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# LIFE INSPIRED

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## TIME MATTERS

There is no time like now to do good and Angela Karto, Datuk Yasmin Yusuff and Tan Wan Jia are out to do just that.

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Well-known Malaysian DJ, singer, actress and former beauty queen Datuk Yasmin Yusuff holds up her phone and scrolls swiftly through a spreadsheet.

It takes several minutes before she reaches the end of the sheet, which is a list of hundreds of families and individuals in the aid database for the Caremongers Ampang group of volunteers.

The names on the list are colour-coded according to how urgently they need help: almost all have been recipients of essential goods, sorted, packed and delivered by Yasmin with volunteer and mother-of-three Angela Karto and behavioral therapist Tan Wan Jia, during the movement control order (MCO) and recovery movement control order (RMCO) periods in Malaysia.

What do these three women from vastly different backgrounds, who belong to three separate generations, have in common?

To outsiders, not a whole lot, but what brings them together and what has given them a lasting bond is their shared passion to help the less fortunate.

## Rallying together

It all started with a donation plea to Yasmin through a social media page, which convinced her to Tan.

"We were then invited to become part of a bigger group called Talian Koordinasi Bantuan Kembara which coordinates between many different organisations such as Kembara Kitchen, Rumah Hope and so on, we were on that group and Angela was on that group through her own volunteer group. Everything is Love for Others (ELFO)," explains Yasmin, who was tasked with the tough job of working out who to prioritise.

"I would do the vetting and I would put out a list on who needs help now, who doesn't need it as urgently and so on," says Yasmin. "Anybody with a kid below one year in age was given high priority."

Wan Jia and a team of 20-odd volunteers would put together a box of food essentials worth around RM40, and occasionally diapers and baby milk depending on the family's needs.

Volunteers would pack and distribute these care packages to several areas where day workers with absolutely no income during the MCO lived, who were made up of Malaysians and non-Malaysians, people with work permits as well as illegals.

Many of their stories were sorrowful, from construction workers locked in the basement car parks of their construction sites to parents who had no money for formula and were giving their babies sweetened tea.

Sometimes, Caremongers Ampang would get up to 100 requests a day and it was heartbreaking to not be able to help every single person.

"With limited resources, we don't have millions of funds to feed everybody, we have to decide who needs it most," explains Yasmin. "Talian Bantuan was a very good resource for us because they would source cheaper supplies, and then we compared notes. I would say I have a request from 95 Indonesian families living in this area, and someone would check to make sure we didn't overlap."

## Challenges along the way

As it is with most projects, even the well-meaning ones, the group faced several roadblocks which they had to work around.

One of the biggest challenges was ensuring their aid distribution didn't overlap with other groups, and that people who were asking for help weren't making multiple requests, a task which took a lot of coordination.

"Some would call right after aid was delivered and claim they hadn't received anything," says Angela. "So we took photographs and videos of every person who received help to share with the other NGOs."

With limited resources and so many needy to help, they had to be careful that goods weren't being hoarded, or worse, collected and sold.

"If you lie and cheat you are depriving other people who really need the help,"

# Using time for good

An unlikely trio finds fulfillment in making time to help the needy.

says Yasmin, who began insisting on proper identification from requesters to avoid overlapping.

Another challenge was arriving at a particular dwelling with a set amount of boxes and discovering that there were triple the amount of people who needed goods.

"Sometimes, requests for 20 people would turn out to be 70 people!" exclaims Yasmin. Fortunately, they often travelled with extra goods, or would return the next day with enough for everyone.

"We worked with other groups as well, I wrote to MyKasih, because some of the families we were looking at had five or six children, and had lost their jobs, had elderly parents or were ill and so on," explains Yasmin.

MyKasih would allocate RM100 or RM150 per family based on their needs, and recipients would need to go to assigned supermarkets where they had store credit given by the NGO to buy whatever they needed.

Throughout their vetting and packaging processes, they tried to cater food boxes to each community's needs and wants, taking into account what they as a culture, consume.

Tan explains that essentials are different for everyone, and people were happy to receive items they actually enjoyed eating, for example, lentils for a particular community, roti and dhal for another, and so on.

"The funds from donors - people entrust us with money and things, and we wanted

to make sure they were being utilised in the best possible way," adds Tan.

## Moving forward

As time went on and the RMCO replaced the MCO, people began going back to work and the requests for aid reduced. Being human, Yasmin, Angela and Tan began experiencing a bit of volunteer fatigue.

However, although they had initially planned to end their run on the first of June, due to an excess of funds they decided to continue their philanthropic endeavours.

