

Cec Busby [00:00:04]:

Hi, everybody. I'm Cec Busby, editor of Flying Solo. Welcome to our weekly podcast where we step inside the minds and lives of solists and Small Business owners. Today's guest, Peter Baines, is described as one of Australia's most effective solopreneurs. He's a former police officer and forensic investigator, and he's received the Order of Australian medal for his humanitarian work as the founder of well well-known charity, Hands Across the Water, which launched following the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 and he has since gone on to create homes and opportunities for thousands of children in Thailand. Pete is also the author of three books, *Hands Across the Water*, *Doing Good by Doing Good*, and *Leadership Matters, Stories and Insights for Leaders, Achievers, and Visionaries*. Now, if you've ever wondered how to find your purpose and make a real impact, Peter has some great advice on how you can marry the two.

Cec Busby [00:01:04]:

Hey, Peter. Welcome to the show. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Peter Baines [00:01:08]:

My pleasure. It's great to have a chat.

Cec Busby [00:01:11]:

Excellent. Now, I would quite like to delve into your hands across the water journey. I mean, it's been very instrumental in making a positive impact on the lives of children in Thailand, but could you share for our listeners a little bit of the origin tale - why you're inspired to start the charity, obviously, the tsunami, etcetera, a little bit of that backstory for us.

Peter Baines [00:01:35]:

Yeah. Sure. So I worked for New South Wales Police as a forensic investigator and went to Bali after the bombings, and my role there was to identify the bodies, and, repatriate them back to those countries where they came from. And the work that we did in Bali kind of set us

up for if something else happened in that Asia PAC Southeast Asia region that would be called upon. And so that was exactly what happened after the tsunami in 2004. I got a call I was on holiday at the time and, was told to return to work and that I'd be heading overseas. So, I spent several months leading the Australian and international operation and the identification of the bodies that we recovered after the tsunami. And, It was on the last, rotation into Thailand where I met a group of kids, who'd all lost their, their families lost their home, and, they were living in this tent within a temple.

And when I met the kids, I realised I couldn't change what had happened, but it felt within my capacity to change what happened next for them.

So returned to Australia and set up a charity, hands across the water. And the goal was to raise enough money to build a home. And then initially, I thought that was all that I'd needed and the job was over. But, when I went over for the opening of that first home, I realised indeed that the job had just started. And 18 years on, as we sit here today, we're still working. And, the challenge and the opportunities are bigger than they've ever been.

Cec Busby [00:03:26]:

Now you recently wrote a piece for us about the importance of finding a journey that's worthy of one's heart and soul, and I think it's pretty fair to say you've found that journey with Hands Across the Water. And, obviously, you are profoundly impacted by your experiences as a member of the police force and working in those recovery teams, but for most of us, we don't face those life-altering situations. So how would you suggest we find that some passion in our in our daily lives?

Peter Baines [00:04:00]:

Yeah. I don't think you need anything as, as big or profound as, what I was involved in, and it was more the nature of circumstance. that, meeting the kids, it just seemed to be the right thing to do.

So I didn't feel it was a calling or I didn't have an epiphany or anything like that. just seemed to be the right thing.

And, you know, I think the for all of us, to find something, it's just – there's a Seth Goddon quote that talks about the challenge of our time is to find a journey whether you have our heart and soul. And, you know, I think particularly those within Australia in a broad sense is that

we live a fairly, comfortable, life and certainly affluent life compared to a lot of people in in different countries. And, when our immediate challenges are taken care of, I think the opportunity and indeed that challenge is to find something that's meaningful to us. And something that's beyond work, beyond the provision of the, you know, our immediate needs upon beyond the accumulation of wealth. And it's something that does, feed your soul. And, for everyone, that'll be different. You know, for some, it can be as simple as taking time out, to do something that might be, you know, walking trucking through the bullshit might be painting, it might be, you know, travelling, whatever it is. I think it's something that we all need to, work towards because it brings up, extra dimension and that level of contention happiness in our lives.

