



SEASON 1, EPISODE 6

Uniting our community in a fair energy transition

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SPEAKERS

Yael Stone, Founder, Hi Neighbour

Robyn Johnson, Director, Blend ESQ

Yael Stone 00:11

Just knowing that these large, wicked problems as they're described, they're complex, and they're systematic, which means that the solutions are wonderfully complex and systematic. And there's something heartening in that, because if we connect broadly, and move out of our silos, we've got a chance, but we've got to do it together.

Robyn Johnson 00:38

Hi, I'm Robyn Johnson, and welcome to Wollongong, Let's Get Salty! For 20 years I've advised industry and business in environmental management, with leaders from community, environment and industry will deep dive issues that impact us all and discuss how we as a community can take action to move towards a sustainable future.

Robyn Johnson 01:10

Welcome back. I am super excited about today's chat. I think we need more people like Yael Stone in the world, calling out action for community and environment. So welcome to Wollongong Let's Get Salty.

Yael Stone 01:26

Oh my gosh, thank you so much Robyn, it's lovely to be here, thank you.

Robyn Johnson 01:30

I want to talk about your journey to this point and introduce yourself, probably you need no introduction.

Yael Stone 01:36

I'm sure that I do, I'm sure that I do. Well, most people who aren't in the realm of family and friends know me as Lorna Morello, from Orange is the New Black. I've been acting since I was 12, and that's been where I've put all of my professional energy into having a really wonderful creative life, and I've had so many wonderful experiences, including that Orange is the New Black experience. And then I guess my focus has changed a lot in the last probably six years, and that was also a gift from Orange is the New Black.

I started getting involved in criminal justice reform in the states, and I worked with a group called Liberation Prison Yoga, and we went into prisons and worked with inmates doing meditation and yoga, and with a kind of larger aim for healing and looking at the bigger problems in the criminal justice system. And I learned a lot from that, and I learned about change, and, you know, before, before that time, I'd felt like I really want to be part of making the world a better place. But I'm not the kind of person that can do that. I don't have any skills in that department, you know, who do I think I am, that I could offer anything. And once I felt that there was a little bit of possibility there, I saw oh, if I do more, it's more helpful, I can push this barrow down the road a little further and help this person out who's leading the charge. And that realization gave me confidence to be able to kind of hold values, personal values, and try and work towards them.

So as I said, that was like six years ago, and it's been a journey, and I've worked in different spaces of, I guess, positive change, that's how I've tried to see it, different zones of where things are possible and pushing the needle a bit, and it's been an amazing journey. It led me to work in climate, and about exactly in time with the fires, which was no good.

Robyn Johnson 03:41

Yeah tell us this story. So you gave back essentially, your Green Card and life between here in the US tell us about what brought about that decision.

Yael Stone 03:51

I'd been really conscious of the negative and kind of frightening impacts of climate change for a number of years before that, and had this kind of itching, varied feeling like I know, this is something we need to address and I want to be addressing it. But I don't know how to, it's too intense. What could I possibly do, again, that feeling like you're insignificant, that you don't have the right skills, that you can't possibly be part of something positive.

And then the fires happened, and I'd had just started studying sustainability online, and the connections between what was possible for change, and what was an imminent threat, I couldn't ignore. So if I'm not working on that positive change, then I'm allowing imminent threat. If I'm living a life that's completely in opposition to the world I want to see, I'm in a really uncomfortable place of cognitive dissonance, where my behaviour doesn't reflect my values at all. And it all just became too much, it was really overwhelming. I was really anxious. I was covered in eczema, head to toe, I wasn't sleeping.

At the time our daughter was two, and I just felt really overwhelmed by her future, and the fact that I wasn't working towards a more positive version of that was really hard to take. So we had had a whole life where we had lived between New York and Australia. We're not extravagant people, but that reality is extravagant, living in two places flying back and forth. Having family commitments in Australia and working commitments in the States was a lot. (Robyn: Yeah). And I just felt like, something's got to change.

At the time I saw it as a sacrifice, but now I understand, I gained so much. There's so much abundance in that decision. And look, I should say, also, it's not that I'm saying I'll never do that work again, I love that work, and I love being around the world and experiencing different cultures and interacting with people. It's not about saying, no, that'll never happen again. It was about some kind of symbol large enough to express the need for adjustment, and as I said, at the time, I saw it as a sacrifice.

