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LIMITLESS

GOING TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH TO MAKE CHANGE



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA

Being Challenged

NOT CONTENT WITH PERSONAL SUCCESS, THESE UWA GRADUATES ARE DETERMINED TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE. AND, AS LIZ MCGRATH DISCOVERED, THEIR PASSION MAKES THEM UNSTOPPABLE.

“I’m as busy as a blue-arsed fly,” laughs explorer Dr Kate Leeming (BPEd 1988, GradDipEd 1989, DEd 2016) when *Uniview* catches up with her over the phone in Melbourne. In 36 hours she’ll leave to cycle 1700km down the Baja Peninsula, from San Diego in the US to La Paz in Mexico. It’s the first of six major cycling expeditions she has planned – one on each continent of the globe.

While each is a major feat in itself, testing endurance, bravery and physical and psychological toughness, for Kate they’re just the precursors to an even mightier challenge: the first-ever bicycle crossing of the Antarctic continent, via the South Pole. The gruelling trek, which she has named ‘Breaking the Cycle – South Pole’, will cover 2800km in 60 days.

Kate approaches the frozen Beaufort Sea, on a polar training expedition in Arctic Yukon, Canada.
Photo credit: Claudio von Planta

“The conditions will be harder than anything I’ve ever attempted and the preparation will be intense,” she says. “The Antarctic plateau is extremely high, mostly between 2000m and 3000m, and the extreme cold exacerbates the oxygen deficiency. There’s lots of things to get right but each new journey is a learning experience. If you live in fear you’ll get nowhere in life.”

The southernmost point of the earth is a long way from the Northam wheat and sheep farm in WA’s Avon Valley where Kate enjoyed a “grounded upbringing” with two sisters and two brothers. Well-known for her sporting prowess, she reached State level in four different sports, despite the lack of proper training available. “I’m a farm girl so you didn’t have coaches,” she says. “You were thrown in the pool and told to swim, and it was the same on the field with athletics and hockey.”

As well as prodigious mental toughness, Kate also developed a fascination for early pioneers. In 1897, her great-great uncle, William Snell, cycled across the Nullarbor Plain from the WA goldfields to Melbourne, so he could propose to his childhood sweetheart, but it was a chance meeting with veteran UK polar explorer Robert Swan OBE that cemented her passion for adventure. “He took me under his wing and gave me the confidence to take it to another level,” she says. Combined with her experiences of cycling through Europe in her 20s, those qualities are driving Kate to take on one trek after another.

But the UWA Physical Education graduate, who was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Education in 2016, is not content with just challenging herself: she also uses her adventures to highlight pressing global issues such as extreme poverty, sustainability and education. Her Breaking the Cycle brand includes an education program that connects students around the world, enabling them to follow her travels, tap into the experiential learning curriculum and discover the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, as well as key issues in each region.

“You can’t underestimate the importance of education,” she says. “Kids need to get out there and explore, to find their own passions and relate them to the world to understand how they fit into it a little better.”



Kate crossing Savory Creek on the Canning Stock Route as a part of her 25,000km Great Australian Cycle Expedition. Photo credit: Kate Leeming.

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Then, hopefully, they will make better decisions about the future and where we are heading.”

Uniview caught up with Kate again after she had completed her journey down the Baja Divide. By then she was midway through a polar training expedition in Iceland, with the Finke River in Central Australia, Skeleton Coast in Namibia, Bolivian Altiplano and Indian Himalaya next on her itinerary to prepare for Antarctica. Even before her 2018 odyssey began, she had already pedalled enough kilometres to go twice around the world, overcoming injury, illness and every possible obstacle on her way across the hottest and coldest landmasses on earth. One suspects that when she starts out towards the South Pole, nothing is going to get in her way.

