

ROSANNA BARBERO

Kylie Kwong celebrates the individuals helping to grow a stronger community. This month, we meet Rosanna Barbero, chief executive of Sydney's Addison Road Community Organisation.



For me, the best part of this recent Sydney lockdown has been connecting with trailblazer and local community hero, Rosanna Barbero.

I have been volunteering with the inspirational Addison Road Community Organisation during this time and have been so moved by the tireless efforts and compassionate work that the team offers, day-in-day-out. It is an absolute privilege to be a part of this grassroots community that makes such an effort to truly understand the specific needs of each of this city's multicultural communities.

Rosanna Barbero describes herself as a realistic optimist. The chief executive of Sydney's Addison Road Community Organisation has been working in community development for nearly 30 years, and believes each of us has a vital part to play in building a just world to live in.

"I'm 56 and I still believe in change and the power of humanity. If I didn't, I wouldn't do what I do," she says. "I witness that power on a daily basis. There are always wins and gains that give you energy."

Barbero, who grew up in south-western Sydney, became engaged with the world of activism through an early passion for animal rights. Her first act of devotion, when she was just seven years old, was to become a vegetarian.

"I understood injustice but couldn't necessarily articulate it as injustice. I knew those things made me upset and angry, so, I became a vegetarian at the age of seven," she says. "My parents thought: whatever she wants to do in life we've just got to let her do it because she's stubborn. That was their first lesson."

It was while studying history and politics (among a list of other subjects) at university that Barbero became involved with heavy-hitting activist groups, including an international organisation known as the Campaign to Oppose the Return of the Khmer Rouge.

“I was always fascinated by the tragedy in Cambodia – an injustice of mammoth proportion,” says Barbero. “I studied under Ben Kiernan, who is a world-famous expert on Cambodia, and became involved with this group he and a few others started.”

Barbero moved to Cambodia after university, where she spent 15 years, on-and-off, working with Cambodian women who had been oppressed as a result of the regime.

“I became part of a women’s movement to bring a voice to the voiceless,” says Barbero. “Women who worked in the garment or sex industry were invisible in that society. I always thought that to be a robust and mature society, wherever that was, you had to have the voices and experiences of everybody, otherwise you’re only getting the opinion of one section.

“As a young woman in my late 20s, I started building relationships and learning from these women. I learnt that as a feminist from a rich country, I cannot judge other women’s choices – particularly those choices to work in the sex industry.”

As well as her work in Cambodia, Barbero lent her time to a number of United Nations and Oxfam aid operations across parts of Asia and the Middle East. She also founded an organisation in Asia Pacific known as the Womyn’s Agenda for Change – another movement to create a platform for women across Southeast Asia to challenge injustice.

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She returned to Sydney in 2011 to take up a full-time role with the Addison Road Community Organisation in Marrickville.

Addison Road currently works to redistribute unsold food from supermarkets to those doing it tough in Sydney’s inner west. The food goes into emergency hampers as well as a Food Pantry, a place where visitors can purchase food items at a discounted price. This project, Barbero says, is not only a sustainable way to help those less fortunate in the community, but a dignified one.

“When we started, we did a study in the community called Mind the Gap,” she says. “In our research we discovered that aside from housing, one of the biggest issues was the ability to buy food.

“Access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food is a human right. So I thought, let’s try and offer that; not in a charitable or condescending way, but in a way that ensures dignity and choice for people,” she says. “At the time it was a small pilot project in response to this need, which has now become an increasing need. Too many people in our community are paying the price of a growing inequality.”

Barbero is used to working in poor communities around the globe, but believes being poor in a rich country is one of the most stigmatising. Through Addison Road, she hopes to bring a sense of power to those who feel powerless, as well as establishing a strong sense of community.

“To me a true community isn’t about a geographical boundary, the same social class, or network. It’s about feeling connected to one another and being responsible for what happens in your world.” ●