

# st mary's women

## LIZA BEINART ('93) State Lead - Migration



*"I always felt like I belonged at St Mary's."*

When choosing a career, students are encouraged to pursue what they are good at and what they love but also consider options that may not immediately spring to mind. This was certainly the case for Old Girl, Liza Beinart ('93). The not-for-profit sector and community-development were not phrases used when Liza was growing up let alone considered a possible career choice.

***Where has life after St Mary's taken you? Was there a defining moment when you decided on the pathway you wanted your career to take?***

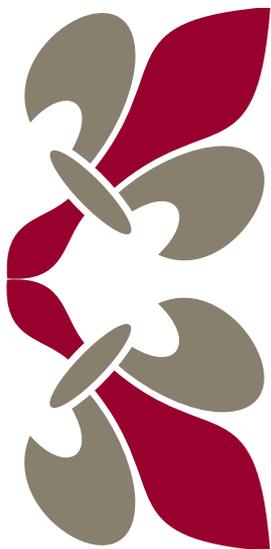
When I left school, I found it very hard to work out a career path for myself. My early years doing a Bachelor of Arts helped me confirm what I was good at and what I loved – writing, analysis and research, history and international politics but I didn't want to be a teacher, and back then I'd never heard of the career that I've finally settled in. After backpacking in 1997, I returned to Perth to complete a one-year Graduate Diploma in Journalism, after which I was very lucky to work in magazine journalism for a few years; however, that wasn't the right fit for me.

I left that career path at 24, did some more travelling and embarked on a PhD in International Relations which I completed in 2005, and although this was an incredibly long, difficult, isolating, academic slog, my doctorate at the end felt like a great achievement. I then worked for a short time in the Office of Multicultural Interests in the WA Government and it was there that I got deeply interested in refugee issues. I was 28 by this stage and very keen to work in what I finally

understood to be "community development" (I'd never heard that phrase at school!), but without a social work degree or experience in case work it was almost impossible to move into not-for-profit.

My big opportunity came after working in Tanzania in 2007, when, after a series of unhappy state government policy roles, I was interviewed for a position with Save the Children, which back then was only just getting started in Western Australia. The fact that the State Manager took a chance on me was one of the best things that ever happened to me and I could not be more grateful to him for this. I was able to grow with the organisation and be mentored by my managers, which was an extraordinary learning journey and eventually led me to my role at the Red Cross, where I moved in 2019. Looking back, I think there were several moments that really moved me and helped me to realise that this was where I belonged, but nothing so clear and simple as a defining moment! Sometimes it helps not to wait for that one moment, because you could be waiting a while as life quietly happens alongside you.





# st mary's women

## ***How do you think St Mary's prepared you for life after school?***

I wasn't one of the cool kids at school and I copped a solid dose of good-natured teasing from the other girls for being small, skinny, opinionated, talkative and good at violin. Despite knowing I wasn't one of the superbly popular girls, I always felt like I belonged at St Mary's and although I had my share of dramas, like everyone else, overall, I was very happy there. From Year 10 onwards, drama and acting were centrally important to me and although I never pursued my 14-year-old's dream of being an actor (much to my dad's relief) I've always been grateful that I had the opportunity to indulge in music, acting and singing when I was at school. I always liked the saying: "The old dreams were good dreams. They didn't work out, but I'm glad I had them."

## ***Keeping connected has never been more important than in the last few months. What has been your experience of living and working through the COVID-19 crisis?***

Working at the Red Cross during a global pandemic has been overwhelming at times. I thought my role was busy before – now I look back on everything before 16 March or so as the good old days. As a humanitarian response organisation, we position ourselves to be at the forefront of disasters, so the COVID-19 pandemic has really been a testing ground for the strength of our responses.

As I oversee our Migration Support Programs, I've been working at a national level to ensure that some of the people made most vulnerable by the pandemic – especially people on temporary visas – receive the support they need to weather the crisis. A lot of our responses and approaches have been developed and rolled out simultaneously, because there was precious little time for analysis and reflection when the political and public health landscapes were changing constantly. It has been excellent training for working in a crisis landscape, which I hope to put into practice again at some point in the future.

Like most workplaces, the Red Cross has really seized the opportunity to be flexible and creative and I have enjoyed the ability to hole up at-home-at-work. That being said, I'm also looking forward to getting back to the office for its access to

incidental collaborative moments, which are harder to achieve while working remotely. There's a lot we need to learn from what has happened this year, and I hope that as a global society we don't immediately forget once this phase of the pandemic has passed.

## ***Who has been your biggest influence?***

It really depends on what you call influence, but I've felt greatly supported by my husband in all my career and family-related decisions. I used to suffer from pretty debilitating self-doubt, and it was his encouragement over the last 12 years that helped me to realise what I could do (but let's not give him too much credit!). I've also been incredibly lucky to have loving and supportive parents (four of them) and it was our family story – my grandparents' pre-war exodus from Eastern Europe, my parents' fleeing of apartheid South Africa, my experience as (to the best of my knowledge) the only Jewish girl at St Mary's – that I think really shaped what I care about and the impact I wish to make in the world. The women who have inspired me include Michelle Obama, Malala Yousafzai, Catherine Hamill, Greta Thunberg, Ani DiFranco, Anne Frank and Samantha Power, but I think I get my professional energy from the invisible women, the ones without accolades and degrees to their names; the ones who hold up half the sky in mud huts, villages, factories, hospitals, brothels and schools around the world.

## ***What accomplishment are you most proud of?***

It sounds cheesy, but the fact that I've been able to do well professionally while still being a committed and present mother is what I'm really proud of. I was so anxious I'd have to sacrifice one or the other, but I've been raising two incredible daughters (Noa, now 7, and Anaya, now 4) as well as carving out a role for myself in the professional world. I wouldn't be able to do this without the unwavering support of my husband (and that's one of the secrets, girls – if you want a partner, make sure they value your career exactly as much as they value their own!), my parents and step-parents, and the colleagues and managers I had who supported me, especially when my girls were very young.





# st mary's women

## ***What is your fondest memory of your time at St Mary's?***

So many, but history classes with Mrs Wright, the 1991 drama production of *Roger Burnout* I was in, and Year 9 camp to Rottneest would rate at the top. Not amazing was working my guts out in Chemistry and only scraping Cs, but even that I now look back on fondly as character-shaping!

## ***Three pieces of advice for current St Mary's students.***

I think the key thing is not to feel freaked out if you don't have your career path written in stone yet. Some girls I graduated with absolutely knew what they wanted and became exactly that, and I found that very intimidating. But these days the average person will have at least five different careers in their lifetime, so just relax and get educated! Try your best, find what you're good at and make sure you love to learn. If you work hard, look for opportunities and wander down roads you didn't plan to take, the future will ultimately unfold for you, just as it should.

At the same time, don't feel like you have to choose between career and family (although I think that's far less of a worry these days for young women than it was when I was starting out). During the time I was developing my career I gave birth to my two beautiful little girls who are the light and centre of my life, and I was able to return to work part time and be a great mother, while still growing and being challenged in

my career. Sure, there were many days when I wasn't doing brilliantly at work or at home, but your story is the sum of your parts and overall, I know I'm a good mother and a good professional. When you want a family as well as a career, you have to be willing to accept the advice of one of my closest friends: "You can have it all – but you can't have it all at once". Truer words were never spoken and if you can surrender to that, you can make it in both arenas.

And see the world! Make sure you have lots of adventures while you're young and free – you're never too old to travel but there's something about being 22, sunburnt, and on a moving train in a country where you can't speak the language and don't understand the food. It'll build you in ways you can't imagine.