I spoke about it publicly as a war on climate change that we needed a warlike footing, and now I understand there is so much abundance and positivity and possibility there, that we don't need to talk about it like sacrifice or like a war, we can talk about it in the terms of all that we have to gain.

Robyn Johnson 06:51

Yeah, there's a certain freedom, and also a, a feeling of doing something to alleviate that anxiety that you feel, to shine a light for the future generations, including our own little children, and being part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

Yael Stone 07:12

Absolutely, and then there's all these amazing positive tributaries that come from it. The work that I'm doing with Hi Neighbour, which is our organisation that's based here in the Illawarra, on Dharawal land, it's meant that I meet all these people that I would otherwise not know. I would never be working with the retired metallurgical engineer of 39 years, who's committed his life to carbon reduction, I would not be able to call him and say, 'Hey, Greg, I've got this assignment, I need some help. What are your thoughts on this?' And there are so many of those examples of just lovely, unexpected friendships and connections with people in your own community that you just wouldn't otherwise have, without pursuing some kind of community mission, and that's one of the unexpected gifts.

Robyn Johnson 08:10

Yeah, tell me about the course you're doing?

Yael Stone 08:15

Well, I'm doing it very slowly. I am at Wollongong University and I'm studying Sustainable Communities. And when I mentioned before that I was studying, I actually was studying with a different uni through Open Universities Australia as a way of testing, ah does my brain still work? It was kind of like a post motherhood, 'how do I get back into a really rigorous thinking place?', and it was by virtue of choosing that course, that I thought, wow, there's some real possibility here. And I did one subject with Open Universities Australia, no I did a couple with them, and I thought, ah, my brain still works, how wonderful. And I was really drawn to want to study on campus locally, and really engage with that part of Wollongong as well.

I think the universities have such a dynamic, wonderful thing for all city centres. But regionally, it's really important, and we've got this incredible uni, with such a wealth of talent. And so, while I'm doing it very slowly, I've learned so much already. And the lecturers are local, their focus is local a lot of the time, and there's a lot of crossover in terms of the work that I'm doing with Hi Neighbour, and the work that some of my tutors and lecturers are doing. I'm probably a little over committed, but there's a really wonderful sense of cross pollination. I hope I can keep it up. I hope I can finish. The other day, I had to ask the course coordinator to have a time limit, she told me I had to 2029 (Robyn: Oh, you're good). Well, I'll try.

Robyn Johnson 09:59

So Wollongong, what made you want to plant a seed here and set up your life here?

Yael Stone 10:05

Well, this is a little embarrassing and dreamy to admit, but I used to catch the train with my best friend, Sydney Smith, down from Sydney to Jervis Bay, and her folks live there. And every time the train would come through this area, I would get a bit dreamy and kind of feel like, I could live here. This is the most beautiful place in the whole world. It was that combination of the ocean and the escarpment coming together in that narrow passage. That felt like an embrace (Robyn: Yep) and also so dynamic and beautiful and unlike anywhere I'd ever seen, and I remember thinking very kind of whimsically, probably from the age of like 13 or 14 all the way through to when I got my licence and I could drive us. On the train, yeah, this is the most beautiful place in the world.

Robyn Johnson 11:00

I feel that too. I grew up in Camden, and so this was always our local beach or beaches. Do you have a favourite way that you'd like to immerse yourself in nature?

Yael Stone 11:10

We got this crazy dog, which sometimes I think was a mistake, but I'm starting to fall in love with him. And I'm very grateful to him for his incredibly incessant bark that tells me that it's time to go to the beach and walk along, and to be able to see the sunrise or sunset, every day, not just when it suits you, is such an incredible gift. Cause I think we've got these missions, we've got drives, we've got commitments, we can get sucked into our screens in the most kind of appalling way, because they're designed to do that.

And also, we've all got a lot on, we're all like, totally over committed, and I can definitely look up and suddenly realise, oh, my gosh, it's almost three o'clock, and I have been just completely sucked into this screen all day. And to have, to have, that impetus to go and take my shoes off, and have the water run over my feet, and to look out and get perspective is such a gift, and you don't get that without a horizon, right? So precious.

