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[00:00:00]Interviewer

Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker Series. Before we begin today, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced and pay my respects to elders' past, present and emerging from across all lands this podcast reaches. Ronni Kahn is a South African born Australian social entrepreneur and founder of the food rescue charity OzHarvest. She's an advocate, lobbyist and activist renowned for distributing the food waste landscape in Australia. She appears regularly in national media, serves in an advisory capacity to government, and is a keynote speaker all over the world. Her mission towards sustainable action is supported through close collaboration with some of the world's finest chefs, including Jamie Oliver, Massimo Bottura, Neil Perry, and Bill Granger. Ronni is an officer of the Order of Australia A O and was named Australian Local Hero of the Year in 2010. In 2018, her journey became the subject of a feature film, Food Fighter, directed by Dan Goldberg. A Repurposed Life is co-written with Jessica Chapnik Kahn. Welcome, Ronni.

[00:01:12] Ronni

Thank you so much. And I too would just like to acknowledge that I meet you on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and wherever anyone is listening to acknowledge the value of our indigenous custodians of this land.

[00:01:29] Interviewer

Ronni, your autobiography is immensely inspiring and extremely motivational. How does one choose what to add and what to leave out when being so honest about their life?

[00:01:40] Ronni

That is one incredible question, because I spent years thinking about what would go in and what wouldn't. And in fact, what went in was never what I'd expected to go in. So, it is always a very, very challenging thing and life is so full and then you end up having to pick and choose. But luckily, working with my daughter in law, my co-author Jessica Chapnik Kahn, that made it easier, in a way because she made some of the decisions that I would never have made, but seemed to have turned out to be good ones.

Interviewer

Oh, that's great.

[00:02:23] Interviewer

Ronni, you grew up in South Africa during the time of apartheid. In your book, *A Repurposed Life*, you mentioned that you were watching on television Nelson Mandela walking out of jail. If you had the opportunity to talk to him, what would you say to him? What would you ask him?

[00:02:39] Ronni

Look, I think the first thing I would say is just the deep gratitude for the role model that he, he represented globally. I think to go from hating people to loving and accepting them, and forgiveness is one of the most extraordinary qualities that any human being can share.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Ronni

And so I probably would ask him a little bit about that journey from knowing how hatred would not serve him to where forgiveness became his modus operandi, because I do believe that that is his greatest gift.

[00:03:22] Interviewer

Wow. Amazing.

[00:03:24] Ronni

Well, he was an incredible, incredible human being. And if I think about inspirational leaders today, they're very few that come close to him.

[00:03:36] Interviewer

Yes, I totally agree with you. Ronni, can you tell us a little bit about your time in Israel and what it was like living in the kibbutz? Apologies if I didn't pronounce that properly.

[00:03:46] Ronni

No, you did. Kibbutz is exactly how it's pronounced. You know, it was a fascinating time given that I had left apartheid South Africa and gone to live in a country which seemed incredibly free, broad, open.

[00:04:00] Ronni

And South Africa during the apartheid era was incredibly closed and internally based, also because nobody from the outside wanted to have anything to do with South Africa. But going to Israel, so Israel itself as a country, very open, very multicultural and then actually landing up, living on a kibbutz, which is a socialist way of life. So from complete inequality to total equality was this enormous contrast that such a wonderful learning curve to see that one could value people for who they are, for what they do, not for how they look and not for their race. Now, having said that, of course, Israel is a very complex country, so I'm not going into the politics there.

[00:04:54] Ronni

But for me at that time, that's what I saw and that's what I experienced. And that's what I try to write and share a little bit about in the book.

[00:05:04] Interviewer

It's very interesting, I must say that part, it really was.

[00:05:09] Ronni

Well, it's very hard to conceive of living in a socialist society, number one, and living where everybody works according to their ability and really gets according to their need. And it does sound so idyllic, and in some ways it really is. But also it's very challenging.

[00:05:28] Interviewer

Yeah I know, you didn't like it very much, did you?

[00:05:31] Ronni

Well, I did. I loved it. Ideally, you know, in an ideological sense. Just that in the reality of being told you're going to go and work here, you're going to go and do this. This is where you need to be at this time is quite challenging for an independent mind who actually hadn't ideologically chosen to go and live there. I did live there in the first

instance because of my husband. And so whilst he believed in it, loved it, lived and breathed it, you know, fully ideologically, I didn't. So there was a challenge for me.

