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THE NATURE OF CONNECTION

BELINDA YOUNG, LOCAL HERO AND FOUNDER OF MUMS OF THE HILLS

Belinda Young and her family moved to Sassafras in the Dandenong Ranges in search of a relaxed, nature-rich lifestyle. The need for community has seen her establish a heartfelt and supportive community network that connects mums in the Hills, and also has the power to create real change for people around Australia.

"I grew up in Townsville with no back fence. I climbed mango trees, played on the banks of the Ross River and had adventures with an abundance of wildlife all around me. It was a childhood I valued – even the 'freshies' (freshwater crocodiles) – and I wanted that for my own children to enjoy," says Belinda Young, founder of Mums of the Hills (MOTHs) and Victoria 2023 Young Australian of the Year Local Hero recipient. "I love to be in nature and to be creative and imaginative."

In 2015, Belinda moved, with her husband Jonathan and two young children (then aged two and four) to the Hills to a small acreage with a running creek, lush forests, and the freedom, fresh air and open space they craved. "The Dandenongs, being the lungs of Melbourne, felt right for us. Surrounded by the Mountain Ash and ferns, we were determined to build our life from scratch, and it was close enough to Melbourne for me to continue my studies at uni," says Belinda, who has a Masters of Environment and is a PhD candidate with a passion for conservation and the environment.

"Now I feel a moment-to-moment connection to nature and this community," says Belinda, who is most alive when pottering in her veggie garden. She relishes the small moments and funny interactions of life in the Hills such as stopping for an echidna to cross the road or hearing a wombat scratch his bottom on her house stump. "But it's taken time, determination and energy to find our place."

"When we first arrived in town, I made a flyer about our family and letterboxed the neighbours to try and establish some connections. It wasn't until I fell off a ladder and needed help that I realised how absolutely critical community was, living where we do. There's a strength required to live in the Hills. We need to be prepared, to look after ourselves, and to be independent and self-sufficient," says Belinda. "We'd invested everything in our move and didn't have much money for socialising, so I turned to Facebook because it was free. I created a private group called Mums of the Hills (MOTHs) and I asked local mums to join. I asked at school pick-ups and childcare drop offs. I even asked mums to join while standing in my togs at the local pool. I felt vulnerable putting myself out there like that, but I kept at it because I had a sense it was important."

From these small encounters, Belinda built group membership to around 1900 mums at the start of the pandemic. Multiple lockdowns, and the storm event in the Hills in mid-2021, saw rapid growth and MOTH's membership now stands at 5900 people on Facebook, with 10 subgroups and a further 3000 people on a public page, and 1500 followers on Instagram. On average the Facebook group facilitates 57,000 interactions per month.





The group, built on the foundational principles of respect, open communication, real information and support, has provided women and their families with essential connections in the everyday, during hard times as well as times of joy. "Many people have negative experiences and perceptions of online groups," says Belinda, "but we've shown how an online group, which has deep roots in a real community, can be effective and provide a real voice advocating for women and women's issues. It's a model that can be easily replicated in other place-based communities, and is gaining increasing support from councils, and other government agencies as being a legitimate source for community sentiment and concerns."

The MOTHs mission is to support the wellbeing of mothers in the Hills by creating a blended online and face-to-face community in which mothers thrive and connect, and to advocate on issues that include but are not limited to access to local childcare, opportunities for family-friendly employment, pram friendly infrastructure, availability of mental health practitioners and other medical experts, and internet connection. Face-to-face events, an online business directory and website, information sharing and resources, and a variety of interest-based member groups have all grown out of this mission, led by women, for women.

