

# MURMUR

ALUMNI MAGAZINE • WINTER 2021



**A compass for  
the motherhood  
*journey***



**MU** Murdoch  
University

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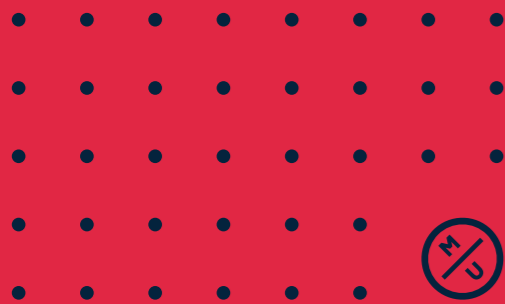
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Free your think



**Giving care to the caregivers**

Psychologist Yara Heary wants all women and mothers to know that they are enough and don't have to struggle in silence.



**Humanitarian Heidi finds her purpose**

MBA graduate leaps in to help when natural disasters strike.



**The secret life of Flatback Turtles revealed**

PhD student's work bringing new discoveries from an aquatic wonderland.



**Graduate helps negotiate Climate Change Agreement**

Lisa finds her calling working at the international junction at Geneva.



**Giving Generously**

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**Building Blocks**

A shot from the skies reveals the birth of your university.

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# Acknowledgement of Country

Murdoch University acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the traditional custodians of this country and its waters and that Murdoch University stands on Noongar Country.

Murdoch University pays its respects to Noongar elders past and present and acknowledges their wisdom and advice in teaching and cultural knowledge activities.



# From the editor

I have always been a little intrigued by the sheer abundance of circulating platitudes. The meaningless phrases we seem to need to grease the wheels of conversation and draw a full stop to many of our daily interactions. Despite their prevalence being akin to the presence of nitrogen, some people still insist on delivering them with the zeal of Archimedes sprinting from that bath. "It is what it is!" cry many, slightly proud of their groundbreaking astuteness, until reminded by an incredulous listener that everything, in fact, what it is. 'Not bad for a Monday' continues to be delivered across a million workplaces, despite being as newsworthy as the sun coming up. Though by their very nature our vast bank of inanities don't stand up to scrutiny, it can still be insightful and let's face it fun, to do so.

You will all have been hit at some point with the definitive advice that you have to 'respect yourself.' But you may have not had the fun with it that I have, in promptly asking the phrase donor "Ok how should I do that exactly?" or "How did you respect yourself last month?" Perhaps workplace kitchens simply wouldn't be able to function without these vacuous closers. Nobody would be able to get back to their desk if people weren't committed to throwing out a 'living the dream', 'onwards and upwards' and the much-loved, 'Well everything happens for a reason.'

I used to think 'making a difference' fell into the same family, but as a phrase I think it does stand up to multi-angle scrutiny. Seatbelts make a difference. Cooking food makes a difference. A compliment makes a difference and as you will hopefully clearly see by the final pages of this magazine, people can make an extraordinary difference. Though I may have missed the calendar for International Women's Day, I am proud to be the sole male (save the buddy on my shoulder) in this issue. One who simply has the pleasure of introducing some remarkable women who, beyond question, are making a difference in this world.

When a natural disaster obliterates a community, taking away all the fundamentals of civilization, alumna Heidi Cockram goes in with a team and begins to lay the building blocks of recovery for traumatized people. Currently based in Switzerland, Heidi has found her calling, which has seen her bring in initial rays of hope to many scenes of devastation. For those of you who know how difficult it is to get a group to agree on a cuisine for takeaway, consider having alumna Lisa Gittos' role. Based at the UN in Geneva, Lisa's responsibilities include developing

international agreements between nations on issues such as climate change and human rights, and ones you may not expect such as universal postal agreements and orbits for satellites.

Alumna Genevieve Onuchukwu was so struck by what she experienced in voluntary work in Africa she established her own charity and continues to touch the lives of those in search of educational opportunity. Researcher Jenna Hounslow is making a difference to the understanding of the fascinating world of flatback turtles. Her groundbreaking research work bringing secrets of an aquatic underworld to a global audience. And finally we have our cover star, Yara Heary, tackling perhaps one of the most sacred concepts of society – motherhood. Her skills in Psychology bringing clarity and comfort to those navigating the often-solo seas of nurturing. These Murmur stories take us from Fremantle to Kenya, from Roebuck Bay to Switzerland, and touch upon moments of elation, despair and hope, but hey as you may have heard, what goes around...

**Michael Sampson**  
Murmur Editor




# Humanitarian

## Heidi

### FINDS HER PURPOSE

Despite becoming a sought-after IT specialist with an impressive global resume, alumnus Heidi Cockram always felt called to do humanitarian work. Swapping optic fibre for typhoons, earthquakes and near-death experiences, Heidi's return to study and determination has now brought her to a place where she truly feels of service. We caught up with Heidi to find out how she tackled a long and tricky career switch that now takes her to some of the most dangerous corners of the globe...



**"I had always had a dream to help people living in crisis situations. I was always looking for ways to begin, but it is very difficult to break into the humanitarian sector if you don't have a degree, and I had never completed mine."**

#### **What did you study at Murdoch?**

I studied for an undergraduate degree at Murdoch and then completed a Master of Business Administration. I also completed a post graduate qualification in international development at RMIT.

#### **How did you get into the humanitarian field?**

I was working for Murdoch University in the IT department and started a new double degree, a Bachelor of Commerce majoring in telecoms communication, and Information Systems. I never finished my degree because I had an opportunity to move to Sydney and work for Hudson Global Resources, an HR and recruitment firm. In 2004, my IT career really took off and I left Sydney and moved to London to work for Accenture Technology Infrastructure Services, a large consulting company where I was working again on telecoms projects in different parts of Europe.

However, it wasn't where my heart was. I had always had a dream to help people living in crisis situations. I was always looking for ways to begin, but it is very difficult to break into the humanitarian sector if you don't have a degree, and I had never completed mine.

The roles the humanitarian arena is traditionally looking for are sector professionals – water and sanitation engineers, nutritional experts, nurses, architects, engineers, etc. However, they do have other roles, – like logisticians, for people with business savvy, and some administrative roles as well. As in

many organisations, they are looking for people with experience, and it's difficult to get that experience unless someone is willing to take a chance on you.

I discovered that Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) would take new relief workers. In 2007 I quit my job with Accenture and went to work in Ethiopia with MSF as a Field Logistician. I was there for three months but fell incredibly sick with E.coli, nearly died, and had to come back to Australia.

This was not where I wanted to be! When I was in Ethiopia, I felt like I had finally found my place and my purpose, so then, it was about trying to work out how I could get back, safely, while recovering from a debilitating sickness.

#### **How did you start?**

That all happened in early 2007 and later that year I got a job on the Woodside Pluto project in Perth, designing the Local Area and Wide Area networks for the new Plant and Platform. I decided that if I was ever going to return to humanitarian work, I would need qualifications. I began considering returning to Murdoch and working out the best way to finish my Commerce undergraduate degree. Then I realised that it was possible to enter into a Masters program without an undergraduate degree if you have sufficient life/business experience. I decided to try that way. I then had to decide which Masters degree to do to get myself back into the field as quick as possible. At that time, MU offered an MBA over three trimesters so you could do it in one year.

#### **Did it work?**

Even though the idea was to get back into the field as quickly as possible, it didn't end up happening that way! I ended up getting a job with an incredible Child Development Organisation – Compassion Australia – as a Donor Relations Manager, and finishing my Masters at the same time. To be honest, the combination made me question everything I was doing.

#### **In what way?**

Well from the very first night I did my first MBA unit – Managerial Finance! We were told that the job of business was to create wealth for shareholders, and the job of a Finance Manager was to increase wealth. I remember calling my sister and saying "I don't want to do this; I don't want to make money. I want to work as a humanitarian! Why do I need to know this?" To be honest, it felt like a punch in the guts for everything that I stood for.

I can still remember her saying – "Look you need to look at this a different way. Humanitarian organisations need people who know and understand how to make money, and how finance and business works. You can have 'bleeding hearts' in these organisations that have no idea how to run an organisation or business. If you can come in and bring that expertise, consider what a difference that is going to make." She completely reframed the situation for me with pertinent advice such as "When they say shareholders, think beneficiaries, when they say build wealth, think raising donations."

#### **So how did you make the switch back into humanitarian work?**

I worked at Compassion for four years and then one year in Perth with Chevron. Then I thought "Right, I feel ready. I have an MBA, a post graduate qualification in International Development and work experience from Compassion." So, I applied to re-join Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). I was ready to go wherever they needed me.

However, because I had left the field in a near death emergency without a performance evaluation, MSF did not think they would be able to place me!

#### **Devastating!**

Indeed. I had heard of another organisation called Medair when I was working in the UK with Accenture. Medair was smaller than MSF but was one of the more interesting humanitarian agencies for me, due to the faith-based nature of the organisation. I applied for a role with Medair and was really lucky to be offered a job. There are hundreds of applications every month and only a handful get through.

My first role with Medair in 2014 was as Projects Coordinator and I ended up as a Country Director within six months. I worked in that role for four years before I considered applying for my current role as Medair's IT Director. I think all of that study finally paid off!

### What does Medair do as an organisation?

Medair is a humanitarian organisation focussing very much on life-saving interventions. They are a Christian, Swiss national, non-government organisation. Our mandate is to help the most vulnerable people, in the hardest to reach places. Generally speaking, if there is a disaster, or conflict, what will happen is that the humanitarian organisations will descend to the area en-masse. You will have all the big ones, - Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision etc. All the names that people know will go there. Usually, Medair only responds to what they call Level Three emergencies. In essence, the really, really big ones that have a huge impact. When we arrive, we're looking for the boundaries of where humanitarian aid is being delivered, and we aim to work beyond them - to the places that aren't receiving any help at all. There are always people that are affected across a large geographical area and we go to the remote places that are more difficult to get to.

