BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES

AUSTRALIAN ACTIVISTS TELL THEIR STORIES

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Introduction

What makes an activist? What makes one person speak out against injustice while another will be content to get angry at the TV news? What makes the activist so determined to make her or his voice heard, often against powerful odds or the gentle encouragement of friends and family to give it up as a lost cause? This book looks for answers in the personal stories of 46 Australians.

When Joy Noble and Fiona Verity wrote *Imagine if: A Handbook for Activists* (2006), they described a flexible 10-step plan for action that required thoughtfulness, courage and creativity, all underpinned by the values and beliefs of social justice, human rights and sustainability. The people who tell their stories in this book display, in different ways, these core qualities, values and beliefs.

What becomes clear as you read the stories is that activists come in many guises: teenagers, grandmothers, lawyers, children, parents, ex-politicians, workers, students, grandfathers. They can be the man next door or the woman in the shop you frequent. They can be a farmer or a newcomer to our shores. They are everywhere.

Their activism takes many forms:

- raising public awareness and focusing attention by speaking out;
- setting directions for new or improved policy, legislation and services;
- initiating or joining action groups, protests, boycotts and campaigns to bring about change;
- sending ideas, petitions or pleas to the media, people in authority and those who have influence on public opinion; and
- establishing ventures which build stronger communities.

Today we face dramatic changes in climate that are beginning to transform the globe as we have always known it. We see millions of people on the move displaced through famine, poverty and war. The near collapse of the global financial system in 2007–2008, which destabilised relatively prosperous national economies, has generated widespread hardship, anxiety and unease. Global terrorism has created an insecurity that has lead to intolerance and distrust, at times fuelled by governments intent on creating a culture of fear of the 'other'. We are reminded daily of the growing chasm between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in our Western democracies. Sometimes it seems as if it is all too hard, and nothing can be done.

The people who have contributed to this book, young and old, show us that this is not the case. Working across a range of areas, including human rights, the environment, ecological damage and resource depletion, gender issues, politics, disabilities, indigenous rights, food consumption, multiculturalism and the arts, they have broken the boundaries erected around them by

governments, institutions, corporations, public opinion and sometimes themselves, and acted.

A book of this size cannot hope to do justice to activism in all its forms. There are major areas of achievement in which we fail to offer a voice, and we have concentrated our efforts largely in southern Australia. All we can hope is that our contributors have told their stories in a manner worthy of all those activists who continue to work toward making our world a better and fairer place.

We want to encourage people to do something when they see a need for change. The first step is often the hardest; but ordinary people can do extraordinary things, and working together we can make a difference.

Yvonne Allen and Joy Noble

Sierra Leone to Australia: The long road to action

KHADIJA GBLA

To understand how I became an activist you have to know my story, because my activism comes out of all the things that have happened to me. It has made me the person I am today.

I was born in Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa in 1988. Until I was three, life was good. My grandfather was a chieftain with three wives and many children. Then the civil war broke out. We went to bed one day thinking life was safe and the next day there were bombs all over the place and people were killing each other. My mum told us we needed to hide, so they would not come for us. But finally, when I was ten, they did. That's when she put my baby sister on her back, took me by the hand and we ran. Along the way we saw things that no child should ever see. That was the end of me viewing the world in a fluffy pink dream.

We managed to escape and after a long journey we ended up in Gambia, trying to survive with thousands of other refugees.

It was there that our story began to change. You see, my mother had gone to teachers' college when she finished school. My grandfather decided that all of his daughters would have an education, which was unusual then. His decision saved our lives – it prepared my mother for what was to come. The unofficial refugee camp was a place where you went to bed with one eye

open because you were waiting to be killed or raped. If you had no skills you did anything to survive: even selling your body or that of your daughters. But my mother could work as a teacher and support us. That's how I learned of the power of education. Diamonds and gold can run out, but having an education stays with you. Her education also made it easier for her to get refugee status. It took three years to be accepted by Australia. When people told us that Australia was at the end of the world, my mum would say, 'Here or there? Even if it is the end of the world, I choose there. I want to give my kids a better future. This is our only chance.'

We arrived in June 2001. We were the first Sierra Leoneans in South Australia. I was 13. It was winter, and cold. The streets seemed so empty. When we found an Asian grocery nearby, life became a bit more normal for us. We found African food – peanut butter and okra and, more importantly, chilli.

Starting school was hard. I had been transported into a culture very different from the one I knew. My mother enrolled me into a girls' school. I think she thought that girls would be less racist, or maybe she wanted to protect me from the young boys. I became the first African to enrol at Mitcham Girls High School. I was the guinea pig – it was a weird experience. The other girls seemed so innocent. They'd had a childhood. Not me.