Interviewer

But it was an experience,

Ronni

Phenomenal experience. And one where I created the best friendships that have lasted to this day, so very precious.

[00:06:18] Interviewer

Ronni, can you talk briefly about the big corporate event that you held and the ridiculous amount of food that was left over that made you seriously start thinking about food waste?

[00:06:29] Ronni

Absolutely, because it certainly wasn't the first event that, in a way, food waste had really come up in front of me. But it was one that was just so obnoxious that it actually compelled me to act. So in my previous life, in my event life, I was producing and putting on wonderful events to mark either a unique moment in the life of a business or an individual. So if it was a party or a wedding or a birthday or an anniversary or a corporate major event or conference. And so the one thing that was common at all these events is food, because food is a beautiful aggregator and food is also a way of showing generosity. So when a client wanted to show an employer, wanted to show their clients or their, their customers how successful they were, they'd put on an event. And one of the best ways to show that was to have abundant food. And I was very good at producing abundant food magnificently. But this particular event, I chose that the theme would be like a Roman banquet. And so because it was for a thousand people, there were just mass stalls everywhere, but like a marketplace and in every stall there was just duplications of produce, fresh produce. So we're talking, twenty five years ago, I was very and 20 years ago I was very.... my events were quite ahead of their time in that we used fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, masses, baskets of grapes hanging, kegs of wine, barrels of beer, all abundantly displayed.

[00:08:19] Ronni

And this was an event for a thousand people. And they walked through and went straight to the beautiful bars that were abundantly displayed. And within a very short while, I'd put all the food there so that they didn't get drunk. But they went and drank first and got so drunk that they didn't eat the food. And so suddenly there were these just stations full of food. Previously you're always in a unique venue, you're off-site, you're not in... most of my events didn't take place in a hotel. And so suddenly I had all this wonderful food that normally the caterer would take care of and would just probably dispose of, but really not as visible to me. This particular night was so visible that I couldn't let that food go to waste. And I loaded up my van, but also my little sports car and just filled it up and went to the one place that I really knew of and took that food there. And one, it was incredibly confronting because it was very late at night and there were masses of people around the entrance to this hostel. But two... it, it actually turned out to be very easy once I'd done it.

[00:09:37] Ronni

And so actually it was the trigger because that night showed me that actually I never had to waste food again, because when I knocked on the door and said, would you like this beautiful quality, perfectly good food that hasn't been touched, they just said, you better believe it. And that really was the beginning of my rogue food rescue days. Because it certainly wasn't legit in terms of it just was me making sure that I wasn't going to waste.

Interviewer

a big eye opener, I bet.

Ronni

Absolutely enormous and I didn't even know then the state, the amount of meat there was, nor did I know how important it was to stop food going to waste, and nor did I know how much food was going to waste. All I kind of had thought of was very micro. I had food waste. It didn't occur to me until then that if I had food waste, other event producers had food waste, and I hadn't even gone further than that to think, well, other businesses might have, that all emerged and grew, once I started doing this more.

Interviewer

Ronni, you moved mountains to change the Civil Liabilities Act of New South Wales. Can you talk about this and also a little about the Good Samaritan Act?

[00:10:57] Ronni

Yes. So the Good Samaritan Act. Well, again, once I had started rescuing food, again it didn't occur to me that I couldn't do this. It just seemed I had food and there were people who were hungry. I should just do this. And that it became apparent that some businesses really weren't that keen to give me food. Once I realized that I could get more and more food, some of those people said absolutely, but some said, well, actually, no, what happens if somebody gets ill when they eat our food? That didn't make sense to me because if they got ill when they ate the food that I'd given them or an hour later. But anyway, I had to listen to that.

[00:11:34] Ronni

Now it turns out that there was a Good Samaritan act in Victoria that meant that if you gave something away for free and it was an act of charity, an act of like a good Samaritan, and that was an acceptable act. I didn't really know that it already existed in Victoria. But what I did know was in New South Wales, I needed to make it possible for anyone who wanted to give food away to give it to us. So the only thing I knew to do was to call on some of the people I worked with in the past in my business and legal eagles and called top legal firm and said, I'm going to need help. Here's what I need. And of course, I didn't have a budget. I had nothing. I just said, I need your help to help me make, pass a law that it is nobody's liability if good food gets given away and somebody gets ill so that the actual food donor is not liable. And, and I had beautiful success with a law firm coming on board. And they lobbied and we lobbied and lobbied. And I was there niggling them in the background because they knew what they had to do. And every time they said, oh, it's quite a tough thing, I'd say, well, we're not giving up now. Keep going.

