



# FREEDOM FIGHTER

Project Futures founder Stephanie Lorenzo is a shining example of how one big-hearted, headstrong woman can make a massive impact on others' lives.

WORDS / CAROLINE ROBERTSON

**I**n a world where abuse hides in the shadows arose one woman ... her mission ... to help the helpless, to emancipate the enslaved, to speak for the mute." This could be Stephanie Lorenzo's biopic trailer, but the inspiring leader humbly insists she's just an average Aussie girl who enjoys snowboarding, travelling and autobiographies.

Lorenzo's whole world changed when at 21 she read the real-life account of a child sold into prostitution. Though many are outraged by human trafficking, what made this young woman different was her decision and determination to do something about it. She couldn't carry on with her privileged life and ignore the atrocities.

Today, at 31, the Sydneysider has achieved what few would dream of doing

in a lifetime. Since she founded the not-for-profit organisation Project Futures in 2009, it has raised over AU\$4.5 million, attracted more than 8000 supporters and helped hundreds escape the trafficking trap. She's also been named among *The Australian Financial Review* and Westpac 100 Women of Influence and been nominated as Australian of the Year.

It's a tall feat from this five-foot-one Macquarie University International Communications graduate. Lorenzo shares how she was propelled from complacency to positive action.

## ON YOUR BIKE

Born in the Philippines to Chinese parents and raised in Australia, Lorenzo was instilled with philanthropic values from an early age. "My parents sparked ethics of giving and gratitude in me,"

she says. "They were always helping out in the community."

At 21, Lorenzo's wanderlust led her to Cambodia where she joined a bike trip to raise funds for The Muscular Dystrophy Association of Australia. "It was at that time I picked up a book by Cambodian woman Somaly Mam and read it cover to cover in one night." Somaly Mam was sold into sexual slavery aged 12 and later, with no resources, set up AFESIP Cambodia, an organisation with safe houses for recovery, education and reintegration of survivors.

Wondering what she could do to help, Lorenzo decided to do the same cycle challenge the next year and get her friends to come. Armed with an articulate voice and a "don't ask, don't get attitude", she rallied her network for a feel-good getaway, giving back to the

host country. Twenty-one people came on that first cycle, raising US\$80,000.

"I never intended to start a charity but, after meeting people in the safe houses, I realised how horrible their situation was and decided to keep running events and enlist others," Lorenzo recalls. "I wanted to create an outlet for people to help, have fun and give back rather than guilt people into giving."

## FUN FUNDRAISING

Back home, Lorenzo was faced with a quandary: "How do you engage a selfie-obsessed millennial generation? And how do you get them to care about issues they can't imagine?" Her answer? Invite them to a party with a purpose. "That was how Project Futures was born; party after party, bike ride after bike ride, we wanted social networking to equal social responsibility," she says.

Her ways of making fundraising fun is the secret to Project Futures' success. Who wouldn't pay to toss their boss out of a plane? Toss the Boss was just one of Project Futures' 2016 events, with 40 willing Sydney business leaders collectively raising AU\$60,000 by plummeting from a plane at 14,000 feet.

Project Futures continuously hosts successful small and big events that have raised over AU\$300,000 to assist them to eradicate human trafficking and slavery in the Asia Pacific. Events vary from movie nights to overseas adventures. Whether organising your own fundraiser, joining an existing event or donating directly to Project Futures, Lorenzo enthuses that there are many avenues to say no to human trafficking.

Ever wanted to see Cambodia? What better way to immerse yourself in the culture than via a 10-day cycle through ancient Angkor Wat, meandering along the Mekong river and pausing for lunch in rustic rural villages before exploring the exciting city of Phnom Penh? "You also see first-hand how your fundraising efforts help transform and restore the lives of survivors," says Lorenzo.

How about soaking up the scenery on a Great Ocean Walk? On this three-day trek, participants are guided by a shipwreck historian and an Aboriginal elder from Apollo Bay to the Twelve Apostles. Or, try a 10-day tour of Spain's sacred Camino de Santiago trail and absorb Spain's culture, nature, art and architecture with kindred spirits.

