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| Speak Up - Kōrerotia  Human rights whats, whys and hows: Three interviews  18 March 2020 | |
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| Male | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s community access radio station Plains FM, 96.9 and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana,  E ngā reo,  E ngā hau e whā  Tēnā koutou katoa  Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”.    Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.  Kia ora e hoa, ko Sally Carlton ahau, te rangatira o te hōtaka Speak Up” - “Kōrerotia. This show is a compilation of three one-on-one interviews carried out with individuals who have been committed to and working for human rights for a long time. They each work in different fields, in different parts of the world, but they have each dedicated decades to trying to improve people’s situations.  We’ll be talking about the work that they’ve engaged in: The highs and lows of their careers and some of their key learnings. We’re also going to hear about why they got involved in human rights in the first place and why they’ve continued to work in this space for so long.  Our first guest is Aroha Reriti-Crofts, who has been a long time activist for Māori and women and who continues to impart her wisdom by heading various organisations and meeting people for casual korero if the need arises. We then talk with Canadian lawyer David Matas about his commitment to human rights and especially his work campaigning against organ transplant abuse. Our final guest is Marilyn Garson, a New Zealand aid worker whose most recently role has been coordinating a social enterprise in the Gaza Strip.  Three different stories but one common why. |
| Aroha | *[Karakia]* |
| Sally | Let’s get on with our first interview: Aroha Reriti-Crofts, CBE. |
| Aroha | CBE. Commander of the Order of the British Empire. I received that in 1993 for services to Māori and the community. At that time I was national president…or international president of Māori Women’s Welfare League. |
| Sally | Are you still involved at all with the Māori Women’s Welfare League? |
| Aroha | Absolutely, with Ōtautahi branch which is here and we still meet on the second Tuesday of the month; we’ve been doing that for about 60 years now. |
| Sally | What sort of things does the Māori Women’s Welfare League seek to undertake in the community? |
| Aroha | The major object is really the health and wellbeing of Māori/women and their whānau and I deliberately say slash women because it’s not only for Māori women, it’s for any woman who wishes to be part and parcel of Māori Women’s Welfare League. So we’re an organisation that is very similar to any other women’s organisation except that we favour Māori. |
| Sally | And what sort of ways do you do that? Other than your meetings, what else do you do? |
| Aroha | If we have someone say at a meeting, they may come in and say so and so needs some help down there, their kids need some shoes or someone needs to be taken to whatever… a doctor, or anyone in need of help, then it’s reported to our meeting and so that’s dealt with by the membership and/or our membership volunteers out in the community on anything that’s happening in the community. |
| Sally | I also see that in 1993 you were also awarded the New Zealand Suffrage Centennial medal, was that also in conjunction with your work with women? |
| Aroha | Probably, I have no idea really. Accepting that It was the celebration of suffrage of women having the right to vote and I was there in the right place at the right time I guess. |
| Sally | I’m sure that’s not true, there must have been another reason than that. As well as your work with the Māori Women’s Welfare League, what else have you done that would have led to your nomination for these two very prestigious awards? |
| Aroha | I probably had a CV as long as your arm so I have no idea who nominated me or why until I got the letter asking would you like to be awarded and please sign the form if you accept. I still don’t know who nominated me and I guess being one of those who nominated others, it’s not my business. |
| Sally | It’s quite a nice surprise to get that in the mail then. |
| Aroha | It was a lovely surprise, yes. |
| Sally | And that was obviously 1993, what work have you done since then? |
| Aroha | Virtually the same sort of things except that probably now that I’m not employed as such, I’m my own boss now so I can do anything I want to, whenever I want to, if I want to - which means that my diary is full every day because I hate to miss out on what’s going on in the community and there’s such a lot of wonderful things happening in the community. |
| Sally | Fantastic that you’ve got the opportunity to attend so many different things. |
| Aroha | Yes. |
| Sally | Could you talk a little bit about your involvement with Tuahiwi? |
| Aroha | I was born and bred in Tuahiwi, that’s 25km north of Christchurch. I went to Tuahiwi school and many of my cousins and I are still there at Tuahiwi and we’ve certainly lost a lot but we’ve seen a lot of our mokupuna coming into the world in Tuahiwi and we’re still very active out near Tuahiwi having a wonderful time. |
| Sally | Ka pai. I was at Tuahiwi Marae early November for an event welcoming newcomers to Waimakariri. |
| Aroha | That was excellent and they had all these dancers there, Filipino dancers and the Chinese and the Indians - beautiful. Oh you were there that day, oh it was a wonderful time. |
| Sally | It was lovely. |