[00:12:56] Interviewer

You made me laugh. I read the part when you did meet with a legal firm that it wasn't only one person in there, there was five people in there because they didn't know what you were going to ask them when you'd show up.

[00:13:07] Ronni

Yes, because in my past, I had used this firm to help me with some legal cases. There was during the Olympics, I'd had an issue where someone had booked us and a week before the Olympics changed their mind and then wanted they wanted their deposit back and didn't want to pay, even though they'd been a very strong contract that said you pull out.

[00:13:29] Ronni

So they love my challenges because they were a major legal firm and they dealt with billions of dollars. And then there was this little person who came in and said 'please help me' and they thought it was another one of those cases. And obviously I paid for the previous ones. But when I walk through the door and there were five lawyers, I said, OK, I'm wonderful to see you all. But this one, you're not making any money. But they agreed and they were wonderful.

[00:13:57] Interviewer

That's really funny. Ok Ronni I need to ask you, I love the colour Yellow. Of all the colours in the spectrum, why choose yellow and black as your signature style? Did the wonderful story of The Wizard of Oz have anything to do with it and why?

[00:14:12] Ronni

Ok, well, let's go first. Yellow is bright, smiley and the colour of the sun. And to me that just embodied warmth and joyfulness, but also highly visible. I mean, the sun shines, everybody smiles and the state of the world changes. So I figured, I've always loved yellow, but not to the extent that I love yellow now, Everything about, you know, that my blood runs yellow. I didn't, it didn't run yellow then, but it just felt like it was very visible. I figured if signposts were done in yellow, it meant that it was visible. So if our vehicles were yellow, they would be seen.

Interviewer

they are seen from a mile away, Ronni.

Ronni

I know they're like busy bees buzzing around.

[00:15:07] Ronni

Now let's get to the Wizard of Oz. If you think about the yellow brick road that the lion, the courage, I definitely think it was there in the background. And it became a beautiful thing to it, to connect it with. But quite honestly, it was yellow because it was so visible, so bright, so happy. And that's what I wanted us to be known for, this organization that comes in to make sure I mean, there isn't a single person who wants to see it go to waste. I didn't even have to teach them. Their grandmothers, their aunts, uncles, somebody in a family has told somebody, don't waste your food because they're people starving.

Interviewer

You gotta love your leftovers.

Ronni

Exactly. Love your leftovers, you know, eat your peas, else because there's someone starving in China or Africa. Well, I always wanted to send my peas to those people, but now I get to deliver those peas.

[00:16:08] Interviewer

We see the OzHarvest trucks around the Inner West with so frequently, they are just so cheerful and there you can see drivers around on a mission. They know where they're going. They probably don't have a GPS. They know exactly where they're going and they're all in. And I see them all the time here.

[00:16:23] Ronni

And you know what's so interesting? If our vehicle breaks down and a driver goes out in a white vehicle and not our marked branded vehicles, they say it is a completely different experience. When they're in a yellow vehicle, people smile at them, people stop, give way. People literally see this as a rescue vehicle, a vehicle doing good.

They say the difference when you're in an unmarked vehicle, people are rude and grumpy on the roads, but they never experience that when you're a yellow OzHarvest driver.

[00:17:00] Interviewer

Oh, wow, very interesting. Ronni, you have mentored so many people. Who would you say was your biggest mentor that inspired you the most to keep on going?

Ronni

Oh, that's such an interesting one.

[00:17:12] You know, certainly in the book I mentioned Selma Browde, and it wasn't that she ever said to me, Ronni, let's just do this, do this, do this. And I'd call her, and she'd say, do this, do this. That was not how our mentorship worked. It was really her actions that inspired me and her own, never giving up on many different things. So subliminally. Definitely, she did. You know, my mother did so many things and never gave up.

So I actually do believe that energetically I imbibe this notion of resilience and ability not to give up.

But they just were, so, I mean, again, you know I mentioned Nelson Mandela because as a role model, he is an extraordinary human being that if one could model oneself, he would be one. You know, there were different people along the way who've serviced, who have literally served me, who've come and offered their support, that have been so incredible. So, so the list is long.