Cec Busby [00:05:44]:

So you mentioned, at the beginning, you know, you started this, you you went over, you came home, you raised the money, you thought, oh, it's just gonna be this - this one home. How did you then realise, actually, no, it's not this. There's so much more to be done, and this is gonna become kind of my journey.

Peter Baines [00:06:06]:

Yeah. It was it was when we were over there for the opening, of the first time that funds had been raised for. And it's a really quick clear, you know, memory for me is I was driving away after the opening and the ceremony and everything that had happened. And and I looked, back to the home and And, thought, well, what happens now? Who takes care of the funding to, you know, pay for the recurrent costs of the building for the staff, for the kids, and, as I was driving away on that day, that I realised the journey, hadn't, in fact, come to an end, but it really had just started.

And then there was a lot of growth, because one of the things I've worked in international crisis and disaster areas in Indonesia, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Australia, and lots of people in the aftermath and the immediate aftermath of a prices turn up. there'll be government. There'll be NGOs. There'll be charities in corporate. And they put their flag in the ground. They say we're here. but, sadly too many leave too quickly.

And, what we saw was a number of kids, within 12 months of opening, the home doubled. And, then it became necessary to build another home. And then, the opportunities, to support others, just continue to present and some we suggested to and some we said no to, but, it led to the growth where we are today.

Cec Busby [00:07:50]:

So what did you know about running a charity before you launched hands across the water. I'm thinking nothing. Absolutely. Nothing.

Peter Baines [00:07:57]:

Absolutely nothing. It was, you know, it was a really strange, you know, occurrence. And I and I guess it's one of the messages that, I share is if we wait until we've got all of the answers, to all the possible questions. If we wait until the time is right to do the things that we might want to do, well, that time might never come. And, And, I knew absolutely nothing. And the reason I was able to raise the money and and made a start was that, I guess I was just focused on the results and not the excuses as to why we could do it as opposed to why it didn't make sense.

And, you know, I can stack a whole lot of reasons up as to why it didn't make sense to embark on that journey. but, indeed starting can be the easiest, but it also can be the hardest initial step And, I was able to raise the funds. I didn't have a network of, philanthropic friends. I wasn't in corporate. I didn't have, the skill set. I didn't have the knowledge, to raise the funds, but very early on, I'd been invited to, speak and share my stories and, and, to get paid for sharing those stories. And, I embarked upon that journey and used the funds that I was paid, to speak at conferences. to build the first home. And, so that was that was, you know, where the funding came from and it was a model that worked and the growth continued from there.

Cec Busby [00:09:38]:

So how has it changed since then? That sounds very kind of grassroots - you getting amongst it at the beginning. Is that still the case, or or are you've progressed a lot further from that

Peter Baines [00:09:53]:

Certainly, there's there's size and scale of, of the charity is grown. And, you know, we started supporting one home with 30 two kids, and, over the last 18 years, we've, we've grown to have raised over \$30,000,000. And up until COVID, a 100% of those funds that we raised went directly to the projects on the ground in Thailand. And I established a social enterprise that sets sits next to the charity and it met the operational fundraising costs. And, you know, back in 2007, our operating costs were \$50,000 a year and now they're \$2,000,000 a year. since that, yeah, since we started, we we had that one home and Now we've got, 7 properties all across Thailand. And at any time, there'll be 300 kids spread across those projects. And We've got, 33 kids who graduated from university, another 23 are currently studying, and And, so this there's everything's grown. the cost, the, on the ground, the activities, the number of, kids, the the extent of the support, you know, we're trying to invest in, yeah, investing in education and different employment opportunities and And, you know, it's all that evolution that comes with, growth.

