

Take on Board

# Transcript – Micaela Drieberg



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking to Micaela Drieberg about how being on a local council compares to being on a board. First, let me tell you about Micaela. Micaela is a director of South Eastern Melbourne Primary Health Care Network, and Connect Health and Community. And she's previously chaired the board of governance for Women's Health East. She's got over 20 years of experience in public health, education and community engagement, and has previously served as mayor and a ministerial adviser will touch on that. In addition to this role, she is also a teaching associate and course advisor for Monash University. Micaela is particularly passionate about how our gender and where we live, work and play can influence our lives. Welcome to the take on board podcast. Micaela.

Micaela Drieberg 0:45

Thanks for having me Helga.

Helga Svendsen 0:47

I'm so looking forward to this conversation in so many ways. But as always, before we get to councils and boards, and what are the similarities, we want to dig a bit deeper about you? And we're going to use some of these new questions that I explored in the first podcast of this year. So Micaela, tell me, where were your Mum and Dad born? And do you know where your ancestors are from? And where were you born? Or where did you grow up? And do you have any siblings?

Micaela Drieberg 1:15

Oh, there's a few questions to respond to their Helga. So I'll try and get them in the right order. So my family actually from Sri Lanka. So do you see my name, it's not an immediate Association. But for those of you that are in the know, then you would recognize it as a Burgher name. It's not a derogatory term. It's a term that's used to describe Eurasian so the Sri Lankans that were of European descent, so that's my, my ancestry is on my father's side, German and Dutch descent. And from my mother's side are English descent. Um, so Mum and I, you see that in our aesthetic, so our were more mixed looking as such. So sometimes people go really both your parents Sri Lankan? Yes, they are, and several generations back. And so that's my background in terms of where my parents were born and my ancestry.

Helga Svendsen 2:05

Interesting stuff already. I'm loving these questions. Where were you born? Or where did you grow up? And what about any siblings?

Micaela Drieberg 2:12

So my parents migrated here in the 70s. And they originally moved to Western Australia, and then came across to Victoria. So that's where I was born. I was born in the Dandenong hospital in the late 70s. So proud Gen X are just scraping in there. And I have a twin sister. So I shared the womb, shared a bedroom for many years, and share a birth date, obviously, as well.

Helga Svendsen 2:36

Oh, my goodness, is she an identical twin?

Micaela Drieberg 2:38

We are as fraternal as you can get. And a funny little story is my sister's name is Bianca. And Bianca means white for those of you that speak Italian, and she does not match that description. So it was always little ongoing joke there that we our names didn't necessarily match what we look like.

Helga Svendsen 2:58

And if you're as fraternal as you can get, does that mean people sometimes think, or not even think that people sometimes say, you're not twins?

Micaela Drieberg 3:07

No, that can't be right, people see what they want to see. So some people think that we look very similar, even though we have very different colouring. Hair is different our eye colours, different stature, and our body types different. But some people will swear black and blue that we look very much like sisters, and then others can see what you can see. And we don't look anything alike.

Helga Svendsen 3:29

A friend of mine had a baby using a egg donor. And it's fascinating for her the number of people that say, oh my god, she looks so much like you and she's like, I'm not sure that she does. But anyway, thanks for saying so you're right, people do see what they want to see. Oh, look, I'm going to ask the

other brief questions if I can. So do you know the names of the traditional owners or the first peoples where you grew up?

Micaela Drieberg 3:52

I haven't double checked where I grew up, but it would be one off where I live now. So I'm right on the cusp of the Wurundjeri people and the Bunurong people. I haven't ventured too far. I'm about 20 minutes away from where I grew up in Dandenong.

Helga Svendsen 4:06

And how many languages do you speak?

Micaela Drieberg 4:08

English first and foremost, and a smattering of Italian was what I learned growing up in high school and university. So I'm still I can get by, but I would not call myself fluent. And I'm married to indigenous New Zealander. So he speaks fluent but I'm speak a smattering of Māori as he would say it, especially for our kids to make sure that they're aware of the language and their backgrounds.

Helga Svendsen 4:35

Right. So did the kids speak Māori?

Micaela Drieberg 4:37

They like to rip off their shirts and do a Haka. And they sing lullabies with me, but they don't understand the language just yet. They're they're just little, they are two and four.

Helga Svendsen 4:47

Oh, okay. Oh, how magnificent. And finally, where do you feel your place so your home is?

