

PEOPLE

UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE

From living under a staircase at a Princep Street address to becoming an entrepreneur and motivational speaker, **Jillian Haslam's** life is about to inspire a film

Jillian Haslam is today a successful entrepreneur, author, speaker and philanthropist based out of the United Kingdom. But the 47-year-old had a very different — and difficult — childhood, growing up in the underbelly of Calcutta where she and her siblings slept on the streets, scavenged for food and watched their parents battle poverty and sickness. Her father, Roland Haslam, a captain in the British army decided to stay back in India after Partition. But he soon fell on tough times and, Jillian, the fifth of 12 children, lived a childhood of penury in the slums and witnessed some of her siblings die because of poor living conditions. The Haslam family even spent many years living under a staircase somewhere in the Princep Street area, grateful for their neighbours and acquaintances who helped them survive.

In the middle of it all, Jillian completed her schooling from St Thomas' Girls' School in

Kidderpore, did a secretarial course in Delhi and then got the opportunity to work in London. She lost her mother to cancer, but supported her siblings through their education and then penned her life story in her bestselling memoir *Indian. English.* in 2011.

Today, Jillian — who considers herself Indian — keeps travelling back to Calcutta many times during the year, where she supports and spearheads a range of philanthropic activities and also rehabilitates the children in the same slum she grew up in. She's also a much-sought-after motivational speaker whose inspirational story finds many takers across the globe.

Now, Jillian's life is being made into a film to be directed by Jack Sholder, the man with films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2* and *Beeper* to his credit. Last week, Jillian — along with Jack and screenwriter Joshua Russell — put in a visit to Calcutta for a pre-production recce that made Jillian



retrace her steps to her childhood. The crew will be back in the city next year to shoot the film.

t2oS caught up with Jillian at Hyatt Regency Kolkata on her remarkable life story and learnt how her childhood has shaped the person she is today.

How has it been revisiting the places that have been such an integral part of your childhood?

I visit these places twice or thrice a year. I always go back and I always help the people around there. That's because, for me, that's home. I've been back a number of times to all the places that we are now revisiting for the film. There are always very deep-seated memories and a lot of sadness when I go there. It has a lot of memories of my parents and all that they did for us, the hardships that we endured. In the UK, every day we see a lot of children on television who meet their parents after being adopted and abandoned and they ask, 'Why did you give us up?'

The one thing that remains with me is that when we were in boarding school, my mum had ample opportunity to send us away — our pictures were sent to sponsors abroad and they wanted to adopt us because of the way we looked and how we were — but my mother always refused. She always said, 'No matter what we live through, we will stick together. I will not give up my children for any amount of money'. That's a woman's heart. She knew we would have better lives if she gave us up, but she never did. That's something to be grateful for, no matter what we went through.

Where in Calcutta has this pre-production recce taken you on this visit?

The first thing we did was go on a tour of my school — St Thomas' Girls' School in Kidderpore. We then went to my house in Kidderpore, which was tiny and so hot that my dad used to describe it as the black hole of Calcutta. Honestly it was, if you put off the lights you couldn't see anything! (*Laughs wryly*) I still know the people who live there... they used to be my neighbours. There's a boy I used to play with and he still lives there with his wife and kids. Whenever I come to Calcutta, he comes to the hotel and I take his family out. We are still very close. I've never forgotten them or the place I grew up in.

After that, we went to the place at Princep Street where we lived under a staircase for many years, and which is depicted on the cover of my book. We went there after we lost everything in Dum Dum. At first, my siblings and I were made to sleep under some old meter boxes. But then my mum was told that we were in the way and people couldn't pass if we slept there, so we were moved under the stairs. That's where we lived after my dad was recovering after a cardiac arrest and the loss of his eyesight while we were on the train coming back from Dum Dum. So my mum put him in the Salvation Army and took us under the stairs. That's where we lived for a long time... played on the streets, slept and ate under the staircase and just survived, you know.

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JACK SHOLDER, DIRECTOR

We read the manuscript of Jillian Haslam's memoir and though it has said her story so succinctly, we are now finding out that there is a whole lot in her life that hasn't really been captured in the memoir. That's what brought us to Calcutta and I am glad we are discovering so many different facets to her growing-up years and I hope we are able to do justice to the story.

I have told Jillian that we are making a movie about a character called Jillian Haslam who's very similar to her. But it's a movie, so we have to follow the truth as it pertains to cinema. I love to tell stories and this is such a great story. Parts of her story are so improbable that it just takes you by surprise. It may make people think, 'Did that really happen or did they make it all up?!' I don't think a movie changes lives, but maybe this movie will change something. Possibly the next time they see someone hungry, they will reach in their pockets. If even a .01 per cent happens to do that, I will be very happy.

It's a difficult story to tell and most of it may seem very grim, but there are parts which are not so hopeless.



the poorest of the poor who saved our lives, I wouldn't be where I am today. Whether it was the meat man in my childhood who kept the bones for us so that we could take them home and cook them or the vegetable vendor who would keep the semi-rotten vegetables for us, a *paanwala* who would give us the little loaves of bread that no one would buy, or the grocery store man who would give us rice and dal and sugar and wouldn't ever ask us for money.