| Aroha | What was lovely about it too was 1) It was the first time those people had ever been on a marae; 2) It’s the first time they’d been officially welcomed by mana whenua; and 3) We just thoroughly enjoyed each other’s company and the kai was absolutely delicious. It was all shared kai so everyone brought kai to share. |
| Sally | I was about to say kai plus waiata plus dance brings everybody together. |
| Aroha | They were so overwhelmed with knowing that they can belong somewhere else, that’s important - belonging to somewhere. |
| Sally | One of the many hats you wear at the moment is Chairperson of the Matapopore Trust. |
| Aroha | Ae. |
| Sally | If you could tell us a little bit about that and what inspired you to get involved in that? |
| Aroha | It wasn’t a matter of inspiration as much as back in the day - probably about four or five years ago - we had people here… I keep saying it was a bunch of cowboys purporting to represent mana whenua ideals and values and it was wrong. So it was reporting back to our rūnanga and the rūnanga set up the steering committee to say go and culturally advise and guide the development of the rebuild of Christchurch. So I was one of those chosen to be on the steering committee and all the rest of them all the second generation, so I said to them well you guys do all the work and I’ll just chair the meetings, how’s that. Yeah, yeah, that’s all good with us and we’ve been working ever since. Culturally advising and guiding those developers who wish to be advised on Tūāhuriri values and tikanga. In that we’ve also looked at Tūāhuriri, Ngāi Tahu artists. In this city of Ōtautahi we want our art here. Not against anyone else having any art but for us, it’s our opportunity to share the skills and talents of our young people and we’ve been having a wonderful time. |
| Sally | It’s so great to see some of that reflected back in the rebuild. |
| Aroha | Absolutely and we have some beautiful art pieces. You have the likes of Tūranga who just won a supreme award for their building and their art forms and those our art forms. |
| Sally | You’ve obviously done an awful lot across a number of decades in terms of this kind of work. I’m interested to see if you consider this human rights work. |
| Aroha | Of course, that’s part of who we are. That’s the right that we have to be noticed and everyone wants to be noticed. We have a right for our art to be out there, we have a right to have our stories out there and our aspirations out there. Absolutely. |
| Sally | Fantastic, that’s great. I think a lot of people do a lot of work helping and serving the community but don’t necessarily see that as human rights work, they see that as just some stuff that they do. |
| Aroha | Even today I get, “Aunty, can I please have an hour of your time?” All you need is a pair of good ears for someone to be able to share their problems, their issues, their pain. You know, you can be advising people as much as you like, it’s whether they’ll take that advice or not and that’s really none of your business if they take that advice or not but at least you’ve offered some time as happens. I have breakfast meetings coming out of my ear, that people want… “Can I please have some time with you, can we have a coffee or can we…?” In one hour or two hours, a lot of issues have been dealt with and not necessarily have I been able to help them with their issues. They’ve really helped themselves by listening to what they’re saying. |
| Sally | Just having someone to talk it through with. |
| Aroha | Yeah having a sounding board. So once they’ve bounced away on the board and go oh true, I could do that myself. |
| Sally | If we get back to thinking about some of your work for example with the Māori Women’s Welfare League. |
| Aroha | Yes. |
| Sally | Have you felt like you’ve faced criticism or challenges along the way? |
| Aroha | Oh absolutely, fight like hell! When one can go through life where not everyone agrees with you and you don’t have to agree with them either. So you win some, you lose some. For me it’s been a good learning process in Māori Women’s Welfare League. I learnt debating rules of Parliament and I’ve learnt meeting procedures and I’ve learnt how to be politically strategic. You know if you get the feeling you’re not going to win that one you give it away and go into something else. It’s all about learning from other people, it’s all very much a learning process that I’ve had in Māori Women’s Welfare League. |
| Sally | You’ve mentioned that in terms of dealing with challenges, the best way is to learn from them and not make that mistake again, I suppose. What other advice would you have to young people coming through interested in getting involved in sometimes quite challenging human rights work? What would you say they do to keep their faith alive? |
| Aroha | First of all, have to believe in themselves, that’s important. So if you don’t believe in yourself, you’re never going to believe in anything else. And it’s just a matter of being prepared to take on what is there to challenge us. I love challenges and I’ll have a go but I think everyone ought to have a go at it as well. You won’t know unless you ask, you won’t know if it’s going to be yes or no. You ask and you may well be given. |
| Sally | I think I’ve taken from you your main pieces of advice are believe in yourself, don’t be afraid of a challenge… |
| Aroha | My daughter says hold your nose and jump; I like that. |
| Sally | Exactly. Learn from your mistakes and engage with others as well I think you might be talking about. |
| Aroha | Don’t let what you know get in the way of what you don’t know. I like that too. |
| Sally | Yeah that’s also sound advice. Anything else you would like to say to people who might be having a tough time of it following something they are passionate about but might be a bit difficult? |
