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## CHANGING THE WORLD

These young women believe that social enterprise is the key to helping the disadvantaged. > 2

# Brave new world

These ambitious young women are making it their business to solve social problems.

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MASTURA Mohd Rashid is clear about her goal. It's to eradicate poverty through her social enterprise, The Nasi Lemak Project.

"I want to help at least 40 families get out of poverty by 2018. And, I want to show Malaysians that social enterprise isn't charity but a viable business. We can help (the disadvantaged) improve their lives and income while making money ourselves. Charity isn't about just giving people stuff," says the 26-year-old who radiates cool without having to try.

Mastura, who holds a Bachelor of Human Sciences in History and Civilisation from the International Islamic University Malaysia, worked for a year in an Oil and Gas company before leaving her nine-to-five job to focus on her social enterprise.

"When I was an undergraduate, I wanted to be a lecturer. I was quite a good student ... well, until I started The Nasi Lemak Project, after which I started failing all my subjects. No, really I failed five subjects in my last semester," she says without batting an eyelid.

"Now, what I want is to make an impact," she says firmly.

Mastura started The Nasi Lemak Project in 2012 to promote volunteerism as a way of eradicating poverty. Their focus was the urban poor. They started by feeding the city's poorest of the poor - the homeless.

"I wanted to create the culture of volunteerism among youth. Not one-off volunteers but those who can commit to a cause and volunteer on a long-term basis. I wanted to make volunteerism fun. So we started with street feeding

because what is more fun than going out at night, right?" says Mastura frankly.

Mastura and her team would go down to the streets thrice a week not just to feed the street dwellers but to build good rapport with them. They want to help the homeless get off the streets. Her programme drew a lot of attention and she received funding which she used to start several other projects for marginalised communities.

Among them are Edu Rangers, a voluntary programme to give Maths and English lessons to children from urban

poor families; Stingarden Theatre, a programme to help urban poor children master English through theatre; Pixel Garage which equips disadvantaged youth with skills in graphic design and the Unemployment Lab that prepares youth for employment by helping them with their resumes and giving them grooming lessons.

The programmes were run with the help of some 700 volunteers registered with The Nasi Lemak Project.

Last November, Mastura converted The Nasi Lemak Project into a social enterprise to make it sustainable and far-reaching. Instead of street feeding, they gave urban poor families the opportunity to earn money by making nasi lemak. Mastura and her partner Zul Inran Ishak educated the cooks on food safety and hygiene. They also emphasised the need for consistent quality control.

The families were then given a one-year contract to provide The Nasi Lemak Project with 50 to 100 packets of nasi lemak daily, which are distributed

to vendors. They were also taught book-keeping and are required to save 20% of their earnings. They are currently working with five families but have identified another 15. Each family uses their own nasi lemak recipe but Mastura and Zul make sure that they quality of the food is consistent.

"Yes, I taste every batch, every day," says Mastura, 26, gesturing with a laugh at her waistline as evidence of her stringent quality checks. She laughs at herself, adding: "Our nasi lemak is homemade and delicious. It's authentic nasi lemak. Although each family has

their own recipe, each one is really tasty and we make sure they maintain the quality.

"We want people to immediately think of The Nasi Lemak Project when they want a packet of good nasi lemak," says Mastura who grew up in the small rural town of Benut in Pontian, Johor, with her younger brother and sister. Her parents were doctors who were more keen on serving their patients than making money.

"My parents would often only charge their patients for their medicine. So, even though we were doctors' children, we lived a simple life. When we went on trips, we never stayed in nice, fancy hotels but in relatives' houses.

"I once asked my father why he didn't charge more. He explained that he couldn't because if he did, many of the people they served would not have access to health-care," shares Mastura.

Her mother went even further, often sharing their household supplies with needy patients.

"We'd go marketing and grocery shopping but a day later, half of what we bought would go missing. My instant noodles and chocolates would disappear because my mother had given them away," says Mastura who has been inspired and influenced by her parents' generosity and altruism.

"I guess I inherited some of it. This thing about not being calculative and wanting to help – I guess it's partly them," she says.

## Food is their refuge

IT started in September 2013. Suzanne Ling, Lee Swee Lin and Kim Lim were all students at UCSI University in Kuala Lumpur and had worked on a college project with the refugee communities in Kuala Lumpur. After their project ended, they felt they needed to continue helping the refugees. The following year, the trio started Hands of Hope Malaysia, a platform for college students to volunteer to teach refugee and special needs children.

"The fact that they (refugees) don't have rights to education or any basic rights just made us so uncomfortable. We couldn't turn our backs on them. We had to do something," says Lee who graduated with a degree in accounting and finance last year.

When they noticed a drop in the enrolment of refugee children early this year, the girls visited their students at their homes.

"That was the first time we saw how they lived and how they struggled to put food on the table. That's when Kim came up with the idea of using the women's cooking skills and turning it into a business opportunity," explains Ling who graduated with a degree in psychology.