Cec Busby [00:11:18]:

So a lot of our businesses that listen to the podcast are small business owners or Soloists, micro business. And I guess corporate social responsibility, ESG, that kind of stuff often might seem to them as though it's a big business thing. but really small businesses can also make a difference. So what are some kind of ways you think small business owners could kind of incorporate? community and philanthropy into their values and day-to-day culture.

Peter Baines [00:11:53]:

Yeah. It's a really interesting question. And, I think that the very, nature of the terminology of corporate social responsibility suggests that it is just for corporate. But, the second book I wrote on commission from Wiley was called, doing good by doing good. And it was it's all about turning that CSR or ESG, what whatever, you know, words you wanna wrap around it into a profit centre to a business. And I think even more important for small business is that if they're looking to partner with charity or community groups, is it not the philanthropy, it not being a philanthropic approach because that means that, that that that really is a one way transaction where you give a portion of your net profit and

you give, time and resources. But, it's very much one way. And, and I think that's what philanthropy traditionally is.

And and I don't think that's in the best interest of either the charity or the business owner. Because when we're going through, difficult economic times and, you know, right now as a classic example of business and and households and small business, you know, with increased interest rates and so forth, finding it a bit tough and looking to cut expense.

And if if our support of charity is based on one of philanthropy, then it will be one of the first expenses to go, and then followed by, you know, training and learning and development and so forth. And they're seen as a discretionary spend.

So what we need to do is change that CSR. So from one of a cost centre to one of a profit centre, And when we view it differently, and this is where it can be done by small business, where their relationships turn, their their support of charity into a profit centre for their business.

And why that's good for the charity is because when times get hard, times requires a reduction in expenses. Well, if your CSR program is indeed a profit centre you're unlikely, to take that out of the business.

And it's not complex It doesn't have to be something which is beyond small business. It's just adopting a different mindset and, it it's entering into the partnership with the charity or with the the community group. looking at what are the clear outcomes going to be.

And, you know, we don't go into a a joint venture or a business with a supplier without understanding where the return is and what the costs are and what the benefits are. but a lot of people think that they shouldn't be having those conversations with charity.

And, as a founder of a charity, I'd suggest you that that is indeed the best things for both sides. So It's absolutely within the wheelhouse of a small business to have that and to have a profit centre.

Cec Busby [00:15:02]:

So what kind of conversations then, should business owners be having with their charity partners?

Peter Baines [00:15:08]:

One of the things to get clear on at the beginning before you select a charity partner, and a lot of organisations, both large and small, will select their charity partner because an because of an association, with

a founder or the cause or some type of social connection with someone involved in the charity. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that it's the right thing for the charity. It doesn't mean, or for the business, it doesn't mean that the rest of the organizational team are invested and share the same passion.

So I think one of the things that I help businesses do is establish a set of guiding principles before they select the charity partner. And when you go through and establish those guiding principles that are going to, they act as a filter. And, because so many times when I work with an organisation, they sit down and they there'll be two types. One, they'll either have a charity partner and it hasn't been effective, or the effectiveness is long gone or they're new.

And, I guarantee you that within that first hour of the conversation, they're asking when do we pick the new charity partner?

And it's kind of putting things around the wrong way because what we need to establish is what the boundaries, what are the principles, that we need to establish in selecting a charity partner?

Because we need to look at, the size, because if you're a a small business and you're donating to a very large a charity, a well known brand, which has, a huge turnover, where your contribution is unlikely to, know, deliver a positive return to you because it's just the economies of scale.

So one of the things we need to look at is finding charity partner where your contribution will be making significant difference in their start to have that equal partnership Then we look at things like, transparency and governance and and alignment and your ability to interact with the charity if that's part of it. So, you know, it's a it's a there's a fair amount of work that goes into it, but it's investing in something that you get right, and we'll have a a long lasting and important, impact on the business.

