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Managing tough times as best as they can

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THE venue itself, in its own strange way, provided the perfect backdrop to the flea market where you can find Sutipong Kanitanon.

The bustling market, which was more like a warehouse sale of about 120 stalls, was being held at a Mercedes Benz outlet on Soi Thonglor, off busy Sukhumvit Road.

What made this place so interesting was that the owner had once operated a restaurant for customers who were waiting for their Benzes to be serviced.

The log-cabin style building was still there, but on that Saturday, together with the adjacent workshop, it was transformed to a warehouse sale where retrenched journalists and other employees of the media industry opened stalls to earn some money.

One cannot help but notice all those running the stalls had their Press tags displayed very prominently. They had no qualms talking about the sudden turn of fate which had brought them together at this building which sold Thailand's ultimate icon of the good times.

The market had an air of a carnival, with people walking around looking at cheap watches, colourful scarves and eating ice-cream. Outside, a disc-jockey was spinning popular Thai hits.

A more sorrowful story, however, emerged beneath this veneer of fun and enjoyment. After a few questions, Sutipong's almost permanent smile gradually disappeared as he began his story of why he, and most others, had to be at Benz Thonglor that day.

"I was a technical manager at Thai SkyTV for two years until it faced financial problems. Like many other companies, it had borrowed heavily and when the bubble burst, it went down," he recalled.

Sutipong, 49, was retrenched together with 800 others 18 months ago, when the company was forced to downsize.

It had seven channels during the good old days, but now has only one channel which it runs with 30 people so that the company can hold on to its licence.

His wife Pracharaporn, 37, a secretary at Bangkok Bank, also lost her job at about the same time despite her long service of 15 years.

"With two young children, that is absolutely devastating. How are we to manage?" he asked. He had no choice but to resort to setting up stalls at flea and night markets all over Bangkok, six days a week, selling clothes, shoes and other trinkets in order to get by.

"The clothes I sell are basically old ones. I go around asking my friends for old clothes which they usually give willingly. I also buy new clothes very cheaply to resell," he explained.

The idea of opening a stall came from the concept of the garage sale which he encountered while he was studying and living in the United States for 29 years.

Besides the few office dresses hanging at the back of his stall, he also had a heap of shoes and ties, and all sorts of knick-knacks which he had brought out from his store room.

He dug into a stack of cards and photos, and fished out a picture of two footballers which were mounted onto a piece of manila cardboard. The whole thing was wrapped in plastic which had grown a little translucent from age.

"This was a souvenir from the World Cup in Los Angeles in 1994. But I

can't remember who the two players in the picture are," he added.

There were also many other stickers, badges and other souvenir-looking things. Obviously, it would have been quite painful for a person who hoards these objects to have to put them on sale.

Sutipong and his wife set up stall six days a week.

"I have to. If I slow down even a bit, I will not have any money," he explained.

Life is now extremely precarious.

"There is just enough money for food and basic things for my family. There is none for any other things. None for movies. None for holidays. None for a nice meal in a restaurant. None even for new toys for my children.

"Sometimes I can't even use my car because I have no spare cash for gasoline."

He was very thankful for the fact that he owns the house he currently lives in or else he and his family would be out on the streets if he had had loan repayments to settle.

He makes about 5,000 baht (RM540) on average a month.

"If I am lucky, I may get up to 11,000 baht but then, if I am out of luck, I may only get 2,000 baht," he said.

However, the hard times have affected business and people would think twice before buying things.

"There are many people looking, but not many would buy," he said.

Despite all these difficulties, Sutipong still finds time to help others.

He is president of the Bangkok Bicycles Friendship Association and its main project at the moment is to get people with old and unwanted but still usable bicycles to donate to the association, which he said was about 100 strong.

These bicycles will then be given to people who do not have any means of transport and hopefully will save them transportation expenses.

"So far, I have handed over 15 bikes," he said, adding that the project is about two months old.

"Most of them have gone to students, but a few have gone to very poor families who really need a bike to get around," he said.

While creating the impression that he is handling the situation rather well, Sutipong nevertheless said the transformation from being an executive to a flea market vendor has affected his self-esteem.

"Not only was it difficult. It made me feel very down," he said.

When asked how he felt about Thailand going to the International Monetary Fund for help, he said that he felt sad that his country had to resort to the body.

"I think it is a bad idea to be obligated to it. And look, more and more people are unemployed because of it," he said in despair.

"I think Malaysia is very brave, and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is extremely strong and smart. I think many people in Thailand would agree with what Malaysia is doing and wished we could do the same," he added.

This whole experience, Sutipong said, has allowed him to be more astute in business. He said he would probably venture into business when the situation gets better.

"I don't think I will give my decision to leave journalism a second thought," he added.

Meanwhile, Sutipong is continuing to find ways to survive the crisis.

"There is no time, or even the mood, to think about anything else

nowadays. Every moment is spent thinking about ways which I can earn some money," he added.

Everyone in Thailand, is in the same boat, finding means to make ends meet.

"We have to do all sorts of things in order to get money. Many hold more than one job now," he said.

On the one free day a week, he and his wife go to the temple to pray, asking God to not make things more difficult for them.

"I pray hard that we will manage through this difficult time," he said, and added, "What else can I possibly do?"

* Part 3 in the main paper on Thursday.

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