I didn't feel confident to speak out, to get things wrong and be laughed at. I would come home crying. I didn't want to go back to school. This was hard for my mother. I remember she said, 'You escaped bullets and guns and bombs, and you are afraid of a bunch of little girls?' I wanted her to be more sympathetic to my plight, but it gave me a bit of confidence too and I started standing up for myself.

Then I started getting sick. When I first arrived from Gambia

there was a lump on my neck that began swelling up. They said it was a rare form of TB. Doctors took the lump out and gave me medication. But I got worse instead of better. I was always exhausted and out of breath. I couldn't sleep. I had no appetite. I was having nightmares. I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to hang out. It felt to me like the Australian environment was bad for my system. By now I was in Year 9 and Year 10. No one could tell me what was wrong.

Me being sick represented Mum's lost hopes. She had brought me here for a better life and I was unable to benefit from it. By this time my little sister was in primary school and Mum was studying to be a registered nurse. She was working very hard on her studies, so it was me and my sister looking after ourselves most of the time. But I became so sick I couldn't even be a big sister properly. I had hit rock bottom. The doctors began talking about chronic fatigue and depression.

In Year 10, it was suggested I talk to a psychologist. My mother was against this. In our culture we do not have a sense of mental health; you are either crazy or possessed by the devil. Finally I said to her, 'We have tried everything. I might as well try this.' That was a good thing because the psychologist got involved in my schooling.

One day Mum sent me off to Women's Health Statewide to get my resumé fixed up, and I met René Weal who ran the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) program there. That was when I began to think about what had been done to me, and it marked the beginning of my activism. I became a peer educator and provided a cultural perspective in the FGM workshops.

Soon after, I wandered into Multicultural Youth SA (MYSA) and met Carmen Garcia, who was to become my mentor. I was now in Year 11. She was interested in mental health among

refugee communities and invited me to speak at workshops to give a youth perspective. I could speak about my own experiences. The more I did, the more I realised that I had a voice, had something to say.

MYSA provided a haven for me. By becoming involved I was beginning to work out my problems for myself. It was the therapy I needed. I saw that we Africans were having difficulty as a group, but the older generation didn't want to admit this, so the services provided didn't meet our real needs. Our elders were pretending, after the struggle to get here, that all was well and good. My mum was ashamed that I might have a mental health problem. She was afraid it would be on file and it would work against me in the future.

I was just a schoolgirl then, but I knew that if we didn't speak out about the real problems we were facing, we would get nowhere – especially us young people, some of whom were committing suicide. Now we were African–Australian. We had an identity crisis. I look back and think in 2003–2005 the refugee atmosphere was tough. Communities were working against each other, with lots of internal conflict. Nobody was representing us at a national or local level. We didn't have a voice.

Because of my work with MYSA, I was invited to speak at lots of consultations. Then I was selected to be on the SA Minister's Youth Council where I could represent the multicultural voice. I worked on mental health issues and, at the end of my time, got funding for MYSA to run the first multicultural youth mental health workshop.

In 2008, I was invited to attend the 2020 Youth Summit in Canberra. In an interview before I left, I raised the issues of mental health in refugee communities and female genital mutilation. My community was very upset. 'Why is she saying

we are all crazy and stupid and retarded?' they said. I got angry phone calls and people complained to my mother. But as a result of the mental health report from that conference, there are now programs to help our young people to fare better in schools and deal with mental health issues.

I continued to talk about female genital mutilation and, in April 2013, was invited by Tanya Plibersek, federal Minister for Health, to attend the first FGM conference ever held in Australia. Before I knew it, I was speaking to a room full of politicians, doctors, nurses and other experts, and telling them my own experiences with FGM. It is a very difficult subject to talk about, but I discovered that with a bit of humour, I could break the ice. There was a big media response to my talk and I began to see just how powerful personal stories can be. Everyone wants their privacy, but some things are bigger than yourself.

When I found myself in an abusive relationship, I decided again to speak out publicly. Here I was, an SA Young Australian of the Year, and even I couldn't defend myself. I found a court-imposed restraining order didn't stop me from being stalked, and the police did not protect me. Once again, my community wanted me to remain silent, because otherwise I would get my abuser into trouble. Later my domestic violence support worker rang me to say I had done more for the domestic violence issue by speaking out as I did than they had been able to do in years. One day I want to have a daughter. How could I look her in the eye if I did not stand up for all women who are victims of domestic violence?

I sometimes think the wider Australian community is more proud of me than my own community, but that's true of many people who work for change. Activism, for me, is a journey that keeps changing form and shape. The things that we have to do to

make the world a better place are obvious, but we have to choose to see them. Being an activist is about being more than just you. It is about creating a better world.

