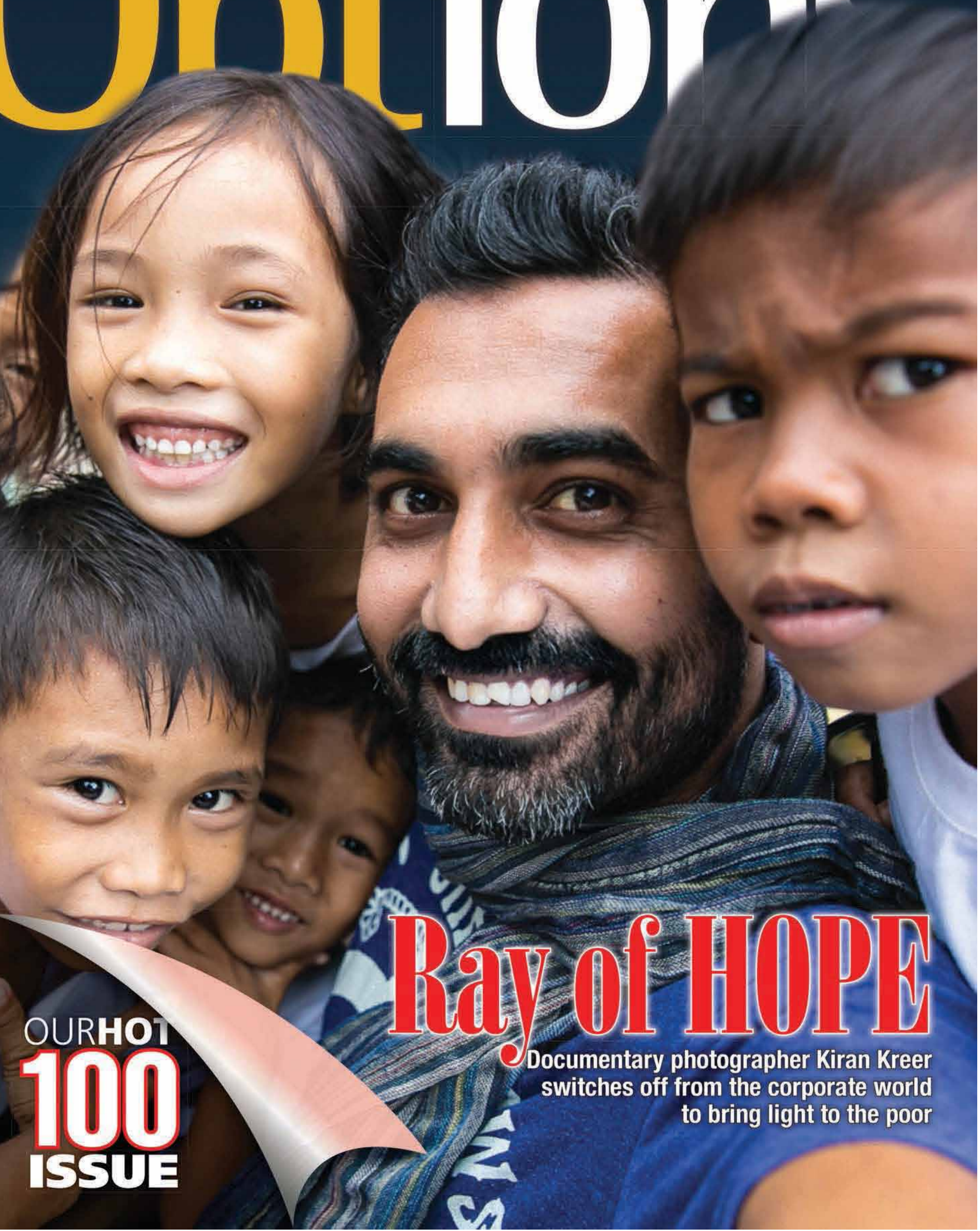


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Ray of HOPE

Documentary photographer Kiran Kreer switches off from the corporate world to bring light to the poor

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ISSUE



Some of Kiran's photographs capture scenes of old people eking out a living



PICTURES: KIRAN KREER

Ray of HOPE

Documentary photographer Kiran Kreer switches off from the corporate world to bring light to the poor

| BY CHAN CHAO PEH |

Photography, in essence, is about capturing light as it falls on a person or scene, in front of the camera. But Kiran Kreer does more than capture light. Through photography, he tries to bring more light, both literally and figuratively.