| Aroha | I would say talk to someone. If not to Ahua, talk to someone - your cousin, your aunty. Not keeping it to yourself. |
| Sally | Have you got anything else you would like to add? |
| Aroha | Thank you for your interesting and inviting me here. |
| Sally | Thank you for coming along. |
|  | **MUSIC BY PLAYING FOR CHANGE FEAT. THE DOOBIE BROTHERS & ELLIS HALL – LISTEN TO THE MUSIC** |
| Sally | This show is an opportunity for us to hear about and be inspired by the various roles you have had and the various projects you’ve been involved in with a view to delving into some of the highs and lows of the decades you have spent in the service of human rights.  In reflecting on your work, I’m also hoping you’ll share with us some of the key lessons and key learnings you’ve picked up along the way. We’d like to know what you’ve done but also how and why you’ve done it.  So David Matas, if you’d please start by introducing yourself and telling us about some of the many human rights hats you’ve won over the years. |
| David | I’m a lawyer in international human rights law and immigration and refugee law in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. I’ve been involved in human rights as an individual, as a member of non-governmental organisations and also as a component of Canadian delegations to international meetings and there’s a long list of each of those. |
| Sally | Why did you choose the type of law that you chose? International human rights law. |
| David | I was always interested in human rights even before I got into law. In terms of the law itself, there is an accumulation of reasons. One was the practise because I got into refugee law and many of my clients were victims of human rights violations and so addressing the human rights violations which they fled was a way of dealing with the problems that they faced. But it also was a vehicle for more generally dealing with human rights because many of the human rights violations I saw were the result of failure of law, failure of remedies, failure of standards and so it was a way of coming to grips with the human rights violations as well. |
| Sally | As well as your work in the refugee and immigration law space, I see you are also senior legal counsel for B’nai Brith in Canada. If you could tell us a little bit about that please that would be great. |
| David | I’ve been involved with the Jewish community and human rights for a long time now, for decades. And my general view of human rights is that it’s important both to stand for the human rights of the community from which you come - and I’m Jewish - as well as to stand for human rights of communities with which you have no personal contact or interest. So I’ve been trying to do both. With B’nai Brith as a senior honorary legal counsel, I’ve been involved with a number of law cases and I’m continuing to be involved with intervening in court cases suggesting legislation or legal reform. That’s continuing work. |
| Sally | Could you tell us a little bit about the organisation? |
| David | The organisation is a membership organisation of members of the Jewish community. It’s one of the oldest Jewish organisations. It originally started off as a service organisation. The Jewish community in Canada, United States and around the world is pretty well excluded systematically from all sorts of things including the standard service clubs so they tended to form parallel organisations or institutions and B’nai Brith was one of these phenomena but it still does a lot of service work but it’s much more involved in advocacy and combating anti-Semitism and standing for human rights. |
| Sally | You’ve also worn a number of hats in terms of delegations from Canada to the United Nations including I see, on the International Criminal Court. Why the United Nations? What’s the role there? |
| David | My view of law is it’s not necessarily a force for good, it can also be a force for harm and indeed we’ve seen that with divisorial regimes that manipulate the law to amplify and accelerate the persecution and of course the United Nations brings together the international community so it’s both an opportunity where human rights values can be promoted and a place where unfortunately, they’re often violated and one needs to combat their violation as well. |
| Sally | David, one of the other things I see you’ve done is you’ve written an autobiography which you called *Why Did You Do That?* This show today is all about trying to learn from you about your “why” and I guess one of the questions is, why did you call your book that? What’s the idea behind a question? |
| David | I’m speaking a lot on human rights and very often I’m speaking on issues that have nothing to do with me but I personally believe if you’re going to stand for human rights, in order to make it meaningful you have to stand for something that doesn’t really benefit you or your community in any way whatsoever. It’s just a way of expressing solidarity with all of humanity. But very often when I’m speaking on an issue that has nothing to do with my family or my community or my country, people are asking… You know, there’s questions and they say, “Why are you doing this?” So I got the question so often I thought I’d spend a whole book answering it. |
| Sally | What was the bottom line? |
| David | Well it starts off how I got involved - which was basically a reaction to the Holocaust and I wanted to do something about that - and then it goes through the various issues that I’ve been involved in one by one and tries to explain for each issue, why I got involved in that and the bottom line… I mean, the way the book ends is don’t ask me why I’ve done something, ask others why they have done nothing. |