### What nations is Medair in?

We are currently in 11 countries. Of the 10 most dangerous countries in the world to work in, we are currently in 8 of them. We are in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and Afghanistan. We're responding to the refugee crisis in Lebanon and Jordan, and we have just gone back into Sudan. We haven't been able to go into Sudan for the last ten years because of the Darfur crisis.

### Tell us about some of your experiences as a Country Director?

I was the Country Director (CD) in the Philippines in response to the big Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013. I went in what we call the second phase. The first phase is the emergency response after the disaster has just happened. The initial work is the lifesaving, bulldozers digging through rubble to try to save as much life as possible. We do not usually participate in this part of the emergency. It is usually the government and the military initially and that takes place in the first 48 hours. While that is still going on, we start to arrive because the next thing that is going to happen is the people are going to starve and they are going to dehydrate.

The damage from the typhoon was just extraordinary. It was one of the most powerful tropical cyclones ever recorded and it just wiped everything out. In Tacloban where we were, there was complete devastation from the storm surge that swept through all the coastal towns and the city. Medair came in after 48 hours, bringing in NFIs - Non-Food Items, such as tarpaulins, rope, and jerry cans because the sea water had swept into all the reservoirs.

### Rendering them useless?

Yes, contaminating all the freshwater reserves. All the toilets had gone, the shelter had gone, even the top of the coconut trees, the shade, all of that had gone. There is nothing to wash your hands with. Think about it just in terms of menstrual hygiene. Women have nowhere to go. There is no privacy, nowhere to get changed.

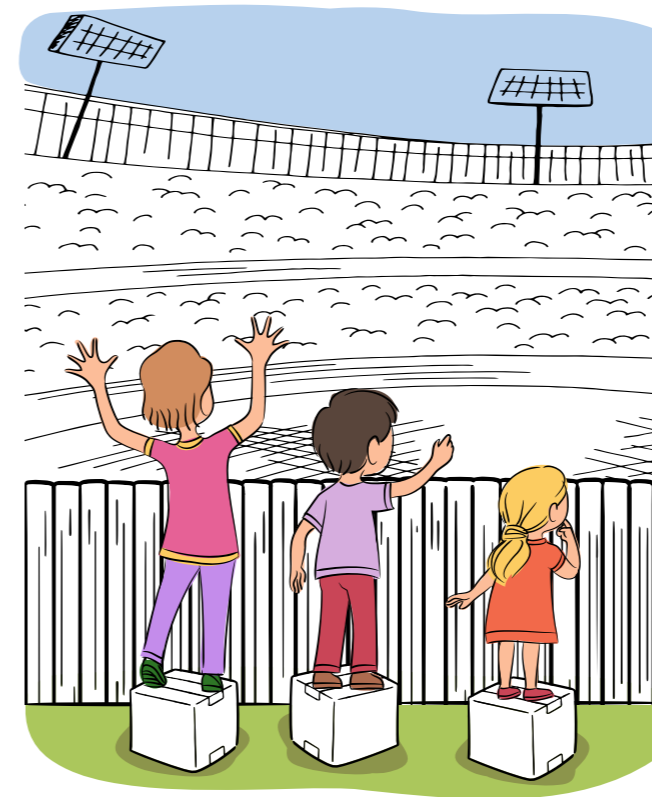
Imagine the issues that would arise if you've lost everything that you had, and everybody around you has lost everything that they had. What do you do? How do you even clothe yourself? People that were caught up in the flooding had their clothing ripped off. Your only course of action is to rummage through the debris in search of items.

It is a very, very difficult situation straight after that kind of disaster. This is when humanitarian organisations are hitting the ground as quick as they can, and donors are responding as fast as they can. The process in that initial part is all about procurement and transportation and logistics. How can we buy bulk tarpaulins? Bulk jerry cans, and bulk water purification tablets? How do we get them to the country? And then, how do we drive, or boat them to get that very last mile? How can we get it in to the hands of the people who will die if you don't?

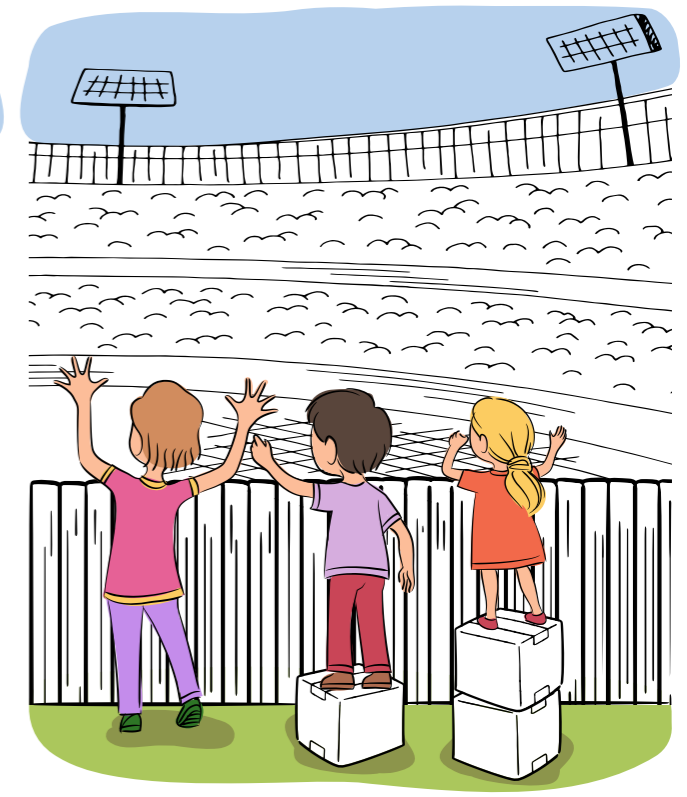


Heidi Cockram and Alberto Livoni in front of partially completed house after Typhoon Haiyan

**"In the second phase we built 1080 shelters, only this time with walls and floors."**



**RIGHTS-BASED ASSISTANCE**



**NEEDS-BASED ASSISTANCE**

We built what we called the core shelters. The structure of a small house that people can then add the walls and the floor to. It was strong and in that first phase we built 600 of these.

The second phase was concerned with - How can we build as many houses as possible? Many people were still just under plastic sheets and pieces of wood that they had managed to stack together. In the second phase we built 1080 shelters, only this time with walls and floors. They were two storeys. (See left).

We also completed 1200 roof repairs for people that had had their rooves ripped off, but the houses were still standing. We did this by building capacity in the families who needed our help. We provided the materials and the training and the engineering expertise so that people could fix their own rooves. We enabled the people to 'build back better'.

### How did all that work pan out?

Interestingly, the first 600 houses weren't all finished. We thought people would be able to finish them, but they often couldn't. They had completely lost their income, so in many cases we returned to finish the walls and floors in these homes. In addition, we built 1250 latrines. We were very much targeting the most vulnerable. There were assessments that took place, to see if people were earning under the poverty line. They had to be under a particular income or meet one of the six vulnerabilities to receive assistance from us. They had to either have

a pregnant or lactating woman in the household, or someone who was elderly, or children under the age of five, be a female-headed household, or be someone with a disability.

### So, it's needs based?

Yes. We are a needs-based organisation. There are needs-based and rights-based organisations. Rights-based is very much around the idea of - everybody is equal, and everybody should get the same. And needs-based is - I give you assistance based on your need. (The picture above illustrates it elegantly.)

### And how does it work on the ground?

Well it is often affected by the ethos of the country you are in. For example, when I went from the Philippines to Nepal, which had two major earthquakes in 2014, there were some issues regarding equality. The government views everyone as equal and legislates that everyone should receive the same assistance from the government or NGOs, regardless of their income, or how badly they need the assistance. This limited the amount that we could give, and it had to go to everybody. Even if you were a millionaire, we still had to give you the same amount as if you had nothing. It wasn't enough to build a house and we weren't allowed to top it up. We wanted to top it up for the people that were struggling, but that was viewed as unequal. So you can come up against unexpected challenges in how to help people.

**What are the responsibilities of a Country Director?**

As the Country Director, you are responsible for absolutely everything. You are Medair's international representative in the country. You are the representative to the local government, and you are initially responsible for making sure that the organisation is registered and able to function from a legal perspective. We had a very small team in the Philippines, and I wasn't just the CD. I carried a lot of other roles as well. I was responsible for understanding the country's labour laws, and for putting together the human resources, finance, and taxation elements of the business.

It's very different from establishing and running a business in Australia where you can consult with, or hire, specialists. Overseas, everything that happens, you are responsible for. As an expatriate going into the country, you don't necessarily know the regulations so you have to learn very, very quickly. Plus, there are a whole lot of security issues and safety issues that you must often consider that you would not have in Australia.

**Was this an issue in the Philippines?**

The Philippines is a safe country in comparison to a lot of other countries that we work in, but there are threats. You've got a group of assessors who are going around assessing who is the most vulnerable and who is going to get assistance from the NGO. You can imagine if you are one of the people who doesn't get picked.

**Do you have personal security?**

No, and as an organisation we don't have guns or armoured cars. Our approach to security is to build community acceptance. In areas where there are armed groups, we coordinate with them to gain access to people in need. We are helping their families. We usually have to negotiate with both sides of any civil conflict.