Cec Busby [00:17:32]:

So how much should businesses make sure that those values align, with the charity that they've chosen? And also, that what they're contributing is genuinely going to benefit that charity. You know, like, if we're not gonna make it, as you say, my support of a charity is, oh, I give X X amount of money and I'm being look at my felons Robbie efforts if it's more more meaningful than that. how do we make sure that there is benefit both ways and the values are shared?

Peter Baines [00:18:03]:

Yeah. So that's in that's in the work that's done before the setup and the agreement. And, you know, if you if we've got a small business, we need to understand what's their capacity, and is it around time? Is it around knowledge? Is it around funding? Is it around all of those? And we look at what the contribution can be. We look at the areas of interests that make sense to the business.

So one of the a number of the benefits that should be coming from a CSR program is, is the retention of staff that the attraction of staff the attraction and retention of new clients, the brand differentiation, new, new business opportunities, and there's a whole series of fundamental reasons and outcomes that a business should be looking for from their charity partner

And once we're clear on what they are, then we can apply this filter and, set our guiding principles that then ensures that we're working with a charity where our contribution is valued and it is meaningful.

And that's where the work is done in the alignment between the two partners because if you're giving, you know, \$20,000 in resources and funding, for example, to an organization that has a budget, an annual budget of \$20,000,000. well, you're not going to create much of an impact.

But if you find yourself with a a charity that might have a a budget of \$200,000 and you're giving 20,000, well, your contribution and your relationship is a lot more valued. And, And there, we we can come to the table as equal partners as opposed to a, a a small donor So that's the work that's done, and it's, it's just based upon understanding that values of the desires, and they're putting in place the KPIs for for both sides to be clear on what the relationship looks like.

Cec Busby [00:19:59]:

And what about employee buy-in? Because we probably would like our staff to also be personally involved in our charities that we've chosen, wouldn't we?

Peter Baines [00:20:11]:

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. And and that's where you know, a number of businesses, the the founder may have a connection, their best friend or a husband or wife or, you know, brother or sister or child has, you

know, an in, you know, an illness or something or a connection to a charity, and, you know, you might you know, support, prostate cancer, you might support breast cancer or something like that. They're not not saying any of that's wrong, but the the question is, if you've got a team of 30 people, in your business, does that make sense to them to be connected to breast cancer, for example, a prostate cancer or, you know, my charity, for example.

And then it's also the broader question is you've got the employees, but then you've got your client base. And, if you're looking to create an effective CSR program, we need to consider all of the stakeholders. And when I build the programs for organizations, we actually build a we we put in place a foundation committee or board or whatever you might want to call it, and it's representative from across the business and key stakeholders.

And we engage with stakeholders of the business. So current clients, potential clients, suppliers, and, of course, the, staff, the team and employees, to contribute to the conversation because there's there's a bigger chance of getting buy in if people have had a an opportunity to contribute than something imposed upon them that just might not make sense to them.

Cec Busby [00:21:48]:

So in your journey of building and leading hands across the water, were there any significant challenges that you faced, like, and if so, like, how did you overcome them?

Peter Baines [00:22:00]:

Yeah. Like, the biggest challenge was, we had year on year growth from, when I started in 2005 and very easy when you're you're just starting something and and, you know, business owners know that if you if you've got a model that's working, it's easy to achieve that growth and gets harder as you go on longer. And, for us, the biggest challenge was COVID. and, we had effectively become a an events based, organization. So We don't and the astrologers, as as strange as this might sound. We don't seek, just to raise money. We don't seek from our supporters and donors just to raise money. we seek to provide meaningful experience and meet the needs of our donors. And when we can provide value to them first, then the funds come. and that might be through our our charity black rights. We run-in Thailand or different

programs that we've got. So we provide reason for people to be involved So that was hugely, effective for us. And, in 2020, we had a 200 bike riders, over 6 rides confirmed, all raising between \$510,000 to ride with us in Thailand, and was our biggest year ever. And 13th March, everything fell apart. Now the biggest challenge we faced was that we lost 73% of our income, over those, next 2 years. but what made it even more difficult was that our operating costs, our current costs didn't change. So, you know, if you're in business and your, your income is declining. Will you look at removing costs? Well, the costs for us are running our homes and the staff and the kids and keeping the kids in university and education that didn't change. So without question, that was, you know, the biggest and toughest, challenge and it was also a huge loss of momentum. We had some really big projects and exciting projects that were, coming on board in late 19 early 2020 and throughout the year. And, there was so much momentum lost. so with it, yeah, without question those a couple of years with a the most challenging.

