

Rising From Ashes of Moral Apathy

By
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The nation's 61st Merdeka celebration is just around the corner, not only is it a day to celebrate it is also a day to reflect. To look how far we have progressed as a nation and as a community or have we failed?

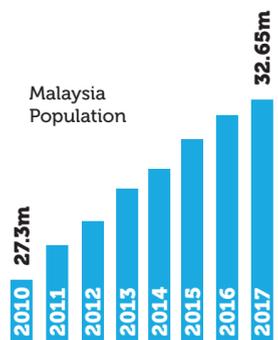
Amidst the skyscrapers and the labyrinth-like network of highways that snake around the city there is a growing sight that many choose to ignore. Homeless people – men, women and children dotting the panoramic vistas of our cities. The numbers have been growing rapidly over the past few years as more and more Malaysians fall below the poverty line and end up marginalised. Many of the homeless are also people who have been ostracized by society because of religious condemnation and harassment, forcing them to leave home and for some making it difficult for them to get jobs thus depriving them of their basic human right to work to take care of themselves.

The rate of homeless individuals of various age groups without a regular private space for sleeping, washing and going about one's daily activities in Kuala Lumpur is alarming. These individuals most often than not have no choice but to spend most of their time in public spaces such as in parks, on pavements, benches and even on the streets. But most of the time, during the day it is hard to notice them but when night falls and the city grinds to a halt, you will see them huddling in the dark in alleyways and pavements.

Various NGO's (non-governmental organisations) such as Kechara Soup Kitchen (KSK) and Mercy Malaysia, as well

as government bodies over the years have been trying to help these individuals, particularly since the total population in Malaysia has been on a steady incline, from 8.2 million people in 1960 to 32.1 million in 2017. With increased population and the migration of people from other parts of the country to Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, it is evident that policies need to change because we are not tackling the root cause of homelessness, we are only merely trying to soothe the effects of it.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the most populous state is Selangor, with an estimated 6.47 million people in 2018.



This is precisely why the Selangor state government has been focused on people-centric programs to alleviate the cost of living for the B40s. Dato'Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali during his tenure as Menteri Besar was very focused on the welfare of Selangorians. Programs like *Skim Peduli Sihat* and *Kasih Ibu Smart Selangor* (KISS) are a resounding success as they ease the burden for families trying to make ends meet.



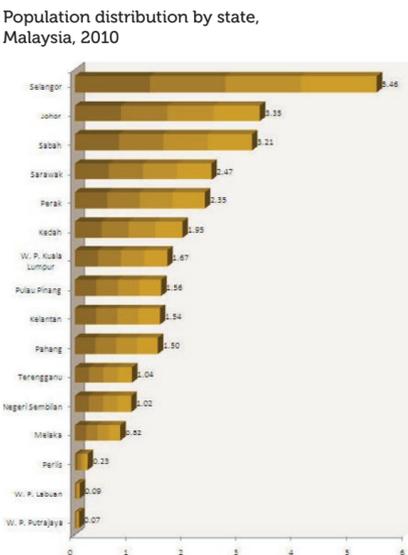
Volunteers at the Pit Stop Community Cafe



Volunteers at the Pit Stop Community Cafe



Volunteers at the Pit Stop Community Cafe



Source: facebook.com/pitstopcafekl/

On top of those two programs as well as others like free water and assisted housing schemes there are numerous other IPRs or *Inisiatif Peduli Rakyat* that is continuing under the present Dato Menteri Besar, Amirudin Shari.

While the state government tries to do their part, the rest of us ordinary Malaysians should realise we all have a service to render to our country however small it may be. It can even be something that doesn't cost a dime but could have tremendous impact like refusing to judge or condemn a person who doesn't fit our map of the world. If eradicating prejudices is too difficult, then maybe we could start by educating ourselves about the world around us beyond our material addictions.

The *Selangor Journal* team recently experienced first-hand the plight of the homeless at the Pit Stop Community Café in KL. Located in Jalan Tun HS Lee, or more commonly referred to as the 'Bangkok Bank Area' by citizens of KL, the Pit Stop Café is a commercial eatery by day and a soup kitchen by night.