**Did you leave field work to take up the IT Director role at Medair reluctantly?**

No, but I took time to decide to apply because I would have to move to Switzerland [Medair HQ]. I made the decision with my sister and father and I was offered the job and moved to Europe. It's a perfect fit for me with my experience of both worlds. Working in the field, you don't tend to have a focus on fundraising; and working in fundraising, you are less focus on programmatic work, but the fact is I have done both. Working in IT, you need to be able to support the donor relationship tools, as well as build the programmatic tools. To come into this position understanding the field perspective has been so useful. Many people working in IT have not had the opportunity to get a field understanding. We are doing the best that we can to upgrade systems and develop systems that are all going to be good for the field applications.

**What is next for you?**

We have a massive program of Digital Transformation that will impact every employee of Medair across the globe, which will in turn have a major impact on our beneficiaries. I think that this will keep me occupied for many years to come. I hope that I will also have many opportunities to go back into the field once the COVID19 restrictions are lifted.

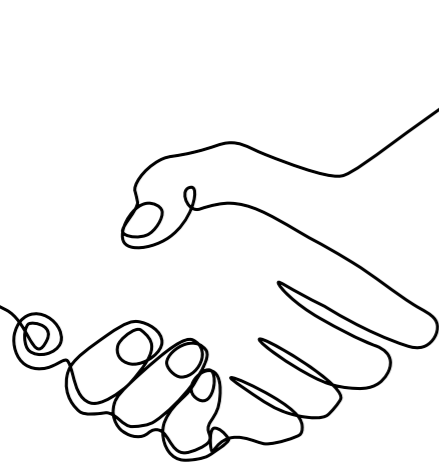
**And are you ok with going back into the field?**

For the short term, yes. I love it when I am there. It doesn't matter where I am – Iraq, Jordan, Nairobi – I feel at home because I am working my purpose.

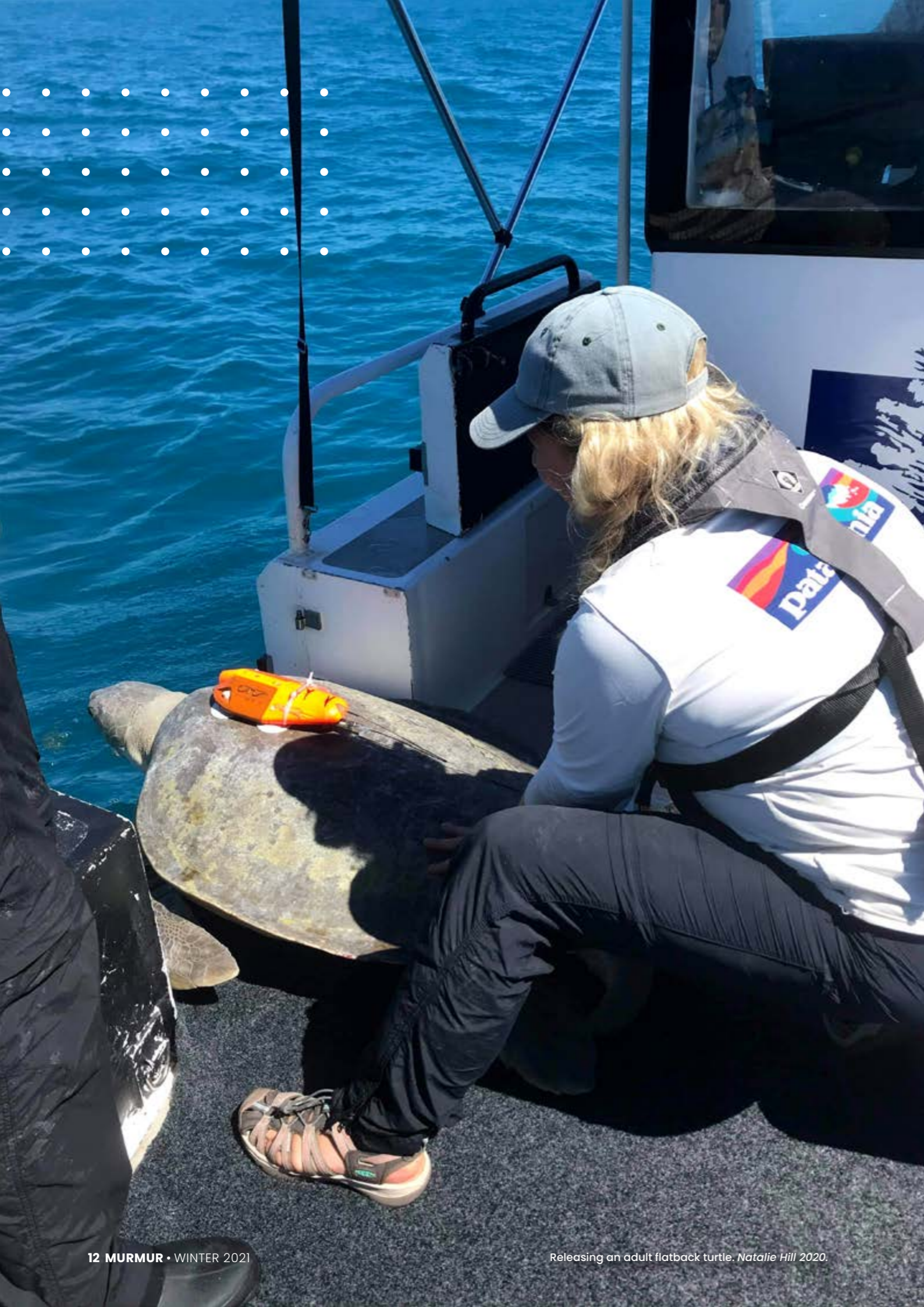
I think that often we spend our lives striving to find where we are meant to be, and I was always looking to the future. I don't feel that any longer. Everything I have ever done right throughout my entire working life made it right for this moment right here, right now.



**"Everything I have ever done right throughout my entire working life made it right for this moment right here, right now."**



**"Our approach to security is to build community acceptance. In areas where there are armed groups, we coordinate with them to gain access to people in need."**



# The secret life of **Flatback Turtles** *revealed*

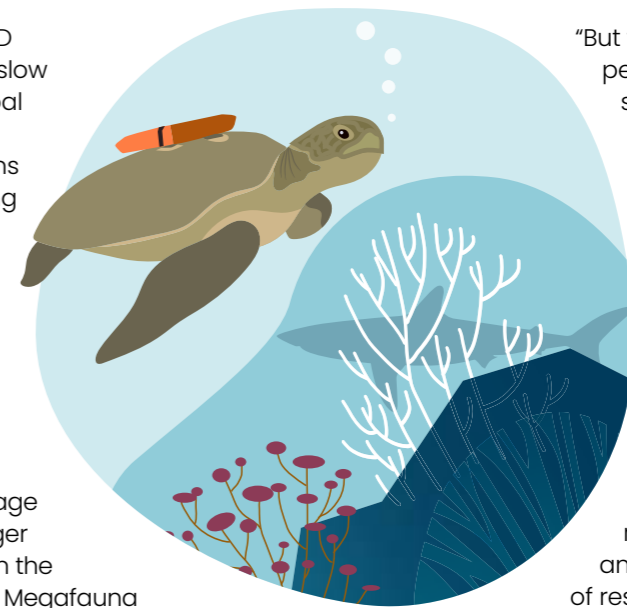
**M**urdoch University PhD student Jenna Hounslow has amassed a global following for her ground-breaking research that opens a window into the fascinating life of flatback turtles.

It's easy to see why her marine videos have more than seven million views. Who isn't excited by the first ever turtle's-eye-view of the aquatic wonderland at Roebuck Bay, off Broome, 2500km north of Perth? Footage of a flatback beating off a tiger shark attack astonished even the researchers from the Marine Megafauna Research theme at Murdoch University's Harry Butler Institute in collaboration with the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions.

"What amazed us was to see the turtle aggressively defending itself by attempting to bite the attacking shark," said Ms Hounslow who uses cutting-edge animal tags developed by CATS, to record every aspect of their foraging ecology and 'at sea' behaviour in what is effectively a daily diary.

Much as a sky diver or mountain bike rider wears a go pro to record their exploits, Ms Hounslow is helping pioneer the use of trackers with the equivalent of go pro and fit bit technology. It promises a future goldmine of scientific discovery to help improve long-term management and conservation initiatives.

Uniquely for turtle species, flatbacks do not make trans ocean migrations. "They only nest on Australian beaches and may venture as far as Papua New Guinea. There has been lots of long-term monitoring of their nesting habits on the west and east coasts of Australia.



"But this represents only a tiny period of a turtle's life. They spend most of their life at sea away from nesting beaches and only the adult females return to their nesting beaches every 2-3 years," she said.

The project team has already collected 109 hours of footage and the equivalent of 82 days of continuous detailed movement and environmental data representing all the seasons and times of day. After two years of research, Jenna will analyse over 4.25 billion data points enabling her to reconstruct every turtle movement in 3D.

"We've observed many interesting activities we didn't know about - fascinating anti-predator behaviour, curious camouflage activity and foraging forays.

"It's almost an adrenalin rush, making these discoveries. The really fulfilling thing is learning something new."

From the age of 15, Jenna wanted to be a marine scientist - being in or near the ocean is the only time she feels truly grounded. So, it's perhaps strange that despite growing to love flatbacks, she confesses to not being especially driven to study turtles.

"For me it was more about the sophisticated technology I am using. The technology means that we can really understand how animals use their natural environment. Without having to put them in captivity or in a laboratory, we can answer questions never before possible.





Jenna holding a juvenile flatback turtle. DBCA 2020.