Micaela Drieberg 4:54

I feel like home is where your heart is so you know where I live now, and I'm very fortunate to live very close by, to both my parents and my sister. So I was able to see them through various lockdowns going for walks and things like that. So where I live right now is very much my home. But

heading down to the Dandy market also feels like home, and with my family coming from Western Australia, and that's where all our extended family that feels like home when I go there to talk for a while. But when we get back home again, it'd be nice to go back to my second home.

Helga Svendsen 5:25

All right, well, let's get on with our conversation today. So we're talking about local councils and boards. And you have been both the mayor of a council and a board member or currently a board member. So I would love to hear your reflections about how a board room compares to the council chamber.

Micaela Drieberg 5:47

I'm looking forward to sharing them Helga, I think there's a lot of synergies, but then there are some huge contrast as well. I think there's lessons from both of them. And I think that it's there untapped areas that I think could be quite attractive to people that they might not have thought about before. So someone that has years of governance experience, having worked in local governments, I think, have got an excellent platform to be able to work in the board environments and may not initially see that. And then as well, those of you that are seeking directorships and, you know, it can be a very competitive process, to have a think about something like local government, which again, is competitive, but has a similar environment with a focus on governance, but also, you get to work directly with your communities. And that's really satisfying.

Helga Svendsen 6:34

A couple of interesting reflections there already that council experience, if you've got it as governance experience, I always encourage people to think about governance experience rather than board experience, because board is quite limiting. Whereas if you think about governance experience, it might include council, it might include reporting to a board, it might include being on a committee, whatever it may be, rather than board room per se. So what are the similarities? What are the, you know, being the Mayor of which is basically in my head, the chair of the board? So being in the council chamber, and being in the board room? What are the things that you've observed that are similar?

Micaela Drieberg 7:07

Where you've touched on some similarities there? Helga. So you know, a council is made up of a number of different Council laws, which are similar to board directors, it can range in number from, let's say, five through to 11, which is where I was at the city of Monash. A board, again, can range in the composition that you have in terms of the amount of directors on a board as well. The chair is similar to the Mayor of the day, but it doesn't need to be again, similar to a board as well. A chair

will usually chair a meeting, a Mayor will usually chair a meeting, but there are some opportunities to delegate that to someone else. It rarely happens in council land. But I was a deputy chair and I worked very closely with a fabulous Mayor the time, who really gave me an opportunity to grow into the in the role and gave me opportunities to chair meetings and to be the spokesperson for key issues that I was particularly knowledgeable and passionate about.

Helga Svendsen 8:08

As I understand it, local council, the mayor is either re-elected or changes every year, which is something that would be different to a board room because the chair might be the chair for four years, or whatever it may be.

Micaela Drieberg 8:19

Yeah, so that's a key difference. It doesn't need to happen. There's certainly circumstances where you have Mayors of the day, there's a couple of instances where you're directly elected by the people as the Mayor for that entire term. There's certainly been examples of Mayors that are elected repeatedly by their peers. So that certainly happens as well. But generally speaking, amongst your council team, there is a different Mayor elected every year, which is very different from a chair and where we really look at making sure we've got that continuity. And if there is succession planning, you know, well ahead that you're planning for that and making sure you've got someone else that can fill those shoes. In local government, you would expect it's different every year. Yeah, I don't necessarily think is a good thing.

Helga Svendsen 9:02

I confess, it's one of the things whilst I think there are many similarities, that changing of the chair or the Mayor each year, I must make it very difficult. So because you just get the dynamics, you just get in the swing of things, and then you're moving on. So how long were you there for?

Micaela Drieberg 9:20

I was one year.

Helga Svendsen 9:21

Okay. It sounds like you were Deputy Mayor for a year. It sounds like the Mayor you're working with was very supportive and helped to build. So that was seamless stepping into the Mayor role.

Micaela Drieberg 9:33

I actually had a break in between. So I was elected twice into my councillor position. And I was a Deputy Mayor in my first term. Then there was a break and then I was re-elected and in the first year in the new term. I was missed. So that was a different dynamic. It was working with an entirely new team, a different composition of the types of people that were in that team and even seeing themselves as a team. Sometimes was quite challenging.

Helga Svendsen 10:02

Interesting. So that's the other thing that might be slightly different is that there might be more turnover every four years when people are elected, as opposed to boards that can probably stagger that changeover and that succession planning a little more smoothly.

Micaela Drieberg 10:15

Absolutely. And, you know, in local government, you're elected to the position, there really isn't much quality assurance. When I was first elected, there weren't any requirements prior to becoming a councillor, they've since introduced training that needs to be completed. So there's an attempt to have some, I guess, expectation in terms of a baseline of knowledge from councillors, which is different from what is best practice in a boardroom where you would, you know, identify a skill matrix, have a look at the type of composition that you want to have in terms of different types of experience in the room, and actively pursue making sure that you meet that diversity in the board room. It's a bit more up to chance in local government.