Under The Picha Project, the girls identified refugee families who can cook tasty meals that would appeal to Malaysians. At the same time, they make sure the cooks meet the required health standards. The girls supervised the cooking and packing of the food initially till they were confident the cooks adhered to their hygiene and safety rules.

In the beginning, marketing their venture was limited to emailing their friends and contacts, urg-

In its short span, The Nasi Lemak Project has won five awards, including the International Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Award in 2014 and the Berbudi Berganda grant from the Agensi Innovation Malaysia. The enterprise was also part of the MaGIC (Malaysia Accelerator Global Innovation Centre) accelerator programme.

"Our aim is to start making money by 2017. By then, we will be self-sustainable and we will reinvest the money we make in our charitable programmes. Now, we need to find more outlets to

ing them to buy meals from The Picha Project.

"We had to be thick-faced about it," admits Ling.

They started with one family from Myanmar.

"We started with one of our students' family. The mother was hesitant at first. But we assured her that we'd support her every step of the way. When she saw how much people liked her food, her confidence grew. And when she started earning for her family, it empowered her. Now, she can handle up to 170 orders a day and has become an example to the other refugee women in her community," says Lee, beaming with pride.

The girls' hard work has borne results. In six months, The Picha Project has trained six refugee families and have catered more than 3,000 meals. They approached companies who ran events or training programmes for catering opportunities and prepared lunch boxes for offices.

Recently, The Picha Project received a boost when it was accepted into the the MaGIC (Malaysia Accelerator Global Innovation

carry our nasi lemak," she says with determination.

What keeps Mastura going is seeing the positive changes in the lives of the families she works with.

"One of the ladies who we work with is moving to a better home in August. She has five children and her husband has colon cancer and can't work. Previously, her monthly income was about RM600 and that too was inconsistent. But with The Nasi Lemak Project, her income has doubled. She can afford a better home and her husband has been getting treatment and looks better."

Centre) accelerator programme, a government-funded initiative to help startups get off the ground. After four months of training to build a successful business, they will get RM30,000 seed funding to develop

their business.

"Getting accepted by MaGIC boosted our confidence. It was a turning point for us. It affirmed our belief in this venture and we want to eventually replicate this business in other countries," says Ling.

They also hope the project would change public perception about the refugee community. Each lunch box comes with a little tidbit of information about the family who cooked the meal.

"One of the Syrian ladies we work with is a teacher who speaks French fluently. Another has a degree in English Literature who had a good job back home. When they left, these refugees left their lives behind. Here, nobody cares about their past achievements or their qualifications," says Ling.

Starting a social enterprise wasn't something they envisioned

doing but the three young women cannot imagine doing anything else now.

"I wanted to work with marginalised children. But I wanted to do my masters in the United States first ... and then this just happened. But I am so glad I started this. I can do my Master's later on if I still want to," says Ling.

For Malacca-born Lee, working with refugees has changed her outlook on life.

"I come from a conservative Chinese family. My parents have always wanted the best for me. To them, that meant finding a good government job that paid well so that my future would be secure. But now that they see what I am doing, they are behind me," says Lee, the quietest of the three.

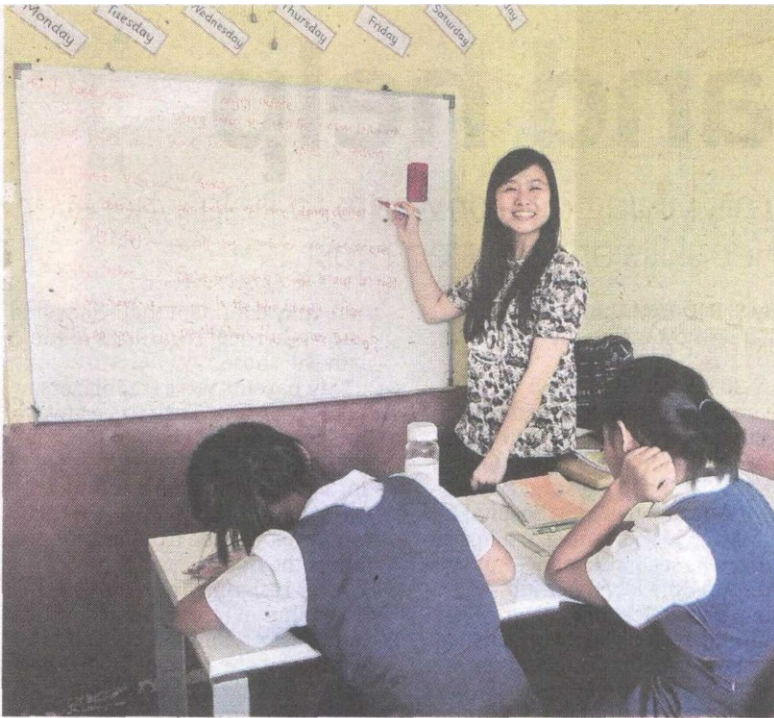
Kim is the only one of the three who is not working full time on The Picha Project. She is a guitarist and composer who works on local movie production, composing musical scores.