"Yes, it would have been exciting, for example, to first name a species all those years ago. But tagging technologies are still being advanced because every tag is pretty much custom-made for each project, so I'm part of this advancement. With science it never really stops. The more you know, the more you know you need to know."

It's tempting to envy Jenna her exciting job but she is quick to ensure observers get a balanced perspective.

"I am very, very lucky and that will never be lost on me – the things I do and the places I get to go. But I also have to remind myself that I have worked really, really hard and sacrificed an awful lot to get here."

"In order to say yes to every opportunity, you have to sacrifice a lot of other things."

This approach provides a good basis from which to encourage other young women to pursue careers in STEM. Indeed, Jenna ranks as one of her own career highlights the recent participation in a program – speaking to teenage students about the joys and challenges of science.

"I put myself in their shoes. I wished that when I was in year 8 or 9, I had had someone like me to talk to me. So, I was happy to see three out of 30 lightbulbs go off in that room."

"My message is don't be intimidated by the hard skills. Subjects like maths and physics are scary subjects at school but if you can't do maths and statistics, or you are not willing to try, then you are going to be lost at some point in your career."

The flatback turtle research in Roebuck Bay is a collaboration between the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) and the Yawuru Prescribed Body Corporate.

The parent DBCA flatback project is \$62.5 million initiative – attractive to researchers like Ms Hounslow who are keen to make a difference and anticipate their findings can have a direct link to conservation policy and planning. They can also gain a new perspective by marrying traditional ecological knowledge and scientific ecological knowledge.

**"It's almost an adrenalin rush, making these discoveries. The really fulfilling thing is learning something new."**

But despite all of her achievements, love of her job and her joy in life, Ms Hounslow is haunted by a shocking fear. It comes and goes. It's irrational and cruel and it doesn't discriminate. It's called Imposter syndrome and apparently it stalks the halls of academia.

"When I was younger, I think I suffered from low self-esteem and lack of confidence – and I think I still do sometimes. But I realised that most researchers experience imposter syndrome – whether you are at the pinnacle of success or are just starting out. It affects even people you consider to be gods of academia. It's a feeling that you are not capable, even as you experience academic success. I don't know if we are conditioned to think we don't deserve success."

Ms Hounslow found that talking with peers, mentors and supervisors helped her to accept that it was a common experience but that the feelings do pass. She urges university students and researchers to develop the habit of celebrating little successes along the way to bolster defences; and to keep talking and sharing with others about the challenges.

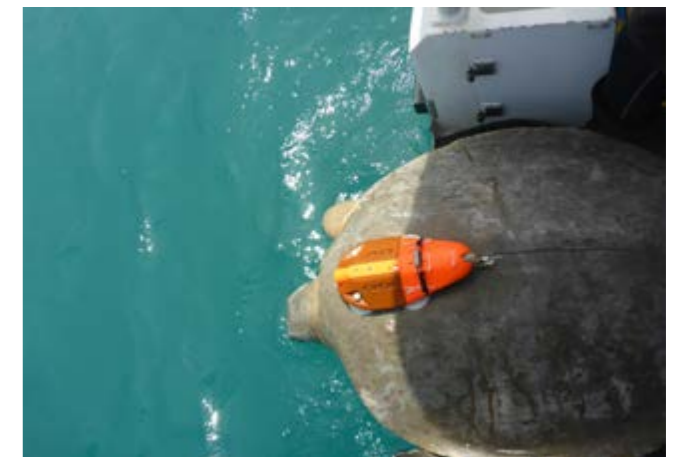
The future she believes will be made better because scientists will never stop decoding, interpreting and communicating about all facets of our world.

**For further information:**

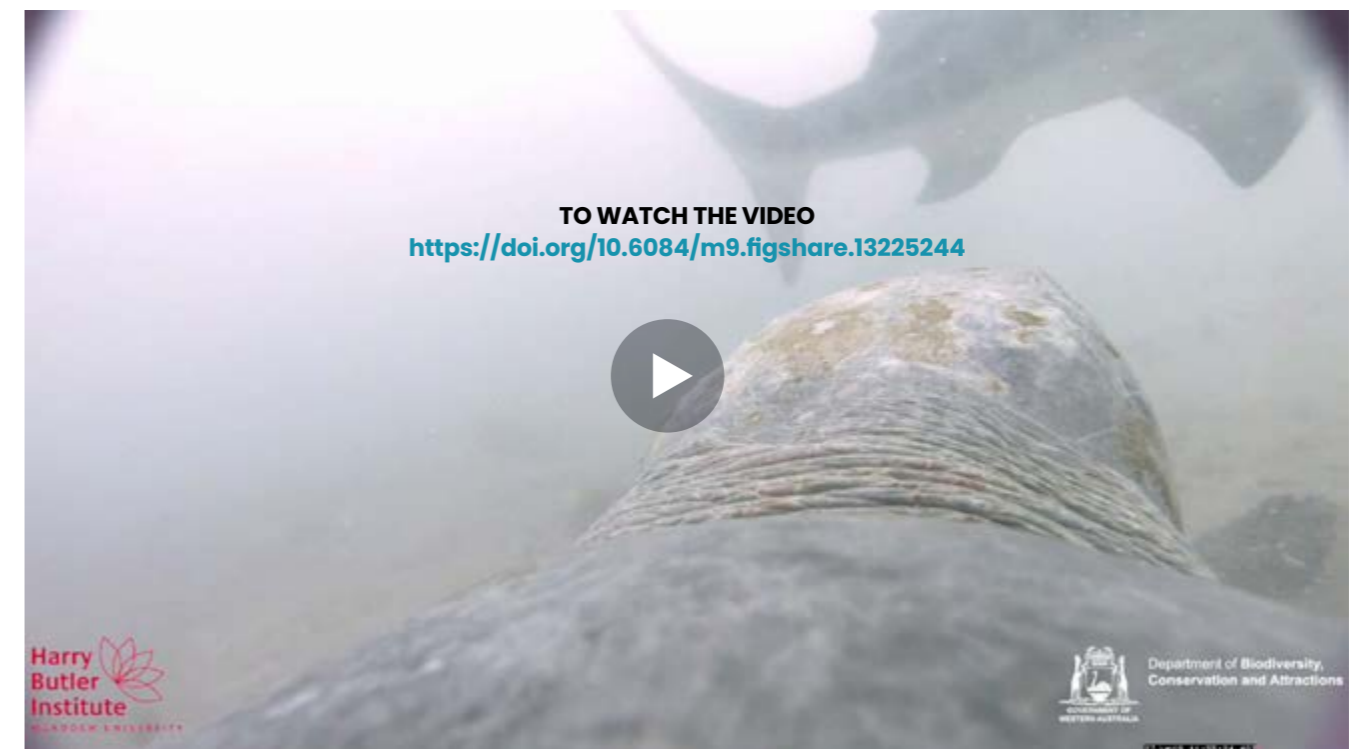
North West Shelf Flatback Turtle Conservation Program <https://flatbacks.dbca.wa.gov.au/>

Journal article <https://doi.org/10.1002/ecy.3251>

*All research was conducted in accordance with animal ethics permits.*



Adult flatback turtles equipped with animal-borne video cameras. Top: Paul Bell Feral Films, © DBCA & NBY Ltd 2019 Bottom: © Jenna Hounslow 2020



# GIVING CARE to the *Caregivers*

Psychologist and alumnus Yara Heary (B Psych Hons 2013 M. Applied Clinical Psych 2015) had just had her first child. Before long, all the balls she was trying to juggle began crashing to the floor. She didn't recognise herself, felt she was losing key relationships and immersed in a new world for which she had no suitable preparation or map. Yara's personal journey of early motherhood became her professional defining moment. It led her to create Life After Birth Psychology – her own practice in Fremantle that focuses on the motherhood journey. Time to switch the chairs at her clinic and discuss parenthood, tears, and the little child that stays in us all...



### **What drew you to Psychology?**

Well I actually have a musical background and was recording and travelling the US, but gradually fell out of love with that scene. I have always been really interested in human behaviour and why people do what they do. That's kind of what got me started. I joined Murdoch to study Psychology when I was 24. I went to Murdoch specifically because I had heard a lot of good things about the Psychology program there.

### **You did your Masters at Murdoch as well?**

Yes. I did my under-grad and then I went straight into my Masters. It was an awesome experience. The Masters was so diverse in terms of student's backgrounds and ages. One of my good friends on the course had young children when she came to complete the Masters. She was just such an asset to me in terms of having a friend in this line of work who has also had a lot of life experience. As a mother now, I understand how stretched she must have been to complete a Masters at fulltime capacity and raise two young children. I'm in awe of her.

### **How did you transition into your focus area of Psychology?**

I think it is something that develops over time as you practice, not just in terms of the niche that you work in like me, but also how you do therapy. Often it is just through the experience of working with people and seeing what works in real life.

It also depends on the type of work you want to do. So, for example, if you want to do trauma-focused work, then you start to seek out further training in that space. You slowly begin to branch out from the core stuff you learned through the Masters.

When you start working, you soon realise how much there is to know, as far as what people are like, and why problems develop. But also in terms of therapy modalities. It is just not possible to teach you everything, or get really good at everything in those two years. But what they do really well is teach you the modalities that have the strongest evidence base behind them.

I initially went into drug and alcohol work. I really loved that work. Then I did some time at Royal Perth Hospital, in the psychiatric ward there, which I adored in terms of the team and the amount of support that we were able to receive from each other. Working in a multi-disciplinary team was brilliant. I didn't love the specific work that I was doing though. It just wasn't for me. I then moved into private practice and really enjoyed that.