So, I think that trying to have a daily moment of perspective, and remembering that you're not simply a pair of eyeballs that serve a screen. But you're a full being and that you're in a much larger context of changing tides, changing water lines, even the way the water runs off the escarpment, noticing how it's different with different patterns of rainfall, just realising you're in a larger environmental system is so precious.

Robyn Johnson 12:51

I totally agree with that, it is a really special place, and I think it's hard to ignore the escarpment and the clouds shifting across it and the sun. And when you're on the beach, it's that kind of energy, that I draw a lot of energy from just hearing the crashing waves, and we catch the bus to school most days. And then I walk and run back along the beaches to come back home, and if I didn't do that, then I get sort of sucked into my day, as you say, with all the things that we need to do without kind of having that opportunity to set what I want to achieve from the day. And to just have some mindfulness time, where I'm appreciative of this beautiful place that we live in, which keeps me doing my work.

Yael Stone 13:37

Yeah. Yeah. One doesn't exist without the other, right?

Robyn Johnson 13:41

Yeah. Tell me a bit more about Hi, Neighbour, and where did the idea come from? And you mentioned AIME, can we hear a bit about that?

Yael Stone 13:50

Oh, gosh, well, AIME is an organisation that my partner runs. It's a global organisation, and essentially, their work is to connect people outside of the margins with people inside the margins and populate our world with unlikely connections for greater equality. So that's a pretty big conversation in itself, I've been lucky enough to be an Ambassador for AIME for a number of years and support lots of their different projects.

The best thing that I could say is that I'm so deeply inspired by my partner, Jack Manning Bancroft, who founded it when he was 19, and has been working on it for the last 18 years. And he's a totally inspiring light in my life, and probably has a lot to do with a growing confidence of the notion that we can all make a difference, and we can all play a part in the world that we want to see. And I would encourage anyone who has an interest in equality and imagination to jump on their website. But otherwise, I let him into the detail.

Robyn 14:53

But locally, what you mentioned to me in a previous conversation that they do some things locally.

Yael Stone 14:59

Oh, well, AIME operates all over Australia, and all over the world now, in 52 different countries, there's about 1000 different ways that they have interactions with communities. And one of those ways is tutor squads, so people going into schools and working with marginalised kids and just, it can be as simple as doing homework. It could be as simple as having a really valuable, supportive, positive connection with kids who might otherwise be left outside of that attention sphere. So there's lots of local opportunities, and I would encourage anyone who wants to get involved to reach out to the local chapter, there is a in Wollongong chapter, so yeah, get involved.

Robyn Johnson 15:38

You mentioned their IMAGI-NATION program, which was maybe, one of the ideas for Hi Neighbour was sort of born through doing that.

Yael Stone 15:47

I was at IMAGI-NATION University, which I think enrolments are still open for this year. I did IMAGI-NATION University last year, and they have a citizen program. So, the citizen program basically allows folks who are too old to run the leadership program within the unis to focus on a project for positive change in the world, whatever it might be. And I had the extraordinary privilege of being put together. So, I did, I did their online training component, while I'm studying at University of Wollongong, it's sort of side by side, and then was part of a reoccurring tutor group.

So, I would meet with four people, all from different places across the world, all with different missions, we had our citizen projects, we'd report to each other. And we just encourage each other, offer mentoring within the group or ideas, some stimulus here and there. And that was wonderfully positive, and it was a great way to focus my energies in terms of organising Hey Neighbour. But I should just backtrack, I feel like I haven't really talked about what we do

Robyn Johnson 16:54

Yeah, let's hear about what it is?

Yael Stone 16:57

Okay, so Hi Neighbour's based locally, we're very much in Illawarra, Dharawal focused organisation. And the ideas are born out of this very unique place, where coal and steel is a really rich part of our history. And our focus is really acknowledging that, interestingly, given that we're an environmental organisation, that might sound a little unusual to people.

But I had started to see a bit of a division between new folks coming into the area with ideas, really positive ideas about wanting the world to be better and addressing climate change. But that some of the people that have lived here for perhaps a little longer, were being left out of that conversation and perhaps being marginalised in that conversation. So coal and steel workers kind of becoming the face of the problem, when in reality, these are folks who have a job, a good well paying job that has a really powerful history in this area, that should not be sort of held up as the examples of what's wrong in the world, but rather, folks who are putting food on the table for their families, who are simply turning up to a job that has been heavily unionised and has great pay, and that things that were hard fought for.

