



Warrior at heart

In one of the world's most corrupt cities where child sexual abuse is rife, remarkable young Australian Genevieve de la Reux has made a commitment to rescuing and rehabilitating boys and girls through a foundation she set up in Nairobi all on her own.

WORDS BY: KATRINA HOLDEN

On her third day in Nairobi, Kenya, Genevieve de la Reux, aged in her 20s, stood in a mission hospital in a slum, scrubbing in for a caesarean on a gang-raped nine-year-old girl. She was eight months pregnant and weighed 27 kilograms.

"Right then and there, I found out more about the epidemic of child rape everywhere, but particularly in the poorer communities in the world," says Sydney-born Genevieve, who was raised in Bowral in New South Wales.

The story of how this dedicated young woman started a crusade to fight child rape, sexual violence and human trafficking in Africa is both awe-inspiring and deeply moving.

With a broken childhood during which she experienced neglect and abuse, Genevieve developed a strong sense of social justice very early on. She has suffered mental health

issues and has battled anorexia and bulimia in the past.

"When I somehow came out of that, I was reflecting on everything that happened. I thought of a younger version of me and wished I'd had somebody I could depend on. Having that support would have changed my life — for the better," says Genevieve.

In 2011, when she was working in financial services, Genevieve became less interested in Sydney's corporate world and more involved with volunteer work. She raised well over \$150,000 in two years for a local charity, but she became increasingly disheartened at the use of funds and charities giving handouts instead of hand-ups.

She shifted her studies from law to psychology, with a goal to eventually study medicine, and planned a trip to Africa

on the proviso she'd secure a one-month hospital placement as a medical observer.

Referred to a group through the United Nations, she paid US\$5,000 for the placement, only to arrive at Nairobi's airport one evening in January 2015 with no one there to collect her. "The whole thing was extortion. I sat around at the airport then had to find my way into Nairobi," recalls Genevieve.

Determined, she door-knocked on hospitals for three days.

After standing in on that first caesarean, Genevieve immediately began the process of setting up the GA Foundation in Kenya, working on the business structure, returning to Australia and registering the charity.

"I was looking for more of a purpose. I wanted something that was going to be very effective in an area that was very desperate for help," she says.

The first child Genevieve rescued was 11-year-old Jane. At 10, Jane and her four-year-old sister were living in a slum. Their mother was missing and Jane went to beg for food. She was gang-raped by a group of men. At just 10 years old, Jane was pregnant and in need of a caesarean.

"What really made me know I had to start the foundation then and there was that these nuns were forcing these little girls to keep and love their babies. Jane couldn't even hold



her because the baby was a reminder of the rape and trauma. The nuns were beating her because she couldn't love her baby. I pulled Jane aside and told her it wasn't her fault and it was okay if she didn't love her baby. She broke down in tears and cried."

In Kenya, if a woman — or a girl — falls pregnant out of wedlock, they are ostracised. Even teachers would shun Jane, despite being a victim of rape. So Genevieve arranged for her to go to boarding school, where she had to conceal her story. "Today, she's absolutely nailing it," she says.

Genevieve, a nominee for Australian of the Year in 2017 and for the Class of 2018

Young Global Leaders Award, admits the most severe cases have deeply affected her. She found herself helping a three-year-old boy whose father had raped him and then set him on fire. "I went and saw him and I broke down," says Genevieve of young Brandon who, having suffered third-degree burns to 80 per cent of his body, wound up in a hospital burns unit for nearly a year.

"The sadistic level of violence really got to me. I was an absolute mess. I was terrified of going back and seeing that child and of what he'd been through. Something snapped inside my head and I realised that's the problem — that's what the world is thinking about this little kid who needs my help more than anyone right now. It was a real turning point." ▶

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HOW TO SUPPORT THE GA FOUNDATION

The foundation has deductible gift recipient (DGR) status and so all donations are 100 per cent tax deductible. Payment methods include credit card, PayPal and direct bank transfer. Donate at gafoundation.co/donations.

The Naisula Project accepts annual educational sponsorship, putting one student through private school for a year. A yearly cost of \$1,472 includes 12 months of school fees, sporting equipment, textbooks and uniforms.

The GA Foundation also accepts donations for projects such as another Angela Project crisis shelter. Genevieve thinks another 20 crisis centres are needed in Nairobi.



Genevieve will be in Australia from 1–20 November 2018 to meet potential corporate donors.

She will be visiting Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne, meeting with some of her major donors, including Bunnik Tours in Adelaide. She welcomes approaches by any company looking to support a charity which guarantees donations will go direct to the cause. She is available to present at private or public functions.

GA FOUNDATION
ABN 49 769 685 389.
gafoundation.co/donations
Email: g@gafoundation.co
Facebook: facebook.com/GAFoundation15/

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All of the children Genevieve has rescued have thrived — even the worst cases like Brandon. “They are now my strongest, toughest kids, who are compassionate and loving and top of their class. That’s what keeps me going,” she says.

Several girls rescued by Genevieve endowed her with the Kenyan name “Naisula”, which aptly translates to “warrior girl”. Since setting up the foundation Genevieve has been thrown in jail and accused of raping and kidnapping children in extortion attempts. Nairobi, she says, “is a disgraceful part of the world” where people have a dog-eat-dog mentality.

Today, she and her partner live outside Nairobi in the countryside — along with the kids in their care.

One gets the sense that Genevieve, too, is finding healing through her efforts. There is no doubt she’s found her calling — and her work is having greater reach beyond the slums of Nairobi. Through her Facebook page Genevieve regularly receives direct messages from people around the world she has never met who, after watching her heartfelt videos, are inspired to share their own stories of abuse.

“I don’t sugar-coat the issues,” says Genevieve. “I want donors to know what the issues really are and where their money goes. Despite what I do and the horror of it all, there’s never been a point in my life when I’ve been happier.”

Foundation projects

The GA Foundation has now saved 138 children, and counts a four-month-old girl and a nine-month-old boy as the youngest rescued. The foundation is split into projects.

GA FOUNDATION

The GA Foundation provides emergency medical and psychiatric care to children who are victims of rape, abuse and sex trafficking, aiming to rescue and rehabilitate them.

NAISULA FOUNDATION

Children in most cases cannot return to where they came from, so the Naisula Foundation is focused on education sponsorship and providing schooling options for those children who have been rehabilitated.

THE ANGELA PROJECT

The Angela Project is the name given to a crisis centre in Nairobi’s worst slum. It was established by the foundation when they realised there were literally thousands of sexual violence cases a week that weren’t reaching them simply because the victims — women and young children — couldn’t afford the \$1.50 bus fare to hospital. The Angela Project crisis centre fills the gap, providing an accessible facility in town. Women are also taught vocational skills. **TB**