Cec Busby [00:24:19]:

So how did you maintain your resilience to be able to keep pushing forward during such difficult times? Yeah. I think, when we talk about resilience,

Peter Baines [00:24:28]:

the thing for me is one of the ladies that, I've worked with, who I met in 2010. who's a director of one of our homes in the northeast of Thailand and and, she'd been running a home for for kids for 24 years before I met her.

And, she, she was, faced with significant challenges kids were, high dependent, on medical needs. Many of them had HIV, and, many of them couldn't prove Thai identity.

So that meant they had to access health care through the private health care system and And it created, you know, huge challenges for her, because she didn't have enough medicine or resources to support all of the kids. And and children were effectively dying, because of the lack of access to medicine. And, and that was a journey she faced for 24 years. And and, when I met her in 2010, we committed to meet all of her, recurrent costs ensure all of the kids had access to all of the medicine they needed, and the kids stopped dying. But on my reflection of her

journey, of her having buried over a 1000 children in 24 years. The thing when I think about resilience and how did she wake up and continue each day, was not letting yesterday define her tomorrow. And, and I and I think on top of that, her hopes have always been greater than her fears. And so having her, as part of, my life, I drew upon her resilience and her learnings to help us and help me continue to to to wake up and and, look at what we could do the next day, that was needed.

Cec Busby [00:26:26]:

That's interesting because, you know, there's always going to be someone else whose experience of life is you know, that is more challenging than yours and can give you a different perspective on on things.

So I'm wondering as well from in terms of that crisis management and disaster response in that area of your life, how that has impacted your resilience and your ability to to handle change and evolving circumstances?

Peter Baines [00:26:56]:

Yeah. I I I, you know, you can't do and be exposed to what I've, done. through my career, and not, take something from it. And, and I think you know, there's a number of things that, I've taken on it at that leadership level, from working and and observing others in times of crisis and disaster. And there's a number of key things. I think that the most important thing s, is to have courage in your leadership, to make difficult decisions and, and keep moving forward.

I think the, many organisations, you know, wind themselves up and bind themselves in policy and procedure. And And they think that that creates safety and predictability, removes risk, but in, you know, my view, whilst there's a place for all of that. obviously,

I think we defer to that and default to that too often. And in in in crisis and disaster, you you know, often the policy and procedure manuals and all of those type of things are irrelevant because we haven't been able to predict the scale or nature of what we confronted with.

And then when those policies and procedures are don't fit, then it comes down to leadership. and, I've seen and worked with some incredible leaders. And and a lot of it is we don't have to have all of the answers. We don't have to bring about change, but there's, huge value in being present with those that you're leading. And, And as I say, I

think the biggest thing for for leaders in times of crisis, is to be present and and have the courage to make decisions.

Because I honestly believe that if we if we consult where we can, if we act with good integrity and good intent and we get it wrong, will be forgiven. But, in types of crisis and disaster and so forth, we don't forgive people who are, who who don't have the courage to make those difficult decisions.

Yeah. It's that actions speak louder than words old adage, I think. Yeah. Well, I think the, you know, we're working in where there's, you know, in Thailand, we had 450 staff from 36 different countries. So the position of the title that you came to the country with was really irrelevant. And, true leaders will be identified by their actions and reactions, not the positions that they hold.