| Sally | That’s a very powerful conclusion, that’s for sure. The point of your book then is obviously to encourage people to consider their own actions and encourage people to get involved. What kind of recommendations do you have of how people might think about doing that in their every day lives? |
| David | I think that it can be done in different ways with different people depending on their lives. I’m a lawyer so I can make a legal contribution but obviously human rights is not to preserve the law or the lawyer. Artists can do it in terms of their art. For instance, I mean this is just an example, one of the issues of which I’m involved is the killing of practitioners in Falun Gong in China for their organs and so I’ve been talking about gaps in legal remedies and need to change the law and ethics and so on but there is an artist in the Czech Republic who just developed this art display of a stuffed toy that is representing China with stitches across them to show the organ harvesting. I mean I never would have thought of that. It just shows that different people, in the work that they’re doing, can promote human rights in different ways. |
| Sally | I think that’s a great example of thinking about how you can use your skills and your interests to make a difference. Obviously one of the main pieces of work that you’re involved in is campaigning against organ transplant abuse, particularly in China. If you could just talk us a bit through what do we mean by organ transplant abuse for people who might not be familiar with it. |
| David | What we’re seeing in China, which we don’t see anywhere else in the world, is an industrial state machinery which is killing prisoners of conscience in order to get their organs. Killing them through organ extraction for transplantation; for transplantations in also, of course, Chinese patients. The hospitals are charging large sums of money and the money is financing the health system. The primary victims have been practitioners of spiritually based exercise of Falun Gong but there’s also been Uyghur victims, Tibetan victims and some Christian victims. Typically these people are taken into arbitrary detention to sort of convert them to loyalty to the communist system and the recalcitrants who want to keep their beliefs tend to be the victims. |
| Sally | One of the things that you’ve brought up in your research is that once people are detained, they undergo a health screen to see, I suppose, whether they… How good their organs may be for transplantation. |
| David | I did some research with David Kilgour which started in 2006, we were just asked to do this by an NGO, and we were trying to figure out whether this was happening and we were looking at various pieces of evidence about this and one of this was this blood testing organ examination. Obviously we weren’t able to interview any of the victims but we were able to interview people who got out of prison and then out of China and they told us, the Falun Gong were being blood tested and organ examined. The others were not. It wasn’t for their health because they were being tortured to recant but it was a very thorough and periodic and made sense in terms of transplantation because you need obviously healthy organs and blood-type compatibility, and ideally tissue-type compatibility as well. So that seemed to be the only logical explanation for what that testing was. |
| Sally | Do we have a sense of how many people we may be talking about? |
| David | Yes. I mean, the government of China produces numbers but they look to be just fabrications. There’s research that was put out recently (which I didn’t do) which showed that the numbers regenerated by quadratic equation and they have little to do with actual reality but we were able in our own research, David Kilgour and Ethan Gutmann and I, to look at individual hospitals who would publish how many transplants they did. We could look at their bed counts, their staff counts. We could look at their newsletters, the media reports, the research reports and through the collation of all this data we were able to figure out by adding up hospital to hospital, what total volumes were and they were between 63,000 in early years going up to 100,000 later years. So the numbers are huge. Far exceeding anywhere else in the world. |
| Sally | And that’s both Chinese patients and foreign patients? |
| David | It’s hard to know, as I say, because the government of China just produces statistics, but before there was a global pushback against what they were doing and before our report came out, they were saying that 20% of their transplants were for transplant tourists. Well our report came out in 2006 and in 2007 they said that they were going to give a priority to locals and now there is still transplant tourism but it’s a lot more undercover than it used to be. It still happens but it’s harder to get hold of the percentage or numbers. |
| Sally | Just to clarify for our listeners as well, the difference between transplant tourism in China versus transplant tourism to other countries, that might be quite helpful. |
| David | Of course there is transplant tourism to other countries but typically what happens in other countries is that people buy organs from disadvantaged and poor, typically kidneys because people can sell a kidney and survive with one kidney although their health is compromised. But in China it’s not just kidneys, it’s the full range of organs including vital organs and it’s not a black market, it’s state institution. I mean there’s people being held in prisons and people being operated in hospitals and I mean, very often in military hospitals which of course are state institutions as well. This is something that you don’t see anywhere else, it’s institutionalised and of course what you don’t see also is the people being killed for their organs and the people being killed are being prisoners of conscience that the state views as political opponents. |