But it wasn't until I had my first son that I found my niche. I was thrown into the chaos of becoming a mother, losing my identity and having to re-learn how to be in relationship with others basically. It dawned upon me how lacking support services are in this space. And that's across the entire perinatal

space. I realised the lack of understanding about the importance of things such as preparing your relationship for a baby. There is a major focus on preparing for labour, pregnancy and on birthing, but not on the rest of your life as a parent.

### **So you had no expectation you would end up doing this kind of work?**

No. After having my first child. I wasn't sure why I was going back to work. I think it was mainly just to have time away for myself. I didn't really know then, but it was a kind of identity crisis. I wasn't sure if I wanted to do Psychology anymore. I didn't know if the work inspired me or interested me anymore. I now know that feeling like this is common because we change once we become parents. That first year of motherhood felt like extreme growing pains. It was like the awkwardness of that teenage stage where you are trying to figure out who you are, but times it by a hundred. I found it really difficult. I didn't have a lot of support. My family doesn't live here. Plus, I was the first in my friendship group to have a baby, so I found that quite challenging. The culmination of all of that also meant that my relationship started to break down. It was hard.

I started to research and look for information about how I was feeling and what I was experiencing, and I found it hard to find much relatable information. Then I found The Gottman Institute. John Gottman and his wife Julie, who run their Institute, have been doing relationship research and therapy and training for around 30 years. They had a programme called 'Bringing Baby Home' and it was focused on couples. It wasn't about preparing you for having a baby. It was about preparing your relationship to be able to withstand having a baby.

I waited for about two years for the training to become available in Australia and when that finally happened, I jumped at the chance and started running the workshops. I had been looking at the stats about how many couples who have had a child don't make it through the first year, second year etc. It's huge. I remember thinking 'Why hasn't anyone told me about this?' I felt like I 'd stumbled across a secret.

### **No-one really discusses it.**

Exactly. I think the reasons are two-fold. On one hand I completely understand not wanting to scare people who are going into it. I also think people might have their own shame about struggling and therefore desire to keep their personal experience private. I totally get that. However, I feel if programmes like this were more widely available, the percentage of couples who don't make it would be much lower. Because people would be prepared. We have this ongoing fantasy about what having a baby brings to relationships, and while having children is truly a joy, it isn't always positive for a couple's relationship.



**"We have this ongoing fantasy about what having a baby brings to relationships, and while having children is truly a joy, it isn't always positive for a couple's relationship."**

### **It's going to cement us!**

Look there might be some couples for whom this is true, but for my relationship it could not be further from the truth! What is important, is as a couple, to discuss the skills and the toolset needed to be able to manage the challenges that parenthood bring. To set realistic expectations about what's going to happen and avoid shock. Often, I think problems can arise because couples feel they already have it all worked out. And maybe they do, but when a baby is born there are a great many new pressures, challenges, and lack of time that they may not have faced before, so you can feel a bit like a deer in headlights.

It's ok that couples don't know what to do. It's fine, to take one example, if they don't know that women often feel touched out, and don't want to have sex, but that men may still have this desire to be physically and intimately close. That many men feel left out, or excluded, as women become gatekeepers to the caregiving. It's typical that it happens, but let's talk about it and find a way to make it better. Discuss that it might happen and teach people how to manage these problems. How to get around them, discuss how to find other ways to maintain connection and intimacy.

We need to look at how to make plans for your family now and in the future. I mean in terms of "What do you see your family looking like in the future?" Or What kind of mother do you want to be? What kind of father do you want to be? What vision do you have for your family? How are you both going to manage sleep deprivation?

It is generally just not talked about. These are the kinds of conversations that happen in these workshops and they make attendees realise how much more there is to think about.

**"We talk about this myth of a 'good mother' - the superwoman who is strong, can just battle through anything, who gives everything to everyone else and never thinks about herself. It is a massive problem and a cultural thing in terms of the society that we live in."**



***Do you think that many problems arise because of the dominant belief in society about 'the mother'? As in it's almost a sacred concept and that mothers will instinctively be nurturing, self-sacrificing, and always take care?***

Yes. We talk about this myth of a 'good mother' - the superwoman who is strong, can just battle through anything, who gives everything to everyone else and never thinks about herself. It is a massive problem and a cultural thing in terms of the society that we live in.

For example, if you look at more collective societies, there is the mother, but there are lots of additional people who do the 'mothering'. Aunts, Grandmas, elder children and other community members. There are others to share the load. The individualistic nature of our society means that many women feel responsible for doing everything for their child, even when they are in relationships. The patriarchy has a lot to answer for here too. When you consider the socially prescribed "good mother" i.e. she loves motherhood, naturally knows how to breastfeed and care for others, she's married or in a stable relationship, always puts the needs of others before her own, is fulfilled by motherhood, can manage an entire household without help, has well behaved children who follow her instruction, is happy running the household, or returns to work and can still graciously balance everyone's needs and demands, and the list goes on... it's essentially for the purpose of servitude to others, it's not for the benefit or fulfilment necessarily of the mother.

The ideal of the "good mother" also keeps women in a state of constant comparison with one another. When mothers internalise the unrealistic standards of the socially prescribed "good mother. I view this in part as internalised misogyny and none of us are immune to this. It's the culture we've all been socialised into, but it is possible to develop awareness and live more intentionally.

These standards build resentment, anger, disappointment, guilt, and shame in mothers which negatively impacts how they parent and how they relate to their partners. Men lose out in the patriarchy too because they are penalised for wanting to be present fathers through loss of income or even their jobs. They lose the ability to be there in those early moments when bonds are formed and to share in the learning of caregiving with their partners, which would deepen the strength of the couple's relationship too.

I love talking to clients about how mothering can be whatever you want it to be. So long as basic needs are being met and there is no abuse, there is no right or wrong way to mother. So we can set realistic and flexible standard and rules based on your values. So I often ask mothers to reflect on questions like, when your kids are older how do you want them to remember you? What qualities do you consider important to help develop in your children? What parts of your own childhood do you want to avoid repeating, or do you want to replicate in your mothering experience, and why? If I asked your partner to talk about your relationship together, what would you want them to say? These kinds of questions help us identify our values and then we can start to direct our daily behaviour to align with them.

So, lots of the conversations I have with women here are about that. About the expectations they have set. Conversations about exploring them, getting curious about them, talking about whether or not they are meeting them, whether or not they are realistic or useful expectations, who are they serving, and so on.

I think it's also that we live in a society which is all about productivity and this idea of being successful, even as a mother. Often, I think that when we do mothering in a way that works for us, it often is slow. It doesn't have an outcome that you can see at the end of the day that says 'Yes, tick, I have been a good mother.' Being a parent is a long haul. You are setting things up now, for who they are going to be in the future. Part of my role is trying to get women to see it more in that way, so that they can slow down and lean into the experience more, which can often mean that they have a better time with motherhood.

One of the things that I talk about on my website and that I use a lot, is this idea about moving from surviving to thriving. Expectations have caused so many women to be in this state of survival, just trying to get by on limited sleep, limited resources, limited support, and trying to do everything that a community would have done in the past. I want to work with women to move their mindset out of that space and to get them to go 'Well, what's really important for me and my family?' If I took away everything else, then what are the bare minimum, basic things to make my family work, and make me a parent that I am happy being? So that I can look back in the future and say, 'I did a good enough job.' We look at how to restructure their life so that it fits more like that, rather than constantly trying to keep up with the Joneses, please everyone or do everything.

***It's entrenched isn't it? That comparison element. We have the Mums groups, potentially a 'village support network', but even within that, we tend to see where you are in the group and hold a fear of judgement. "Well mine isn't talking yet." "You give your baby additives?!" and so on...***

One thing that the Gottmans say a lot is 'we are all in the same soup'. In other words, everyone is going through the same thing. One of the other things that I often say to women is find good people. Just because you are in a mothers' group doesn't mean you are locked in. If they are not serving you, if they are not helpful for you throughout your journey in motherhood, then they aren't your people. So perhaps it is time to place boundaries around how much time you spend with them and how you manage the information they give you. Getting clear on your values makes this much easier too.

I think it's so important as mothers that when we figure out how it is that we want to parent and come up with a good value system around that. Protect that space and protect that energy, so that it isn't influenced by outside, because everyone's mothering journey is going to be different, it's not a one size fits all. It is just about what's good for you and your family.

I do a lot of family origin work with the women that I see, and we examine the internal dialogue that happens in terms of the criticism they give themselves and the shame that they feel about the way that they are parenting, or not. I work a lot with that and feel that has really good results in terms of figuring out where the internal judgement comes from, where in their history it developed, and then how we can re-programme that. We may search for ways that we can re-parent their inner child, that could be leading them to these ways of thinking.

It all feeds into expectation i.e. What are the expectations that you have set for yourself or have been set for you in your history? How your parents parented, and whether you do, or don't want to parent like them, or perhaps the sort of things that they said to you, which have led you to have certain beliefs about yourself. Some of the work involves figuring all of that out and then moving to "Well, what life do you want to have?" Then looking at how the internal voice might start to be more encouraging and supportive of that goal.

***But when you're evaluating the parenting that was done to you, you don't really remember much from the first few years do you?***

But you know what you do remember, is how you felt being parented. I think most people, if you close your eyes you can remember being a child and your core feeling of how you felt as a child. Some people might say 'I felt really lonely' or 'I felt really rejected like I was never enough' or some people might say 'I felt really and truly loved and I felt like I could go to my parents for anything' or whatever.