The Malaysian photojournalist wants to get up close and document the reality of impoverished lives, their struggles and optimism. By doing so, Kiran hopes to encourage the donation of solar lights to these people, through a multi-country, multi-year project he calls "Give Them Light".

The solar lights are not just an item to be donated, he says. "It is a gift of hope, to pass on a message that people around the world still care for and see the impoverished as part of society." The lights provide clean energy that enables "mothers to feed their babies, children to read and families to get together".

In a sense, Kiran seems preordained for this task: His name means "ray" in Sanskrit. He has tattooed himself with the word "kiran" and his personal branding is the apt iMKIRAN. "I shed light with my photos; I donate solar lights to the poor. I don't believe anything happens by coincidence," says the 36-year-old.

There is a practical aspect to focusing on solar lights as his cause. While most of us take electricity for granted, many people around the world have no access

to this utility. They buy kerosene lamps, spending money that could be used for better food, education or medicine. According to Nokero USA LLC, a Denver-based maker of solar lights, the world's poorest countries spend US\$40 billion (\$52.3 billion) a year on lighting fuel.

Unnecessary expenditure aside, a kerosene lamp gives out fumes equivalent to that of 40 cigarettes. Every year, more than 1.8 million people die from fume-related complications. Kerosene lamps are also a fire hazard, says Nokero, an amalgamation of "no" and "kerosene".

Solar lights, on the other hand, are cheap and produced reliably, drawing on the most visible and abundant renewable energy source on earth. The Nokero Prima N202, for example, provides 25 lumens of light for up to seven hours, following a full day of charging in direct sunlight.

Kiran's project has taken him to places near and far. Recently, he journeyed to Cameron Highlands in Pahang, where he sought to hear the stories of the illegal immigrants hiding there. He visited Panay island in the Philippines to help victims of Typhoon Haiyan, and documented relief efforts following the eruption of Mount Kelud in eastern Java, Indonesia. Kiran has also trudged through the slums of Delhi and the dumpsites of Manila to take photographs.

In between travelling, he actively updates his social network platforms — Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. He also found time to speak at a TEDxYouth conference

held at the Nexus International School in Putrajaya, Malaysia, to spread awareness of his project.

Liberating decision

Marketing is one discipline Kiran is familiar with. Before picking up the camera full-time, he ran his own online shopping website and marketing company. Prior to that, he worked at a bank for eight years, selling credit cards, "just for the sake of earning money". But he reached a point where materialistic possessions did not make him happy and decided to leave the corporate world. "I was not going to live my life only making money for others."

Kiran's first major trip was in October 2013, when he backpacked across India. Of the many places he has documented, it was the most memorable because he captured the "true reality of humanity" and the suffering wrought by poverty.

"When you have a moment to sit by some young children from the slums and hear their stories about their daily life, you know how to appreciate yours more. I learned so much about life in the 30 days I travelled across India than the 30 years I lived in KL. It helped me find my true calling and the subject matter I love most as a photographer today," Kiran says.

Almost right after he returned from India, Typhoon Haiyan struck and he took off for the Philippines. By then, Kiran had decided to become a full-time photojournalist and to start the Give Them Light project. Early this year, he sold his

apartment lock, stock and barrel, paid off his loans and bills, bought a new set of high-end photo gear, and used the rest of the money to fund his backpacking trips across the region.

Kiran does not follow fixed objectives or milestones. "The plan is not to have a plan. Only then [can] you experience life to the fullest." That's not saying he does not care. "I work hard on what I do, I stay consistent in my work, but am creative with ideas. Then I allow the universe to show me the path," he adds.



Solar lights are powered by an abundant, renewable source of energy, helping users save on costs

Naturally, as the only son in a conservative Punjabi family, and still single, his radical decision had his family “really worried”. “Honestly, nobody understood why I was doing this. I just knew I had to do it to start life over and find true happiness. I didn’t have any future plans; it was liberating,” says Kiran.

He defends his actions. He needed to do what he loves, to get away and, hopefully, find himself again. “Finally, I felt real freedom. A freedom that came with a price — being selfish about myself and some sacrifices — but it was all worth it. I saw life in a new light, I could capture moments and tell real stories. It felt really good. I was happy doing it so I kept going.”