| Sally | David, you mentioned why you got into this in the first place, you were asked to do it by an NGO. Why are you still in it 15 years on? |
| David | I’ve been involved in a number of different human rights issues. You don’t give up until it stops, I mean sometimes it does. I mean eventually it does and I hope and expect sometime that this will and there has been an accumulation over time of more people involved, more research, more intergovernmental activity but it’s still a problem. Especially when I first began with David Kilgour, my attitude was if we didn’t keep on this it would just disappear and now I don’t believe that. I mean, I think we’d carry on even if I stopped but because I’ve been on it so long, I’ve accumulated a lot of knowledge about the issue and so I feel I have still something to contribute. |
| Sally | Have you found that you’ve faced criticism or disbelief or lack of momentum, challenges along the way? |
| David | On this issue or all issues? |
| Sally | Particularly this one but generally. |
| David | Well sure, nobody likes to be criticised and the Communist Party of China has a history of massive violations of human rights and then subsequent cover up and denials. So the work that I’ve been doing has been criticised and I personally have been criticised but I’m trying to evaluate the merits of the criticism and the very fact that although there’s criticism, it has no content; in a way, that is another form of establishing, or at least supporting, the position I’ve taken. I mean, if there were some real viable arguments against the evidence then I assume they would be produced and the fact that none are produced and all we see is insults and bafflegab… I mean, obviously I don’t welcome the insults but it tells me that they don’t really have anything much else to say. |
| Sally | You mentioned that there’s been increasing traction and in June 2019 there was the release of the report produced by the China Tribunal. Maybe if you could just run us through that please. |
| David | Ethan Gutmann, David Kilgour and I co-founded this NGO called ETAC (The International Coalition to End Transplant Abuse in China) and got a very active volunteer Executive Director, Susie Hughes, who lives in Australia. She had been talking with Benedict Rogers who is part of the human rights movement in the UK and he had suggested something like this to her - an independent tribunal and he suggested Sir Geoffrey Nice who he knew. And these independent tribunals have existed in a number of different contexts and they spring up where the legal system really isn’t able to deal with the situation - and what we’ve got with these Chinese massive human rights abuses is we can’t use the International Criminal Court because China is not a state party to the Treaty of the Court and China has got a veto at the Security Council. China is a global power so individual states are very reluctant to prosecute individual perpetrators, should they show up within their borders. There have been some attempts of prosecution of various countries but the individuals being investigated left the jurisdiction before the prosecutions could be finalised.  So there needed to be some system to deal with this and a tribunal was a way of doing it. The people were independent, I mean they weren’t involved in the issue beforehand, so what they learned about the issue was just through the tribunal process, through witnesses and documentation. And they came up with a judgement starting from scratch, being convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that this was happening and it was a crime against humanity, that was torture and that it was an act of genocide. |
| Sally | Now that that report has been released, how does that change the situation? |
| David | Although there’s no real evidence contrary to our work, there’s a lot of excuses: That we’re anti-China, that we’re being manipulated or that we’re manipulating that, and so on. And it makes it harder to generated these excuses with this report because the tribunal is a conglomeration of independent and also well respected and well known people in their fields. Everything they heard and saw is publicly available, as indeed is everything we heard and saw. And it generated a lot of publicity as well and publicity has its own momentum of requiring accountability and giving attention. So I would say it really helped give prominence to the issue. |
| Sally | If we think about your work, particularly in terms of organ transplant abuse, what have been some of the moments you’ve been particularly proud of? |
| David | I mean, every aspect of human rights is a collective effort and of course massive human rights violations is also a collective effort. I think it’s a mistake to say any one person is responsible for success or any one person is responsible for the devastation. I would say, although I’m pleased that more people have joined and it’s got more attention, from the minute I began this my ultimate hope was to be proved wrong because I would rather this not be happening and as the evidence has accumulated beyond a reasonable doubt and I suppose you could say I’ve been proved right, I can’t say I’m pleased with that and in fact I’m dismayed by that but I guess you could say I’m pleased I’ve been able to continue doing this while it needs to be done. |