I think that the feeling that you have, absolutely stays with you for life. It influences you. The kind of messaging that you received from your parents stays with you and it informs the inner dialogue that we have about ourselves. If we meet expectations that we, or someone else sets, then what's our interpretation of that? What if we don't? A lot of that is influenced by when we did or didn't meet expectations in the past and the messaging received back then.

Lifetime experiences also influence our internal dialogue, but it's important to remember that the wounds of our childhood are often repeated until they are healed. So someone may end up experiencing similar "traumas" throughout their adult life which serve to confirm the inner dialogue that has been formed during childhood. We can also however have healing experiences in adulthood. For example, if we are with a partner who is really nurturing and meets our core emotional needs, while lovingly maintaining their boundaries, this is likely to be a healing experience for our wounded inner child.

Many people are unaware of the connection between their past and present. A lot of the work that I do with people is talking about trauma. I don't necessarily mean like a PTSD trauma, or an abuse trauma, I just mean any kind of adverse experience and in the case of our childhoods, there can be consistent and prolonged adverse experiences like feeling invalidated by our parents. There is so much research showing that these experiences are stored or remembered in the body, within our nervous system. It is relevant to parenting because the way we automatically respond to challenges, or difficult behaviour from our children, can be understood in part as our nervous system responding to threat. So if as children our parents were incapable of calmly holding space for our big emotions, our nervous system may respond with an anxious or anger response when our own children experience big emotions. It's an intersection between our thoughts that make meaning of what's happening, and our bodies essentially not feeling "safe" because similar experiences weren't experienced as safe before.

***Would it be more beneficial to see clients before they give birth?***

In terms of 1 on 1 therapy, I don't think there is a clear answer for that because for some women they may need to be "in it" to know what they need to work on. Unless of course they have pre-existing mental health difficulties. It's really had to get women to value psychological preparation for post-partum when it's their first time because they haven't yet got the lived experience so they may not see the value. In terms of preparation, I tend to get mothers who already have a child and are expecting again, come during pregnancy or very shortly after the birth as they already know the challenges they are likely to face and want support in place. It's encouraging however, that I have had a small number of first-time pregnant mothers asking me questions like "how do I know I'm ready to be a mother" or exploring things that will change for them. I think that's brilliant because it is not discussed enough. There is massive change that happens when you become a mother. Of course the job is rewarding, and we love our children and all the rest of it, but it's not to be taken lightly. Your life is going to change a lot from what you knew before. When you know what's ahead, you can go into it empowered. It's like with everything. When you have knowledge, you can go into it knowing what to expect, which

means that you're not fighting the reality all the time. It can take a layer of pressure off your mental health because you can just ease into whatever it is. The benefit for engaging in therapy after birth is of course that clients are driven to do the work. The downside is that they are typically already really struggling.

In terms of couples, I find that they are not typically focused on the importance of preparing their relationship for the arrival of a child, they are usually more focus on the pregnancy and birth. I would love to see more emphasis placed on the couple relationship in education services across the board, for couples who are expecting. A relationship requires a lot of energy to keep it in good health, particularly after having children. When you don't have kids, people can utilise coping strategies for dealing with things that don't get resolved in relationships. For example, if you're annoying each other, you can go out and see your friends, you can disappear to the gym, or take a holiday, or go visit family. You may not have access to those strategies once a baby comes along. Hence it can become a more pressurised state. Lots of parenting programmes are more focused on the parent/child relationship which of course is very important, but what we also know, is that when the relationship is well, then the parent/child relationship does better too.



**"There is massive change that happens when you become a mother. Of course the job is rewarding, and we love our children and all the rest of it, but it's not to be taken lightly. Your life is going to change a lot from what you knew before."**

### **Do you focus on child behaviour too?**

Absolutely. A lot of what I do is 'normalising' normal infant and child behaviour, and helping parents understand where their expectations have come from and assessing whether they are unrealistic or useful. So things like reframing challenging behaviour from an attachment/connection perspective; i.e. "what need is the child wanting met here", infant and child sleep education, upholding loving boundaries, the importance of time in connection, the concept of rupture and repair etc.

I was in a shop the other day and my daughter who is 2 years old just had this complete meltdown. I just sat down on the floor with her and she was screaming and crying and I just sat with her quietly, didn't say much, but I stayed with her. I believe the key is to 'stay' with them, stay present and don't break the connection. Make it clear you are there with them and able to handle their distress. When she was past that moment, which took a while, she looked at me and said, "I'm okay now mum" and we got up and finished our shopping. Now, I want to make clear that I am not always able to respond in this way, but I have made it my intention. There are times where I haven't been able to meet the needs of my children and even acted in ways that are not in alignment with my parenting values. In those times what I do and what I teach my clients is, self-compassion and repair, repair, repair. Every rupture can be repaired and it's never too late. It's also great role modelling for our children.

When I think about my own childhood, I know my own dad wouldn't have had the capacity to handle that approach. He would have perceived that behaviour as manipulation. The usual response was "Stop misbehaving!" along with some kind of threat. I don't have animosity toward him about that, I understand how his own childhood impacted the way he parented and in his inability to tolerate the distress he would have experienced in that kind of situation. So, like many parents, he would have tried to stop my emotional expression in order to manage his own.

### **Because nobody wants to be the centre of attention in a public space?**

Absolutely. Sitting in discomfort is difficult. In my instance in the shop, I have previously established how I want to parent in this situation. If they need me emotionally, I want to meet that need and I don't care where it is because I want to be consistent for them and for myself. I've decided that I'm not going to be worried that someone is hearing a screaming child because I know it is probably not going to last that long anyway.

### **But shame can be so powerful.**

Yes. I deal so much with shame in my work. And the thing about shame is that the more you hide it and the more you avoid it, the stronger and the deeper shame

runs. If you can actually be present in your shame, which will be uncomfortable, it diminishes its power.

Even parents who aspire to live in a way where they allow full expression for their children and are very attuned to their kids can be in a situation publicly where they don't act in alignment with that, because the potential to feel shame about their child's behaviour is so powerful. Then it is a double whammy, because they leave, and they then feel shameful for fleeing and not acting in alignment with their beliefs. Just sit there with your first shame!

It is deeply uncomfortable though, but a lot of the work that I do as a Psychologist is asking people to sit in their discomfort. I have had clients who say that they want to do certain work but when it comes to doing it and feeling it, they find all sorts of ways to avoid it in the session. The desire to avoid discomfort is extremely powerful.

### **That is interesting your point about people wanting to do the work, but not really when it comes down to it. It's like the feeling just before you burst into tears, where there is a momentary universal resistance in us all to collapsing emotionally.**

Yes. I think that the resistance is to do with our socialisation. It's because we have been taught to believe that negative emotions aren't good, or that they cause discomfort in ourselves and others, so avoid avoid avoid. When you first start to cry, with some awareness, you probably noticed how other people responded to you and you have probably been taught at some point that it's not ok.


I mean in terms of 'we don't want to make you feel bad.' I think that is a lot of it. And I think that it's kind of the same thing, it's shame. It is shame about the impact that you're having for other people and potentially the shame for some people of visibly breaking open publicly. 'I'm falling apart.' 'People are going to see that I'm not in control.'

### **People are going to know I'm not perfect.**

Yes. As a society we have such a focus on productivity, being successful, being in control all the time. Then people eventually become fearful of being vulnerable because they've worked so hard to be "in control" for so long. Then when they are in a situation where they do feel vulnerable, it can be so de-stabilising for them. This is what happens to many women when they become mothers. They are not "in control" the way they have gotten accustomed and that leads to feeling vulnerable and that can be a scary thing if you're not used to that.

### **Well it's probably helping keep you fully booked!**

Yes, well the pandemic has shown us how destabilising vulnerability is for us all. My experiences mirror that of my colleagues, in that it has been hard to keep up with the current demand. My job is to help people feel safe



**"My job is to help people feel safe enough to sit with all their emotional experiences."**

enough to sit with all their emotional experiences. I believe that everyone has got the ability in themselves to feel more aligned, to figure out who they want to be, what their values are, and to live their lives accordingly. I want to help people navigate the mothering journey and navigate their personal history often too. Also, to equip them with tools and skills, so they get to the point where they can do that for themselves.

### **Have you got some wise counsel for expectant or new mums?**

This parenting journey is yours to enjoy. It is not simply an exercise of self-sacrifice for someone else's benefit. Give yourself permission to enjoy the process and to disappoint others. Get clear on your values and let that guide how you want to mother. You don't need to parent like anybody else. If I had to give just one piece of advice for that first year it would be that you make the rules. How do you want to parent that works for you? So that you're not burnt out, so that you aren't feeling resentful, so that you aren't easily triggered and angered by lots of stuff. One where you're accepting of all your own emotions. To know it's ok to be angry. It's ok to snap occasionally. It's ok to have arguments with your partner. Rupture happens in every area of life and

in every single relationship. But if we don't repair then that's when the damage is done. If you repair, you can get back into connection with those you have hurt.

Also, to have in mind the concept of the 'good enough mother.' Tomorrow is another day. If the day went to hell, have some compassion with yourself. Give yourself what you need, what that inner child needs, which may just be - 'I'm feeling crap because of this and this and this.' Or the inner child probably needs to hear that it's ok, that you've had a really hard time. There was just lots going on today. Know you snapped because you had all these things piling up. All you need to do is let your kids/partner etc. know that you are sorry. Then start afresh. Know that one action you perceive as being not a good representation of who you are as a mother, is not your entire mothering journey.

Finally, plan your support for your postpartum period. I mean the logistical things like meal prepping, someone to help at home, how will you get the sleep you need if you're feeding throughout the night, what regular time will you set to connect with your partner, who will do the food shopping, and how you will get time for you.

