



Warrior woman

Outside of her talent on camera, or behind it, Deborra-lee Furness is a dynamic woman who has worked tirelessly to ensure children the world over are happy, healthy and whole.

Words CAROLINE ROBERTSON

“I only have two speeds — stop and go.” Deborra-lee Furness talks a mile a minute. “I’m a juggler. I do it all. A multitasker.”

I believed her as she shared sparkling insights while watching her 13-year-old daughter Ava cook gyoza and prepared for an evening engagement. All this while managing her domestic duties, charity work, acting career, portrait classes, cryotherapy sessions, celebrity spouse, French bulldog, labradoodle, two fish and a guinea pig.

Furness doesn’t do dull. Married in 1996 to Hugh Jackman, she lives a full life in New York’s fun lane. “I like to be in the middle of the action and party.” Even holidays are extraordinary. When asked what kind of vacations she likes, Furness responded with a throaty laugh, “Really, really good ones!” This Aussie actress sucks the marrow out of life. Her upbeat attitude is contagious and overflows into all she does.

Her lust for life is palpable. “Let’s dance!” she says as our chat commences. Furness dances to the beat of her own heart. When something touches her she does something about it, earning herself a recent Tribeca disruptor award for “Badass behaviour for the public good”. Jackman’s touching Instagram comment was: “So proud of my incredible, disrupting, world-changing, heart-filled, extraordinary wife.”

From class clown to change-maker

As a class clown, Furness felt compelled to act when a friend said, “You should do that for a living.” Furness was gobs-smacked. “I could get paid for that?” So the adventurous Sagittarian set off to give it a go, leaving her Melbourne base to thrive in the thick of New York’s American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Forty film and television roles followed, including the 1995 prison drama *Corelli*, where she met Hugh Jackman, and

the iconic 1988 feminist film *Shame*. Furness fitted the role of the motorbike-riding, leather-clad lawyer roaring into a small town to right wrongs like it was tailor made. *Shame* was her favourite role because she was a woman with something to say; a fighter for justice. “I realised that your work could really affect people after *Shame* when girls would come up and thank me for telling their story.”

Like a courageous cowgirl, she protected the vulnerable and put the groping guys in their place. This very timely topic, spotlighted by the #MeToo movement, saw a re-digitalised *Shame* shown at the Australian Screen Forum in New York recently. Furness agrees this role was written for her. “The reaction was as powerful as it was 30 years ago.”

An empathetic lens

Furness is a shameless spokeswoman for those without a voice. “I always speak out; I literally saw an injustice in the adoption system and shared my opinion.” Furness heard of the plight of a Chinese woman who had found a baby to adopt in China but couldn’t bring the child into Australia. This snowballed into a campaign in 2008 to change Australian adoption laws through Adopt Change and National Adoption Awareness Week (NAAW).

Her empathy for both parents and children was amplified by her own experiences. Sent to boarding school by her single working mother at age five, Furness felt the hardship of living far from family. “I can relate to a child feeling on their own, so I have an empathetic reaction to children on their own.”

After failed IVF attempts, Furness and Jackman pursued their original intent to adopt. “I went to a meeting to start the adoption process and was appalled at how difficult and negative it was and how long it took. I saw these families and these kids and what’s stuck in the middle is bureaucratic

BS. Couples desperate to adopt [are] blocked from adopting kids who are desperate for care.” They eventually adopted two beautiful children from overseas, where it was easier.

Being of service

Furness explains that the difficult and drawn-out process of adoption in Australia makes it near impossible. “Almost 40,000 children in Australia need a permanent home, but last year there were only 315 adoptions in Australia.” The global need is even greater. There are approximately 18 million orphans who have lost both parents, for whom Furness feels “ethical adoption is a pathway to permanency”.

Children in long-term foster care suffer a life in limbo, moving up to 20 times in their childhood, and lack the stability of a lasting home. An unsettled childhood contributes to difficulties with education, relationships, the legal system, poor health, early pregnancy and homelessness.

To support Adopt Change’s initiatives to assist carers and children, the NSW Government announced that the 2018–2019 budget will contribute \$7 million over three years to Adopt Change’s My Forever Family NSW to recruit, train and support more foster carers, guardians and adoptive parents. After hearing of the contribution, Furness says she “literally did a dance for joy. We’ve worked with existing experts for years, including Trust Based Relational Intervention from the Karyn Purvis Institute. Our initiative is training the carers so they know how to care for the children.”

If you’d like to assist needy children, Adopt Change CEO Renée Carter suggests, “The first step is to find out what type of care is needed in your area at adoptchange.org.au then apply to be a foster carer, guardian or adoptive parent.” Carter explains why it’s so hard to adopt in Australia compared to countries with gold-standard practices like The Netherlands, North Korea and Sweden.



