

green cross calling

They are the new "green" kids on our block and Brisbane is their new frontline in the defence against climate change. **Emma Portelli** reports.

Green Cross Australia may be a two man – or more accurately woman – show at the moment but they are fuelled with optimism and passion and are backed by a platoon of volunteers and an international network that spans more than 30 countries. Green Cross International was founded by former USSR president Mikhail Gorbachev and is supported by the likes of Brad Pitt and Leonardo DiCaprio. Brisbane is home to Australia's only branch, which opened last year in early June following the success of the Earth Dialogues held during Brisbane Festival 2006. "It was a free event that fully booked out in 10 minutes," said Mara Bun, CEO of Green Cross Australia, which highlights how seriously concerned people are about the future of the planet.

Green Cross is the brainchild of Gorbachev who became heavily involved in the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 after being awarded the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize for his part in ending Cold War tensions. "It was during this summit that Gorbachev had the inspiration that all future conflicts of the world would happen over environmental concerns such as oil, water, food and land shortages and in anticipation of that set up a group to bring a new approach to these challenges," she said. By anticipating and resolving future conflicts over natural resources and by building resilience within communities, Green Cross International believes this will

shift values and head society towards a more sustainable and secure future. The international nature of the organisation also allows them to expedite solutions to environmental problems that go beyond national boundaries.

According to Mara, Australia is uniquely placed at the forefront of climate change and rising sea levels. "Around the world Green Cross is working on big international campaigns such as the Right to Water, sustainability and climate change but here in Australia we are on the frontline of the climate impact. We are experiencing the droughts, floods, fires and storms and they are going to get worse," she said.

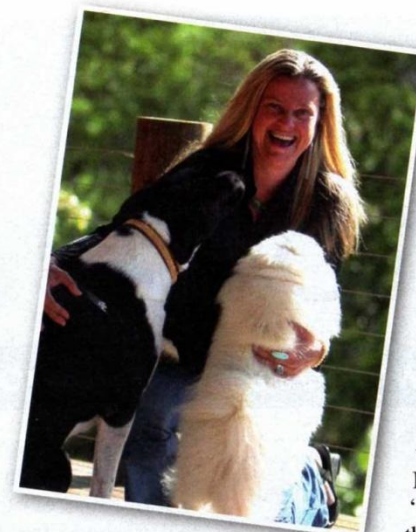
Mara said Australia is also heavily involved in researching rising sea levels and the outlook is not good for our region. "Scientists predict that if the seas rise by one metre over the next 100 years 145 million people will be displaced. This doesn't mean they will leave their countries, it means their land and houses will be under water and it will change life as we know it. The Asia-Pacific, our region, will feel 90 percent of the impact. We know it's a gradual risk and we also know that it is happening faster than anticipated because the CSIRO is measuring it. The bottom line is it's too serious a problem to be pessimistic about. What we need to do is find inspiration to change our values and have a lighter impact on the world but at the same time we need to prepare for extreme weather and prepare for

rising water levels," Mara said.

To do this Green Cross Australia is focusing on two key activities to take place later this year. One of these is the world's first People's Assembly focusing on the issues that Australia may face as the Asia-Pacific region experiences widespread population displacement due to sea-level rise, which will be held during *Riverfest* on 29 and 30 August. Designed to stimulate public debate and give ordinary citizens a chance to directly affect the policies of the Australian Government the assembly will discuss how we should prepare and respond to the environmental crises facing our region.

In the lead up to the assembly 14 randomly-chosen, ordinary Australians, which include four Queenslanders, will be given access to world class academics, government leaders, senior business people and other experts over three weekends to learn about the issues that Australia may face as the Asia-Pacific region experiences widespread displacement due to rising sea levels. "This group of people will lead the assembly and present their findings to the Federal Government," Mara said.

The second project involves our response to extreme weather. "Following the tsunami we found out how generous and giving Australians are. Countless people in many professions said, 'How can we help?' but it was hard to accredit



Mara Bun,
CEO of Green Cross Australia

those people to volunteer and many were unable to lend a hand. You need to assess their skills, perform health checks and organise public liability which makes it hard to respond as quickly as possible," Mara said.

This issue is exactly what their Extreme Weather Heroes project aims to address. "We're hoping to celebrate the contribution of emergency volunteers and raise awareness

that over the next 50 years more will be needed. We want to engage people from all walks of life and get them involved," Mara said.

In June Green Cross Australia will recruit five emergency volunteers under the age of 25 currently active with the Red Cross, St John Ambulance, SES, Rural Bushfire Service and Surf Life Saving Australia from around the country. Each representative will be given a handheld camera, a BlackBerry and a mobile phone to document their organisations' contributions to emergency volunteering. With the help of project partners Virgin Blue, who will develop the Extreme Weather Heroes website and Nova radio which will help recruit the 'heroes', the project aims to connect with Generation Y and show them how to get involved.

"Green Cross is not the Red Cross or the SES, we won't be on the ground in the crisis. What we want is to create engagement of the public, work with the volunteer organisations to develop training programs and create a network of volunteers that are ready to go so when it does happen we can respond quickly. We want to work with businesses to create more flexibility so their employees can volunteer during emergencies," she said.

To get involved go to www.greencrossaustralia.org or call 3003 0644.