

Elysia Cook
McDermott

Children Today, Leaders Tomorrow: Spotlight on Bali Children Foundation

July 14, 2018

WRITING

During the summer of 2018, I went on a solo backpacking trip through Southeast Asia. My growing interest in and support for global nonprofits (which stemmed out of my work at Vitamin Angels) inspired me to give more purpose to my trip: rather than travel for the sake of traveling, I wanted to use the opportunity to share the stories of NGOs in the areas I visited. The team at Bali Children Foundation, located towards the northern part of Bali, Indonesia, warmly welcomed me into their world and shared the moving stories behind their life-changing work.



Luh Eka leads the way to her home.

The afternoon view was magnificent from where Margaret Barry stood, offering a prolonged glimpse of prolific greenery, scattered homes, and a stripe of the ocean on the horizon.

We paused for a moment atop one of the hilly paths woven through the Balinese village of Kayuputih, en route to the home of ten-year-old Luh Eka Cahyani. Unfazed by the midday heat and the steep grade of the road, the child scampered ahead of our group in a burst of youthful energy.

“She’s very smart and has a lot of potential,” Barry mused, watching the young girl. “But she’s at risk of being pulled out of the program.”

The program in question is the Bali Children Foundation (BCF), a nonprofit organization that provides supplemental schooling to children across the island.

Started by Barry sixteen years ago, following the 2002 Bali bombing, the Foundation serves disadvantaged children to provide them with a quality education and the cornerstone for greater job prospects.

The bombing, Barry said, brought to light the ramifications of inadequate education and the chance to make a lasting difference.

“We knew it was terror-related, and the villages that had been radicalized, they’d just been offered an opportunity,” she said. “But if they’d been economically empowered, they wouldn’t have taken that path. I didn’t see it as a terror-religion issue; I saw it as a terror-social economic issue. That’s where the concept started.”

Amongst the myriad of challenges that face most nonprofits, BCF also tries to mitigate the additional obstacles that go hand-in-hand with serving rural communities. Many of the families BCF serves work in agriculture, and depend on their children for additional support—often at the expense of their education.

Amongst the myriad of challenges that face most nonprofits, BCF also tries to mitigate the additional obstacles that go hand-in-hand with serving rural communities. Many of the families BCF serves work in agriculture, and depend on their children for additional support—often at the expense of their education.

Consequently, the number of school-aged children who receive an education adequate enough to pursue professions outside of farming and basic labor is next to nil. Luh Eka, whose parents are both laborers, is in danger of falling into that category.

“High illiteracy and poor education have all kinds of income and benefit restrictions beyond jobs,” Barry said.

“Indonesia’s had good economic growth over a 20-year period. But the problem with Bali is the population isn’t skilled, and the skilled jobs are going to people coming from other islands.”

Java, a large island to the west of Bali, serves as a prime example. Its close proximity to Bali, combined with its saturation of universities, has made it all too easy for Javanese workers to ferry over and take on jobs in Bali that require higher education.

For Barry and the rest of the BCF team, which is comprised of 14 full-time staff members and around 100 part-time employees, educating the leaders of tomorrow is the means to implement sustainable, community-wide change.

“By being enabled with education they’ll stay in charge of their community, and we think that’s very important. It’s one of our primary goals, to enrich communities with income or skillsets,” Barry added.



As a BCF student, Luh Eka is learning skills to improve her opportunities for a more prosperous future.

Not wanting to lose sight of Luh Eka, we continued down the slope and followed her to the house at the end of the path. Our intent was to meet her parents, but they were nowhere to be found.

“Ah, they must have been called to work,” Barry surmised. “It’s Sunday; many people work that day.” The majority of laborers work six days out of the week, investing long days to grow and harvest crops under demanding conditions. Even still, pay is minimal.



Margaret Barry, BCF's founder and CEO, believes that education is the key to sustainable change.

Through BCF's programs, though, Barry is optimistic that long-term impact is achievable across Bali. Regardless of when children enter the program—it serves youth from elementary through high school—BCF's initiatives tackle the gaps prevalent in most Balinese schooling systems, and then some.

“We've got five programs that we're delivering as our core education: English in the Village (EITV), Computers in the Village (CITV), Reading in the Village (RITV), teacher training in the village, and the scholarship program. Those are the five areas of delivery,” Barry listed.

Working with Bali's education department, which lends BCF use of local schools after classes are dismissed at 12:30 p.m., the organization administers curriculum and supports student-run clubs during the afternoons. By addressing lessons that are typically overlooked or neglected, students can graduate with greater skillsets that are applicable in a real-world setting.

The program is a slow burn, necessitating patience and dedication. But it's working.

Within the first village BCF targeted over a decade prior, Barry recalled that “at that time 60% of the kids were dropping out after grade six; only 40% were going up to junior high, and 5% up to senior high school. There was massive dropout.”

Today, over 500 graduates have exited the BCF program, and approximately 4,500 children are expected to participate in the program for the upcoming school year. As the word spreads about BCF's work,



One of the school locations in Kayuputih, which BCF uses after hours for its programs.

children and parents alike are more engaged and eager to participate, adding to the momentum that drives the organization's success.

The stories of individual students speak for themselves. One boy, Barry mentioned, was able to earn a hospitality scholarship even after getting his girlfriend pregnant. His intellect and work ethic enabled him to find employment at a restaurant, and he recently purchased his parents a home.

