# Take on Board

Transcript – Helga Svendsen, Happy Birthday Take on Board

Buffy Gorrilla 0:00

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, it's Take on Board's first birthday, so the microphone has turned towards Helga, our fearless and enthusiastic podcast host. She's agreed to sit down for an interview with me. First, let me tell you about Helga. No, wait. I'm not gonna tell you about Helga yet. I'm gonna let Helga tell you about herself in this episode. So without further ado, I'm so excited to say this. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast. Helga.

Helga Svendsen 0:36

Hey, Buffy, it feels so weird to be on this side of the microphone, but awesome. Nonetheless.

Buffy Gorrilla 0:42

Happy birthday.

Helga Svendsen 0:45

First birthday. It's been a while since I've had my first birthday. So it's nice to have it again.

Buffy Gorrilla 0:50

So I'm going to start off with, tell me about young Helga. When did you get an inkling that governance was something that you were interested in?

Helga Svendsen 1:01

Oh, so fun being asked my own questions. So I'm not sure if you'd say made me interested in governance, but I was on the school council back at school. In fact, I was trying to think back and wondering whether I was even on some sort of representative thing at primary school, but I think, I don't think that's right. But definitely at secondary school, I was on the student representative Council and I was the SRC representative to our school Council. I remember the principal who was there some of the teachers some of their parents during my time as a on that school Council. There was a bit of controversy, always fun in your first governance experience. So I went to school and went to a school called Diamond Creek Technical School. So it was a tech school was having a lot of the trade sort of things that tech schools have it was also had quite a few creative things. neither of which I must say I was good at. I'm terrible at creative stuff and at the trades. So we had at our school, a mud brick tower. And it was the emblem of the school, this mud brick tower. And whilst on school holidays one year we all came back to school and the tower was gone. That knocked it down during the school holidays for health and safety reasons. And there was uproar amongst the student body and this was while I was on the council and hadn't told us at Council. So people were coming to me and saying what happened? I'm like, I have no idea what happened. We weren't told about this. We weren't told there was health and safety issues. So we organized a student protest. So we had a sitting in our common area to protest that they hadn't consulted us about what was happening. We all wore black armbands to signify the passing of our school tower. My sister, my older sister at the time, was volunteering on the local paper called the Diamond Creek news. And she covered the story. And I of course was one of the strike organizers. So it was kind of ironic that in future years she went on to become a journalist and I went on for a period of time to be A union organizer. It just seems it was all set. Back then when I was in year eight or nine or whatever it was at the school, whilst we didn't get our power back, because they'd already knocked it down. We certainly got some concessions, I guess, from the principal and others that had decided that that they should have consulted with the student body and what's the outcome might not have been different if that engaged us in the process that we wouldn't have been quite so angry at the end of it.

Buffy Gorrilla 3:24

Did you carry on with that activism in the rest of your schooling?

Helga Svendsen 3:29

Yeah, yeah, I was involved. A friend of mine, called me a joiner. So I'm a joiner. I like to join things. I can see that. So of course, join the student, the SRC, the student, Representative Council, join the school Council, join the student newspaper, you know, I was involved in things so that was both at school at the secondary school that I went to and when I went to university once I kind of worked out what uni was all about. Because I had no idea in my first year, but once I got the hang of it, I took my joining gene to the next level, got involved in all sorts of things that you need. And likewise was editor of the student newspaper at university as well and involved in student politics and all sorts of things.

Buffy Gorrilla 4:16

Now Helga is at university, and you've made a decision to study law. Walk me through that process of choosing that as your degree.