"We took a vote among volunteers and agreed that we would meet once a month to help out at a homeless shelter, to provide dinner," says Yasmin.

In a move to empower those who were still experiencing financial hardship, Yasmin enlisted the help of aid recipients who had culinary skills.

"While I was vetting, because we asked for their occupations, there were several who had previously cooked and sold various types of food, from nasi lemak to kuih to goreng pisang."

"So we decided to ask them to provide the food for these dinners and we would pay them," explains Yasmin.

"They don't want cash handouts, they want people to order their food, and these people are hardworking and honest."

One particular lady who used to have a food stall had been unable to continue her business because of the MCO, and then the

area saw a sharp rise in dengue cases which forced her to stay closed.

"So we ordered 100 packets of nasi lemak for the Rohingya in our area, and then we discovered that she makes curry mee, so we ordered from her for the homeless shelter," says Yasmin. "When she came to the shelter, she brought her children and she also brought drinks and ice cream. This is somebody who needs help!"

The trio have come to look forward to their visits to the homeless shelter, where they engage with the residents and even play bingo with them, while enjoying delicious food.

## An eye-opening experience

When the MCO was first announced, Yasmin sat back and began planning how she would utilise all the free time she would have on her hands.

"I was all set to learn how to use my camera properly, do my photo album, spend time in my study doing this and that, but then I got the message from Wan Jia and I didn't do any of that!" she laughs.

In the past six months, she has discovered places she never knew existed in her backyard, and has come to realise that the community is so much bigger than what she initially thought.

"We were looking at how people live, and a lot of it had to do with opening my eyes to people who had no legal rights, and after the MCO, no jobs. That was a reality check."

They were touched by how people in desperate situations still went out of their way to help their friends and neighbours in need.

"People were in need but still had time, and had heart," says Yasmin. "We would get a lot of messages about people who had no food and we would ask how are they surviving? They would say their neighbours or housemates shared with them. That's one thing I learned ... people are always willing to help."

Another revelation was the level of volunteerism among Malaysians and how much people are willing to do, from packing and delivering goods to spending their own money on extra items for the needy.

Tan was working in the mornings and spending her afternoons packing and delivering goods, and planning the next day's activities at night, when originally she had planned to zone out and watch TV shows during the MCO.

"But throughout the whole period, seeing people on social media complaining about being bored, watching TV all day long, that's when I started posting what we were doing, which got people asking about how they could get involved," says Tan.

## A sense of fulfillment

"As much as we do help people, we get a lot back. It's food for the soul," explains Angela. "At the beginning of the MCO, people were really angry at the situation but there was nothing we could do about it. We were scared, we were angry, there were so many negative emotions. I feel like this is a good outlet, to make someone happy."

"Personally I feel I got a lot out of it, it made me more positive, we learned to appreciate a lot of things we take for granted," adds Angela, who also helps to feed the needy and distributes boxes of masks and hand sanitisers through Hope Selangor and Medi2U.

"For us, we go out, we take one mask, but for a lot of people it's a luxury and they would rather buy food than sanitisers or masks. A lot of them reuse their masks, they are dirty and crumpled and along the way we also educate them that that's dangerous, but if they don't have the means to change



To be a good person is of utmost importance

Tan Wan Jia



Photos:  
**YAP CHEE HONG /THE STAR**  
 Angela's and Yasmin's makeup:  
**ANITA TANG/A CUT ABOVE**  
 Angela's and Yasmin's hair:  
**EHSMOND/A CUT ABOVE**  
 Wan Jia's hair and makeup:  
**KIRSTEN YAP**  
 Text and coordination:  
**NASA MARIA ENTABAN**



Helping  
 people is  
 food for the  
 soul

Dotuk  
 Yasmin  
 Yusuff

Angela  
 Karta



Time is best  
 spent doing  
 something  
 meaningful



the mask every day, it's a double-edged sword."

To Tan, making time to do good and to be a good person is of utmost importance.

"I always have arguments about religion, because while some say you need religion to be a good person, but for me you don't, just be a good person in general, as long as you have a good heart, you can spend time doing anything that helps anybody. Even if it's just talking to your grandparents, family and neighbours," she says.

To Yasmin, time is best spent doing something meaningful. "Something that you will remember, something that means something to you. For me, I lost every single job from March onwards, so that was very hard, because suddenly I had zero funds and I've had to cut back a lot," she says.

"Meaningful for myself, and self-improving. That's important. Spending time doing something that improves the quality of your life, whether it's educational, with family ... something that makes your life more fulfilling."