# GIVING

# Generously



Genevieve sharing biscuits with some local children in Karunga

How many of us would dare to admit giving pause for the plight of impoverished children in Africa when World Vision and Oxfam advertisements appear on the telly, only to forget about them with the next ad or program – or worse, switch channels when they come on?

Not Genevieve Onuchukwu (nee Radnan).

Genna, as she is known, was 11 when she first noticed those advertisements calling for donations to help sponsor the underprivileged in poverty-stricken nations. The injustice of the images she saw on TV as a young girl lit a fire in her belly; the contrast to her own privileged life so stark it set ablaze a passion to the point of eventually creating her own charity.

“People would rather turn a blind eye to it; it’s not their country and it’s too far away. Whereas things bother me, and if something is unjust I need to act on it,” said Genna, the founder of Australian charity Gennarosity Abroad.

“You don’t choose the family you’re born into – it’s purely luck. Why was I so lucky? Why was I born into an affluent family where I’ve been private schooled my entire life? I’ve now got two uni degrees. I’ve never struggled. I’ve been very sheltered.

“The pros of that mean that I haven’t had hardship, but the negative side of it is that I was ignorant to what the reality of life was like for the majority of the world.

“I hate the idea of having things go wrong and standing back and being okay with that. Or things are too big an issue to even bother trying. Because if you have that attitude nothing’s ever going to change.”

Genna’s attitude saw her set off on a volunteer placement in Kenya, in 2009, after finishing high school. In 2010, aged 19, she returned to the African nation – this time for six months, during which she began fundraising to rebuild the Karunga Emanuel Kindergarten, about 140 kilometres north of Nairobi.

“That was my ‘aha’ moment,” she said.

“There was this little kindergarten, which was made out of cardboard and wood. It was built as a storage room, and then it became a principal’s office, and then eventually they just put the kindergarten in there.”

An existing primary school on the same land was considered a separate entity and therefore it held no responsibility for the kindergarten. There was neither the funding nor the inclination to support the pre-school – until Genna arrived.

“I asked how much it cost to build a new room. I sent emails back home to all my family, friends and my high school network and asked if people would be so kind to help me raise money. And they did,” said Genna.

“I only needed \$2,500 to begin with, but people kept sending me money. I ended up fundraising \$15,000. The kindergarten was so easy to build that I thought, why don’t I keep doing this?”

Such was the organic genesis of Gennarosity Abroad.

"My intention originally wasn't to start my own charity," said Genna. "I actually contacted some of the larger organisations after my first trip, asking if I could volunteer and get involved, and I was turned away because they said I was too young and inexperienced. And I was, like, screw you guys, I'll do it myself – and I did."

In the two years it took to obtain Deductible Gift Receipts (DGR) status (for taxable donations of more than two dollars) before Gennarosity Abroad became a registered charity in 2013, Genna remained hands-on in Kenya. She encouraged community participation and built a trusted network of local support to develop projects and run all the activities.

2011 was a particularly busy year: the kindergarten officially opened, with new facilities and supplies for the children; community consultation took place for a women's training centre; and then fundraising commenced for it.

Named after Genna's grandmother, a seamstress, Grandma Jenny's Training Centre provides education and training to women to empower them through financial independence.

Basic and diverse life skills such as sewing, maths, English and Swahili language literacy, business studies and health education are provided to women with limited or no education. The first intake of 40 participants in 2013 included a woman who was Genna's inspiration for opening the centre.

"Zipporah is a single mother of eight children whose husband died in 2011," said Genna. "I first met her in 2010 when her husband was alive and I was supporting them. They had no mattresses to sleep on. When I first met the family they only had a two-room hut, with all the kids sleeping on the same 'bed'. I [personally] bought them mattresses and food and school supplies, but the husband sold it all for money because he was an alcoholic."

With the loss of the family's sole breadwinner, Zipporah's older children were removed from school to work on farms to support the family because she had no formal education or employment prospects. The training centre has now equipped her in a field that allows her to support her family and keep her children in school.

"She was my inspiration to try to help as many women who haven't had previous education; to teach them life skills and basic things like maths, to be able to count money, save money, spend money – things we take for granted because education is compulsory – to break the poverty cycle and be able to send their kids to school," said Genna.

Inspiration is the well from which Genna draws, impelling her to help others.

She credits her high school tutor and Legal Studies teacher, David Whitcombe, who shared with Genna his own positive experiences volunteering in Namibia, with encouraging her to dip her toe into the ochre sands of Africa.

"I tend to have people who inspire me, and when I click with someone all these amazing things unfold," said Genna.

"It's important having connections and forming relationships with people because when you're invested in another person, they really want to help you and they make it a safe space for you to reach out to ask questions and get guidance, and I thrive on that. I learn better from having an idea and bouncing it back and forth rather than doing it by myself.

"I certainly would not have been able to establish and accomplish what I have without a village of support behind me."

The first settlers in Genna's village were her family.

"I am one of four sisters. We were raised to be fiercely independent," said Genna, who was born and brought up in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

"My parents separated when we girls were all pre-teens and my mum primarily looked after us. Her mum, my grandma, was also a single mother raising her twins – she raised us as well. They have been huge role models.

"We've had a long line of strong women and no one had a man around to do things, so we had to learn to do things ourselves. And there's nothing wrong with that."

And then there's inspirational Mary, a school teacher in Kenya.

"Mary is a single mother of five children. The previous principal of the primary school was trying to get her fired. He gave her a really hard time," said Genna.

"Mary's one of the most incredible women I have met in my life. By redoing the kindergarten classroom it meant more children were coming to her, which meant more parents were paying for their children to get an education. It wasn't a lot of money, but it meant that Mary was able to send her own children to school.

"And she's still there. This is how amazing she is: I said to her, 'You should never turn children away just because they can't afford school fees. Let's not deprive other children of getting a basic education; just let them sit in the classroom'. So she kept on doing that for years without telling me, and eventually she did tell me, as it was impacting her financially. She wasn't getting paid because the charity supports the kindergarten with the books and supplies they need at the beginning of the year and Mary was paying for them.

"A lot of these people who have nothing will go above and beyond to help other people. Yet in our society, people who have the most don't want to share it because they want to keep it that way. It's so backward."

At Murdoch University, Genna reached out to Allan Johnstone, Academic Chair for Sustainability, who teaches international aid and development and sustainable development. Genna said she chose Murdoch for her degree in this field primarily because she could study online while working full-time as a nurse. But, she added, Allan's "really personable approach" drew her to becoming a Murdoch student. She graduated in the discipline in 2019.



(L-R) Nicholas Cracknell, Teacher Nancy, Genevieve and Teacher Simon - Staff at Grandma Jenny's

**I tend to have people who inspire me, and when I click with someone all these amazing things unfold.**

"I loved the fact that, similar to charity volunteering, I wasn't another number; Murdoch genuinely care about actually supporting you through your journey," she said.

"For the degree itself, even though I have so much experience with what I'm doing, it's only because I've had good intention and that is not okay. You need to be qualified.

"We can't rock up and go into a classroom in Kenya as a white individual and say, 'Okay, I'm going to stand in front of you without any qualification and be your teacher'.

It's a white complex issue we have because we've been raised that way, and I've been guilty of it.

"Similarly, I can't go into a community that's not my own and say, 'Oh you look sick, I'm going to perform an operation; however, I have no skills'. So why would we be doing the same when it comes to humanitarian work?"

"That's the main reason I wanted to study for a BA in International Aid and Development and Sustainable Development, because having good intentions can cause a lot of harm.

Genevieve with a group photo of the 2015 graduates of Grandma Jenny's Training Centre







I wanted to learn. I've never loved anything my entire life as much as I loved doing that degree.

Genevieve and former graduate, Gladys

"I wanted to make sure that if the charity is to go in the direction that I want to move towards, then I need to have more than good intentions. I wanted to learn. I've never loved anything my entire life as much as I loved doing that degree."

Through the course of her studies, Genna applied a research project to real-world issues in Kenya that she was looking to address through her charity. The contacts she made led to her involvement with the Rhonda Maternity Clinic, with which Gennarosity Abroad has partnered to help reduce rates of mother and infant mortality.

For this project, Genna was, once again, personally inspired. In 2015, the niece of Rose, one of her best friends and former employees in Kenya, lost a two-and-a-half-month-old baby to meningitis and pneumonia – both treatable medical conditions – because they couldn't afford the astronomical medical bills.

Said Genna: "If you call an ambulance in Kenya, you have to send money for them to fill up their car with petrol. They had no money. They took the baby to the hospital and there was no oxygen available, so they had to take the baby to another hospital and the baby died in transit."

From educating children, to training women and providing maternity care for mothers and their infants, the charity's scope has broadened since its inception.

Today, Grandma Jenny's Training Centre has expanded to also empower men in the Karunga community. The centre also offers mentorship programs for students to develop work experience and improve employability post-graduation. And collaborations with New Hope Children's Centre have seen an intake program commence for abandoned babies.

Generosity at the not-for-profit knows no bounds. Genna is hopeful for the charity's continued growth in fundraising and projects in-country, but she's simultaneously keen to keep her trustworthy team, including the size of her board, small and focused.

"I've had a few people volunteer through different stages based on their individual availability, and overall that's been great, but we have had a few experiences of people having done wrong by us, so we have to keep our guard up and make sure that even though people have good intentions they're not causing more problems," said Genna.

It's testament to her dedication and likeableness that Genna's kept all (except one) of the same staff abroad since Gennarosity Abroad began.

While all Australian staff, including Genna, devote their time in an unpaid capacity, the charity employs staff in Kenya to run the various programs and centres. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has continued to pay a portion of their salaries, to keep food on the family table, since Kenya has closed all schools until the end of 2020.

