

When Shirley first said to me that she wanted to run an immersion #SHE #BRAVE program for female leadership with International Needs Australia (INA) in Nepal... I thought two things.

1. No way can #She pull this off, and simultaneously....
2. Shut-up and take my money - I'm 100% IN.

Three months later there I was packing my bags, because despite what the naysayers had said, despite the horror of my own family, or the trepidation of friends, Shirley had done it - she had proved that when it comes to leading #SheCanAndSheWill

I will admit, I didn't read the fine print in advance ('cause you know, #YOLO... and who has time for details). But I was determined to go, and once I had arrogantly jacked up on hand sanitizer, gastro stop tablets, borrowed a "proper" backpackers trekking bag, and downloaded the Lonely Planet guide to Nepal on my iPad - I felt I was ready. But at the same time, just between you and I, I was absolutely terrified. Terrified of traveling alone overseas (having never done it), terrified of where we were going (I had never camped or slept rough... I don't want to go all Mariah Carey on you, but previously I have only ever "camped" under 4/5 stars.)

Then there was this terror of the whole #BRAVE #SHE program itself. How was I even chosen for it? I didn't even consider myself a "Female Leader" in my sector, and if I don't - who else would? Whilst I'm definitely female, a Leader is a word that implies a certain level of confident authority that I sorely lack. I am chaos dressed in lipstick, not capability. On any given day I am far more likely to be spilling my lunch throughout my work bag, breaking my high heel or getting pen all over my face than nailing a presentation in a boardroom. #PowerpointIsWitchcraftAnyways

(Plus, to let you in on a little secret, I'm not even a Christian, and this project definitely seemed to be some of God's best work judging by its globally recognised project awards).

Wrought with insecurity, my head told me to stay home, wear my zebra pyjamas and drink wine on the couch - safe and comfortable in my existence. But a little voice in my heart wouldn't be silenced, "be #BRAVE" it whispered fiercely. So I did, because #SheCanAndSheWill and because I have learned, thanks to this experience, that the first part of Leadership is turning up.

Now having gone to Nepal (and assuming you haven't), I can tell you the following four things:

1. You can never really be prepared for Nepal. No books, or anecdotes can prepare you for the onslaught of colour, sound, taste and smell. It is an addictive bedlam wrapped in the most beautiful sari you will ever see. Everywhere you look is a celebration of colour and what it truly means to be human; the ugly, the beautiful, and all that lies between.
2. Also, you will find that cows are the cats of Nepal, wandering freely, napping on highways unphased by highway traffic. Sometimes they wore collars of flowered garlands, and damn girlfriend, they knew they looked good. #YaasQueen #🐮🐱#HaventEatenBeefSinceNepal
3. Poverty isn't an abstract concept or an arithmetic equation. It is not a measure of personal success, it can actually just be a public state of norm. So much so that no one blinks when the power goes out in the fancy restaurant or 4 star hotel. Again. And again. Every single day. Because my friends you may not realize this but electricity is a gift - not a given... regardless of your class or status.
4. Surprisingly for me grace was not found in the divine or the temples we visited, instead I saw it in the faces smiling back at me #Namaste. I saw it in the abundance of generosity and fierceness of vision that people can hold for their future. It is tireless and unflagging - and if you somehow managed to leave Nepal without your soul forever touched and humbled by a presence of a greatness far bigger than you and I, than you my friend, have never really visited the country at all.

My immersion was intense, as was planned. And it was completely absurd at times, which whilst unplanned did not occur from a lack of organisation - but rather because that is what Nepali life is like. Time is relative. Nothing is definite. Hope is resilient.

We always think life is a series of structured sentences with a full stop. Nepal taught me it is actually a paragraph full of question marks and exclamation points. Being pushed outside of structure, relinquishing control from day one and driving (often very close to the edge of a cliff in a tuk tuk) into the literal unknown - led to a form of leadership I've never flirted with before. It was agile, it was flexible, and it centred on putting ALL people first. Executing against a written plan (#SpreadsheetAddict) is comfortable, steering wildly across "roads" that are unpaved, prone to landslides, flooding and leopards is not.

I could write a separate novel on what I saw of HDCS and INA's projects in Rukum, Nepal, but they deliberately asked me not to. And to be honest, I don't want to break your heart with tales of

hardship or human suffering. I don't want to provoke or leverage against privileged guilt, by showing you what the #BRAVE of a few can achieve with next to nothing.

I do though want to tell you about the woman who medically died whilst we stayed at the Rukum Hospital, not because she could've been saved (life is by nature finite), but because the staff worked to keep her alive in coma manually to give her family time to come and say goodbye. In this context manually meant pumping her blood by hand (with machines not being available). I saw her life force being preserved by hand, and I witnessed no one leaving her bedside whilst they waited for her family to come to say their goodbyes (no easy feat in Nepal). So for 24 hours someone stood and cared for her, to give her loved ones the closure they would need. Dignity. Devotion. Divine. That was Leadership in action.

I want you to know that when I met the weak, scared little girl the same age as my niece with a permanent heart murmur following a fever we don't see anymore in Australia I tried not to be impacted. I tried to ignore knowing that she would require lifelong medication her family would never be able to afford. I tried not to think of her life being cut unnecessarily short. But I did take off my silver heart shaped necklace my niece had given to me for Christmas and gave it to her. Because as a girl, it is unlikely anyone will pay for her to get that medicine. Yet, like Nepal, I am #ResilientlyHopeful and as it was her father that was sat there attentively next to her by her bedside, I felt hope that maybe, just maybe, #SheCanAndSheWill survive – and that maybe her life does matter.