I started learning a bit more about that history, because I came in really judgmental, we moved here in 2016. And I was like, why is everyone going on about the coal coast? And why is everyone so proud of that? Aren't we supposed to be getting away from coal, and that was my kind of naive position, until I started to learn a bit more. And that came from the University of Wollongong, an amazing academic

called Chantel Carr, who's doing fabulous work in this area, and she was one of my teachers, and she taught me about the human geography of this area. And I started to understand more about what energy transformation, otherwise known as transition looks like, and how that affects people on a personal level. So, while I'm all about positive action on climate change, and radically reducing our CO₂ emissions, I'm also learning that there's a huge human cost when we transition. So for some of us, we think, oh, I've got a keep cup, fantastic. I brought my bags to the shopping centre, fantastic. Meanwhile, other people are being asked to let go of jobs that have supported their families for generations, and not being offered a clear pathway to what's next.

So, Hi Neighbour is all about supporting that clear pathway and illuminating that clear pathway, answering some of those questions about how we practically move forward. And we're doing that by providing scholarships for local people. So, any local worker can apply, coal and steel workers are prioritised, and their children. So, we're looking to the future and saying, hey, we'd like to support you with money, with scholarships in your chosen field of training, towards low carbon technologies.

So, if you're a sparky and you're interested in retrofitting houses for reduced carbon emissions, can we help you get the tickets that you need to get. If you're thinking a bit more long term and you're hearing about hydrogen coming into the area, and you want to train long term in a kind of university pathway, can we help you with that? Can we sponsor you? Can we provide a scholarship for your first year of training? We're really interested in creating those pathways and making them practical to make sure that local workers can stay in local jobs.

Robyn Johnson 20:52

And so the money for these scholarships comes partly through the interest on loans for businesses say to do solar, and then also identifying opportunities for grants, investment from philanthropists (I can't say that word).

Yael Stone 21:09

Philanthropists, yeah, it's a good one. Yeah, we have a novel approach to raising money, because we wanna include as much of the community as possible. So basically, when you donate to Hi Neighbour, you donate to a solar rooftop, and that solar rooftop is going to go on the rooftop of a local business that has some goals around sustainability and reducing their CO₂ emissions, and saving some money as well in their power bills.

So we organise for that whole installation process, we provide the funds through donations to that business, and then they pay us back with the principal and the interest, much like a bank, and all of that goes to Hi Neighbour, and all of that goes into our scholarship funds and supporting local workers to keep local jobs. So basically, you get a bit of bang for your buck, your dollar that you put towards that ultimate goal of a scholarship goes through the solar roof top, it reduces CO₂, and also increases in value because of the interest rate that's negotiated with the business.

So we're trying to get as much bang for your buck when you donate with us, and you can know that you have contributed to emissions reductions now, and an investment in renewables in the future, and the people that live in your community, so it's kind of a three pronged win.

Robyn Johnson 22:36



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Robyn Johnson 23:12

Yeah, and I mean, people are looking for ways to offset things in their lives that they can't yet remove an emission. There's the Effective Altruism movement, where people are looking to find charities, or somewhere to donate their dollar in a way that's actually impactful. And I find this story really interesting, particularly in light of Dendrobium, making a decision this week to not go ahead with their mine expansion, that creates some serious job security concerns for not just the miners working in that mine, but the supply chain, locally.

And we live in an area where there is so much unique opportunity for renewables, you mentioned hydrogen, offshore wind, some advanced manufacturing, that's sort of pushing in that direction in terms of making steel plate for wind turbines, etc. There's also, in the last couple of weeks, the Royalties for Rejuvenation Fund, which the government has committed to \$25 million dollars a year coming out of coal royalties, to go towards projects across regional communities that will be affected by the move away from coal mining and coal power plants. So it's very topical.

What I love about yours is it's really focused on local action, which I think is where every community needs to and has the most influence to create change. So I love what you're doing, how can people reach out to you, and where are you up to in terms of your launch?