Helga Svendsen 10:57

Yeah, it's interesting and is there other ways then that councils can bring in I guess that, you know, whether it's the diversity of views, I mean, technically, of course, the Councils reflect the community, and therefore would reflect the diversity of that community in the City of Monash where you are, that's one of the most diverse communities in Victoria? So did the council actually represent the diversity of the community?

Micaela Drieberg 11:21

It did, the first year that I was elected, we were a very odd example of what a Council is comprised of. So out of 11, we were fairly gender balanced, it was five out of 11, there was five out of 11 that were under the age of 30. Again, about five or six of us came from clearly culturally diverse backgrounds, a real mix on there. And I thought that was the norm, until I went to state and national conferences and realize that was not the norm, especially when I was asked whose date I was,

because the expectation still was that you met the stereotype of what a elected official might look like.

Helga Svendsen 12:04

Oh, no, were you really asked that?

Micaela Drieberg 12:07

I've been pointed to the childcare conference, rather than the local government conference. I've had many stories, one that really stands out for me, because gender was never an issue that was at the forefront of my mind Helga until I was elected to Council, and then it became very obvious and was in your face. But a real standout for me was when someone sent me an email about her daughter looking through the local paper with her. And she pointed out to her daughter, oh, look, this is our local Mayor. And her daughter looked at her and said, "Are you sure because aren't all men are supposed to be old, white bald men with beards." She was very specific. And her Mum thought it was comical, and sends it through to me. And I initially went, ah, isn't that cute? And then stop myself. And when that's not true, at all, why does a 10 year old girl in this day and age have that view? So we, when we reached out to them, I ended up going to a school and talking about what I did as a man. And I think that's really one of the most important things that local governments can do is to really break those stereotypes of what people perceive an elected official should look like. And by the very nature have, in some ways, a little bit of dumb luck of how our council was made up. It broke those stereotypes, people could see what they could be.

Helga Svendsen 13:27

How did you end up in the council chamber? How did you end up choosing to run for election because it's quite an arduous process, you talk about it being hard to get into the board room? I'm not sure it's easier to get elected? What prompted you to do it and tell us about your campaign and how you ended up in the in the council chamber.

Micaela Drieberg 13:45

I knew councillors existed. So that was probably the one thing I knew a few people that were councillors not I don't know if many people are familiar with the different levels of government we have in Australia, and that there's these things called councillors. So, you know, that was the first stumbling block that I was able to address. For me, I've always done some sort of voluntary work, I'd always been on a committee and I just saw that as an extension of that was really important for me to be a part of shaping the community where I live. So that was really my driver behind that. And I honestly thought it was a voluntary role. And I was just it would be like being on a committee. So I got a little bit of a rude shock, when I discovered what was involved with being a councillor that

there was such a strong focus on governance, the community expectations that you had through correspondence or just people meeting people on the street. And then just the politics that does come into play as well.

Helga Svendsen 14:40

Which, again, is probably one of the differences, I think between the board room but I'm wondering whether it should be one of the differences around that the accessibility you have, you know, you're elected and that accessibility to the community, in terms of having street stalls or whatever it may be for people to be able to give their views to you. You don't often see boards doing those sorts of things. There might be walk arounds in hospitals of the board and though but it's not deep, or the deeper community engagement that councillor do. And I'm wondering if that's something that boards can learn from, I'm not sure boards always have to go out into the street stall. But I'm wondering about your reflections around that community engagement.

Micaela Drieberg 15:18

It's a really interesting area and a challenging area, especially for health services. So, you know, I've purposely chosen to be a part of boards that are impacted by communities or with communities. So all mine are related to health care. And it's a really challenging space for people to authentically engage with their communities. Boards are not alone, as are the health sector in terms of how do you authentically make sure that we're engaging with our communities, consumer voice, the lived experience, elevating the stakeholder voice to that board level so that they're incorporated in decision making. So there's certainly there's a lot where local government, I think, have done excellent and are doing excellent things in this area, to make sure that community views are incorporated in decision making. It is a huge challenge in a governance land in general, and directors are certainly turning their minds to that direction, especially as as grown up more and more emphasis on that lived experience. But there's no silver bullet, and there's no easy answer. So I think we're starting to figure out how you can exactly do that. But there's yeah, there's no magical answer to that. We're still learning.

Helga Svendsen 16:28

Yeah. And I think both boards, and councils are learning some of those things and how to do it better. And again, particularly during pandemic times how to do things a bit differently, because the street stalls won't necessarily be happening and the community engagements not happening in the same way as well.

