angels comprises 2200 volunteers and has been running welfare activities from Senegal to Singapore. "It is all about cultivating leadership, whether corporate leadership or personal leadership. We don't fund-raise. We emphasise on using skills and influence to make positive changes on a long-term basis." Poesy's increasing venture into corporate speaking reflects her focus to garner the support of leaders. "When I speak at Bank Negara or at leadership forums, the faces I see are the ones who will one day lead and be able to make an impact at all levels. I want to be able to influence leaders and explain that there is a platform for them to be involved in altruism."

KEEPING THE PALETTE FULL

Poesy says there is no difference in her work and play. And no doubt her creative juices lend a different dimension to her already impressive resume. While she stays in the heart of KL, her cosy abode offers her a stimulating oasis, with an art studio to channel her experience outside the four walls and onto canvas. She is currently working on a solo exhibition in Okinawa for next year, featuring her trademark cat and tree paintings as well as her cartoons, an accidental endeavour.


"Less than a year ago I didn't have enough money to buy a ticket back home and was stranded in Paris. Things were not so romantic at the time, and I was drawing cartoons by the sidewalk to purchase my flight home. A London blogger raved about one of the works on Facebook and suddenly there were international followers as far as Texas who wanted to buy my drawings. After two weeks, I managed to fly home business class!"

Poesy will also be lending her vocals to a music

production. The details are sketchy, but she shares, "It will be an international production. I have roped in Jacky Cheung's music director and I'm penning lyrics for music compositions by a Swedish classical guitarist. Some classic covers and a few original pieces will be in the album." Two books are also slated for production, the first of which will be on Helping Angels.

REBRANDING GOODNESS

Poesy's journey seems to be going full steam ahead. But she puts her hope and faith in small gestures, like seeds that will eventually bloom into something beautiful. "I see myself as a gardener doing the digging, planting the seed, patiently watering and providing the right elements. I didn't start wanting to inspire people although I am grateful to be in that position," says Poesy. "I try to live my life to the best of my ability and do what's right by me, my family and my friends."

She reflects on that further by saying, "This journey has made me more appreciative of life's blessings." 

POESY LIANG'S JOURNEY OF GOODNESS:

2006

Started her own jewellery line.

2007

Set up Helping Angels, an online do-good community. Started Thursday Tutorials where volunteers give their time to teach children at shelter homes for free.

2011

Started the Bald Empathy Movement to create empathy awareness, including for cancer patients. For this, Poesy shaved her head bald.

2012

Organised the Helping Angels Speaker Congress, to foster green humanity.