



Jillian Haslam interacts with slum kids in Kidderpore

## Dreams soar high in Kidderpore slum

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Kolkata: Nidhi Chetri wants to be an airhostess, Swati a doctor, Zeenat Parveen a teacher and Chandar Ojha wants to be a cricketer. Aged 15-17, they are like any children with dreams.

But in the Kidderpore-Ekbalpore-Mominpore belt where they hail from, dreams get snuffed out somewhere between teenage and adulthood as girls are forced into marriage and boys get exploited by criminals, politicians and businessmen. "Our dreams are ephemeral. They don't last long," Chandar said on Tuesday.

A couple of hours later, he felt differently. He believed in himself and his dream as did other kids who had gathered at Sir Syed Hall ground to listen to Jillian Haslam's rags-to-riches story. Jillian or Jill, who was born in the very neighbourhood, had through perseverance overcome poverty and forged a successful career in the banking industry in the UK. After 20 years of corporate life, she

founded Help Yourself Associates, a life improvement and training firm to inspire others.

"Just like Muslims return home to celebrate Id with family, I have flown down to be with you during Christmas. During this festive season, I want to be with the people I love. And I am here to tell you that dreams do come true," she said.

Born in an impoverished Anglo-Indian family in Kidderpore, she lost four siblings to illhealth and abject poverty. "Because we were fair skinned, spoke English and wore dresses differently, we were ridiculed. We moved houses, begged, scavenged for food, were beaten and abused by men and neighbours. But we also always lived on charity. For every atrocity, there was kindness," she recounted.

"If I could have made it, so can each one of them. They just need support. I am glad to be back amongst the people who supported me during those vulnerable days. I am sure there will be many more Jill from here in the future," she told TOI.

Kamalendu Bhadra