"She worked on Ola Bola," interjects Lee. "She won't share that with you so we have to."

Although the enterprise is still getting off the ground, Ling, Lee and Kim are all confident that they have made the right decision in choosing to help refugees. "It has taught me to appreciate life more. And to do as much as we can to make a difference," shares Kim.



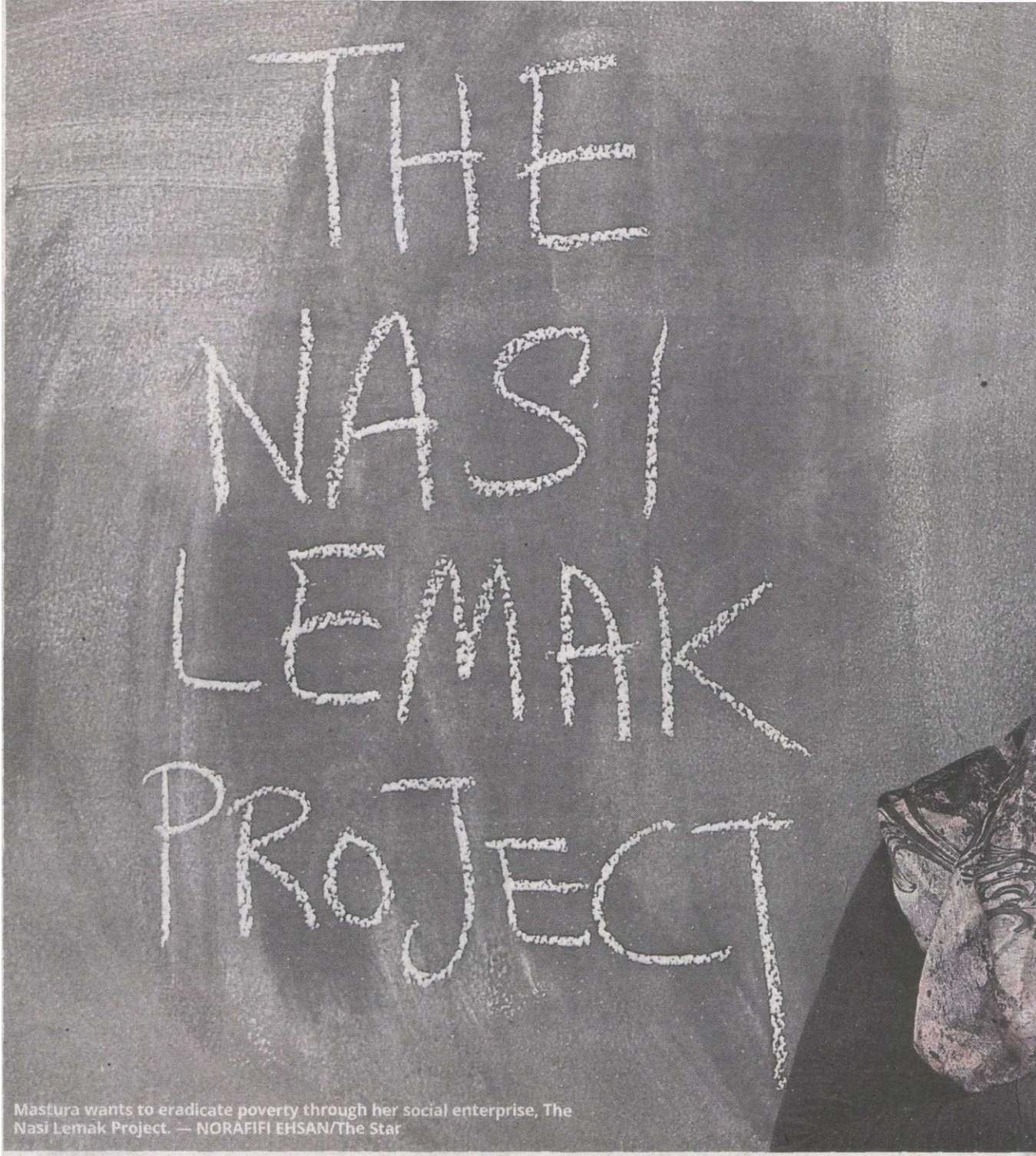
The Picha Project co-founders (from left) Kim Lim, Suzanne Ling and Lee Swee Lin hope to bring dignity back into the lives of refugees. — ART CHEN/ The Star



**Passion for children:** Ling teaching English to Burmese refugee children while in college. — Filepic



**Mastura (right)** started her social enterprise called The Nasi Lemak Project to help the homeless and urban poor; not just to feed them but to be their friend and help them off the streets. — GLENN GUAN/The Star



THE  
NASI  
LEMAK  
PROJECT

Mastura wants to eradicate poverty through her social enterprise, The Nasi Lemak Project. — NORAFIFI EHSAN/The Star