Yael Stone 24:56

I just feel like you covered about 10,000 of my favourite things. I do want to acknowledge that Dendrobium is a big environmental win for a lot of groups locally, and then we do have to acknowledge that the CFMEU came out straightaway and said 'this is a big blow for workers'. So how do we straddle both of those complex ideas at once? How do we both say, the environment, and CO₂ emissions, and water loss are really important to us, and we want to see positive decisions on that. But we also need to support workers when we close certain industrial pathways, and that's important. I guess that's what we're trying to straddle with Hi Neighbour, bringing a bit of sensitivity as well to the fact that employment opportunity is now gone.

And you also mentioned there's a relationship between Dendrobium and other local industry, you know, they provide significant coal to BlueScope. So we have to look at that in relation to the relining project at BlueScope, how those things affect each other, BlueScope's plan to move into other areas eventually or their commitment to, what does that mean for workers? How are we practically saying, okay, there's a pathway that's changing, what are local businesses, big and small, because it's some very big business that we're talking about? What are they doing to invest in their workers to make sure those workers can transition as they transition, or do those workers get left behind, and we bring in a bunch of people from out of town.

Cause for my money, I would love to see local people be able to stay local, and we could say, oh, well, there's all these other mining opportunities that are going to happen here, there and everywhere because of batteries. Well, that's all well and good, but do you want to move out of the town that you've lived in for your whole life where your parents grew up, where your grandparents grew up, because that's a big deal socially, to make people move away, I would rather see us invest in those workers being able to transition with the businesses as they transition too. And I would argue that there's a bit of a kind of social contract responsibility for those businesses to do that, too.

If there's ways for local business to partner with people like Hi Neighbour, and with people like Ty Christopher, looking at skill shortages at the university. Let's do it. Let's work together dynamically because Wollongong is so full of talent, and opportunity. When you look at the incredible synchronicity of the future energies network, of the innovation work that's going on, on campus at UOW, the incredible talent that's coming through that place, plus business energy of a BlueScope transformation, mining transformation, plus communities who are deeply invested in seeing things happen in the right way.

And there's so much wonderful community action, we've got power, we've got Electrify 2515, we've got the Knitting Nanna's. We've got all this wealth of enthusiasm and experience and care for both the local environment and the local social environment.

We've got a rich Dharawal history, we've got really dynamic, thoughtful, local leaders, like Catherine Moyle, who is on our board, so that's a bit of a shout out, like Jade Kennedy, like Vanessa Cavanagh. Vanessa is a Bundjalung leader, but she lives here, we've got so much wisdom in this place. And with all these groups, this synchronicity of change and hope for a better way, and drawing on wisdom that's existed for 1000s 1000s of years, surely, we can find it, surely, we can work together to make the social paradigm healthy, and the environment paradigm healthy and have that happen together. So I have a lot of hope around that.

So I guess that's my big call out to how people can get involved, is support that dynamic ecosystem that's happening around you, find those groups that really speak to you. And you know, if our work speaks to you, please get in touch through our website. And on all sides, if you're working in mining, if you're working in steel, I really, really want to hear from you. Tell me what I'm getting wrong. Tell me how I could do it better. I would love to work with you to make those pathways clearer. If you've got goals or questions, we can work together to find the path and find those answers, hopefully, in communication with all these amazing actors in the area.

And if you're somebody who wants to see change, and wants to support people in your area, your neighbours, whether they be in your street, or down the coast, please support us, support us with your dollars, support us with your time, we have a great opportunity for an arvo tea where, basically we have a sit down with people and their 10 to 15 closest folks, and we talk about the issues and how you can get involved and talk back and forth.

It's really very much a listening process, cause I'm a novice, I'm putting everything I've got behind it. But my novice energy has been useful because I can just ask questions and be stupid. And that helps us all learn, you know, when someone's prepared to be stupid, ask the dumb questions, then we all get to listen to the answers. So this project is very much a two way street, and I'm really interested in learning as we grow.

