



HEAD IN THE CLOUDS, FEET FIRMLY ON THE GROUND: TAMARA CANNON

21 December 2017 | Alumni Insights

“I’m often asked what motivated me to start a charity and it wasn’t really a conscious decision... it was more of an organic process and being in a time and place where I was able to help. That’s how it began.”

We are delighted to share with you the story of Lille Frø, an Australian charity founded in 2008 by HSF alumnus, Tamara Cannon. The idea was to build a boarding house for the students, so that they would no longer have to navigate the notorious annual frozen ice river trek, dubbed ‘the world’s most dangerous walk to school’.

“There are days when I do more law running a non-profit than I did as a lawyer.”

“I was the first foreigner ever to be granted that opportunity and at the time I felt quite emotional about that. I was thinking, ‘Well, why me, how did I end up here?’”

Any firm that hires a motivational coach to fire up its workers is always taking a risk. The chances are the move could backfire spectacularly. And this is exactly what happened to Tamara Cannon in 2008. After beginning her legal career at Herbert Smith Freehills in 1999, she was deep in the corporate world working as a senior corporate counsel for a multinational that had decided to divide its workforce into what it called ‘campers’ and ‘climbers’. The former were the reliables, “oiling the cogs,” says Tamara, while the ‘climbers’ were the ones who “went out on a limb, scaled new heights and tapped into new profit margins”.

As a designated ‘climber’ Tamara went along to the company’s seminar only to be confronted with three questions: ‘Where do you want to be in five years’ time?’, ‘Do you want your boss’ job?’ and, ‘If someone paid you a million dollars a year to be doing what you’re doing now, would that make you happy?’

“My answers were ‘not here’, ‘nope’ and ‘no’,” she recalls. This wasn’t the sole catalyst that caused her to turn her back on the corporate world, but it certainly stopped her in her tracks. Originally, she merely thought she would take a breather and recharge her batteries. Nearly a decade later she’s still on that ‘six-month break’.

She began with a creative writing course, and a business project in Hong Kong, before covering her eyes and pointing at a map to see where she should go next. The map said the Himalayas. Mount Everest to be precise. After completing an impromptu trip to base camp, the rainy season set in, diverting her from Nepal to India to find her mountain to climb.

And she's been there ever since on and off. As the mountains she found have been as much metaphorical as literal. She's now the head of the charity Lille Frø (Danish for 'Little Frog' or 'Little Seed'), an organisation that grew out of her initial sponsorship of Pema, an impoverished Indian girl she met who couldn't afford an education.



"I'm often asked what motivated me to start a charity and it wasn't really a conscious decision... it was more of an organic process and being in a time and place where I was able to help. That's how it began."

Providing one child with access to schooling soon ballooned into a charity that works in one of the most remote spots on earth. The northern Indian region of Ladakh is 3500 metres above sea level, a place of mountain villages cut off for half of the year by harsh winters. Lille Fro's projects began with education, but have grown to include disaster relief and such fundamental initiatives as building high altitude greenhouses, as it soon became clear that an educational program alone was not much help if the children were too malnourished to learn anything.

Tamara says her passion to help those in need started at home. "My father has incredible empathy and the ability to listen to people without judgement," she says, adding, "My mother has the passion and fire in her belly. And she's a doer."

"Both my parents were inspirational and installed in my brother and me this value of gratitude, my mother reminding us every day that miracles can happen as long as you believe in yourself."

It was her mother who came to mind when Lille Fro started hitting hurdles. "I was really focused on the bottom rung of poverty and trying to reach these families who are living in extreme poverty. When I asked, 'where do they live?' I was simply told, 'Well, you can't get there' and being my mother's daughter I didn't think that was a good enough answer."

The reasons were as much political as geographic - many of these sensitive border areas were traditionally off limits. But tenacity paid off. "I was the first foreigner ever to be granted that opportunity and at the time I felt quite emotional about that. I was thinking, 'Well, why me, how did I end up here?'"

A decade later, she says the main challenge is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. "We're working in a huge geographical area; it's difficult to navigate physically, logistically and also politically. The fact that we are still standing after 10 years is really nothing short of a miracle."

Along the way there have been numerous setbacks, but ever the pragmatist, Tamara's attitude is, "I think you can only learn if you are not afraid to fail." Persistence could be her middle name. One of her proudest achievements took an age to bring to fruition. The idea was to build a boarding house for the students, so that they would no longer have to navigate the notorious annual frozen ice river trek, dubbed 'the world's most dangerous walk to school'. "It started off as a simple, 'We'll rent some premises and have the kids starting in October six months down the track. How hard can it be?' Well, seven years later we've just been granted this land... and we started building this year."

And just as the harsh conditions take their toll on the region's inhabitants, it's also tough going for visitors. Recently, Tamara was accompanied back to Zaskar by an ABC film crew, and she could see how the journey and the altitude had affected the whole team physically. "Then I had a look in the mirror myself and we were all in the same boat. That's just the harshness of where we work."

“Unfortunately, I’m not getting younger and I find that every year I go back I find it harder.”

How does she keep herself motivated if this is the case? “It’s very easy to get swept up in the admin side of it and bureaucracy and reporting, which we do, but it’s not what I love. When I do go back and see a room full of kids who are happy and healthy and smiling and have these opportunities open up in front of them that they wouldn’t have had otherwise, it’s just rewarding and feels great. That’s what keeps me going.”

She says managing the unloved bureaucracy is helped immeasurably by her legal background, however. “As a lawyer you’re given such an incredibly broad skillset to be able to approach any situation and I draw on that pretty much every day. There are days when I do more law running a non-profit than I did as a lawyer, so it feeds into my every day life in a very real way - whether that’s negotiating with government, formulating policies or developing memorandums of understanding with our partners.”

Still, it’s no surprise that she has recently relocated to Sydney to give climbing peaks, both literal and figurative, a rest. “I think I’m really happy to come down now and camp for a while,” she admits, adding a pertinent bit of advice for anyone considering following her lead with a ‘blindfold yourself and point at a map’ course of action. “Maybe just fold it in a way so all that’s showing is the Bahamas or something like that...”

Tamara Cannon worked for Herbert Smith Freehills, Melbourne and Sydney from 1999 until 2004 before moving in-house to work as Senior Corporate Counsel for a Sydney-based multinational.