

SOPHIE'S WORLD

From the UN offices in Vienna to the prison halls of South Sudan, Sophie Ryan's career path has been IMPRESSIVE and SURPRISING. Now as the CEO of the Sony Foundation, she's HELPING Australian youth fight drug abuse, homelessness and cancer.

WORDS SERENA RENNER

PROFILE PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK CLINTON

WORKING FOR THE UN IN SOUTH SUDAN



Some people learn in the classroom or from books. Others get their education from the real world. From a young age, Sophie Ryan, now the CEO of the Sony Foundation, has resided passionately in the second camp.

The daughter of a dentist and a pharmacist, a young Sophie often travelled far from her Canberra home with her parents. When she was 12 and her younger brother was just a few weeks old, her parents packed up the family for a year in Europe and the Middle East where her father served as a volunteer dentist.

"My dad would do a history lesson based on where we were at the time," remembers Sophie, 32. "I think it was definitely that trip that made me realise how important it is to look beyond your own borders."

This global perspective infiltrated Sophie's law degree back in Canberra, for which she had to work for a government administrator and write a paper on torture, "the-ticking-time-bomb scenario" of the early 21st century according to Sophie. Her research led her to an international law exchange program at the University of Vienna, where she met a personal hero: Manfred Nowak, the then-UN Special Rapporteur for Torture. Sophie sent him her paper and soon, in 2006, became his research assistant. But the excitement eventually turned to nightmares, as the self-described "great sleeper" became haunted.

"This was a very fast and hard way to learn at the coal-face what kinds of horrors were actually happening in the

world," explains Sophie. "And not just as a result of global poverty or natural disasters. This was humans inflicting [pain] on other humans."

But nothing prepared her for what she witnessed next. On a UN prison reform project in South Sudan in 2008, 15-year-old boys carried machine guns and Sophie lived inside a fenced UN compound while the harsh realities of Sudanese life literally piled up at her doorstep.

"You can get up in the morning and go to the mess hall and there is food," says Sophie. "And there's a gym. They're trying to create this normal life on the inside and then you venture just five metres outside the door of the compound and there are people starving and dying. It's really hard at first not to just wonder: if you can create food for international workers inside, why are you not doing the same outside?"

As time wore on, she discovered things weren't so simple, and that she needed to check her moral judgements and preconceived notions at the compound gate. Her job was to work with the courts, to train judges and liaison personnel on efficiency issues and on how to administer new criminal justice laws. But the first day she was taken to the courts, the judge told her they weren't operating: for various reasons, including government corruption, the judge hadn't been paid in four months.

"I remember phoning my boss and expecting to be sent home to look at a



WITH YOU CAN AMBASSADOR SALLY OBERMEDER

new project," recalls Sophie. "But he said, 'Well, find out where all these prisoners are, all those who had been issued with a sentence. If they hadn't gotten a trial, where are they?'"

The answer was the women's and men's prisons. Sophie was first assigned to the men's prison, but the guards wouldn't

let her in. Instead, they tested her will, making her wait outside in the oppressive heat for hours and then days, until one day, for no apparent reason, they ushered her in. Six hundred half-naked, emaciated men and boys were inside.

"I think they were just as shocked to see me," she laughs.

Sophie began trying to understand the institutional and personal challenges inside the prison system, which is also where people with mental illness live. So too, women who commit adultery. Often, being on the wrong side of a conflict is all it takes to be locked up, as was the case with a young man Sophie met during a mental health assessment. He had lost an arm to a land mine and spent his whole life in refugee camps before being sent to prison.

"I was trying to explain [mental illness] saying, 'It's when the mind is sick or ill,'" recalls Sophie. "He said, 'Well, how can it not be, here? When I've been here for I think a year but I have no idea of days or time. I have no access to learning or keeping my mind thinking of other things. And because they don't know when I came in, how am I ever going to get out? I'm not even serving a time that's being recorded.'" >

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That conversation drove Sophie to give the prison guards large log books to write the names and dates of people entering the prison, or the length of time already served. In addition to record keeping, Sophie introduced reading material and fostered a teaching program where the most educated prisoners would teach other inmates to read and write.

In the women's prison, Sophie helped shift the work of pregnant women from cooking around an open fire to sewing on treadle machines, which helped reduce the incidence of miscarriages. She also initiated a project that taught the women to sew hygienic sanitary pads for themselves as well as prison staff.

Once she returned to Australia to work as a lawyer, Sophie set up Tooth Mob, a program offering free dental services for Indigenous communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, run by the Charlie Perkins Trust. It wasn't until she was considering leaving her law firm for yet another UN position that she was approached by the Sony Foundation.

"I had never really considered working in charity in Australia," says Sophie. "But then I met with the board of the Sony Foundation, which was implementing a new strategy to shift the foundation from a grant-making and -distributing organisation to actually investing in becoming part of a solution."

When Sophie joined Sony in 2010, she was just 27 and one of Australia's youngest CEOs. Since then, the Foundation has grown financially and surpassed AU\$20 million in fundraising, increased corporate partnerships and added more of its own charity programs, despite having only four employees. In 2013, Sophie won the Young Leaders category at the *Australian Financial Review* and Westpac 100 Women of Influence Awards.

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Under Sophie's leadership, the foundation has expanded its Children's Holiday Camps, the Sony Foundation's flagship project that gives high school and university students the opportunity to care for younger children with special needs, as well as disaster-relief efforts with the Salvation Army, the Youth Off the Streets program and Operation: Acoustic, which brings live music to the bedsides of young patients across Australia. One of Sophie's biggest focus areas has been the You Can program, which aims to support 16-to-25-year-olds with cancer, an age

group the government found to be slipping through the cracks.

"We have a pediatric oncology system and we have an adult oncology system, both operating well in Australia, and then we have this gap in the middle," says Sophie. "As a result, these young people have some of the most alarming survival rates

and low compliance rates, which I find really heartbreaking."

The long-term aim of You Can is to establish youth cancer centres across Australia, each complete with the technology and entertainment products for which Sony is known. Centres are now operating in Perth and Sydney, and the foundation is currently planning to open its next facility in Melbourne in August.

Looking back on her checkered career, Sophie says it's the people who have taught her the most.

"You can meet people, from prisoners in Sudan to a parent with a child who needs 24-hour care," says Sophie, "and yet they have this beautiful smile on their face, and they're grateful for their life and they learn to enjoy the simple things. I feel like I'm very lucky in seeing such different walks of life and being able to take different lessons and bring them into my own." ■



5 LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

1) DON'T BE TOO HARD ON YOURSELF.

I think I probably judged myself too harshly and really put pressure on myself to fit in to a mould that didn't feel right.

2) EMBRACE WHO YOU ARE.

Everyone wants an authentic leader, and to be authentic, you can't try to be someone else.

3) SPEAK UP.

I really think it's important to be a different viewpoint and to speak your mind if that's truly what you believe. Homogenous decision-making doesn't make the best decisions.

4) WATCH, LISTEN, LEARN.

I think one of the most valuable learning experiences is to learn from others. I get to see so many different peoples' pathways and learn from them. That's one thing I really do treasure.

5) STAY CONNECTED TO YOUR PEOPLE.

You don't want to be disengaged or too far removed from what it's like at the field or grass-roots level. So I try to always keep an appreciation and an open mind about the people I work with.



SOPHIE AND CHRIS KENNEDY PROVIDE TREATMENT AS PART OF THE TOOTH MOB VOLUNTEER DENTAL PROGRAM