SAYING NO TO POVERTY

In another part of the world, UWA graduate Michael Sheldrick (CitWA LLB, BA 2013, BA (Hons) 2013) is also midway through a relentless travel agenda. It’s all part of his New York-based role as Vice President of Global Policy and Government Affairs at Global Citizen, an Australian-grown international group working to build a million action-taking global citizens calling for an end to extreme poverty by 2030.

Fresh off an 18-hour flight from Davos in Switzerland, where he and his colleagues were advocating to government ministers and businesses at the World Economic Forum, he is due to fly to Senegal in a few hours with the chair of the board of the Global Partnership for Education (none other

than former Australian prime minister Julia Gillard) and its Ambassador singer Rihanna. There, he’ll petition for US\$2.3 billion to support education in developing countries.

“I remembered I still needed malaria tablets for Africa,” he says. “Luckily there’s a late night pharmacy opposite our offices on Broadway!”

The 29-year-old former Young Western Australian of the Year majored in political science and international relations at UWA. He credits two high-school teachers (from Clarkson Community High School and Mindarie Senior College) and the guidance of his university lecturers for pushing him to overcome learning difficulties and aim high... and he’s probably achieved more than he ever dreamed of already. Not only has he worked with world leaders, musicians and philanthropists including former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Beyoncé, Usher and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, he also has a weekly schedule that might include working on United Nations agreements such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (“I rely on the letter-writing skills I learnt in commercial practice on almost a daily basis”); drafting speaking points for one of their influential ambassadors; and working with the homeless.



Michael travelled with pop star Rihanna who is the Ambassador for the Global Partnership for Education.

Michael has coordinated advocacy campaigns for Global Citizen that include efforts to eradicate polio and promote universal access to sanitation and education. That work has contributed to the group raising US\$35 billion in financial commitments in the past six years – funds that will support and benefit global health, education and gender equality. He also serves as Global Citizen’s chief representative to the United Nations, where he oversees the organisation’s outreach to diplomats from all over the world.

“The future of humanity ultimately rests in the hands of citizens,” he says, “and our goal of a world without extreme poverty is only going to be realised through the constant drumbeat of citizen-led movements clamouring for change. What I do involves a lot of work and travel but there’s never any shortage of Australians here in New York (see our story on Shakira Donovan on page 23), so you never feel too far from home. I consider it a privilege to be able to work full-time on a cause I care so much about.”



Michael Sheldrick (right of picture) with former first lady and advocate for change Michelle Obama and Chair of the Global Board of Global Citizen Peter Murphy.

SURFING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Closer to home, Perth-born social entrepreneur Sarah Sands (née Vann-Sander, MEnvSc 2014) is showing just as much passion for her cause. Her social enterprise, Sandswell Inc, is based on the premise that by creating a connection with self, community and nature, surfing can be a potent vehicle to inspire social change.

"It has the power to bridge the gaps between race, faith, gender, sexuality and socio-economic status because in the eyes of the ocean everyone is equal," she says.

Sarah's childhood was spent "loving the sea", while a stint living with her family in the Northern Territory also engendered a passion for country and culture. During her final year of a master's in Marine and Coastal Management at UWA, she sat on the national board of the Surfrider Foundation – an international marine conservation organisation – as well as running its local chapter. Never one to laze around, she also squeezed in a full-time job as senior community organiser at The Wilderness Society WA.

A 2015 scholarship to the School for Social Entrepreneurs, where she completed a nine-month incubator program, helped her to develop and launch Sandswell.

The new mum's Margaret River-based non-profit organisation combines her passions for the ocean, science and the community. It runs surfing programs (including classes at schools in the Kimberley and in Aboriginal communities), as well as events such the Summer X Salt Markets in Perth's coastal suburbs of Trigg and Scarborough. All aim to target one or more of four impact areas: sustainability and environmental connection; gender equality; mental health and wellness; and leadership and team-building.

"Projects like these have a strong social impact in many areas on different scales," she says, "from supporting people with mental health issues through learning to surf, to social and economic development through tourism collaborations. Some impacts are immediate and others are longer term."