| Sally | In contrast, what would you say have been the toughest moments? |
| David | Well I’m always disappointed when there’s people who for personal reasons - economic reasons, political convenience reasons - turn away from the victims, turn away from the evidence. I mean this is a pervasive problem. For reasons of political convenience, there are all too many people in Canada and New Zealand and Australia and elsewhere, that are just not dealing with this issue the way they should. I think the China Tribunal put it very succinctly that one has to realise when we’re dealing with China, that we’re dealing with a criminal state - and most people do not treat China that way. |
| Sally | What then can we in our day-to-day business do to make a difference in this respect? |
| David | Well as I was indicating previously, I think each of us in his own way; your way by asking questions, my way by answering them; and they’re different people in ordinary lives going about it in a way… I mean, if you’re in contact with people in China, tell them that you know; inform them if they don’t know. Anybody can write a letter, sign a petition, host an event, attend an event, talk to your colleagues, talk to your neighbours. When you’re dealing with human rights, what you need is human solidarity. I mean, human rights belongs to each and every individual but it’s like every other right, if you don’t assert the right it withers so that in order to maintain respect for human rights you have to continue assert your human rights and everybody should be doing that. |
| Sally | Just to finish up then, what advice would you have to people who work in human rights and are finding things a little bit difficult? |
| David | I would say be patient because it’s a long haul. I mean, I’ve seen many people over the decades get burnt out. They have temporary enthusiasm and then things don’t change quickly, or at all, and they get discouraged - and I think one has to realise is that this is a long, difficult effort. I mean, one of the things I’ve seen over the decades I’ve been involved is one human rights problem can get resolved and another one pops up. I mean, I was involved in anti-apartheid movement; it’s gone. The problems over the Soviet Union, and that’s gone. The National Security Dictator states and they’ve pretty well gone. But this whole Falun Gong phenomenon, it started in 1999 and has accumulated in this millennium. I would say that if you want to get involved in human rights, you have to be prepared for a long effort. |
| Sally | Yeah and not lose heart. |
| David | Because what we’re dealing with is really the human condition and you’re not going to change human personality and it’s an effort of mitigation rather than elimination. I mean, if you don’t do anything, things will get worse. If you do what you can, things will be better - but the problem is never going to disappear. |
| Sally | What are the primary lessons or learnings that you would take away from your lifetime of involvement? |
| David | I guess I would say that it’s a never-ending effort. Like I started with a focus on the Holocaust and that still remains. I mean, actual killings of the Holocaust have long since passed but the work of remembering the Holocaust, learning from the Holocaust, applying the lessons, it will continue indefinitely. And never forget and always learn and try to apply those lessons to continually evolving and newly arising human rights violations. |
| Sally | I’d like to say thank you so much, David, for coming in and sharing with us such a wealth of information and all those lessons you’ve imparted to us. |
| David | Thanks for inviting me. |
|  | **MUSIC BY SAM COOKE – A CHANGE IS GONNA COME** |
| Sally | Marilyn Garson is our third interviewee for this “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia” show, looking at the whats, hows, and whys of spending a lifetime in the service of human rights. Marilyn, tēnā koe and if you could please introduce yourself. |
| Marilyn | Thank you, my name is Marilyn Garson. I grew up in Canada and immigrated to New Zealand in the 1980s and I lived mostly in the Hokianga. I spent about 18 years working overseas with communities affected by war, primarily with Cambodia former child soldiers, people with disabilities, Afghan women who were restricted to their homes and then in Gaza. I’m glad to be home. |
| Sally | Yes, that sounds an incredibly intense 18 years. |
| Marilyn | Hmm… yes. |
| Sally | You were just saying before that New Zealand has changed in a few ways with improved quality of wine and coffee and also the introduction of more te reo into our New Zealand English. |
| Marilyn | Absolutely and I’m one of those late learners. Now that I’m back I can’t wait to get started. |
| Sally | Great that you’re into it. Can you please tell us what got you into this work in the first place? What was the first motivator? |
| Marilyn | It actually came from the Hokianga. When neoliberalism came in so abruptly and you couldn’t help but see the losses. I started to work with people who wanted to become self-employed or people who were self-employed but not very profitable and in 1998 I had the chance to take precisely those skills overseas to work with communities who were excluded socially and economically - and although none of us knew the word, I set off on an 18-year programme to build social enterprises. |
| Sally | So that’s something, you’re right, that word is relatively new, isn’t it? |
| Marilyn | Yeah. |
| Sally | What are some of the most enduring memories you’ve had of those 18 years away? |