Helga Svendsen 4:27

In year 12 I didn't really expect to be honest, to get the marks to get into law. So I had down as my preferences at the time to do teaching. And when I got my year 12 results I had gone unexpectedly well, so had an opportunity to change my preferences. So I then chose to apply for economics law at Monash University, and was successful so got into economics law now, why I chose economics as my second degree. So my At the time, and I think still does, you can't just do a law degree you need to do a combined degree. So I chose economics. I don't know why I chose that it was clearly the wrong thing to do. And hmm, should I be admitting this? Yes, I shall. I failed spectacularly. I fell first year economics. I found Fisher accounting. Why was I doing accounting? What was the other subject or economic statistics? I almost passed that but not quite. So I had to go up before the exclusions committee in my first year, and I was desperate to get back in just so I could say, I didn't want to be there. It's kind of like being dumped. But unfortunately, they dumped me. So I got chucked out of economics, which was the best thing ever, and I went to the outside equity instead. And did my arts degrade combined with my law degree. So arts was where I should have been from the start. It was just a foolish decision from somebody who knew no better really. So yeah, I had a pretty rough start to uni. They was very few kids from my school that went to university. And in fact, you know, there was very few public school kids in university and I didn't really have much of an inkling about all of these private schools and private school kids. So it was a really rough start. So I was pleased by second year to get myself into the arts faculty and you know, find my feet

Buffy Gorrilla 6:20

And then you were successful and you move through and you graduated, and then you were a practicing lawyer, and then shock among shocks. You made the decision to leave the law. Why?

Helga Svendsen 6:34

Um, so I did law, because I wanted to help people. I think it's probably the start of that's what I wanted. Like I say, I kind of had an interest in law from secondary school but didn't think I would get the marks. There was some kids at my school. It's an awful story. Actually. They were boys. I shouldn't say boys being boys, but they were boys being boys and they were mucking around as they do, and they were throwing rocks at the train. And one of the rocks hit a kid and killed him. And those kids that were in my home group, the three boys were, of course, charged with our murder or manslaughter or something and ended up in whatever the children detention centers were called at the time. And look, my memory of this might not be the accurate memory, but to my memory, they were really kind of overwhelmed by the legal process and weren't really involved in the legal process and didn't really know what was going on. And so for me getting into law was about making sure people knew what was going on in the legal processes and being, I guess, empowered in that, in some ways, it gets back to that school council thing like it, you want to know the Decisions, decisions that are impacting you and to be able to understand those decisions that are impacting you. So I wanted to be part of being able to explain that to people and have them engaged in the process. So and in fact, thinking about it, even my experience at university Like when I was thrown out of the economics faculty, I was very fortunate to have another student supporting me through that process. I had to front up to the law exclusions for equity as well. Even though I had passed my law subjects, I had to front up to them. I had a, an older law students supporting me in that process. And I know having people supporting you well through those processes makes a huge difference. So that's why I got into the law. So I was a personal injury litigation lawyer. I was working down in Latrobe Valley and supporting people through their injuries. I think I did that. Okay. Even though I was ridiculously young and so much younger than the clients that I was dealing with, and I sometimes kind of just think, how on earth they listened to me, I don't know. But what I found was that as a lawyer, you wait for something to go wrong in somebody's life. In this instance, you know, they do their back at work or do some other injury or get mesothelioma from working with asbestos or whatever. And then your suit Somebody and you get them some money, but you don't really make the problem go away. And you don't really have any role in stopping the problem from occurring at all. So my next role was working for the union. And in my role as a union organizer, I just found it was all flipped on that on its head, you your role was essentially to work with groups of workers, work in a workplace to kind of identify their natural leaders to build those people within the workplace to support their other co workers and to kind of equalize the power structures within a workplace. So that problems didn't happen at all. So I found that flip from kind of reactive to proactive and to being able to work with some of those people in the workplace on a long term basis to build their leadership skills. That was just incredibly satisfying. So that's what drew me away from the law and whilst I still got to use my legal skills, It was in a very different format, which I loved.

Buffy Gorrilla 10:03

And was it a natural transition to go from the union organizing to board work.

