

THE MALAYSIAN Insider

Opinion



Helen Hickey

Helen Hickey is a British expat who has recently moved from the jungles of Kuala Lumpur to another of the concrete variety, New York City. She writes to escape her four young children and secure what little remains of her sanity.

Homeless at Thanksgiving

November 22, 2011

NOV 22 — New York is gearing up for Thanksgiving Day this Thursday, one of the largest and oldest non-religious holidays celebrated in the United States.

Plans are underway for a day of feasting, thus continuing a tradition dating back to 1621, when the British settlers of Plymouth Colony (in present-day Massachusetts) marked that year's bountiful harvest with a jolly good knees up.

But not everyone will give thanks around a table laden with roast turkey, pecan-crusted sweet potato and pumpkin pie.

I'm thinking about NYC's homeless. More than 3,000 people live on the streets and in the sprawling subway system. These people prefer, for whatever reason, not to use the city's shelters that help close to 40,000 homeless (recorded in November's Department of Homeless Services NYC shelter census).

Plenty live in my Upper East neighbourhood: From the well-dressed Russian gentleman who rummages through the rubbish bins outside Bed, Bath and Beyond to the weathered-looking man called Michael, who sits all day outside a 60th Street car park with his trademark red suitcase, seemingly oblivious to the passing stream of traffic exiting Queensboro Bridge.

"I got no plans for Thanksgiving," he told me; the best he hopes for is that he'll be given a plate of something hot from the kind-hearted people in the area.

There are many like him for whom Thanksgiving will be just another day to get through. There is a soup kitchen on 59th Street and First Avenue, but for people like 61-year-old chronically diabetic James this isn't an option.

I met James, a statuesque African-American with seven years in the US Marine Corps under his belt, at a local recycling depot with a shopping trolley full of cans and bottles he had spent the entire night collecting from street bins.

He inserted a can into one of the giant vending machines in the depot and a nickel popped out. The five cents-a-can return on the 300 empties salvaged would earn him US\$15 (RM47) in weighty coins. The recycling money buys him diabetic-friendly meals, "but it's not enough to survive in the city."

You have to wonder how some of these people ended up homeless. There are the more extreme homeless cases — persons with a dishevelled appearance, invariably suffering from a mental disorder or addiction — but the majority in my area look pretty presentable.

One wet Friday I met Christopher James Phillips, or CJ for short — unlike others he was comfortable disclosing his full name. He sat on an upturned crate, sheltering under Queensboro Bridge, with a shopping cart stuffed with black bin liners bursting with his belongings — the trappings of a homeless person — except for the Dell laptop he was feverishly tapping away on.

"I spent every dime I had to get the computer, the wait in the library [for computers] was just getting too long," the 51-year-old explained. He was composing an email to a local church seeking a foster home for his two cats he had tethered to the cart — "his children" as he calls them having no family of his own.

CJ, originally from New Jersey, has been homeless for close to a year after the government stopped paying his housing subsidy for his apartment in the Bronx, an area he has lived and worked in for 20 years. He sleeps on a wooden bench in a dog run by the East River, a stone's throw away from our glass-panelled high-rise, preferring this to NYC's shelters, which he says are "too dangerous."

He worked his way up from a kitchen hand to an "executive" chef, and later ran both a pizza restaurant and an office cleaning business. His résumé also records a fledgling acting career on the side.

"I was doing ok before I became ill, earning between US\$20,000 to US\$30,000 a year."

CJ was diagnosed with diabetes, liver disease and chronic arthritis 10 years ago, at which point his life started to unravel. Unable to afford health insurance — as is the case now for one-in-six Americans — the doctors' bills mounted, and with bad health came the loss of his livelihood. He became reliant on social welfare programmes, like Medicaid and housing subsidies, whose operation he says is "whimsical" at the best of times.



CJ Phillips with his "message cart" at Occupy Wall Street Movement in Zuccotti Park early this month. — Pictures by Helen Hickey



An all too common sight on NYC's streets...

Since he lost his one-day-a-week job last month waiting tables at a pizzeria he has been recycling cans for money. On occasion, he is forced to beg: "I don't like panhandling. Never done it in my life until now... but what can I do... I can't drop dead either."

"My current initiative is to get the heck off these streets. But it is a very daunting task." He's pinned his hopes on the Occupy Wall Street movement, which he has been deeply involved with these past two months up until the occupiers' eviction from Zuccotti Park last Tuesday.

He intends to publicise his struggle by pushing his "message cart" along with other OWS occupiers joining the 85th annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade this Thursday.

I'm told this televised parade is one of those NYC events not to be missed. But given a three-hour line-up of Miss America 2011, the likes of "Tom Turkey" and "Santa Claus" float themes and guest appearances by pop divas Avril Lavigne and Mary J. Blige — I fear his Thanksgiving message may not receive the attention it so deserves.

** The views expressed here are the personal opinion of the columnist.*

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