| Marilyn | The highs, if you will, were almost always from the secondary benefits of employment. In Cambodia for example, at that time in the 1990s, people had the idea that Cambodians with disabilities were necessarily financially dependent, so they had a great deal of difficulty getting married. As their financial lives stabilised, the people who we worked with began to get married, they became numerate and literate and they set in motion a cycle of ability and changing perceptions. Those were the things that really gave me pleasure, much more than the fact of doing business. |
| Sally | What about some of the other highs? |
| Marilyn | I have to say that, consistently: leaving. Although it was extremely difficult, it was the sustainability of the enterprises that I got really excited about. I mean, to work in someone else’s country, to build an enterprise that they own, not me, I had always to be trying to build something that withstand my exit and they did. |
| Sally | That’s really great that you’ve built something that’s able to sustain itself. Do you hear back from them how they are going? |
| Marilyn | I do. In particular the enterprise that we launched in Gaza called the G Gateway I hear about. Its managers, Gazan women, were recognised by Time magazine as emerging entrepreneurial leaders of the Middle East and all that feedback says yeah, good ideas. |
| Sally | I imagine that you are very proud of the role that you’ve played in helping establish these social enterprises. How much does that sense of pride come into the fact that you’re still involved or you’ve been involved such a long time? |
| Marilyn | Really, the pride is more in being the cheerleader. What I found was that the power of being believed in was a really strong multiplier and anybody who works for disadvantaged communities I’m sure would say the same thing. That ability is not lacking but belief is often lacking and if that’s the missing ingredient then that’s what you can bring and you take a lot of pleasure in seeing that as a multiplier. People just start to do good things and because they’re working at home, they have some good ideas to work on. |
| Sally | So what were the social enterprises? |
| Marilyn | In Cambodia we converted what had been a struggling charitable NGO into an enterprise that produced really high-end goods made from leather and handwoven silk. In Afghanistan, the women in Afghanistan have a particularly high level of skill as embroiderers and embroidery income is female income, it’s not household income. So we launched an embroidery business based on selling at the New York trade shows. I worked for a while in the States launching an enterprise to import handmade goods, to make large internet sales available which were not yet working in the developing world. And then the Gaza Gateway, which is an IT enterprise. |
| Sally | OK so all quite different then. |
| Marilyn | Yeah I never felt ready! Always something different. |
| Sally | And what were the commonalities between them? |
| Marilyn | In common our good intentions were not insulation from any kind of business reality. So first you have a noble idea and you get all excited about it and then you confront the same business realities that everyone else confronts in the global marketplace and that’s what they had in common. Profit and loss and expenses. |
| Sally | I imagine there must have been quite a few challenges along the way. What are some of the ones that stand out the most for you? |
| Marilyn | Without question the most difficult thing that I did: I volunteered in Gaza to join the United Nations Emergency Response Team, the group that would stay in Gaza through the 2014 war, and we were sheltering eventually nearly 300,000 people in flagged protected United Nations buildings and it was one of my jobs to inform the Israeli armed forces every day, usually twice a day, of the precise locations of those protected buildings - and seven of those buildings were hit. So the hardest thing that I had to face was the very limited value of rights or protection behind the [Gaza] wall. Unless the world fills the law and the rights with meanings and enforces them with some meaningful penalties, people are in great danger. |
| Sally | There was no penalty then, that those protected buildings were targeted? |
| Marilyn | No. Well, in December, the International Criminal Court announced that they want to open up some war crimes investigations. So the law moves slowly, but perhaps. |
| Sally | That’s to be seen. |
| Marilyn | Yeah. |
| Sally | What other challenges did you encounter? |
| Marilyn | In Afghanistan we were setting up this embroidery business and unfortunately for me, I got started in 2008 just in time for a global spike in food prices followed by the global financial downtown. So our women saw their purchasing power declining month by month. Many of them were paid in Pakistani rupees and the rupee lost 23% of its value in my first eight months so the challenge was, again, just the reality workers all around the world were buffeted by the same thing. Our women were not in a good position to understand their declining purchasing power and we couldn’t change it. |
| Sally | If you reflect back on the disparate human rights activities you’ve been involved, what are some of the most important lessons that you would draw? |
| Marilyn | I would say that when you work with really intransigent situations and big injustices, it’s very tempting to idealise the people that you work with. You really want to find people who are as good as their situation is bad and that’s wildly inappropriate. I see people idealise Gazans, they say because the blockade is bad, they want Gazans to be unbreakable and simply and I want to say people have rights, not just perfect people. It’s really better to remember their humanity than to create some kind of saint. |