Robyn Johnson 30:26

Hmm, and I think you hit the nail on the head, when it's we have the mindset here for what's needed for the transition. And I would add to that what's needed to deal with climate change mitigation locally in terms of flood and water management and bushfire and all biodiversity, other things that are not carbon

emissions, but our ability to kind of build up the condition of our local environment so that when things repeatedly, you know we have more extreme weather events, that we're building up the resilience of our local community and our local environment to be able to cope with that change. The University and the Future Energy Skills Centre, does that interact with your work?

Yael Stone 31:17

I'm really hoping that it does, I hope it's not too cheeky of me to say that out loud, but I'm really hoping there can be a very strong connection between what we do and what happens as they move forward with their really exciting grant from the Federal Government to create a place where people can upskill and train, the combination of TAFE and Uni, is really exciting to me also, I guess I have a bit of a golden vision, which is, you know, you get nervous when you share your like big goals.

Robyn Johnson 31:46

Someone's gotta have it though, we need the vision.

Yael Stone 31:49

I would love for our group, I would love for us to be putting solar panels across all of UOW, and using the funds from that, to send people into the classrooms underneath those solar panels, and creating that whole next generation of people who can service hydrogen, that can service wind, that can service all the retrofitting that you want to get done in your home, that can service a whole 2515 decarbonisation of domestic spaces. We need to have local people taking those jobs.

And it would be so magical for us to be generating low carbon energy for the University, sending young people and anyone of any age group who might otherwise not be having that opportunity to go in and upskill without scholarships, that would really bring me some satisfaction. And to see those people go out in the community, be able to stay where they love to live and surf and send their kids and do that work that is essentially decarbonising work again. So it kind of see it like a big, full cycle. And I truly, truly hope that we can work with the University, I think there's a lot of joy there.

Robyn Johnson 33:04

Yeah, there's something like 57,000 homes across Wollongong, plus businesses, and I think the reality is we don't want it to just be 2515, we want it to be 2500 and 2528 and every 25. There is so much work that needs to be done, every rooftop is an asset for this transition, and being able to draw on local skills, local supply, even having technology down the line to be able to recycle your solar panels when their end of life and having those circular connections.

And by having these conversations and the conversations you're having with through your work and through University, and you know myself within industry, I find myself talking to a whole range of engineers and managers, but I equally am having conversations with activists and local politicians. And it's just joining the dots, we've got to keep talking, so we can keep joining these dots to strengthen our community into this next phase of life, provide a future for kids and a pathway for what their future might look like whether it's in this at all, or whether it's you know, something beautiful, like the arts. It's I guess, just creating that really strong connection to each other, connection to place, and then the work we do around it.

Yael Stone 34:34

Yeah, 100%, and in saying that out loud, I want to acknowledge my partner, Jack Manning Bancroft, and another big influence Tyson Yunkaporta, the author of Sand Talk, and an amazing thinker who's really focused our energies in terms of large system thinking, and relational work. And just knowing that these large, wicked problems as they're described, they're complex, and they're systematic, which means that the solutions are wonderfully complex and systematic. And there's something heartening in that,

because if we connect broadly, and move out of our silos, we've got a chance, but we've got to do it together.

Robyn Johnson 35:19

Yeah, I think it's a beautiful way to say it, and I think there's a great energy that comes from doing things together, and doing it as a team and also the diversity of thought and the imagination of the future that will come from having lots of people from all different walks of life coming at this solution, in a very local way that could be replicated in Newcastle and Singapore and New York. And you know, it's I think every community needs to do these things together, and I think Wollongong's got just as much chance as the next regional town and possibly an opportunity to inspire Sydney and join the dots with what they're doing up there as well.

Because in terms of geography, you know we're still close and Newcastle's still in that realm for us, we're all on the east coast of Australia. But what we do here might be able to influence what's happening in Perth. So I think setting up these visions and sharing them and not being afraid to stand up and go, no, what we're doing in the past is not working anymore. Let's work together to find the solutions. So I'm really excited that Hi Neighbour is here, (Yael: thank you) I'm keen to hear more as you go through this journey and yeah, looking forward to your every success and the passion that you bring to your work and to our local community.

Yael Stone 36:50

Thank you, Robyn, I appreciate your work as well. It's lovely to be here, and I've really enjoyed listening to the other episodes. I think an awesome local brains trust that you're bringing together, so I feel very honoured to be a part of it. Thank you.

Robyn Johnson 37:04

You're welcome. Thanks again.



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