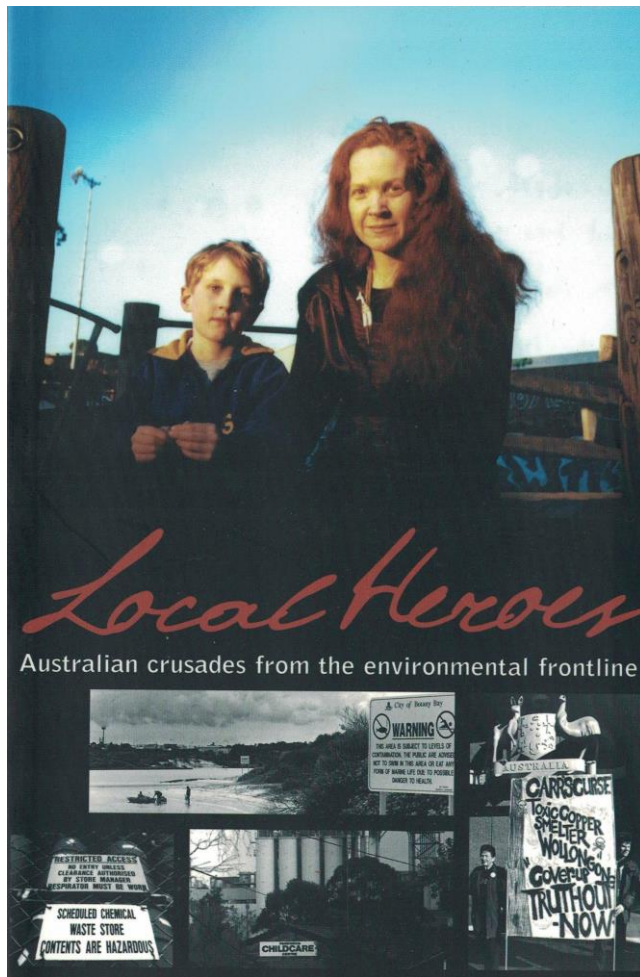




“Local Heroes” book launch speech from 2002

Speech given by Elizabeth O'Brien at Berkelouw Books, 70 Norton St Leichhardt, 6:30pm, Wednesday 7th August 2002. Photo on front cover of book, of Elizabeth with son Harrison

You'll have to read the book to find out my story – it's in chapter one [at <http://www.lead.org.au/lanv14n2/lanv14n2-11.html>]. I decided to just talk about some of the interactions that have happened along the way and tell you a bit about some of my favourite people.



My favourite local hero of all, Theresa Gordon, couldn't be here tonight – she wrote chapter two about her successful campaign to reduce emissions from the lead smelter that cast a pall over the community Theresa grew up in - Boolaroo just outside of Newcastle. One of the highlights of the campaign for lead poisoning prevention in Australia was the very first trip Theresa and I took to Canberra together in 1992 to demand a ban on leaded petrol from the policy advisors of the then Environment Minister Ros Kelly. Being from two small single-issue community groups Theresa and I of course had to take a big gun with us, who happened to be Lynette Thorstensen, at that time she was yet to be the head of Greenpeace.

When we finally got the Lead Roundtable meeting out of Ros Kelly in June 1993, we were determined to prepare the Australian public for a ban by first reducing the market for leaded

petrol with a 5 cent per litre price increase above the price of unleaded petrol. The Roundtable meeting involved hundreds of government, corporate and community representatives with only 40 having positions at the table.

Theresa represented Greenpeace and I represented Consumers Health Forum.

Ros Kelly had obviously had training so advised us all before we went in – “the cameras will be on all day so don't fall asleep and don't pick your nose”. In a private moment she took the time to tell me “usually it's best if your clothing is not more interesting than what you have to say”. I knew then I had to be on my toes as my outfit had at least 10 colours to it. I was terrifically relieved that night to be watching the evening news in which Ros Kelly



made a statement, the camera cut to me correcting her from across the table, and then she thanked me and went on to announce the two cent price increase for leaded.

We learned a big lesson that day. Despite our belief that all the action was going on at the table, it was only the smiles on the petrol company managers faces in the corridor at the end of the meeting and Theresa's careful observation that the ACF representative returned in the lift with Ros and the petrol heads from the afternoon tea break with looks on their faces which said they had "done a deal together" that gave us a hint of the true story. The petrol companies had got off lightly and to our great shame (and a small amount of pride) it was not until 1st January this year [2002] that leaded petrol was finally banned in Australia. We did well but like all campaigners, we wanted to do better.