Helga Svendsen 10:11

So it was actually in my very first union role. So I was an industrial officer in a union for a while. And through that role, which is kind of like being a legal officer, you don't have to be a lawyer to be a industrial officer, but often you are. So in that role, I represented the union on my first proper board, I guess the community services and health industry training advisory board had a snappy title. So I was the union rep for the health services union on that board. And I enjoyed that a lot. I think I really thought about being a board. I was just representing the union at the time, in a way. And in my next union, when I was working with the Australian services union, I ended up as Assistant Secretary of that union, which means you are effectively kind of like the deputy CEO of that organization are reporting to the board, our branch executive. So working with our board in that way, although again, I don't think the union executive really thinks about governance in the way I think about governance now. And it was only really when I left the union because that union, we had a lot of coverage in the community sector and membership organization. So I dealt with a lot of not for profit organizations and I want to continue that connection to you know, for purpose organizations when I left. So it was then that I started looking for my what I would consider my first inverted commas proper board role. What was your first proper board role? That was the YWCA Victoria fabulous organization in Victoria, improving the lives of women by ending inequality, although it had been around for at the time about 125 years and is still around, we haven't quite ended inequality yet. But yeah, that was my first proper board role, I guess, with other fabulous women. And that's where I really think Got my governance legs for one of a better word. So I was on the board, and also for a period of time on the subsidiary board, which was social housing Victoria, great organization and strong governance, probably partly from the length of time that organization had been around and just a group of amazing women that I am still in touch with today.

Buffy Gorrilla 12:21

And what was the learning curve like for you joining that board?

Helga Svendsen 12:24

Oh massive. You know, I've also had been involved in some boards, as I say not, I didn't feel like proper boards. And this one felt like a proper board. So learning about the organization and being inducted into the organization and finding out, you know, we had housing that we ran, we had community sector programs, and we also ran a hotel. So we owned a hotel in the city, which was part of the kind of business model that we had that that hotel would provide funding for the rest of the organization. So that was a lots of stuff to get your head around as well as then thinking through all the things by niche boards need to think about strategy risk, the finances, all of those sorts of things. It was a great training ground. And the other thing I loved about the Y was we had a constitutional requirement that four of our directors were inverted commas, young women, so women, I think it was aged 30 years and younger. So it was great to ensure that we had those young voices on the board and they were equal members of board. They weren't Oh, what are young women think, you know, let's just give them their training ground. They were there as full members of the board participated as full members of the board. And you know, it was absolutely fantastic. So yeah, it was great. It was great in so many ways for me to learn a lot about governance.

Buffy Gorrilla 13:45

Do you remember anything that you learned during your time that you still draw upon in your current board roles?

Helga Svendsen 13:53

I think we went through I said we owned a hotel, the Jasper hotel, and we had to sell it during my period. I won't go through all of the reasoning and thinking behind that. But again, the thing that stood out for me is we engaged our inverted commas key stakeholders. Well, I think during that process, it was quite a controversial decision. It had been in the white portfolio for quite some time, there was some people who were not very happy at that decision that we made sure we spoke to our members. We spoke to the staff, we spoke to our life members, we spoke to some of the groups that have been involved in that organization for years. And again, whilst everybody wasn't happy, I think at the end of it, there was certainly a better understanding of the decision making behind it. That was a bit of a trial by fire in some ways in in big decisions and even the way we dealt with it within the board, we went through a quite a, I think a good process for us in terms of thinking it through and making sure that everybody was on deck in the boardroom as well.

Buffy Gorrilla 14:59

So you've been hosting, Take on Board the amazing podcast for the last year. Again, congratulations. So exciting. So how have you implemented some of the tips and tricks that some of your guests have been parted with you and your big audience over the past 12 months?

Helga Svendsen 15:24

Oh, it has been so fantastic to just sit down with different women and have these conversations. And of course, you draw it into your own governance practice. So when I got to sit down with Alex Newton, for example, about the modern slavery legislation, it was let's have a case study. Oh, I know. Let's use a hospital in Melbourne and what they should do so we've got all this advice about what we needed to do about modern slavery, which was fantastic. You know, I remember Llewellyn Prain. Llewellyn was actually whilst it was the wasn't the first episode to go to air. She was my very first person that I interviewed. So thank you Llewellyn for being my guinea pig bear. And I remember her talking about after each board meeting, reflecting, and just she would sit on the train on the way home and reflect on the board meeting and what had happened. And it was such a simple thing. But to just take the time to reflect on what you're doing well, what you could do differently, to do that before a board meeting about what you want to draw out and reflecting afterwards about what can be done differently.