The café was founded by dynamic duo Joycelyn Lee and Andrea Tan back in 2016. After more than two years of feeding the homeless and the urban poor, the minimalistic café has now become a known place of refuge and respite among the community.

Dinner is served 5:30 pm onwards daily and serves around 200 homeless or poor. Distri-

buton of dinner for the individuals is carried out in an unorthodox way, as Lee and Tan refuse to just hand out packets like other soup kitchens. "We give them an empty bowl and ask them to choose their food. Newcomers are baffled as to what they want because they're so used to having food packets. They get a sense of dignity when they're able to choose instead of just having to accept handouts," says Lee.

Besides giving out free dinners which are sometimes sponsored in full by individuals or corporations as part of their CSR programs, Lee and Tan also organise skill programs. Among the programs are English language training, basic culinary skills, and even kitchen management. These set of programmes are open to anyone willing to learn with hopes that they can be placed in jobs

in the respective fields. Some have even been hired by the café because of their willingness to learn, work and serve.

We were astonished to discover that among the individuals who are homeless 90% were Malaysians. After much probing, we found that the percentage of Malaysians by far exceeds that of non-Malaysians amongst the homeless community in the country.

Percentage of Malaysian and Non-Malaysian in the homeless community



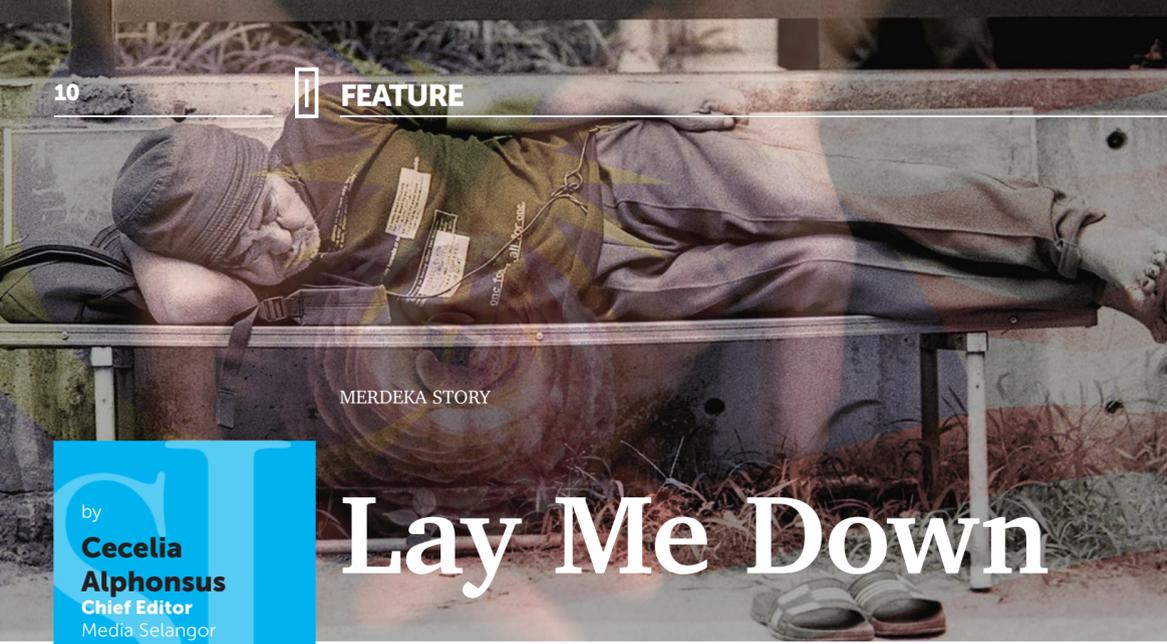
Malaysians are undoubtedly a patriotic bunch, each with our own way of showing patriotism come the month of Merdeka. For this year, alongside flying the Jalur Gemilang and having it attached to your car or hung on the front of your house door, why not portray your patriotism beyond just a day by committing to help hungry Malaysians?

Instead of reinventing the wheel and trying to organise your own "feed the homeless" ad hoc program, contact people like Joycelyn and Andrea at www.pitstopcafekl.com and find out how you can volunteer or better yet how your organisation can help support financially the people on the ground who do this day in and day out come rain or shine.