[00:18:20] Interviewer

Yeah, I can imagine.

[00:18:23] Ronni

And now just all I hope to give back is that I could make a small difference to somebody that along the way they may never remember where they found that piece of information or what inspired them. But if I've effected change then that is a beautiful thing.

[00:18:41] Interviewer

I wouldn't say a small difference. You've made a huge difference, Ronni.

[00:18:45] Ronni

Well, thank you. There's a long, long way to go and a lot more to do.

Interviewer

You're very busy.

Ronni

that's for sure.

Interviewer

Ronni, during Covid, I can imagine more and more people were reliant on the services that OzHarvest has provided. You and your team being on the front line, would have seen the need firsthand. How did you keep up with the demand for food when the hospitality business was not booming and there was hardly any food to rescue?

[00:19:13] Ronni

Yeah, so absolutely, I mean, Covid really brought us and has affected the demographic that we service significantly. I mean, there's, there's really been a forty-eight per cent uplift to need in the last year.

[00:19:31] Ronni

So there were huge fluctuations of food, demand, charities closing. But honestly, the resilience of my team, we managed to keep every staff member. We redeployed, we redesigned, we lobbied for government funding because suddenly for the first time ever, we had to purchase food. We've never had to purchase food. There's always been enough food to rescue. That is what OzHarvest is built on, but during Covid, we've had to purchase food because so many more people needed food.

So we rolled out about twenty new programs and in fact, ended up having to hire more people to deliver more food to make sure we could make the biggest impact ever. And quite honestly, during this last year, we've delivered and diverted over eight million eight hundred eighty-one thousand kilos of food from going to landfill. And in fact, we delivered the equivalent of thirty-one million seven hundred eighty-five thousand meals through this last year.

Interviewer

Oh, Wow.

Ronni

I know it's amazing. We cooked meals. We had never really cooked meals, but charities closed. So we needed to find a way to reach people who didn't have the capacity to get out, who would normally have gone and got ready-made food. So we cooked over seven, almost seven hundred thousand cooked meals together with us and some hospitality heroes, we call them, our partners, who helped us cook to make sure that we could deliver more food. We worked with thirty-seven hospitality Chefs, businesses to help us support making food, but which in turn helped those people because it employed them.

Interviewer

So everyone got together.

Ronni

Everyone did a huge collaboration. We delivered over one hundred and ten thousand hampers because we created pop up feeding hubs, because many international students, temporary visa holders and people who were not given Jobseeker or were not supported in any way needed food boxes. And the beautiful thing is we called them essential food boxes. Our recipients called them dignity boxes because they were created and curated with such care.

[00:22:05] Interviewer

It's such a wonderful story, it really is. How did you... I didn't ask you a question about your free supermarket, but how did you keep filling the shelves of the free supermarket?

[00:22:14] Ronni

Yeah, exactly. Well, it had to turn into a hamper hub because we couldn't let people walk through, because our supermarket's quite small. So we literally converted into the same amount of people. Three hundred or more people would come a day at least, but we'd hand out hampers that included fresh produce, that included some dry goods, included ready cooked meals. So we did that daily. And yeah, that's how we managed to deliver over one hundred and ten thousand.

[00:22:47] Interviewer

Wow. Ronni, your chapter One Little Starfish was so heart-warming. Can you talk a little about Hilton Harmer?

[00:22:55] Ronni

Well, I should, if, if at all I should talk about a mentor or an inspiration, it is this extraordinary human being, Hilton Harmer. So he's an ex Salvos officer, devoted his life. But if I've ever met a true Christian and I use the word Christian, not in the religious sense, but in the sense of someone who cares about others, who literally has taken off his shoes to give to someone who didn't have shoes on their feet. So he's an extraordinary human being and wakes up every day and says, thank you, God, that I can serve people and do more good. So, a very exquisite human being, which is why the chapter on him is quite long. But I just felt there was nothing in it that I wanted to change.

[00:23:49] Interviewer

And you can only save one little starfish at a time.

[00:23:53] Ronni

Absolutely. And that story is so relevant. Even I'll share it in the context of when we opened South Africa two years ago, my new CEO there turned around and said, Ronni, look, if it's really going to be hard, it's hard to get money in South Africa.