For one who has said she struggled in school – "I was going to drop out in Year 10" and "I honestly thought I wasn't smart enough to go to university" – Genna obtained her first degree in nursing, from Australian Catholic University, in 2013.

"When I was younger I never wanted to do nursing. My mum kept saying I should do it, but at the time I ended up deferring for a year because I honestly thought I was stupid," said Genna.

"But then, when I was first in Kenya, I called my mum, bawling my eyes out, and said, 'I'm going to university'. Because it struck me that I was taking education for granted, and so many people around the world would die for an education."

Gennarosity Abroad continues to flourish, and the busy 29-year-old charity founder, full-time nurse, wife and first-time mother to a newborn also has plans to grow the size of her family.

Just because they're different doesn't mean they're lesser than you. They have emotions and feelings just like we do. I've never understood the disconnect between us and others.

With 11 trips to Kenya in 10 years under her belt and a slew of awards since 2009 for her community service – including the 2019 Humanitarian Award from Celebration of African Australians Inc. – Genna pays forward her privilege and the inspiration of her family and mentors with a playground sense of justice for the underprivileged in Africa.

"Just because they're different doesn't mean they're lesser than you. They have emotions

and feelings just like we do. I've never understood the disconnect between us and others," she said.

"You know the saying misery loves company? I think that applies the opposite way as well.

"When you are surrounded by people who think like you and care about the same things that you do, you tend to act and get motivated a lot more and feed off each other.

"I think that's where greatness happens."

Emanuel School students visiting Karunga's Emanuel Kindergarten in 2018





**"It is not about ego. It's that you got to work with an amazing group of dedicated individuals to create something that is going to last and that hopefully will be the baseline for global climate action into the future."**

Moderating a Gender and Climate Change Panel – Climate Change Negotiations, Bonn, 2018

# Graduate helps negotiate landmark Climate Change Agreement

**M**urdoch Graduate, Lisa Gittos, still pinches herself most days when she enters the United Nations building in Geneva.

"Honestly, I've been here two and a half years now and every time I walk past the UN, flags flying, I can't believe how lucky I am" she said when Murrur caught up with her via Zoom recently.

Lisa works for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as a First Secretary for the Australian Permanent Mission to the United Nations. It's a long way from Perth, but Lisa navigated her career path to the epicentre of international affairs in less than a decade.

At Murdoch University, she completed a Bachelor of Mass Communication with units in Indonesian language and culture and international politics. The Communication Studies equipped her with an exceptional ability to craft and disseminate a

message; and the Asian and Political studies stoked her interest in international affairs. She then enhanced her skills with a Master of International Relations from Macquarie University, studied part-time.

"So much of the art of diplomacy is being able to craft and deliver a message and understand your audience, which I learned from the Mass Communication's side of my degree. I was fortunate enough to channel this into something I'm really passionate about – foreign policy and foreign affairs."

Arriving in Geneva in 2018, Lisa was a senior negotiator on the team representing Australia during its membership of the Human Rights Council (2018-2020) where she worked on issues such as climate change and security.

This year Lisa assumed a new position as Australia's first dedicated cyber and digital affairs diplomat in

Geneva, working to advance Australia's interests in the areas of cyber security, and new and emerging critical technology. As part of this role, Lisa also examines the relationship between new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and human rights.

However, she doesn't hesitate when asked to nominate her career highlight.

"Honestly, I still would say the day we managed to achieve the Paris Agreement on Climate Change was one of the best days of my life."

Prior to Geneva, Lisa worked at DFAT headquarters in Canberra on climate change.

On 12 December, 2015, Lisa was a negotiator on the Australian delegation which joined 195 other nations in a landmark agreement to limit global warming to below two degrees Celsius.

"The eyes of the world were on Paris and the pressure was on... It's something that stays with you, being a part of the process and being able to point to sections of the Agreement and know you were in the room and you negotiated certain elements..."

It is not about ego. It's that you got to work with an amazing group of dedicated individuals to create something that is going to last and that hopefully will be the baseline for global climate action into the future."

It's easy to see why Lisa has prospered in the diplomatic environment. She has a warm, charming personality, with a broad knowledge of international affairs and a genuine interest in others. She is engaging company and breaks into a cheeky grin as she describes the challenges of being cooped up with a hyperactive cat and having to switch to negotiating from her living room during the pandemic.

This hasn't fazed Lisa who "really enjoys multilateralism" – the process which, at the United Nations, can at times involve more than 190 nations coming to agreement on rules and policies.

"I love the idea of 190 plus countries coming together to agree on something and to navigate all the different interests of the nations involved. It's also about the personalities. You have to be persuasive, make compelling arguments and build coalitions to reach an outcome."

To be a successful negotiator you need to be an excellent networker and communicator. In addition to these skills, a diplomat's tool kit also requires expert problem-solving, analytical and inter-personal skills.

"Fortunately, I really enjoy the process of getting to know people and a good network is essential to being able to do your job well in Geneva."



COP21 Paris, 2015

**"I really enjoy the process of getting to know people and a good network is essential to being able to do your job well in Geneva."**



Representing Australia at the Human Rights Council – Geneva, Switzerland, 2020

In her time working on climate change, Lisa has been lucky enough to participate in two initiatives to boost the inclusivity of climate action and the international negotiations.

She developed and ran a program designed to increase the meaningful participation of women in climate change discussions by providing training and networking opportunities for female negotiators in the Asia Pacific. The Program aimed to ensure women's voices were at the table influencing outcomes that impact us all.

She also worked as a negotiator on the establishment of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform – a platform to enhance the engagement of indigenous peoples in the response to climate change and UN climate discussions.

Lisa's first foray into foreign relations came after graduation, working as a Consular Officer at the British Consulate in Perth. This gave her a good insight into the essential role of providing consular support overseas. Each day was full of challenging situations in the process of helping British citizens living and travelling overseas which she credits with honing her problem solving skills. People may end up in prison or hospital, have a death in the family or need an urgent passport.

"Most people are not coming into a consulate because their day is going well. They are coming in because something's gone wrong."

This role took her to a number British embassies and consulates in the Asia Pacific including providing emergency consular support to British Nationals in the wake of the Christchurch Earthquake.

The whole experience was an excellent grounding for a career in diplomacy, although it wasn't what she had planned.

"Every career plan I've ever made didn't work out the way I'd imagined. What it came down to was consistently having an open mind when opportunities were presented to me."

There are many paths to launch a career in international relations – through work at an NGO, private organisation or government. She urges people to "follow your passion. Ultimately, there are two factors that continue to influence my decisions – working with good people and on something I care about. It's a real privilege to do this in Geneva – with these things in mind, you can't really go wrong."



Representing Australia at the UN Climate Conference (COP24), Katowice Poland, 2018

**"Every career plan I've ever made didn't work out the way I'd imagined. What it came down to was consistently having an open mind when opportunities were presented to me."**

# BUILDING BLOCKS

Aerial view of South Street Campus, taken in December 1975. Photograph courtesy of Murdoch University Special Collections.



# CIRCA 1975



**"All these women's stories, and others highlighted in this edition, demonstrate the depth and range of the contributions made by Murdoch alumni."**

## Vice Chancellor's Column

**B**y the time some of you will be reading this magazine, my time as Vice Chancellor will have come to an end. I will leave Murdoch University after five years of service to take up the position of President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

The pandemic has made it very difficult to maintain a close connection to loved ones on the other side of the world. I am no longer 'just one flight away' from my family, so I must return to Europe.

It has been an honour and privilege to have served this fine university and to have been a small part of its nearly 50 years of history.

Murdoch University has been my home here in Australia and engagement with our committed and diverse alumni community has been one of the highlights of my time as Vice Chancellor.

I am proud of the contribution our alumni make across the nation and around the world.

This edition of *Murmur* highlights some of the diverse and inspiring ways Murdoch University's female alumni are creating positive change around the globe.

Genna Onuchukwu could not stand by and witness the suffering of people living in

poverty so she created her own charity with a particular focus on the education and training of girls and women in Africa.

Yara Henry is a psychology graduate who – following her own experience of childbirth – created a service to support vulnerable new mothers.

Heidi Cockram, an MBA graduate with high-level IT skills, pursued her passion for aid work and now holds a senior role in Medair, which provides support to communities in crisis.

Lisa Gittos is a young Murdoch alumna engaged in diplomatic work at the United Nations in Geneva.

And marine scientist Jenna Hounslow is taking her research into flatback turtles to the world, with more than 7 million people tuning into her inspiring and educational marine videos.

All these women's stories, and others highlighted in this edition, demonstrate the depth and range of the contributions made by Murdoch alumni.

They reflect our University's aspiration for all graduates to use their knowledge, skills and interests to see beyond themselves and give back to society.

As I prepare to depart, I recognise that this is a critical time for higher education in this country. A number of complex factors, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, are increasing pressure on Australia's universities and it feels like there is an ever-growing line of critics, cynics and doubters.

At the same time, governments are seeking to impose more regulation and onerous reporting requirements on universities, on issues as diverse as academic freedom, freedom of speech, foreign interference, industry linkages to research, Job-ready Graduates, and international student support.

There appears to be a growing national sentiment questioning the benefits of university education and a perception problem about value relative to other sectors.

As a valued alumna, you are in a prime position to promote the standing, value and importance of university education within your spheres of influence. You can play a key role in this important national discussion and it is my sincere hope that you will do so.

I thank you for your support, and wish you well as you continue on your life's journey, as a proud graduate of Murdoch University.

**Professor Eeva Leinonen**

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