Micaela Drieberg 16:43

Yeah. So how do you reflect the end user as such for the organisations that you're involved in? So, you know, whilst our method vague may vary, I think as a director, it's really keeping that at the forefront of your mind when you are making decisions, you know, and one of your remit is to make sure that you're supporting an organisation to be viable. But also, what does this mean for our end user? What does it mean for consumers is a term we use in health? I think that if you can just make sure that you're asking yourself that question with any decisions, or putting it out there to your colleagues, I think that can help us make better decisions.

Helga Svendsen 17:20

Absolutely. Keeping the stakeholders or the shareholders depending on what sort of organisation or the stakeholders and the shareholders. So it's not just shareholders who are being taken account of. When were you the Mayor, how long ago?

Micaela Drieberg 17:34

Almost 10 years ago, it's a little scary. I was first elected in 2008. And then again, in 2012. So that first term of the new team 2012-2013 was when I was me, social media was just coming in. So there's certainly a different emphasis on that now, but it was, it was there, and we were responsive. But there's certainly a different expectation for people that are in those roles now.

Helga Svendsen 18:02

I mean, council meetings often have the community turning up, they are encouraged to turn up these days, they are often webcast, so people can be watching from wherever they happen to be. How does that impact the conversation, the discussion and the decision making of council when you know, you've literally got people watching the conversation as you go?

Micaela Drieberg 18:24

Luckily, I was a pre recording. So you know, people couldn't play back what you may or may not have said, although I could see how that'd be handy as well. But there's definitely that transparency that you don't have in the board room. Often people would call for a division. So it was recorded if the the votes were split, and what you wanted to be transparent that you didn't agree with that decision. And that's a key difference with board as well. But it still happens in council once a decision is made, that's a decision of the Council, that's the decision of the board. But you don't tend to see that so and so didn't actually agree with that decision. And having an audience, there's certainly some people that like to perform for their audience. And there's that added weight and pressure of being able to get your point across. But also recognizing you're not performing for that audience.

You're not there speaking to the audience, that's there you are debating emotion in front of you, and trying to convince your colleagues to share your views. So you really have to make sure you were focusing on that, because that's was your primary reason for being there.

Helga Svendsen 19:28

I can see some real advantages. You know, it makes me wonder what would happen if board meetings were webcast? What would happen if board meetings were all held publicly?

Micaela Drieberg 19:37

There's certainly a move towards that where I know there are boards that are considering having the occasional Open Board Meeting with the focus on transparency. So it'll be interesting to see if that happens a little bit more. I don't know how many people would be interested in sitting through a board meeting, but there certainly would be you know, you counsel you had you're committed people Well that were there week in and week out because they were the committed to the issues or they were committed to weeding out. People do they didn't want representing them. And that's the biggest, biggest difference between being on council and a board is I'm yet to be in a board meeting where I've got 500 people screaming at me.

Helga Svendsen 20:17

Interesting. Okay, so how do you when you're in a council meeting, and you've got 500 people screaming at you, how do you handle that both as an individual who's there to make sensible, smart decisions, whilst you're also trying to support others to make sensible smart decisions, how do you do that?

Micaela Drieberg 20:31

Yeah, I was the Mayor. At the time, when we had some, some really difficult decisions to make. At the time aged care was a part of one of the services that my council was delivering, we had to aged care facilities. And we were making a decision whether or not we stepped away from that and allowed a specialist provider to take over those facilities instead. So it was a hugely emotional issue. You know, we talked about my family, I've grown up with Grandma's in my house, you know, through my childhood, so it was very emotive issue, it was very emotional for communities that were directly affected as well. So we did have audiences we've never had before, hundreds of people coming along, some were respectful, others were very passionate and vocal about their issues. We had a public question time, so they were extended way beyond what we would normally do. But I felt like at the time, it was really important for people to feel like they were heard. So we made it a point to be able to respond to them. But then we also need to get on with the meeting of

the day. So it was finding that balance of making sure we were able to respond to people, but also get on with the numerous decisions we had to make at Council.

Helga Svendsen 21:42

Interesting. And when people satisfied in the end?

Micaela Drieberg 21:46

You were never going to satisfy anyone. But it was you know, we just tried to be as transparent as possible, as respectful as possible and that that was our approach to it, you know, with the questions and answers, I tried to use people's names. I tried to look at them when I was responding. But you know, you had an audience so there was performers around you as well. And, you know, the politicking that comes in with counsel as well, not necessarily party aligned, it was just really, you know, people that wanted to play to their audience that certainly came up. And that's what you don't tend to have in the board room.