Another girl, whose family lived in a shack amongst the rice fields, was able to purchase land after graduating through the program. She's saving up to build a house and relocate her loved ones. A third student, who was brought up by her grandmother, is now in her fourth year of medical school.

Fitri Sudiarta, a 26-year-old BCF graduate who returned to work as an employee five years later, is one of many students who benefited from the opportunities afforded them by the program. Rather than go into farming or labor, she received a scholarship to study IT at a university, and is able to provide for her one-year-old daughter today.

"Before I chose my subject, I loved computers—especially Excel; math, and science," she enthused. "After that I worked for BCF doing database work, and now I design for graphics." Perhaps she'll inspire her daughter to do the same one day, I quipped. Her mother is already setting an example of the possibilities within her reach.

The prospects for BCF as a whole are also promising. But Barry is in no hurry to expand the Foundation's scope to neighboring islands; at least, not until she feels that the projects on Bali are developing sufficiently. Back at BCF's northern office in Lovina, Barry ran her fingers across a map of the island, dotted with red and pink dots that indicated program locations.

"What we're working on now is a program for next year. In the east there's a volcano that's exploding at the moment—these are the areas we would need to deliver assistance to. There are very few schools, so this is going to be a big job in logistics planning, working out where to put our centers," she said, waving her hand over the zone in question.

"One of the possibilities is covering the area with WiFi towers, finding quality teachers, and developing a model where we find smart people in the community who can become teachers' aides. Then they can deliver this program to the students digitally."

She stopped, looking pensive. "We're being pushed to go to the east to Lombok and Sumba where there is a big need, but I don't think it's ethical for us to go east until we've fixed up our own east," she said.



Fitri Sudiarta, a BCF graduate and current employee, pursued a career in IT after developing a passion for computers within the program.



From left to right: Wayan Anggriani (Project Manager), Margaret Barry (Founder and CEO), and Fitri Sudiarta (IT Support) pose in front of one of the program coverage maps in the BCF office.



BCF students record a thank you video for one of their sponsors.

It's a sizable job, and one that can't be accomplished alone. Depending on the needs of a given community, the Foundation leans on partner organizations to handle external factors that affect the efficacy of BCF's work.

In some areas, limited access to water kept students from coming to school, so BCF collaborated with one partner to set up pumping stations; in another, they worked with a partner focused on people with disabilities to provide hearing aids for children whose impediments prevented them from receiving an education.

When all is said and done, though, "We stick to education," Barry asserted. "We get other people when we go off tangent; we always use a partner to do that. We can't afford to take our eye off the main game."

Jesse Kirley, who runs the organization Saba's Kids alongside his wife, is one of BCF's funding partners. Whereas activity partners operate with BCF to provide the resources outside of BCF's realm of expertise, funding partners like Saba's Kids provide direct

financial support.

"If we can educate the next generation, I feel it's a great way for them to get a better life and get out of the poverty cycle, which is more of a long-term solution to improving their conditions," he shared. "I think it's important to give back to the island that's been so good to me." Of Kirley and Saba's Kids, Barry was quick to praise their contributions. "There are 77 kids supported on his program, pretty significant," she said. "He runs that under us and does an amazing job."

The united work of BCF, its partners, and other affiliates has not gone unnoticed. In the first half of 2018 alone, Barry accepted two awards—the Order of Australia Medal, and the title of Dame by the Order of Saint John—for her charitable efforts through the Foundation.

“It was great for the charity because it provides another form of credibility that is unquestionable,” she said. “It’s a group thing to succeed; at this level it’s utterly a group thing. No one person can ever do anything like this.”

But the accolades are only cherries on top of a growing legacy, one that’s rooted in the children and communities that BCF serves.

“It’s a lot of fun! It’s great; it’s really satisfying. Hanging out with the kids, just thinking up new ways of doing things,” Barry said.

“I come from a fashion background and have always had a strong creative direction in my life, and this is a different kind of creativity. I don’t come from an education background; I don’t come from any formal sort of charity background. I’ve been lucky to have the knack to see what works, and try it, and replicate it.”

As Barry and the BCF team look towards the future, their evolving means to instigate lasting change don’t negate their cardinal motivations.

“Our mission is to deliver education to the disadvantaged children of Bali so they have a sustainable future—that is what we do, and everything we do is reflected upon from that point of view. So every action we take, whether it be major or minor, is taken within that reflection,” Barry said. “Are we delivering to disadvantaged children, and to as many as we possibly can? I am quality conscious, but I am quantity conscious.”

Leaning forward, she smiled. “For communities that are really disadvantaged, getting in there and empowering the whole lot is how you get change. Empower as many as you can, and be ready to help the ones that are popping up on their special path. If you can do that, you’re creating future leaders.”

Learn more about the Bali Children Foundation and show your support at www.balichildrenfoundation.org.

<http://www.elysiacm.com/blog/children-today-leaders-tomorrow-spotlight-on-the-bali-children-foundation?fbclid=IwAR1jJXnvoSePQOKwd-Lu3boj7qVwj7R5wacwysBv3WHzKHqAjvpu6KqXZ-4>



Margaret Barry shows off a poster created by a BCF student. “Look, they even wrote ‘Don’t Do Illegal Logging’ on it,” she noted.