Helga Svendsen 16:27

Another person I spoke to said that she puts posted notes on her board papers for the questions that she is going to ask. Now I don't put post it notes, because we have it all in the app. But I do definitely have my separate notes with all of the questions sitting next to me, so that I can, you know, refer to them and make sure I've asked all the questions that I need to ask during the board meeting. I mean, I learned as much from these conversations as I hope the listeners learn from it as well. It is just a great way for me to reflect and learn and to use all of that in my gut. It's practice as well. So I love it. I love it that I get to learn, and I love that I get to share it with others as well.

Buffy Gorrilla 17:06

And what are your plans for the podcast for the next year?

Helga Svendsen 17:09

Oh wow. I think, um, I mean, continuing, I think it's continuing to have some of these conversations. But for me, the podcast is just one part of it. For me, it's about building community. And it's why I created the podcast because I had this programs that involve women and I wanted to kind of start to engage the community in different ways. And I was looking for a podcast around governance and I couldn't find one. So I thought, Well, I better go and create my own. So for me, it's not just the podcast, it's not just my programs. It's not just the Facebook group all sitting in different spots. It's them coming together and creating this community of supportive women that you know, look out for each other and help each other and guide each other and provide opportunities to each other and cheer squad for each other to me over the Next 12 months, I just want to grow the community and grow that engagement in the community. So there's not just more people in the community, but people are really helping each other out. It's already pretty amazing. I remember in the Facebook group the first time there was a post there about people getting together before this particular event, and I hadn't prompted it, somebody else had prompted it. And all these people got together because of it, unlike Yay, others are now really starting to engage in it. So yeah, that's what I really want to do is grow the community through all of those facets and really make sure they're engaging strongly with each other.

Buffy Gorrilla 18:34

As we mentioned earlier, you're a joiner, and you're a connector of people. So does this come naturally to you? Or is this something you've had to really practice?

Helga Svendsen 18:46

I think it's probably a bit of both. To be honest, I think I am. Like I say I've been a joiner since school. And I like getting involved in things. I think I've certainly heard My connecting powers are since then, I can always remember who's who but I love when I speak to people, I'm like, Oh, you really need to speak to that person? Do you want me to connect you to them, and ensure people can have that conversation? So I think I have gotten much better at this. I think probably just more courageous in it. It requires a little bit of chutzpah to be able to say, oh, there's that person, would you mind talking to this person and just going out on a bit of a limb and asking, the people are generally incredibly happy to help out? They're generally honored to help out I think people like to help. So I mean, I have reached out to I can't even count how many people both for myself in terms of, you know, can I get some help about whatever issue x or organization Why can you tell me more and I've connected lots of people to find out about those things and I would have been knocked back less than times and mostly they would be because I don't have time or it's not appropriate, it might be a conflict of interest, whatever. So people are happy to help out. So I think I've got more courageous in that as I've got older, and we just encourage others to just have the courage, have the words better reach out and ask people if they'll connect because generally they are very happy to do so.

Buffy Gorrilla 20:26

Excellent advice. So how do you recharge?

Helga Svendsen 20:32

I have to remind myself to recharge sometimes because I'm fortunate to love what I do. And therefore that means sometimes, you know, it takes quite a bit of effort for me to step away, but for me to recharge, the things that I really love doing is walking. So if it's on a daily, I try on a daily basis, it's definitely not every day but my ways at the end of the day is to just get out and have a bit of a walk around the Murray Creek which is quite close to me and like Why's getting away bushwalking I love it. I don't do it anywhere near as much as I would like. But, you know, I was fortunate earlier this year to get down to Tasmania and do some hiking around the Bay of fires before the whole COVID-19 thing kicked off. So it was great to get out for a few days and do some hiking, and travel generally, I love traveling. I love seeing the world. I love seeing new things and just being put in those new places and being able to explore...

Buffy Gorrilla 21:29

Exploring..I remember the days. What are you looking forward to most about the post COVID times if we ever get back to that normal that everyone keeps talking about?

