

## How the Bali bombings led one woman to her life's work

By **Margaret Barry OAM**



The founder of the Bali Children's Foundation on how she began her life's work. (Supplied)

I was born in Yarram, South Gippsland into a family of community leaders. My father was always extremely active in the community – his life revolved around building the community, and that's what our kitchen table conversations centred on. So I guess you could say charity work and helping the community is in my blood.

Over 43 years ago, I moved to Asia. I had a prominent role in a global garment manufacturing company which saw me posted in New Delhi during India's turbulent seventies and eighties.

Then the nineties brought me to Bali as I launched my own fashion manufacturing firm MAGG Bali.

A few years after I arrived, the devastating Bali bombings happened in 2002. It was a Saturday night and after I heard the explosion, I immediately knew what it was.

It was heartbreaking to lose so many people - over 200 people died - and it had a significant impact on the local community. But I witnessed first-hand the cooperation between locals, expats and tourists who helped and comforted one another in the days and weeks that followed, and it was heart-warming.



This tragedy in my eyes, was a consequence of lack of access to education and I saw the situation as a chance to make a lasting difference. So I founded Bali Children Foundation.

All my life I had seen what a lack of education could do – first in regional Victoria, then India and Bali. I knew that providing quality education could increase the chance of better life outcomes by reducing poverty. Poverty and a lack of educational and economic opportunities can breed radicalism and I knew that providing children in Bali with English and computer skills would transform so many lives in these rural village communities.

A little over a year after starting the project, I suffered a serious setback. As a result of an accident, I suffered a broken neck which resulted in total paralysis.

I felt helpless and all I wanted to do was get back on my feet and carry on the work of BCF.

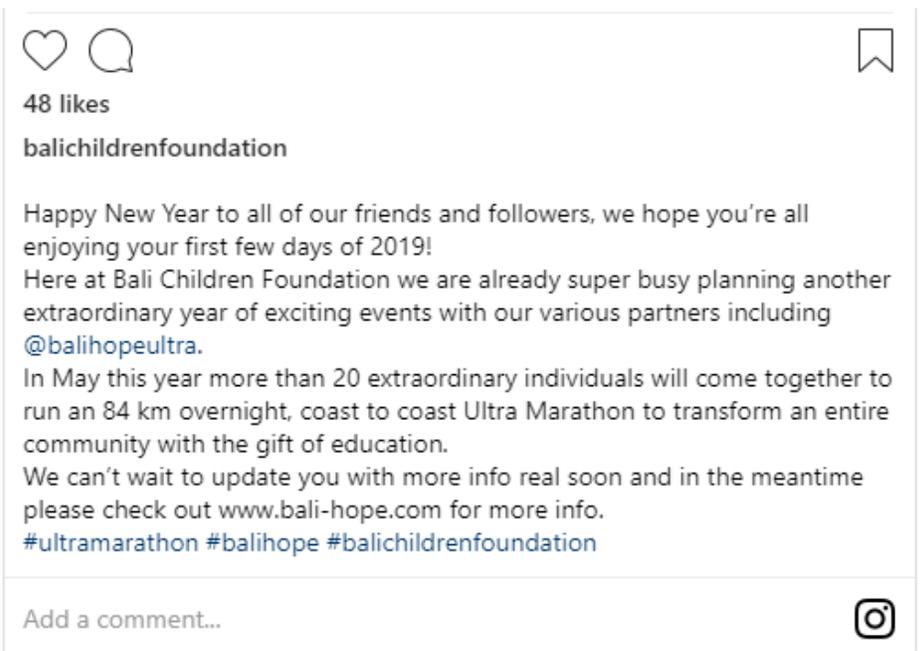
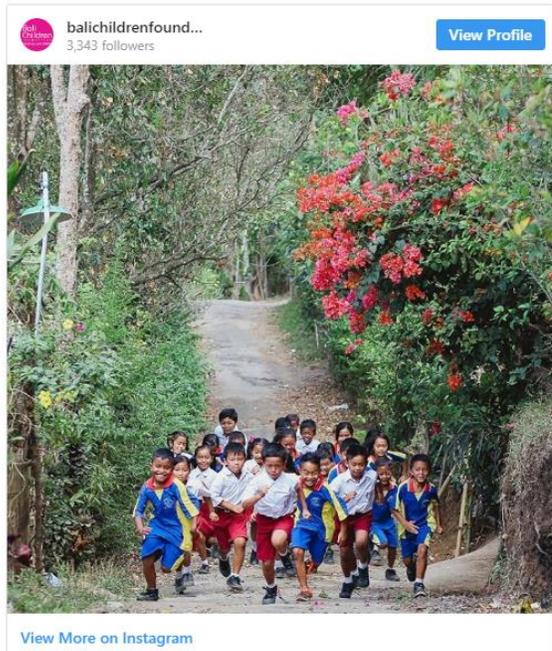


After an extremely fortunate but slow process of rehabilitation, over a period of 3 years, I eventually recovered and carried on my charity work.

At this point, I worked with children's homes in North and West of Bali and came to the realisation that a more sustainable model was well overdue.

So, in 2007 we launched the first community-based project in Corot, North Bali, supporting a total of 40 students.

Today, BCF provides scholarships to over 1100 Balinese students. The national school drop-out rate in Indonesia is 40%, in Bali it is 32% and yet BCF programs have a drop-out rate of less than 1%.



However, the sad fact is that families in Bali rely on their children to work the land, more often than not at the expense of their education. With a high level of illiteracy amongst the poorer communities and a low appreciation for the benefits of education, school dropouts are BCF's biggest enemy.

And I dare to be controversial by saying educating boys is a bigger priority than girls in Bali. Here, girls tend to have equal representation in the schools, and in fact their numbers over-ride the boys in high school and Universities because it's the boys who leave school early to go to work.

We are working with the community to show them that keeping their boys in school longer will lead to better employment opportunities which in turn will lead to higher incomes to support their families. Our challenge is getting families to see and value the longer term education rather than taking the short term gains of basic employment.

In August 2018 and again recently, tragic earthquakes struck Bali's neighbouring island of Lombok and the incredibly popular Gili Islands. Hundreds of people were killed, thousands injured, and more than ten thousand people displaced.



Some school buildings were so damaged by these events that children have been learning out of temporary tents or bamboo buildings with less than half the rooms needed to teach core lessons and few chairs or tables for them to use, so they sit on the floor. This is all whilst children are still suffering trauma from the earthquakes.

I believe that after a disaster people will more likely consider opportunities than they would otherwise do, so I have introduced BCF's Spoken and Listening English curriculum into the damaged villages, delivered on large TV's in a way that brings laughter and fun into communities who have faced fear and tragedy.

I truly believe education is the key to sustainable change and the chance to alleviate poverty in the communities of Bali and I'm committed to continuing this work in this wonderful place I call home.

*Margaret Barry, OAM, is the founder of the [Bali Children Foundation](#). Find out more about her incredible work by visiting the website.*