## HELPING THE HELPERS

Since 2009, Lorenzo has built Project Futures from a one-woman show into

a team of passionate professionals and partners dedicating their time and talents to ease others' adversity. But it hasn't been easy. "It's very hard to constantly ask favours but it's something we need," she explains. "Innate empathy is in everyone, but I wasn't afraid to go out of my comfort zone to act on it."

Lorenzo's infectious enthusiasm and indomitable spirit are evident when watching a movie of a Cambodian cycle challenge. Everyone's muddy, some injured after a hard day's ride, yet Stephanie sees them through the potholes with a smile and encouraging words. By trip's end, the group's exhilaration and sense of achievement is palpable — they'd made a compassionate connection with the Cambodian people that was priceless.

Where do funds raised go? "Project Futures informs, inspires and equips others to combat human trafficking," Lorenzo explains. "It raises awareness and money for existing anti-slavery and human trafficking organisations."

Focusing on the Asia-Pacific region, Project Futures helps to transform and

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restore the lives of victims, survivors and those at risk of human trafficking, slavery and exploitation. It achieves this through holistic prevention, education, rehabilitation, reintegration, employment and advocacy. "We focus on support of specific organisations that meet our criteria so we can set up sustainable, long-term infrastructure for prevention as well as problem solving." Project Futures is not a grant giver.

Lorenzo is resolute about their standards: "We track our progress closely and continuously support the same projects, keeping costs minimal and very transparent. We visit partners every year and publish our progress report bimonthly plus an annual report." Supporters can see how they're making a tangible contribution to needs such as housing, counselling, medical care, education and employment.

## STOPPING THE MEAT MARKET

Human trafficking is the fastest-growing crime industry worldwide, worth an estimated AU\$150 billion. Eighty per cent of the victims are girls. It involves the illegal trade of human beings for the purpose of cheap or slave labour, sexual and domestic servitude or forced marriage. Victims are drawn in due to poverty, poor education, migration or kidnapping.

Shockingly, there are an estimated 45.8 million people enslaved globally, including 2 million children being sold and 4300 people enslaved in Australia today. "Even Australia has victims of domestic servitude, sex trade, construction, hospitality and agriculture," says Lorenzo. "Businesses need to be aware of migrant workers' rights."

Project Futures has partnered with three Australian groups since 2011 to uproot the weeds in our own backyard. The Salvation Army's Trafficking and Slavery Safe House provides supported accommodation for female victims of trafficking or slavery. The Freedom Advocates Project champions the rights of people who have experienced human trafficking or slavery. The Child Wise Protective Behaviours Personal Safety Program promotes strategies and awareness of "safe" behaviours for children to avoid and address abuse.

In Cambodia, poverty and poor education have led to an estimated 256,800 people enslaved nationwide with about 22 per cent victims of forced marriage. Cambodian organisations supported by Project Futures are AFESIP, an eradication and empowerment charity for victims of trafficking, and the Cambodian Children's Trust (CCT), which educates kids to escape poverty and become ethical community leaders.

CCT runs programs in schools and youth centres around Battambang to prevent vulnerable children from being trafficked, subjected to child labour or ending up in orphanages. It costs just US\$2500 for a Cambodian girl to train in her chosen vocation, so Project Futures' funds are sponsoring significant changes.

## SUCCESS STORIES

Lorenzo's real rewards are when she hears of the heartening progress of Project Futures' recipients. "The hard work didn't seem so hard when we learnt stories like Nora's," she says. A girl rescued from sexual abuse who Lorenzo met on her first bike ride in 2009, "[Nora has] since earned a



## THINKERS & DOERS

### STEPHANIE LORENZO

Bachelor of Psychology and is working back in the safe house that sheltered her." Or there's the young Cambodian woman who recovered in a safe house and got a spot on a local radio station to share her story.