There's so much corruption. People don't trust charities and the need is so enormous. You know, how will we ever give food to everyone? How will we ever support?

And I said to him, Al, actually you might never give food to everyone. You know, you might find two little orphanages or two places that you give food to. I can tell you that the difference you'll make to those people is what counts if you can't feed everyone. And it's exactly that. It's you make a difference to one person. That's the person who you make a difference to and that, that will affect them forever. And it's better to make a difference to one person than to none. And that's that notion of the starfish story that Hilton shares.

[00:24:57] Interviewer

Finally, Ronni. How can we help, what can we do to assist OzHarvest?

[00:25:03] Ronni

Well, thank you for asking. So there's three ways. First of all, anyone who buys my book or by reading it, it won't, you know, I'm thrilled that they can go to libraries and read it.

But if you do buy my book for every book, we can deliver at least six meals to someone in need. that so money, three ways, money, food and time. So with money, every dollar that you give to OzHarvest allows us to deliver two meals to someone in need. So money is always useful. Time is volunteering and through Covid it became quite challenging to volunteer. But even across the country, although this week there's lockdown in Victoria, of course, everywhere, we still need volunteers and we're back inducting new volunteers and there are volunteer opportunities to work in all of our different programs. And then the third is, if you know people in the food industry, if you know farmers, if you know people who've got coffee shops or different kinds of food businesses that might have surplus, just share with them, get them to call us. Even if they don't have surplus every day when they have, it's very useful so that their food does not have to go to waste. No chef, no food owner, no food producer wants to see their food going to waste. So not everybody knows about us yet, even though we, we hope that they do. But there's still plenty food going to waste. So share our message.

[00:26:43] Interviewer

Ronni, they would have to register on OzHarvest to be a supplier, wouldn't they?

[00:26:52] Ronni

To be a food supplier, yes. You have to connect with us so that our logistics people know when you want us to fetch food or people can call one off, you know, if you, if you had a gold catered event in your home. And I said gold catered, that means catered by a catering company. We don't collect food from homes that is home cooked, not because it's not good, but just because we had to, from a health point of view, create a standard. And you had food left over, you could call and say, I'm calling because I've got food left over will the OzHarvest truck come and collect it.

[00:27:27] Ronni

But obviously businesses that are going to do this on a regular basis do get registered with us. And then they get slotted into a routine and volunteers can go onto our site. It says get involved or how to get involved. And then there's a questionnaire, just a volunteer form to fill out.

No one has to sign up for life. You can join and volunteer once. You can volunteer once a month. You can volunteer once a week. You can volunteer as much or as little as the time that you have.

[00:28:07] Interviewer

If you were a grandma, that's all of a sudden planted this huge pumpkin field in your backyard and you've... just so much pumpkins and it's a one off thing and she's just gone overboard and she's just like...

Ronni

I love it. Well, they have a couple of things you could do.

[00:28:27] Ronni

You could either load up those pumpkins into your car and drop them off at an OzHarvest office anywhere because we're across the country. Or I can tell you that if anyone called me and said, I've got three dozen pumpkins sitting in my garden and I'm not able to put them in my car, could you send someone to pick them up? I would make sure that a van went and collected your produce from your own home.

[00:28:54] Interviewer

Oh wow, That's amazing. That's really good because, yeah, sometimes, some, some years you only yield a couple of pumpkins and then other years you...

Ronni

Absolutely...

Interviewer

So many, yeah!

[00:29:05] Ronni

Absolutely, absolutely. Or we also have on our website there is a button that it says if you need food and you can't get hold of us or you're not in an area, we connect you with the closest organisation near you.

But you could also call and say, I've got pumpkins. Is there a charity that, that cooks near me? And we would be able to tell you if you wanted to drop them right off at someone or somewhere that could use them. But we might say bring them to us or we'd say, depending where you lived, you could drop them off. Absolutely.

[00:29:47] Interviewer

Ok, thank you Ronni, for your time and for a wonderful chat. We wish you all the best with your autobiography, A Repurposed Life and with all future publications.

[00:29:57] Interviewer

Ronni's book is available, both physical and electronic formats at any of our inner west libraries. Ready for you to borrow or log on to our catalogue and place a reservation at any time. If you would like to purchase Ronni's book, please visit your favourite independent bookstore online or in person. Bye everyone and thank you for listening and look out for upcoming digital content through the Inner West library What's On and social media channels.