

cash flow

The many-faceted, remarkable life of Mara Bun has turned to doing her best to save the planet

Story Deborah Light
Photography Richard Whitfield

Woman on a mission

Turn on the news most nights and you're struck by a troubling disparity, says Mara Bun: "There's another flood or fire or storm; a report on sea levels rising; or that we have the highest consumption in the world; it comes at you like a train. Then, suddenly the business report comes on and it's all about: 'The resource sector has ticked up by 12% today on the back of additional demand from China', blah, blah." Over time the disparity – she calls it a disconnect – rankled enough to make her change her course, yet again.

Having built an impressive career in the private sector, Bun is diving into the deep end as inaugural CEO of Australia's chapter of Green Cross which, broadly, seeks to

Read Bun's CV and there's another disconnect. She's packed a lot into her 45 years and she's nothing if not adventurous. Brazilian born, educated in the US, she's lived in three countries, held high and low-profile jobs in some of the richest and poorest spots on the globe. Merchant banker, consumer advocate, business consultant, aid worker and investment analyst, Bun has worked – among other gigs here and overseas – at Macquarie Bank, Greenpeace, the CSIRO, ratings agency Cannex, *Choice* magazine and the Allen Consulting Group. It's like trying to follow the ball in a soccer final: you're never sure where she'll land next.

Look closer and there's a vein: the recur-

ment monolith Morgan Stanley, Bun got an internship on an earthquake relief project in Nepal where she met her first husband, an Australian adventure travel guide, also a lawyer, who brought her to this country. "I was amazed. I had this stereotype of Australia, somehow. I didn't realise it was as culturally diverse or that it had this unbelievable natural beauty. I fell in love."

The couple lived relatively simply in Sydney's buzzy Balmain for more than a decade – without a car, credit cards, or debt. "It was not the life of an investment banker," she recalls, laughing. "But it was wonderful in many ways."

When they split Bun, uncharacteristically perhaps, became a little aimless.

"I went through an absolutely ordinary period," she recalls. "I was in Australia with my family very far away. After lots of horrible dates set up by friends, one of them said: 'I'm really sick of this.' And she wrote my profile [for a web-dating service]. She said 'Don't listen to anyone. You are going to meet completely different people'. So I did, and that's how I met my husband."

She and Stuart Hall have been together nearly five years; the last three on their property in the lush hinterland of Queensland's Gold Coast, from which Hall runs his plumbing business and she commutes to her new job in Brisbane, an hour or so away. As her goals have changed, so has her attitude to assets. "I've made choices which require commitment because we have invested in this eight-acre block surrounded by magnificent rainforest and we've done a lot of work, clearing a weed

"It felt exciting to be part of this new wave ... this is a critical time"

encourage and enable society to interact with the pressures – social and political – associated with climate change. She put up her hand for the job late last year, attracted in part by the motivation of its founder – former Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev. "Having lived on the edge of really deep conflict [Gorbachev] saw that wars could arise from natural resource issues, such as competition for water and energy. His vision was, was it possible for there to be a non-government organisation that could look at sustainability and the natural environment from the perspective of helping people interact with it?"

rent pull of commitment to society and the planet. In fact, when she opted to study economics, most were surprised. Her family hadn't come from a big business background and her leanings seemed to the not-for-profit sector; including volunteer work during most university holidays for public health projects in Central America. "I guess my thinking was that the world of business is such a prevalent factor in the world, so if you can understand and contribute to that it only helps to contribute just about anywhere else."

On deferral from her studies at Harvard Business School while working for invest-



FACT FILE

Mara Bun

Age 45. Lives Gold Coast hinterland, in Queensland.

CEO of Green Cross Australia. Previous posts: Merchant banker, investment analyst, consumer advocate, aid worker. Early work: Holiday volunteer jobs on community health projects in Central America.

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environment. We want to open our house to people we love from all over the world because it adds to the richness of our life, which is magnificent but definitely isolated. We're not in very much debt, but the great bulk of our equity pretty much is in the property and more will be needed."

You'd expect Bun to practise what she preaches and the couple's on-going renovations to the once tiny cottage on the property focus on recycling and sustainability. Her first car, after 10 years without, is the energy-saving Prius. It wasn't cheap and that's not the point. "It felt exciting to be part of this new wave; that people like us can maybe shift the cost curve; create the demand for these new technologies so the cost will gradually come down."

Small steps, perhaps, but if enough take them, they begin to become significant. In the depressing avalanche of climate change warnings, Bun knows it's understandable for the individual to feel defeated. "What Green Cross wants to offer is the hope that it's only by building community resilience – at a global level and in our backyards – that we're going to come out of this in a positive way." The sorely unacknowledged foot soldiers in this endeavour are our emergency service volunteers – including bush fire brigades, the Red Cross, iState emergency and ambulance service volunteers, Bun believes. "We actually think they're climate heroes and in some cases they're struggling. They need to be show-cased, thanked and supported."

Her immediate Green Cross agenda covers a range. There's a conference on rising sea levels (Bun quotes research predicting a one-metre sea level rise could displace 145 million people – 90% of them in the Asia Pacific region) down to seemingly minor issues such as how we consume: "You constantly find in market research 40-50% of the consumers say they want to be green; buy green, drive green, travel green – yet 5% do. If we can find ways to close that gap, we begin to offer some hope to find the right way out of it."

Having held high-paying jobs, Bun says of money: "I guess it's critical because it gives you the capacity to make decisions and they can be to live in ways that are sim-



pler or a bit more fancy but, at the end of the day, it allows those choices. Being able to move in and out of the private sector and to have a stable financial base was really important for me. When I worked in Nepal I was being paid \$50 a month so I basically drew down on savings. But I was always reluctant to feel part of this thing that: you make money, therefore you're happy. That was a pretty prevalent culture in investment banking and I wasn't always happy. I enjoyed being around bright people and the complexity of new deals, but I always felt the world was much bigger and this is a really critical time to be on the planet."

So when she came across the newspaper advertisement for the Green Cross job: "It was very karmic," says Bun. "I really enjoyed what I was doing [head of research for Cannex] but I kept coming home thinking: 'Look what's happening to the planet – surely there's something else I can do.'" Another karmic moment happened when she saw who the founder was: "The first thing that hit me was, it's a Mikhail Gorbachev charity." Bun's parents, you see, were canny in encouraging their three kids to become world citizens – they themselves spoke six languages apiece – and she remembers growing up in a household peopled by visitors from around the

world. Yes, they'd pay their children's university fees, said her mum and dad, provided the kids learned another language. Given the choice of Chinese or Russian, Bun chose the latter.

Bun's nomadic CV means she identifies with Generation Y (aged six to 25), age notwithstanding. "I'm really comfortable with them. Their horizon is a little different to the traditional. It's an irony because our horizons for performance are so short in some ways – that next project, next quota, next election – and it is possible to make contributions in the short term. The problem is the strategy for the public and private sectors now needs to shift to 50 years down the track. To therefore conclude you have to stay in the same place for 50 years is just not real. You can move from one sector to another and keep your foot in all camps. Gen Y does that. It's ambitious but the loyalty factor is seen through a different lens."

Besides, this generation has sussed, like Bun, that no-one should be defined by a job. "You are the same person. You're building relationships with the same people, regardless of where they go. People begin to see you in light of who you are, as opposed to the particular role they happen to come across you in. You are an individual."