| Sally | Any advice on how people might do that? |
| Marilyn | Find something recognisable. Just find one person that you relate to as a recognisable human being and multiply that by two million. |
| Sally | That sounds very, very lovely. One of the ideas of this particular radio show is to think about why it is that you’ve gotten into this kind of work but also that you’ve stayed involved in it over the course of such a long time. What is it that keeps drawing you back? |
| Marilyn | It’s just the way I’m wired, you know. I grew up with very political ideas about the world, I grew up in the era of the Vietnam war and the Cambodian genocide and well, I’m really afraid of violence. I knew as a child there would be children in those places who are also terrified and they couldn’t make it stop so I’ve wanted always to go and just be with them, be company for them. I can’t explain it more clearly than that, it’s the way I’m wired. |
| Sally | Thinking back on your several decades of work, what kind of advice would you give to people if they’re interested in working in the human rights field? |
| Marilyn | I often say that the department of clean hands is your couch. The moment you walk out your door into the real world, you hit the moral ambiguity and you make compromises and your work has unintended and sometimes terrible consequences. Every place will require more from you than you intend to give. So my advice is to go where you are most needed and to know that whatever you do, it won’t’ be the way you expect it to be. It will be murkier and it will be much richer so go where it’s impossible and start from there. |
| Sally | I like “murkier but much richer,” that’s a lovely line. |
| Marilyn | Like life! |
| Sally | Is there something that you wish someone had told you as you were getting involved in all this work? |
| Marilyn | There is not really, because if they had told me I wouldn’t have believed them, I had to go out and do it and wade into it and I’ve never regretted a moment of it and hopefully the people who worked with me can say the same thing! |
| Sally | Would you like to tell us a little bit more about the experiences you’ve had in Gaza and the book that you’ve recently published? |
| Marilyn | Gaza was an unexpectedly complicated place for me, partly because I’m a Jew. It required me to really unpack what I believe and to form a response to what was happening there. I worked there for four years, through the last two wars, and launched this long-odds enterprise and for me, that discovery of Gaza’s social capital. The way that Gaza does not let go was an extraordinary thing. It is the most accepting, embracing place because they are locked in together and Gazan’s simply don’t let go. So I wrote a book about the day-to-day life of our team because there are plenty of books about the politics but the life behind the Wall is so important. It’s the people who make this worth resolving. |
| Sally | Have you got anything you’d like to say in terms of what you think should happen? |
| Marilyn | In the Middle East? Yes. I can say it simply. It’s a formula. What’s happening behind the Gaza blockade is exceptional but the solution is to de-exceptionalise all of it and just bring it back to the laws and principles and the rights, the rights of citizens of both peoples; Palestine and Israel. The solutions lie in the law. The law is there but states have not upheld it. The law of states, the rights of humans, there’s nothing mysterious about it but we simply haven’t done what we need to do to enforce the law. |
| Sally | And you said the book is about people’s day-to-day lives. Is that just an attempt to personalise what’s going on? |
| Marilyn | Yes, my response to a dehumanised community is to rehumanise it and if you read the book, I believe you’ll find people who are very recognisable. And once people get involved with someone in Gaza, I think the place is very hard to forget. That’s what I would like to happen. |
| Sally | I think that seems to tie in nicely with what you were saying before about getting in touch with just one person and from them you can have a bit more understanding. |
| Marilyn | Yes. I believe Amartya Sen wrote that human rights are a claim addressed to anyone who can help. I want to tell that story in New Zealand because we are among the people who can help, you just have to reach in and make contact with a person and you’ll stay involved. |
| Sally | I’d like to say tēnā koe, thank you very much. |
| Marilyn | Thank you for your interest, it’s wonderful to be in the company that you’ve placed me in. Thank you. |
| Sally | Thank you.  Marilyn’s interview concludes our show reflecting on the journeys of three long time human rights advocates. It’s interesting and not surprising that despite the differences in their causes - the different whats - each of the guests had similar driving passions which led them to their work that they do. In terms of the advice that they offer, Aroha thinks believe in yourself and take on challenges - and ask, you never know what people might give you. David recommends that you be patient; after all, human rights is a very, very long term game. And Marilyn suggests go where you are most needed because the skills that you have are most important. She also suggests reach out and humanise those people you are going to be working with. Hopefully there’s some nuggets of wisdom for everybody in there and this concludes our show for this time. |