We had a landlord who would make my sister and I dance as Dharmendra and Hema Malini and we would wait for them to ask us because that would mean they would give us *bhutta* to eat. We used to do whatever steps they wanted us to do for that *bhutta*. But we loved them and they loved us. There was a teashop man who actually once saved my sister's life by giving her milk every day, and she then went on to top university in the UK and her picture was on every bus and every tube station. So I feel that you need to give gratitude where gratitude is due. All those people saved our lives.

Yes, my father made a rash decision and decided to stay back when everyone else left and we lived in abject poverty and I lost four siblings, but I choose to look at it as a positive. We still had some very happy times and went through everything as a family and we've come out of it stronger and as better people, I think.

What do you hope to achieve by telling your story through your motivational talks and now through the film?

Most people who come to my

It's kind of a normal childhood in very strange circumstances. There was great love in the family and there's a real range of emotions — from the highest to the lowest — that we will explore in the film. No one wants to watch a film that only focuses on misery. The last thing I want to do is pound in a message... we just want to tell a story and hope that the audience gets the message. What Josh and I are trying to do is take these disparate events from Jillian's life and make it into a

movie where one thing leads to another and gives it a kind of dramatic arc.

speeches would probably go back and do nothing, but even if two people take inspiration from what I say it's a job well done. There's no problem in showing poverty if we can deliver an inspirational message through it. It's also about getting the young people to care about the lesser privileged who are of their age.

When I went to St. Xavier's College here a few years ago for a talk, the girls there were doing some gardening project and I told them it's lovely but it didn't work for me; with the resources, the brains and the acumen they had they could pretty much turn around the city if they wanted to. And after the speech, so many came up to ask how they could make a difference. The young generation needs to be taught and nurtured because most of them are brought up to look the other way when they see poverty. Students want to do work, but there is no one to motivate them. I want to be able to help them.



Jillian Haslam with Jack Sholder and Joshua Russell

THE MOVIE WILL COME AND GO, BUT WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS FOR EVERYONE IN THIS WORLD TO REMEMBER WHAT WAS DONE FOR YOU, WHAT GOT YOU TO WHERE YOU ARE AND WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT TO GIVE BACK



JOSHUA RUSSELL, SCREENWRITER



There are a lot of rags-to-riches stories that focus on the heroism of the protagonist, but what we have discovered is that Jillian is unique because she doesn't want us to talk of her heroism. What's remarkable is how Jillian's circumstances during

And you continue to come back and give back here...

I belong here. I have so many memories and no one can take that away from me and I want to help my people here, in whatever way I can. We have four food banks across the city where we look after elderly people, some of whom are so severely disabled that they sign their ration cards with their feet. We also have skill-training centres — a tailoring centre for young girls, a secretarial centre and a beautician centre. We also have a playschool for slum children, which has standards equivalent to a private playschool. The last time I was here, I was going somewhere in a car and saw this child urinating blood. There were people coming out of the shopping centre in the vicinity, but they didn't even look at the child. I couldn't leave... I mean, how can you not care?

It's always been my dream to give the poor what the rich have. I was at my school and I spoke to the children of the same slum I grew up in and told them I have done what they all did — go hungry, fetch water, wash utensils... I told them that I was an example of someone who had turned her life around, but that didn't mean I turned my back on my roots. I always wanted to go away and better myself and then come back and give back to my city, Calcutta and to my country, India. The movie will come and go, but what's important is for everyone in this world to remember what was done for you, what got you to where you are and why it's so important to give back.

— **Priyanka Roy**
Pictures: B. Halder

childhood brought out the fighter in her and how they continue to empower her even today. It's the complexity and nuance of the story that hooked me. The message of the film is understated, but it's there. It's a tricky subject and we will try and present it as truly and honestly as we can.

We are not going to peddle Indian poverty to the West in a sort of hyperbolic manner so that it tugs at their heartstrings. That's because we are operating from the standpoint that all human beings, no matter where they belong to, are essentially the same. There are moments of joy and suffering in a slum in Calcutta just as they are in a small neighbourhood in Midwest United States. Then you aren't peddling, you are telling a human story.

This morning, we also went to the room where I was born and also Mrs Cleofas's house, where my sister Vanessa and I started living when we got very sick under the staircase... there was such squalor, it was just a drain, really (*smiles*). My mum asked Mrs Cleofas if she would take us in. She did, and she loved Vanessa but she didn't really take to me and she would lock me up in a dark toilet infested with cockroaches. We are also going to go to the Salvation Army, which took in my dad. Whatever food he got there he would save for us and I remember Vanessa and myself racing in to finish the food, particularly the apples. The men there loved us and the Salvation Army has pretty much remained the same... the beds are the same, the lockers are the same... They all know me because I look after them to the best of my ability. We are also going to visit the hospital where my mum died of cancer.

What makes it so easy for you to tell such a tough story?

When you are learning public speaking, you are taught never to say 'Sorry' if you make a mistake on stage and never to say 'Thank you for inviting me'. But the first thing I say when I go up on stage is 'Thank you' because if it wasn't for