Lorenzo also tells the tale of Ly Thia, who survived and thrived due to her unbreakable spirit and AFESIP Cambodia. "At only 10 years old, Ly Thia was living in Vietnam and was sold by her aunt. She was unpaid, overworked, abused, raped and dragged from brothel to brothel." Eventually, she was given sanctuary in a safe house. "She decided not make her past equal her future. Not to be angry at the world. To help people and tell her story so she could be an example to inspire others."

Then there's Sina Vann, who was forced to service 20-30 clients a day in brothels from a young age. Today, she's salvaging her life and hope thanks to AFESIP and says she is deeply grateful for a second chance: "Love is very important for us because we never got it from anyone. We have power now because you all support us."

Another woman, Srey, was being trafficked from Cambodia to China with other girls. Immigration at Siem Reap

Airport grew suspicious and detained the group, arresting their female escort and referring the girls to AFESIP. While in the care of AFESIP's recovery centre, Srey was given safe and secure housing, legal assistance, medical care, counselling, support and other life skills training before enrolling in a vocational course.

She's now realising her dream to run her own small restaurant. "I am very happy and proud to have graduated, now able to use a skill I love to earn money and support my family. I like making food. When I have enough money, I want to open my own small restaurant. It is a dream I have had since I was young."

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Lorenzo is a big believer in the power of connection, "having fun, being social and attaching that to a good purpose". Never doubt you can make a difference. Even simple efforts can reap great results and, remember, a little goes a long way in developing countries. Take, for example, Samara, who hosted a fundraising event for Project Futures. A trivia buff, she chose an afternoon of games at her local bowling club, created a Facebook page, linked it to her ticketing platform and raised AU\$5500!

Lorenzo offers simple strategies to fundraise for any charity that moves you. For example, instead of getting birthday or Christmas presents, ask people to donate to your chosen cause. Host an event like a morning tea, party, karaoke, bowling, movie night, auction, workshop or theme day or offer your services. To up the ante, ask your work to match your donation dollar for dollar.

**Above left: Project Futures participant Mel with two AFESIP safe house residents after finishing a half marathon in 2011. Below: Making friends in Cambodia on the International Cycle Challenge 2014.**



You can also be a conscious consumer, she says. "Check if your clothes contributed to child labour by asking where they're made." Lorenzo suggests using Good On You, a free app showing which brands follow ethical practices for people and the planet. Contacting companies to question why they support unfair work practices can also create waves of change. A recent example is when Apple stopped sourcing cobalt mined by Congolese children due to public uproar at the hellish conditions.

Encourage your company to get involved and get the gift of giving like Leo Young, CEO of Synergy Fitness, did: "As a father and grandfather of girls, this issue struck a real chord and made me realise how truly privileged we are in Australia, but also that there were girls around the world living without hope of ever being able to change their fate," he says. "I wanted to use the resources at my disposal to make a difference and support Project Futures."

### FUTURE GENERATION

When asked what the future holds for the mother of Project Futures, Lorenzo sighs deeply. "This may shock you but, though I'll always be involved with Project Futures, I've decided to resign as CEO because I don't feel I'm the best person to lead it forward. It has been an extremely difficult decision to let go [but] this work was truly tough and challenging and I need a break. I believe everything in life has a cycle. These cycles allow you to explore, discover and get curious again — not stay stuck."

Lorenzo won't slow down for long, though: she was born to shine and enlighten others. Her legacy will live on in Project Futures and a movement she calls Gen F (Generation Futures) — an ageless platform of mutual passion, authenticity, meaning and ethics that Lorenzo embodies. It's about the balance of taking care of ME and WE. As Somaly Mam, the activist whose book sparked a movement, advises: "Love yourself, but life is not just about yourself. Life is also about sharing, about participation, about giving and forgiving. We have a lot of space; our heart is never full. The more we give love, the more we've got." 🍷

■ For more on Stephanie Lorenzo and Project Futures, visit [projectfutures.com](http://projectfutures.com) or @projectfutures on Facebook and Twitter.

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