KHADIJA GBLA *is now running her own cultural consultancy offering cross-cultural training, mentoring and motivational speaking. She is spearheading a campaign on change.org to end FGM in Australia and is planning a magazine for multicultural young women. She has received a number of awards for her work. In 2014 she was listed as one of the 50 most influential women in South Australia by the* Advertiser *newspaper.*

Social media in times of crisis

MEL IRONS

The Tasmanian bushfires of January 2013 were the state's worst in more than 40 years. Thousands of people were displaced, hundreds of homes were destroyed and thousands of hectares of bush and farmland were burnt. This is a story outlining the work I did in the immediate aftermath of the fires, and the work I continue to do.

On the afternoon the fires struck, I was stuck at home working and babysitting for a friend. Since 2006, I have been running my own business from home. At the time I was also working toward completing a PhD in Psychology. I live in an area that has been hit by bushfires before, but we weren't under any threat from these particular fires. I was listening to updates on local radio and monitoring the Tasmanian Fire Service website. Already stories were circulating about homes being destroyed, people being evacuated and others being trapped. Many of the details were murky, but it was clear a crisis was unfolding.

I had no experience of working in a fire situation, or anything to do with emergency management in general. I was anxious to help but was limited by my experience and immediate situation. I posted a few questions on Facebook and details started to emerge: there was a refuge centre that needed volunteers; people

were worried about their pets; others were offering donations. This was only the beginning, but I had a strong sense that all this information – all this goodwill – needed to be organised. It was only a general thought, but it was enough to get me started on making the 'Tassie Fires – We Can Help' page.

I was not a social media expert (and I'm still not!) and I can't pinpoint why I acted on my desire to help. I had a thought, and I carried it out. I know I was emotionally connected to what was happening. It was clear at that stage that the worst of the fires were burning in the south-east, near the town of Dunalley. Friends of mine either lived in the area or had family there. This wasn't something happening in some far-off place on a map. In my mind I could see the eucalypts, the small country houses and the beaches. And from my house, I could see the smoke.

The fires in the south-east were on two peninsulas, which are connected to the rest of Tasmania via the same highway. When the road was cut off, thousands of people were stranded behind the fire front. Homes lost power and telecommunication services were completely down. Hundreds of tourists holidaying in the area were also stuck. There was a tremendous hunger for information – from those trapped behind the fire front, and from those trying to reach them.

I set up the Facebook page with the general idea that it could be something of a clearing house. People could post with requests or problems, and solutions would be found (I hoped). I called my local ABC radio station, which at that time was providing rolling coverage of the emergency. I explained what I'd done and encouraged people to get involved.

Within a few hours the page had attracted 16,000 'likes'. This number peaked at 20,815. People flocked to the page to get information, to ask questions, to give support and to see what

was needed. There were updates from police and emergency services, information from various charities about what they were doing and how people could contribute, while thousands of volunteers shared information about what they were doing. I was on the laptop and phone for up to 20 hours a day, posting new content every three to four minutes. That became my job.

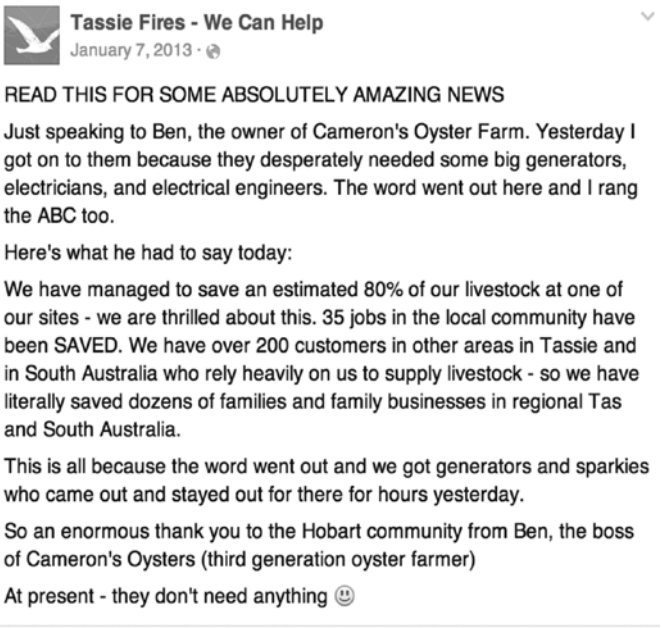
One of the stories which helps illustrate the page's role and impact concerns the plight of a particular oyster hatchery in Dunalley. The hatchery contained 60 million baby oysters. About 40–45 per cent of the oysters grown in Australia come from this business. It also employs 35 people locally. The hatchery only narrowly escaped the flames but in the days following the fire, another crisis emerged. Power had been lost and there was nothing to keep the oysters cool. Baby oysters are very sensitive to temperature, even slight changes cause stress and can eventually kill them. A distraught local farmer contacted me. He had already seen people using the website and figured it was his last chance to get some help. On 6 January (about 36 hours after the fire) I posted the following message on his behalf:

URGENT

ARE YOU AN ELECTRICIAN, AN ELECTRICAL ENGINEER
OR OWN A BIG, BIG GENERATOR?
Can you contact someone who is or does?
Dunalley needs you NOW …

The message detailed the type of generator needed, as well as contact details for the hatchery and the emergency services people that would be needed to ensure people were able to access the area.

The following morning, I was able to post the following message from Ben, the owner of the hatchery:



Tassie Fires - We Can Help
January 7, 2013 ·

READ THIS FOR SOME ABSOLUTELY AMAZING NEWS

Just speaking to Ben, the owner of Cameron's Oyster Farm. Yesterday I got on to them because they desperately needed some big generators, electricians, and electrical engineers. The word went out here and I rang the ABC too.

Here's what he had to say today:

We have managed to save an estimated 80% of our livestock at one of our sites - we are thrilled about this. 35 jobs in the local community have been SAVED. We have over 200 customers in other areas in Tassie and in South Australia who rely heavily on us to supply livestock - so we have literally saved dozens of families and family businesses in regional Tas and South Australia.

This is all because the word went out and we got generators and sparkies who came out and stayed out for there for hours yesterday.

So an enormous thank you to the Hobart community from Ben, the boss of Cameron's Oysters (third generation oyster farmer)

At present - they don't need anything

This one example showed how the page helped connect volunteers and provide immediate assistance. The owners of the hatchery are certain help would not have arrived in time if they had tried to go through the official channels. Throughout this crisis, there were hundreds of volunteers doing amazing things to help others. Some used the page, others probably didn't know it existed. But the ones that did use it found they could rely on it when needed.

My role as the administrator of the page was to channel, moderate and filter the information coming in. People were able to contact me directly either through the page or on the phone. I could post information on their behalf and they could also

comment directly on existing posts. I liaised with local media outlets and emergency authorities as much as possible to ensure the information I was sharing was accurate.

In the week following the outbreak of the fires, more than 26,000 people were actively engaged with the page each day – meaning they clicked on a link, shared something or commented on a post. After 35 weeks, more than 2.6 million people were exposed to the page. Its role in the immediate aftermath of the bushfires became the subject of my new doctoral thesis, which I finished in August 2015. It looked at the way social media is used in times of crisis, as well as psychological first aid, community resilience and leadership. I have been asked many times to speak at conferences about why the page did what it did, why people used it in such a way. Now that I have completed my PhD on this topic, I have much more detailed answers, but these were my initial reflections about why the page was useful:

- Early successes (i.e. people getting help): built confidence among people using the page, and fostered the idea that it was a viable option. People were empowered and it helped keep the tone of the page positive.
- Fast: problems were solved, help was received … quickly
- Accurate: the information posted on the page came from good sources, often from people who were 'on the ground' and knew what was happening. This included official sources (e.g. police, fire service)
- Accessibility: using the reach of Facebook, and I was there as the administrator for hours every day, available to respond to all requests
- Interaction: people could add their own information and insights to the page; it was a conversation, not a one-way broadcast, and I was responding to all posts.

There were other factors, but this provides some insight into how the page worked. Authorities often regard the social media space with suspicion, and emergency services as something that can't be trusted, and to be kept at arm's length. There's a view that it's too prone to rumour mongering or the spread of false information. These fears have some merit, but are usually blown completely out of proportion. They shouldn't obscure the fact that social media can also be tremendously beneficial during times of crisis, for example myth busting. In fluid, ever-changing environments, where information needs to be shared quickly, social media is a valuable communication tool. In fact, it's essential.

Personally, I get a bit tired of all the risk paralysis and fear in our community – the stuff that prevents good people from doing good things. I wasn't trying to be a hero or do anything extraordinary – I just wanted to help and I started helping. I negotiated, communicated, learnt, made decisions and learnt some more. I had no idea where it would all lead and I'm still finding my way. But the risks I took were worth it – for me and many others.

MELANIE IRONS *has now completed her Psychology PhD on the way social media can be used in times of crisis. In addition, she runs a Tasmanian-based, award-winning personal training and health coaching business, Booty.*