“It is important to retain rigorous processes around adoption, as the rights and safety of a child should always be central. However, the inconsistencies of approach across Australia often add delays and complexity to the process. We need to continue to shine a light on the fact that all children deserve access to safety, nurture and permanency, and therefore we need to ensure adoption is an accessible option for the children that adoption is appropriate for.”

Furness did face critics when she started her crusade for kids, but passion pushed her through fears. Furness says the process of getting the organisation off the ground has been “long and laborious”.

“We had to overcome prejudice and stigma and people not wanting the system to work,” she tells lifestyle website 9Honey.

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“At the same time I realised that part of the backlash was coming from a place where people had experienced their own trauma or hardships due to past practices that involved forced, closed and unethical adoptions.” She says it took years for the organisation to have a voice, but says they were prepared to “go the long road to ensure more children find permanent and loving homes”.

Furness would like to see “double the number of kids adopted in half the time it takes now”. Children and carers continue to suffer while the wheels of change slowly turn. Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott agrees. “For too long it has been too hard to adopt.”

Furness is forging a network for change. “I want to help to mobilise the most influential leaders across government, business and civil society and join forces in creating innovative solutions and policies. I believe that, with unity and using all of our voices, we can ensure children will belong in a safe and loving home.”

Adoption is just one area Furness devotes her time to. “My mum was always of service. I always knew you contributed a certain amount of your time to a cause.” Through Adopt Change, Furness is a driving force for improving adoption programs, procedures, legislation



and raising awareness of the issues of vulnerable children. On an international level, she cofounded Hopeland (ourhopeland.org/about/) in 2014, which is committed to building a world where every child grows up in a safe, loving family. She is also patron of the Lighthouse Foundation for displaced children in Melbourne, Australia; World Vision ambassador; patron of the Bone Marrow Donor Institute for children with leukaemia; patron of International Adoptive Families of Queensland; a board member for Worldwide Orphans Foundation Australia; and newly appointed on the board of the UN Women for Peace Association in New York. She was named NSW Australian of the Year in 2015. Also in 2015, Furness was honoured in Washington as Advocate of the Year by Kidsave.

A wholesome life

To stay centred amid the celebrity cyclone, Furness is an avid meditator, and keeping the family healthy is top priority. "I'm big on health and the environment. We've created this toxic environment with our food and with social media. I'm very conscious about the food my family eats and where it comes from. We have a deep respect for the ritual of sharing the family meal." She enforces restricted screen time, eats mostly organic and encourages exercise.

Furness' voice becomes even warmer when talking about her own children. "My kids are fully aware of their privilege in the world because they've travelled with us for World Vision. They're both very conscious. My daughter speaks out for social justice and my son wants to study sustainable agriculture in countries that need the resources."

On motherhood, Furness says, "They teach you more than you can possibly learn on your own. They highlight all aspects of yourself and make you attend to them." Oscar inspired Furness to get involved with World Vision when at five years old, after watching World Vision TV ads, he filled his wagon with water and wanted to take it to Africa.

Providing hope

Furness extended her efforts to assist vulnerable children in 2014 when she founded Hopeland with Nicholas Evans. Shocked at the sight of a two-year-old street kid sniffing glue in Cambodia, Furness decided she wanted to work with organisations and leaders to help every child thrive.



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Hopeland pioneers innovative solutions and builds new partnerships to prevent family separation, reunify children who are separated from their families and mobilise a movement of families to support children who are growing up outside family care. The mission of Hopeland is to ensure children are nurtured in loving families by fortifying family, empowering the community and driving creative solutions for vulnerable and abandoned children globally.

"There are 157 million orphans in the world and 87 per cent have family, but due to poverty, lack of resources or education they relinquish their children to an orphanage. Hopeland is going to the root by addressing poverty, funding single mothers in Africa to empower families to stay together," Furness explains.

Role model for all

When asked what she does for fun, Furness fires up. "I love to create. I cook, I paint, I sculpt and I've just finished designing a beach house. If I wasn't an actress, I'd be a designer. I love interior design and inventing things that are practical but also beautiful — looking at a space and creating magic."

Furness enjoys playing with her kids like a kid. "The whole family is creative. The child within me is still alive." She also has aspirations to direct more, as she considers directing short film *Standing Room Only* a career highlight. She is also scouting for a good script, potentially on menopause. "We need more female writers and to change the image of women we see. I want a role model for older women."

Furness' fortitude, compassion and positivity make her an amazing female role model. She has the courage to stand by causes and calls for others to stand with her. When asked what she'd like to be remembered for, in her typically humble way Furness responds, "For bringing people together." She invites everyone to come together for the kids through volunteering, fundraising, donating, writing to your MP or remaining aware of issues by receiving updates at adoptchange.org.au or ourhopeland.org.

Caroline Robertson is a writer, naturopath and first-aid trainer. For consultations, courses and retreats please see carolinerobertson.com.au