Helga Svendsen 22:19

I wonder if that's because there is no audience literally so therefore people aren't playing to the audience? It's, it's an interesting one, I think it would mean that the dynamics of the board room would be very different to what they are. I'm not sure what the answer is, whether that's better or worse, I think it's, as you said earlier, it's about keeping your community and your stakeholders front of mind, however that might be and it might be having them in the room. But it might just be having them in the mind as well. But ensuring they're with you and the decision making in some way, shape, or form.

Micaela Drieberg 22:47

That's definitely where diversity either around a council table or a board table is really critical. Having those diversity of views and the different perspectives that you bring can just bring about stronger decision making. If you have that homogenous one view, they're not going to take into account your end users point of view if they haven't experienced it themselves, or just the different potential ramifications of your decision as well. I distinctly remember it local government once there was, you know, an increasing amount of births in the area, we it was very logical, we needed to increase the amount of staffing in maternal child health care. So it was just a quick no brainer decision. But distinctly remember one of the staff coming up to me afterwards and saying, that wouldn't have happened with the last council. And at the time, we had a gender balanced Council. And so and, again, a number of us had babies while we're on council as well so it was understanding that perspective, there was no argument against that. I've heard of other stories of councils looking

to shut down story times at libraries because they didn't think it was needed. But they didn't have that direct experience, just how much they were loved and needed by their communities.

Helga Svendsen 23:54

By both the children and the parents who are dropping the kids off for Storytime so that you get five seconds of headspace for yourself as well. Oh, Micaela, it's so much in there about how councils operate, and how boards operate. And, you know, just some questions for consideration, I think around what boards could learn from the council chamber, even though there are some similarities. What are some things that could be considered maybe not picked up but at least considered? What are the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Micaela Drieberg 24:24

I think something that local government does well is that decision making is often made within the context that this decision will play out and the impact will play out. I don't know how well, board rooms tend to do that, putting it in the context of the decision that they're making especially when you have a focus rightly, on the different skills and experience you want to have around the board room. You don't necessarily have the sector experience or that lived experience. So that's where we're seeing a growing emphasis on making sure that we are having those voices heard or taken into account for our decision. So I think that's a big one that we can learn from local government. I also think that, you know, they're really complimentary in terms of if you are seeking out directorships and you are finding that you're not getting an awful lot of love with your applications, but you are really community driven, I think that you should definitely start to think about, well, maybe I'll have a look at local government. And you'll get that really rich experience in terms of governance. If you really love playing that strategic field, you are very much focused on strategy, because you're not only shaping the communities of where you live, but also the communities that don't even exist yet. So you're very much future focused. But it isn't just a pure directorship. So it's not just about numbers. And it's not just about papers, it really is about people, which arguably any directorship is anyway. But in local government in particular, there is a very heavy focus on the impact that you're having with your communities. So you definitely need to keep that in mind. If that's not something for you, or something you're particularly passionate about, then I wouldn't encourage you to go down that local government road. But for your listeners that are very much focused on not for profit and having impact with people, it's something else they might want to have a think about in the future.

Helga Svendsen 26:13

I did an interview with Ruth McGowan, who wrote the book *Get Elected* a year ago or something, but I'll make sure I put a link to that in the show notes as well. So folks, if you're inspired to think about the council chamber as your governance experience, have a listen to Ruth's episode as well. It'll give you some tips about how to, unsurprisingly get elected. Well, that's one resource I'm going to share

with the take on board community, is there any resources you would like to suggest that we can share with the take on board community?

Micaela Drieberg 26:40

Aside from your podcast, I'm an avid listener. And I know a number of people are. Podcasts, for me are really efficient use of your time to learn whilst you're walking or driving or public transporting. So I look at it as efficient learning. I've really become quite a fan of podcasts just in the last couple of years. Being a director, it can be quite lonely, you don't really know anyone else outside your board room unless you sit on a few different boards. So it's really ways to have more communities of practice more opportunities to learn from your peers outside your walls.

Helga Svendsen 27:13

Fantastic. Well, there's some great resources in there. And I'll make sure I put links to all of those in the show notes and because you touched on the mentoring, I'll also put a link to the episode we did with Megan May, who was one of the mentees in that program. And Sandy de Wolf who was one of the mentors in that program, so people can find out more about mentoring as well. Ah, fabulous. Thank you so much Micaela. There is a lots of little gems in there for people in thinking about governance and how we can do governance differently better. Thank you so much for sharing your experience both in the boardroom and in the council chamber with the take on board community today.

Micaela Drieberg 27:50

Thanks for having me Helga.