Helga Svendsen 21:43

Well, you know, I don't want to go inverted commas back to normal. I'm one of those people that wants to create the new normal, and to keep some of these things from this period that have been valuable and useful and take them into an even better place. feature. So I mean, I think it's great not having to commute for every meeting. And being able to do things a little bit more locally, I think is fantastic. So, I mean, I've always worked from home, but for something to work from home is incredibly useful. So I'm looking forward to taking some of that into the future. The thing I'm looking forward to most is being able to get away to get out hiking again to get traveling again. And traveling overseas. I'm guessing that won't be this year in 2020. But hopefully in 2021, that will be back on the cards. But by the same token, I'm kind of hoping that at some stage this year, I'll be able to do a bit of travel and have holidays within Australia, which is also a good opportunity to say parts of Australia that I might not have seen, although at the moment from Victoria, we can't even really get outside where we're technically allowed to go to New South Wales, but I don't know if we're welcome at the moment. And I'm not able to visit any other state in Australia at all. moment. So even that needs to wait a while, so I'll just need to explore Victoria.

Buffy Gorrilla 23:04

What's a beautiful state? Sure, there's plenty of things to say. All right, we're going to switch to the lightning round. What are you reading at the moment?

Helga Svendsen 23:15

I read Penny Wong's autobiography. Those in Australia will all know Penny Wong are one of the senators for South Australia and a fabulous woman. So yeah, read her biography, which we're all sorry, not autobiography, her biography, which was just fantastic.

Buffy Gorrilla 23:31

All right, favorite winter food.

Helga Svendsen 23:34

Whoo, ah, probably just a wide range of interesting soups. And that and that's one of the things I've enjoyed during this period as well as cooking more. So you know, just creating all sorts of interesting warm soups. favorite summer food.

Buffy Gorrilla 23:53

Ice cream, flavor.

Helga Svendsen 23:55

Whoo. Ah, what flavor I'm probably more of vanilla person than a chocolate person but with interesting things in it. So, Pavlova. I remember having a pavlova over ice cream from Minot ice cream over and Pascoe Vale a couple of years ago and I still dream about that ice cream. It was magnificent.

Buffy Gorrilla 24:15

That sounds magical.

Helga Svendsen 24:17

Yeah, it was good. Passionfruit, meringue and all sorts of wonderful things in there. Yeah, um,

Buffy Gorrilla 24:23

are you a coffee drinker or tea drinker?

Helga Svendsen 24:25

Tea most definitely. I don't drink coffee at all. It's coffee. Smells magnificent, tastes awful. I am a tea drinker and I am very persnickety about my tea. I have a tea pot, and we'll avoid even tea bags. So have a range of teas. All of my coaching clients will know that tea is part of the ceremony. When I'm doing coaching with people they do a pre coaching reflection about you know what they've done since last time they came to see me. And the last question on that reflection is what sort of team would you like, would you like me to choose so it's all about part of the service.

Buffy Gorrilla 25:01

And Helga, what is your favorite saying?

Helga Svendsen 25:04

I think it's probably never missed an opportunity. So if something's out there, just grab it with both hands.

Buffy Gorrilla 25:13

Love it. Thank you so much. It has been a pleasure being your podcast producer for this past year. And you're a delight. And I'm sure the listeners will continue to just revel in your enthusiasm and warm words every week.

Helga Svendsen 25:32

Well, thank you, Buffy. I don't think we introduced you at the start of this. So I have loved doing this podcast. And there's two people in particular that have made it a dream and one of them is you being able to pass the audio over and just know that you will wave your magic wand and make it sound fabulous has been amazing. And the other person that has just been an angel in this is of course Lisa Davis, my business manager who just makes everything better. So thank you to both of you. And all of the guests that I've had. And those women that were around at the start as well. We had a small group, Jackie Cooper, Cressida, Bradley Sandy Bell yourself, of course, that helped me come up with a name and all of those things. So thank you for being with me on the journey and for getting us to our first birthday and here's to getting to the second birthday as well.

Buffy Gorrilla 26:27

Thanks, hell yeah. Thank you.