Quite often the good intentions of people go awry because they do not understand the "mechanics" of feeding the homeless and food is wasted, food containers litter the streets and worse cause food poisoning for our street friends.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had once said, "The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honourable, to be compassionate, to make some difference that you have lived and lived well."

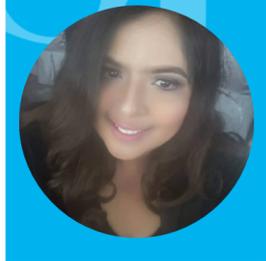
“The one thing that had us befuddled on that day was the fact that 90% of the individuals we had served were Malaysians.”



MERDEKA STORY

Lay Me Down

by
**Cecelia
Alphonsus**
Chief Editor
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thrust those packets into eager out-stretched hands. I bet they too focused on the hands and not the eyes.

We avert our eyes because it is truly impossible to stare into the eyes of a person living on the streets and not acknowledge them as an individual human-being. You can't look at their eyes and not feel the grief, disappointment and frustration that fills their soul.

I couldn't and I didn't until I met Uncle Ramlee (not his real name) at the Pit Stop Community Café, thanks to Joycelyn Lee, one of the founders of this oasis of warmth in a desert devoid of humanity in the heart of KL.

Uncle Ramlee

Uncle Ramlee shatters whatever stereotypes you might have of homeless people. Neatly dressed in a clean shirt and pants, sporting a cotton French beret that had my stomach in a knot because it was just like the one my late father used to love wearing.

Clean shaven with impeccable manners and speaking in fluent English, this gentleman in his late sixties cut a more impressive figure than some of my dates. For some reason, I decided not to sit across the table from him and I asked if I could sit next to him instead.

I wanted to look at him, really look at him. Not like an object or a curiosity but to really see him, his eyes, the lines on his face, the missing teeth, the way he clenched his lips when he speaks and I wanted to listen, intently to him.

And when I started listening, that is when my heart, despite the shattered mess that it was already in, continued to crack into a million tiny pieces.

Uncle Ramlee has been living on the streets since 1973, the year that I was born. For my entire existence on this planet,

he had been moving from state to state, from Johor right up to Penang until he finally settled near the Bangkok Bank area in KL almost 30 years ago.

"This area here," he tells me "was my home. I was comfortable here with my friends. It was easy to find a meal and by 2am the city will be quiet and we could sleep."

"What happened then? Why did you move?" I asked.

"They came for us. The authorities."

"In the middle of the night, when we were fast asleep, they woke us up with their sticks, shouting and yanking us by the scruff of our necks, pushing and

elders and for people in general."

I replied that the police are usually gruff and lacking in the manners department. He gave me a wry smile and told me that some of the worst abuses he has seen and endured was at the hands of officers from government departments tasked with ensuring their welfare.

A lump formed in my throat and I wondered what kind of species of animal would manhandle elderly homeless people?

Uncle Ramlee continued his story and told me about how he was thrown in jail and that it was thanks to Joycelyn and her "lawyer friends" that he got out.

"I knew I couldn't stay here anymore, even though it was home to me, I know the authorities would not leave me in a peace. I lost most of my belongings in the raids and had to start over. I moved further out of the city centre, closer to the outskirts of the city. It is more difficult to find a meal but at least the authorities haven't started to chase us away there."

Hope For The Future

As it was almost August when I met Uncle Ramlee, I asked him if he remembered Merdeka Day in 1957.

I could see his eyes travel back to a happier time in his life as he recounted how excited he was standing in the stadium clutching his father's hand.

"I was just about six years old," he chuckled "and I didn't really know what was going on except that it was something important."

"I could sense that the people around me were very excited but at the same time there was a nervous air of apprehension."

"Similar to what we felt on May 10th recently?" I asked cheekily.

He threw his head back and laughed heartily, with a

smile he said "this change is good isn't it?"

"I guess it is. What are your hopes for this new Malaysia?"

"Freedom."