I saw hospital staff accept that they will not see their families for years as they devote their talent and education to helping the people in Nepal who need their talent and skills. Whilst they slept in primitive quarters (legit rustic, not as a style guide, but as in actually no running water rustic). They would walk for days to reach remote areas and provide health care and education to remote pockets of the world that we can't even comprehend, sleeping in hay bales and resting where and when they can. And here I am most days thinking I'm generous for sharing my Netflix account with friends.

I saw the constant daily struggle of transport, bogged busses, and river crossings by tuk tuks (the four wheel drive vehicle of Nepal). Infact I've pushed more tuk tuks up a mountain than I ever thought I would in a lifetime. And although it took hours with unplanned diversions to get to the schools or mothers groups (and not all of us could always make it there), I spent the whole time being told how great the roads were now. Because now, if you were sick, it often only took two days for people to carry you to the hospital instead of 11. That's what real progress looks like in a developing country, so best I forget my wet feet from walking through a river, because I was still living the diva experience.

I saw the treasurer of a mothers group stand up in a far flung corner of the world, against a background of rice paddies to tell me with pride how much money the women had personally saved by themselves to further spread education and knowledge for safer maternal care and family planning in their regional areas. It was awe inspiring to see how they had taken control and ownership of the program, their bodies and the health of the communities they cared for. They had been given more than tools – they had been given a voice by #HDCS and #INA.

I think my most favourite moment of #Leadership was when we visited the school program that #INA and #HDCS provide support to. Pri, INA's #Leader was given the chance to speak to the school kids. She could've said something naff. She could've taken credit for what INA (via their donors) had done or gifted. She could've waxed lyrical about the future. But she stood in that moment 7 foot tall and was #BRAVE. #SHE took that stage with the confidence of Beyonce because she saw the audience, and far further than the audience – she saw the opportunity to create real intergenerational change. #SHE saw the mothers, the fathers, the teachers, the men, as well as the children that were gathered there that day and she spoke to all. Without missing a single beat she challenged in a split instant the role of women in Nepal and the world in a way that was beyond reproach, and beyond contradiction. #SHE demanded that mothers be given the respect of a Goddess in the home, highlighting that they should be helped more, not hindered, that brothers (who will one day be men) should be kinder to their sisters, who will one day grow to become mothers. #SHE inspired a movement, and it certainly moved something deep within me. I get goose-bumps when I think about it now.

Coming back to Melbourne I haven't shut-up about Nepal. I haven't stopped talking about the possibilities that could be created there – because like the team at the hospital walking for days to help others, like Pri addressing the next generation of men and women, like Shirley pulling together this concept of the Leadership Immersion Program in Nepal, and like the women I shared this extraordinary experience with – I too will forever be a #BRAVEWOMAN giving a voice to those who do not have one.

So I'd like to close on this #BRAVE reflection, that regardless of who you pray too, it is worth highlighting that the phrase "Do not be afraid" occurs 366 times in the bible.

And, if like me you don't pray at all (or read the Bible), then in the words of a young Goddess I regularly bow my head to, Malala Yousafzai: "There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a third power stronger than both. That of women."

Namaste Friends

I am hoping that you will help me to change the future for children in Nepal.

The reason is because 2019 has been a far more transformative, challenging and compelling year than I ever could have imagined. I'm not the same woman I was back in January.

Yep. Big call. BUT, believe it or not, the girl who has only ever preached about the sustainability of business and social enterprise now understands the power of charity to provide opportunities to those in need. Sometimes, the key to real change can be as simple as a single gold coin.

My thinking shifted because of the International Needs Australia (INA) & BRAVE leadership immersion program that I was lucky enough to take part in alongside some incredible women. A key part of our immersion involved travelling to the remote heart of Nepal, Rukum to Chaurjahari Hospital to see the outreach work of INA's partner local organisation Human Development Community Services (HDCS).

It was in Rukum that we saw firsthand the difference that supporting women can make in changing the health outcomes for an entire community.

In fact, the outreach educational work that INA supports in partnership with HDCS has seen a STAGGERING decrease in childhood mortality rates over the last few years from 118 per 1000, to 39 . They have also decreased the rate of maternal mortality rate from 574 to 143.

Incredible.

These highly positive results are not only encouraging, but have received global project management recognition and awards.

There is no doubt that the outcomes achieved are because of INA and HDCS's shared initiative to educate a whole community around the benefit in supporting, educating and nurturing their women. Simple put, they know that improving the life of each and every mother, means improving the lives of the next generation to come. #Smart

SO why am I walking? Well, until just a few years ago, HDCS had to walk the final 38km to reach the hospital, (but in more recent times only have to walk the last 30-60mins).

I want to match this, by walking from the North of Melbourne, Ivanhoe to the South of Melbourne, Frankston (40km), in a single day. I want to walk with a purpose to change the future for children in Nepal. I want to walk with the strength, generosity and grace of a Nepali Woman, and to honour the women whom I have met and been inspired by. By sponsoring me, you'll be able to take that walk with me and help change the future of Nepal.

Thank you in advance for your contribution to this cause that means so much to me.

Vettyxx