Ros Kelly also taught me one other thing at a later meeting in Sydney. Her training had obviously taught her to aggressively take the space when talking to people. While chatting over drinks I became keenly aware that she was leaning towards me like a cobra flaring and after taking tiny steps backwards in a pathetic effort to make the space between us "comfortable" I finally realized, before it was too late and the conversation was over, that the correct response was equal aggression in closing the space. I had survived my first head to head with a politician, but obviously Ros didn't have all the answers as she did not survive her encounter with the whiteboard.

It's been fascinating learning how media personalities function too. Karl Kruszelnicki, the man who dubbed me the Lead Queen of Australia, is amazing to watch. He starts with an excellent base of understanding of science, medicine, the environment and how people think and learn. Then, at about 100 miles an hour, he does a fast-learn before the camera starts rolling or before the live-to-air broadcast begins. In every encounter with him he has fired off a dozen searching questions at me (about lead of course) and then moments later delivered an explanation to the audience that made complete sense and was easy to understand. This is a great gift that he has.

I have several people to thank for still being in this game after nearly a dozen years. My family supported my work for the first five years before The LEAD Group received any government grants and my children are a constant source of inspiration to me and very supportive, despite having had to give up their bedrooms and move into the lounge room since the Lead Advisory Service lost its government grant and the office had to move back into our house. Apart from some of our very long-term callers to the Lead Advisory Service, it is my children who most often remind me of how noble our aim is – to eliminate lead poisoning and protect the environment from lead. When the personal and especially financial cost of pursuing this aim becomes nearly overwhelming – I really appreciate their kind words.

We have also had some funding from CTI Consultants and a fabulous amount of management support from the members of the LEAD Group Committee – Fred Salome, Carol Bodle, Roger Kilburn, Michelle Calvert, Karen Johnston, Rosemary Ayoub and Dr Ben Balzer. Our largest private donor is Professor John Ward and the people that give the most



valuable technical advice and have done so consistently for years are Professor Brian Gulson, Jason Bawden-Smith, Carol Bodle, Dr Ben Balzer and Dr Neville Gibson. I could not do without the incredible support and advice from my parents Noela and Evan Whitton and I count Noela as the best media clipping service as well as the best friend a daughter ever had.

Another mother who cannot go unmentioned is Kate Hayter who should have had her own chapter in this book. Being a kick-boxer and almost totally unafraid, when the rough necks of the Boolaroo lead smelter community that Theresa Gordon constantly had to deal with, took on Kate Hayter, after her child became lead poisoned, they got decked. Kate demonstrated the kind of courageous campaign tactics that meek campaigners such as myself only dream of. Like the time she told the secretary of the Chief Public Health officer that his niece needed to talk to him urgently because she was tired of no answers to her letters and his refusal to take her phone calls. Of course, Kate became his niece for a moment because he took the call.

I've made a number of friends among toxics campaigners along the way and I'd especially like to thank the most inspirational groups and people – Theresa Gordon of No-LEAD, Kate Hayter



of the Hunter LEAD Group, Mariann Lloyd-Smith of National Toxics Network (photo at left: Mariann & Elizabeth), Jeff Angel, Herbert Beauchamp, Jo Immig and Ben Cole of the Total Environment Centre, James Whelan of URGE and later of Queensland

Smogbusters (and right now, relaxing in Ottawa instead of coming to his own book launch), David Gilmore, Olive Rodwell and Helen Hamilton of IRATE (Illawarra Residents Against Toxic Environments), Anna Priest of ASOMAT (Australasian Society for Oral Medicine and Toxicology), Dr Peter Brotherton of ACF, Mark Oakwood, Matt Ruchel and Michael Bland of Greenpeace and Colleen Hartland of HazMAG or Hazardous Materials Action Group. It's an honour to be among this fellowship working hard for a less toxic environment.

There have also been some wonderful women among my staff over the years and each has added her own specialty to the work



– Patricia Parkinson (environmental law), Joanne Dodd (agricultural science), Margaret Johnston and Helen Escreza (information), Michelle Calvert (politics), Robin Mosman (writing), Susy Retnowati (computing), Ann Gethin (social science) and Carol Bodle (environmental health), but I'd especially like to acknowledge the nearly 10 years that David Ratcliffe has put in as our office manager and webmaster. David is entirely responsible for our website which has over 1000 visitors every week and has brought in enquiries from over 40 countries to the Global Lead Advice and Support Service.

Finally I'd have gone mad many years ago if I did not have a spiritual and creative outlet that is my weekly holiday from all things lead so I would like to thank the members of both my choirs, many of whom are here, for their comradeship over the years and the many happy memories of singing together for a better world.

Enjoy the evening and enjoy the book. It represents decades of environmental struggle for the eleven authors and it's worth celebrating.

Note: The Local Heroes book is available for purchase from The LEAD Group's Lead Safe World Online Shop at <http://www.lead safeworld.com/product/local-heroes-book/>
