

mara BUN

INTERVIEW BY FRANCES FRANGENHEIM

You can't help but smile when chatting with Mara Bun. Her energy is infectious and she uses phrases like "bottled sunshine" and "equal parts total error and complete glee" to describe projects she is working on in her role as founding CEO of Green Cross Australia, based in Brisbane. Green Cross Australia launched in 2007 out of Green Cross International, which started its own special journey in 1993 with the bold mission to apply the Red Cross International medical emergency response model to ecological issues. Mara's role is to convince partners across Australia that it's easier to work together, rather than apart, to respond to environmental change and extreme weather events in proactive, creative and sustainable ways. It appears a daunting task but spend time talking to Mara and suddenly it all sounds achievable and bundles of fun.

Mara Bun shares that there are three major Green Cross Australia projects keeping her awake at night. The one she describes as "bottled sunshine" is the Green Lane Diary, which involves 30,000 primary school children undertaking a 10-week program of self-directed environmental action in their schools, homes and communities.

"It's so beautiful," Mara gushes of the project's scope. "We have no idea what the kids are actually going to do until they tell us. Over the next three months we're just going to sit and smile because we'll be getting emails from kids doing amazing things."

The curriculum-linked education program encourages 8–13-year-olds to become aware of the stresses our planet confronts and how sustainable living can make a difference. "Kids are so passionate about the environment and so aware of the challenges ahead. It's a recipe for optimism at a time when you could be persuaded that things are not looking so good."

Optimism, rather than fear-mongering, is at the heart of the Green Cross mission. Mara explains that the constant themes are resilience and self-reliance, and that no matter what our environment throws at us – floods, bushfires, cyclones – we can learn to build back greener and smarter, and achieve a secure future.

Green Cross is using the digital space to share this message and bring together communities,

businesses, educational institutions, governments and individuals. "We're lucky," Mara says. "We were born four years ago in the Web 2.0 age so of course we're going to operate in different ways and what we excel at is creating digital journeys for individuals, partners and governments that can help us work out the best way things can be done."

A shining example is Green Cross' response to Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires. The tragic event inspired Green Cross Australia to create the builditbackgreen.org portal to help those affected rebuild sustainably and affordably. Mara proudly notes the site won a Best in Class Interactive Media Award in New York last year for its efforts in providing links to green resources and suppliers, and sharing design techniques and inspiring stories from people who are rebuilding sustainably. A Queensland project is next on the cards in the wake of the recent Cyclone Yasi and Brisbane floods.

Read through Mara's career CV and it's clear to see she is comfortable in the hot seat. Starting her career in investment banking at Morgan Stanley in the 1980s, Mara has since worked in lofty roles for consumer watchdog CHOICE, Greenpeace Australia, The Wilderness Society, Macquarie Bank as a senior equities analyst, as head of research at CANSTAR CANNEX finance research firm and for a World Bank earthquake reconstruction project in Nepal.

That's ample experience to prepare her for the gutsy role as Green Cross Australia founding CEO in 2007.

Born in Brazil, Mara's childhood dream was not to be an environmental warrior but to grow up to be a boy so she could be a football player, "... not knowing that girls could also play soccer," she laughs. Her family lived between Brazil and California, and Mara moved to live in Australia in 1991.

She credits her Hungarian father and Austrian-Brazilian mother for her social conscience and love of the environment. "I am blessed by amazing parents. Really, I just can't tell you," she gushes. Her parents' wonder for the environment underpinned their lifestyle, and every holiday the family visited a different national park.

From Yosemite to Joshua Tree and Yellowstone, Mara learnt to treasure the natural environment. "My parents also really instilled in us the sense of the 'us' and that it's not good until it's good for all of us," she says. "And that I am so grateful for".

As a teenager and uni student, Mara volunteered throughout Central America with the Amigos de las Americas. "It was like Peace Corps for younger kids in the work of public health," Mara explains. "During the school year I would fundraise to spend the summer somewhere and I would go through training about vaccinating, building latrines, oral health programs, you name it ... that was fantastic."

After studying economics and political science at Williams College in Massachusetts, Mara worked at global financial services firm, Morgan Stanley. Mara recalls it was during the days when *Wall Street* was filmed. "So it was the 1980s; it was the big shoulder pad thing ... It was such a joy to have big hair celebrated. It's the only time in my life when I've actually been on trend," she laughs. "But it was five years of my life that I'll always remember," she says gratefully, noting she learnt robust skills in how to understand cashflow, to value companies, and how different

cultures drive organisations. "It was so diverse. I was involved with a team that sold a tobacco company and a fertiliser company. I defended one of the big oil and gas takeovers."

When asked if she considers herself a success, Mara sidesteps the question, noting: "It's impossible to judge one's own contribution." Instead, she acknowledges that she feels blessed.

"I have this tremendous satisfaction as if, almost by magic, my life has evolved to a place now where I live at the top of a valley almost inside a forest," she gushes of the Gold Coast hinterland home she shares with her husband, Stuart, an environmental plumber. "Our windows open onto this wall of rainforest into this kind of volcanic mountain surrounded by waterfalls and above our block we can actually see baby Wedge-Tailed Eagles learning how to fly. It's just the most incredible thing. And Stu is just a gem and has all the practical stuff to ground all my whacky ideas. We live off the water grid and our energy is pretty much close to zero, and we have the most wonderful motley crew of neighbours who are very diverse and all look out for each other."

Mara is clearly grateful for her lot in life. "The fact that I can do this work with such interesting research, corporate and community partners right around the world and certainly around Australia, and live in this way – I feel it's not so much that I'm a success; I feel blessed by how this world is full with possibility," she marvels. "It's amazing how there are those forks in the road. I feel very fortunate to have turned the right way."

Mara's words of wisdom to herself are: "Just let go a little bit". As she explores Tibetan Buddhism, Mara can see a different view of herself from when she was young and ambitious, striving to be the best in the class and score the best job. "Now it's much more beautiful. The wisdom is that it's wonderful to lose yourself and then you gain yourself." ■