They're issues she learned something about during trips to Sri Lanka in 2015 and 2016 where she worked on empowering local women in the community through surfing while taking part in The Fresh Air Project and Surfing The Nations.

"I also attended the international Surf + Social Good Summit in Bali in 2015 where leading changemakers from around the world came together to connect, collaborate and innovate new ways to use surfing to create positive impact in the world," she says.

Currently Sarah is enjoying bonding with her new daughter Florence while her "wonderful team keeps things going", but she already has a new project in her sights: setting up a pilot program to test a Sandswell Sea School. "It's a long-time and long-term vision to create an outdoor, education-focused marine institute for school-aged children to discover the ocean through science and adventure, up and down the WA coastline," she says.

"Projects like these have a strong social impact in many areas on different scales, from supporting people with mental health issues through learning to surf, to social and economic development through tourism collaborations. Some impacts are immediate and others are longer term."

Photo credit: Ming Nomchong.

WAR ON PLASTIC

The chance viewing of an advertisement on television was the catalyst for Darren Lomman's (BEng 2007) latest mission. The Perth-based entrepreneur and engineer started the GreenBatch Foundation, through which he is building WA's first-ever plastic-reprocessing facility, after the TV spot warned there would be more plastic than fish in our oceans by 2050.

"I was horrified when I saw that ad," he says. "I actually thought it might be fake news but I did some investigating and discovered that because there is currently no reprocessing happening in WA, our plastic is sold on to the international waste markets. Only one to two per cent is actually reprocessed into new products. The rest ends up in landfills, oceans or waste incinerators."

It's the latter that drives the biggest demand for waste generated in WA, says the 34-year-old former Leeming High School student. "It turns out there's a huge industry around burning waste to generate electricity. It's such a polluting thing for our world – burning plastic can generate 30 times more pollution than burning coal. When I figured that out, I knew I needed to do something."

Darren is the brains behind Dreamfit, a company born out of a meeting with a paralysed motorcyclist when he was a third-year engineering student. Agreeing to modify his bike, Darren was soon creating a range of equipment for people with disabilities. After selling the company, however, he was looking for a new challenge, and here was one that was not only close to his heart but that also played to another of his interests: the booming 3D-printing market.

His goal is to establish a reprocessing plant that will handle polyethylene terephthalate (PET), the kind of plastic used in bottles for water and soft drinks. The plant will turn PET into the filament that goes into 3D printers, which can then be used to make objects as diverse as toys, tools and even prosthetic limbs.

"My idea is to partner with schools and we're already trialling this with a few primary schools in the local area," he says. "Students collect bottles and drop them into collection bins. We pick the bins up and turn the plastic into filament, which we'll give back to the schools for their 3D printers. It is a win-win."



Photo credit: Rhys Woolf.

"It turns out there's a huge industry around burning waste to generate electricity. It's such a polluting thing for our world – burning plastic can generate 30 times more pollution than burning coal."

The scheme has been enthusiastically received, with Darren raising an astonishing \$75,000 through crowd-funding ("I was so surprised, absolutely amazed because I thought rubbish was pretty unsexy"). At the time of writing this story, an agreement was being struck with UWA for potential funding and a site for the plant.

Darren, who works out of the UWA Business School, says he's also been

overwhelmed with physical support from student volunteers and interns. Passionate about recycling, they are assisting both with getting the plant off the ground and all the peripheral tasks such as building a website, marketing and liaising with schools. "There's a long way to go but we're all working together to make this work," Darren says with a grin. "It's going to be such a great thing for Western Australia."

For more information on Dr Kate Leeming's Breaking the Cycle program, go to: breakingthecycle.education kateleeming.com

For more information on Global Citizen, go to: globalcitizen.org

For more information on Sandswell, go to: sandswellsurf.com

For more information on Darren Lomman's GreenBatch program, go to: greenbatch.com