

COVER STORY

A rough business

A charity sleepout gives those at the top valuable lessons about life at the bottom, writes **Sue White**.

From the moment the chief executive of the SME Association of Australia, Dr Caroline Hong, heard about the chance to sleep rough with other Australian business leaders, she knew the Vinnies CEO Sleepout was something in which she wanted to be involved.

"I felt I needed to do it," she says. Like many CEOs, Malaysian-born Hong has a string of successes behind her. However, she also knows firsthand how easily life can be thrown off course.

"I come from a very privileged family, but when I was 12 years old I had a homeless period myself," she says. "Circumstances changed and my father lost his business, and my parents had to find a home for me." Hong recalls her mother walking her, her sister and many brothers around town while trying to find them temporary homes.

"I was eventually taken in by a temple of Chinese nuns and lived there for six months," she says. "I was fed properly, and clothed."

Her childhood hardship didn't return fully to Hong until her first year of taking part in the CEO Sleepout. Run by the St Vincent de Paul Society since 2006, the now-national event aims to raise \$5 million for the charity's homeless services while changing public perceptions about homelessness. That was certainly the case for Hong.

"I was sitting on the bench in the cold, and I found myself talking

about what I was feeling," she says. "Everything came back, like a movie in my head. It's really made me appreciate what Vinnies is doing."

The manager of community relations for Vinnies New South Wales, Julie McDonald, says CEOs and those on the streets have more in common than one might imagine.

"We often say to CEOs that there's not much difference being at the top of an organisation or the bottom of the ladder of life," she says. "Both are lonely places to be."

Although the successful fundraiser is a drop in the ocean for an organisation spending an estimated \$10.4 million in Victoria and \$54 million in NSW on mental health and homeless services, McDonald says the night in the cold has a real impact on participants.

"The mood starts out being quite chipper," she says. "But by the next morning it's a lot quieter. You can see people thinking: 'What if I had to do this every day?'"

While the official experience ends after a hard night on the ground, McDonald says many CEOs are moved to do more once they leave.

"It's a profound change. They arrive one person and leave another," she says. "I don't think there's one CEO in seven years who hasn't seen some sort of change as a result."

One such CEO is Keith Maloon.

The managing director of Bravo Coffee stumbled upon CEO Sleepout two years ago when he provided free coffee for participants the morning after. The experience was so moving



Appreciative ... Dr Caroline Hong, who was once homeless herself, felt compelled to take part in the sleepout. *Photo: Fiona Morris*

that he decided to do more. After speaking extensively with St Vincent de Paul staffers, he decided to create a barista school for homeless people.

"The idea was to give them a skill they could learn and potentially use for work," he says.

It might sound simple, but the reality hasn't been easy.

"When I started, I wanted to give the whole world a job, but one thing I've learnt is that getting people up and out is a huge achievement," he says. "It's more about getting people to have a zest for life."

After a few false starts, including an attempt at running the courses from Bravo's Enmore (Sydney)

location, Maloon moved the operation into a purpose-built community facility, Our Big Kitchen, in Bondi.

"We've created a barista school inside their kitchen," Maloon says. "I donated a machine and a grinder, and we've taught their trainers to become barista trainers, too."

Maloon says the project has a long way to go, but adjusting his expectations to meet the realities of those facing hard times has helped him see the bigger picture.

"It's tough," he says. "Some people disappear and don't complete the five-week course.

"It's not an exact science; it's ongoing hard yakka."

It is also a reason why he believes support organisations such as St Vincent de Paul need to do their work year-round.

"I was completely oblivious to the whole plight of homeless people before, but the more I'm involved the more I understand how complex the problem is," he says.

Despite the challenges, Maloon says giving back is rewarding.

"I get enormous satisfaction from it," he says. "Even a small action can make a difference."

The 2012 CEO Sleepout runs on Thursday, June 21. Sponsor a boss at ceosleepout.org.au.