Gazing at what was quite possibly a puzzled expression on my face, Uncle Ramlee went on to explain that what every homeless person wanted was the freedom to live their lives with dignity. They didn't want to be herded into cells where their freedom was restricted.

"All we need is a place to sleep at night and the opportunity to work or to ply a trade. We have talents, we have experience, I myself was once a golf caddy. Do not treat us like we are nothing or worse, criminals to be under lock and key. We have skills that we can share with others but no one takes the time to find out how we can contribute to society. I have ideas on how we can eradicate homelessness but no one wants to listen to me. They just treat us like animals."

I look at him in silence, wishing I could give him a place he could call home. I couldn't help but see my father in his face and I shuddered wondering if would he end up dying all alone and the tears just rolled down my cheeks.

Joycelyn grins at me like a Cheshire cat, knowing full well the emotional symphony that was playing out within me as the peaceful atmosphere of the café was broken by the excited hustle and bustle of the dinner service for her street clients.

Uncle Ramlee can't wait for dinner to be served and told me he was already drooling because Joycelyn had cooked *labu masak lemak*, a typical Malay dish that he hadn't tasted in a long long time.

I felt a stab to my heart again as I tried to compose myself.

This was home to Uncle Ramlee. A place he was treated with love, surrounded by friends, walking the streets he called home, always knowing that a warm, tasty meal was there for him to fill his stomach. But after 30 years, he was driven yet again away from his home, this time by the "authorities". How many years he has left, I don't know.

He told me he is tired, walking further and further each day, carrying a heavy knapsack filled with the only earthly belongings he has, to evade getting caught by over-zealous enforcement officers.

Uncle Ramlee may not have a property deed in his name but he has heart, he has soul and to me he is an eminent person. "You pick the place... to lay me down where peace is prevalent and hate can't be found."

SELAMAT MENYAMBUT HARI KEBANGSAAN

The first Merdeka celebration that I can remember was when I was in Standard 1. We were told that the school will be holding a Merdeka Day Celebration a week before. It was a joyous occasion as we got to wave the Jalur Gemilang and sang patriotic songs together. As a 7 year old at that time, Merdeka to me was all about waving the Jalur Gemilang and singing *Negaraku* together with my schoolmates.

On childhood Merdeka tradition

Merdeka Day is all about getting together to understand the sacrifices of our forefathers and knowing the importance of safeguarding the sovereignty of our country. We usually celebrate Merdeka together with the whole family. No specific tradition but my father usually will make us understand the significance of August 31st. We watched the Merdeka parade on television up until I went to university.

Significance of Merdeka

I first started to realise the significance of Merdeka when I read about the history of our country in my high school years. The sacrifices made by Tok Janggut, Datuk Bahaman and Lieutenant Adnan and not to forget the struggles lead by Tunku Abdul Rahman to fight for our country's Independence.

Learning History in school made me understand the importance of safeguarding our *Kemerdekaan*. The significance of August 31st each year goes beyond the parade and patriotic songs and is a reminder to each citizen of the challenges that awaits in the future and also the responsibilities to protect and defend our Constitution.

Sharing the love

My children are so fascinated with Malaysian history. Knowing that their father's day to day job is managing the state, they have always asked me how it feels like to be holding so many responsibilities. I have always made it a point to tell them the history of Independence and ask them about what they learned in school about Merdeka.

It's good to let our children understand the history of our country at a young age. This will help them to grow as a responsible and loving citizen who treasures each aspect of our history.

Merdeka this year is a bit special because of what happened on the 9th of May. Malaysians stood up united against corruption and kleptocracy. It is also a testament of our love for this nation and its Constitution. The people of Malaysia should be proud that they are a part of history.

As the Menteri Besar of Selangor, I am grateful that the state is blessed with peace and prosperity. Selangor is the golden state of Malaysia and a model state which has become an example to others. Our people-centric policies have become the foundation of our success. It is our obligation to maintain and preserve the harmony between different religions and cultures which have become the hallmark of Selangor. It is my hope that the people of Selangor will always benefit from the state's wealth and at the same time contribute to the economic growth. My sincere wish is that Selangor will continue to strive for excellence in every aspect and become the main actor in the South East Asia region.