Cec Busby [00:29:37]:

Getting back to that corporate social responsibility side of things, we're often pushed to just think locally in terms of that. What are you doing on the ground here? What are you doing for your local community? What are you doing for, you know, other Aussies, etcetera? But what about global causes? I mean, environment for one thing, global warming, blah blah blah. Like, I mean, how can businesses ensure that they have responsible practices that also not only meet the needs of their local community, but are addressing those kind of global challenges like environmental sustainability, you know, human rights, responsible sourcing, all those things that, there's a lot of lip service too, but it can be difficult as a small business owner to know where to start.

Peter Baines [00:30:29]:

Yeah. You've put on the table some big things to tackle there around, some big challenges. And I think that's, like, in that second book, I talk about the, shared value, which is engaged of the entire supply chain. And it's not as in our values are aligned, but it is that, that entire supply chain.

So where we're looking at, if we're, importing goods, for example, we're looking at the working conditions in which that exist in the manufacturers of where the goods are made. We're looking at the sourcing of the raw materials. We're looking at the, the cost efficiency and then, so forth of, transporting goods from one side of the globe to the other in in saving costs, but what's the net effect with emissions and

so forth? And And, you know, I think that that becomes quite a big, a big piece to to buy it off and chew when we're looking at all of that. And, And that's hard for for business to, to get their head around when when we when we consider that most of this stuff for a small and medium business, it's not their core business. It's not what they're about. And, and their investment in these type of programs, and when you talk about those things that you just did with global warming and emissions and you know, all of that, that can be just become too big and too hard, but, I think that that that and that's where the investment in time in planning, what you're going to do, is the most important thing to take on a challenge, take on a cause that's meaningful, and make sense. And, it might be an international, a national, a local charity partner. It might be just that it makes sense to be just local. you know, there's a there's a whole series of reasons why you would pick one charity over another, whether it's domestic, whether it's within your local community or whether it's a it's an international charity partner. And, you know, I don't think there's one rule that applies for all. I think it's the work that needs to be done is in finding, that charity partner that makes sense and, you know, that might lead you to 1 or 2 charity partners so so that you're, you know, sharing and undertaking different experiences, but, yeah, I think that the the key thing is something that, can be managed, can be maintained, and, because the, you know, I've seen a number of organizations invest in establishing it, and then you look at it 3, 4 years on. and it's become something that, was, was good, and now no one's doing anything with. And so you wanna avoid that. And, and it might be the case that you start small and do something that makes sense before you expand on those bigger bigger, global issues.

Cec Busby [00:33:46]:

So I think we've only probably got time for one more question. So What what advice or, I don't know, key takeaway would you like our listeners to, to leave with today about, I don't know, the power of giving back communities or why they should be considering, doing good with their business.

Peter Baines [00:34:08]:

Yeah. I think the most important thing is to, you know, we talked about finding that journey worthy of your heart and soul. And I think it's, you

know, we we've been taught within, certainly, within Australia, is to say that we give with no expectation of return. But as we've discussed, you know, that's not really sustainable. So I think it's the important thing is to, if you're looking to engage on a personal level, or a business level, with an organization, to look at what the returns that you'll get from it because, then there's a a greater chance of it being enduring, being sustainable, and meaningful for you. And, because it's hard to continue to do something where we don't find value. And, so I'd say, invest time and investigate the partnership, and do your due diligence. before you start handing over your money and make sure that there's going to be a personal return to you. And if not, we'll keep looking.

Cec Busby [00:35:16]:

Yeah. Find the right the right cause that's gonna make your heart sing. Yeah. Alright. Thank you so much, Peter. It's been a pleasure chatting with you today. My pleasure. Where can people get your book, by the way? Amazon?

Peter Baines [00:35:29]:

Amazon Booktopia or through my website, which is, Peter Bowings.com.au. And, if they wanna know more out hands. It's, hands across the water.org. au.

Cec Busby [00:35:40]:

Thank you so much, Peter. It's been great having you on the show. Thank you.