Looking at Kiran’s pictures, it is easy to see what gives him a sense of fulfilment. He seems to have a special fondness for the young ones, many of whom are pictured with matted hair, no shoes and ill-fitting clothes. But their eyes glint with joy — at least at the moment Kiran presses the shutter. The adults add a sense of realism. One photo shows a pensive grown-up holding a solar light, appreciative of the gift, which seems to remind him of the material trappings he misses. There are also stoic images of the elderly, eking out a living in simple circumstances.

Some of the pictures are selfies of Kiran surrounded by giggling children; they suggest he has had a lot of fun and company along the way. But that’s not the whole story. There were lonely and difficult moments too, when he felt lost and alone. “I remember looking in the mirror and not recognising myself anymore. It’s like you

know this person from the past, you have memories of him but you see the reflection of a stranger,” he says.

What keeps him going at such times are memories of his own past, that he has no wish to return to. “I just keep moving, taking one day at a time, [with] no worries [about] the future.”

The nature of his work — roughing it out in rural areas, heading up mountains and jumping onto boats — influences the camera gear he carries: a Canon EOS 5D Mark III, favoured by both professionals and serious hobbyists; a 24-70mm f/2.8L II lens that covers the most common focal lengths, plus a 50mm f/1.4 for low light work. Sometimes, for street photography or projects that needs reach, he adds the 70-200mm telephoto lens.

But the best gear is no substitute for a sensitive photographer who treats his subjects with respect. Kiran says he never photographs a stranger without first introducing himself and asking for permission. “A smile and eye contact [can] change the whole outlook of the person in a picture,” he says.

Of course, it helps to be prepared. Kiran makes it a point to do his research before heading for a location. And should he miss certain shots, he just lets it be. “Not everything is supposed to be photographed. Some scenes are for you to just see and [capture] a mental image,” he says.

I am Kiran

Now, storytellers are supposed to maintain a semblance of objectivity when interacting with their subjects. But Kiran admits to being affected by the stories he has to retell. There was a mother who lost everything after Typhoon Haiyan; she had no home, no means of livelihood. But she has children to take care of. “I walked to a hidden area and just cried,” he recalls.

He admits that spending months listening to hundreds of stories of hardship takes a toll on him. That’s when he recognises the need to “let it go”. To avoid burnout, he takes short breaks and meditates to keep his spiritual balance.

Now, if Kiran’s aim is to generate awareness of Give Them Light, wouldn’t it be more effective to raise funds directly instead of spending time on the road taking pictures and using them to get donations for solar lights? Surely, he has not forgotten the return on investment of marketing spend?

Well, yes, perhaps. There were companies and organisations that offered to donate, but they were doing so merely to build their own brand or tick certain boxes in a CSR checklist, he says. For example, a Malaysian bank wanted its logos on the solar lights. Kiran walked away. “I will



Give Them Light encourages people to donate solar lights to the needy. These are also a gift of hope, to show that people care and that the impoverished are part of society.

never use another person’s misery to promote and brand a company, even if they paid me a million bucks.”

It is easy to forget that raising awareness of poverty and social issues is about the people first. “I use art to connect societies to understand the true reality of humanity today. This is not a business; this is also not an advertising platform. This is just about being human first. Forget the money and brands. It’s about people helping people directly. I will keep doing it only for humanity, arts and photography,” Kiran says.

Thankfully, he has received support from individuals, friends and followers and people he meets on his travels. He calls them “my soul family”. Various organisations, especially NGOs, have chipped in too. Kalinga, a Dutch NGO, used his pictures to publish a 2015 calendar and the proceeds will be used to support the education of children living in the dumpsites of Manila. A German non-profit,

HelpAlliance, is sponsoring the Nokero solar lights.

Of course Stephen Katsaros, inventor of the Nokero lights, has been a part of Kiran’s Give Them Light journey from the start. Nokero, the company Katsaros formed, has published Kiran’s photographs and helped raised awareness of the project across its own platforms.

While Kiran is enthusiastic now, he has been doing this for only two years. Does he see his passion and stamina waning, and himself heading back to the corporate world or activating some fall-back plan?

Kiran agrees that he will not be back-packing all his life, but insists he will continue to use his skills as a photographer, and other means, such as books and talks, to raise awareness of the plight of the people he is trying to help. He says he is truly happy doing what he loves. iMKIRAN is not a company, so it is not a job. It is also not a charitable foundation, he adds. “It’s me. How can I stop being me?”



Kiran seems to have a fondness for children, who are drawn to him and his camera



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