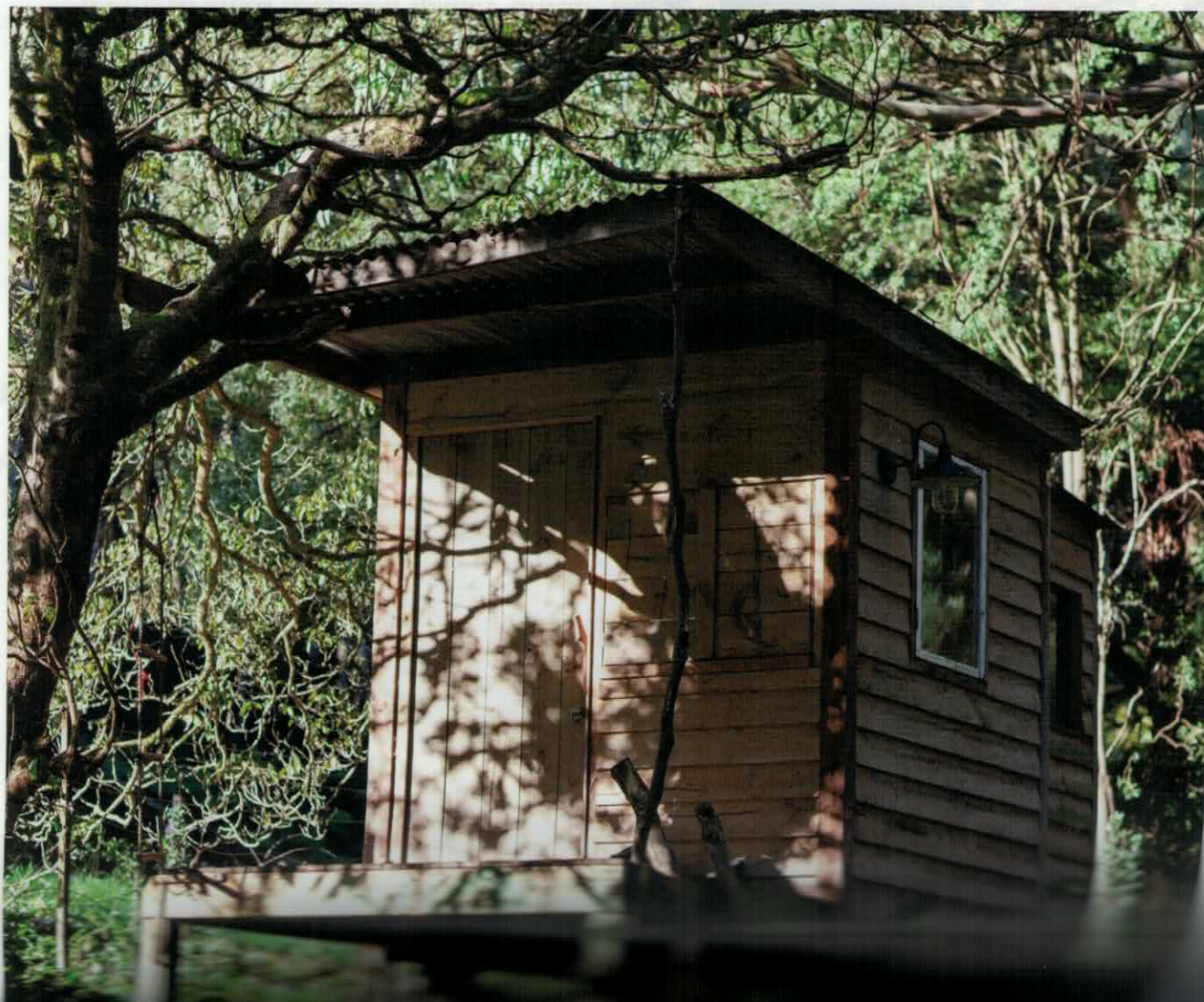
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From initially working on a laptop on a camping table in her children's cubby house, to becoming an incorporated body with a committee, and fundraising for a permanent physical site for MOTHs – the MOTHs Hub will be opening in Belgrave in mid 2023 – Belinda acknowledges the many women, businesses and connections in the area that have helped MOTHs grow. "I may have started this, but I was not alone for long and the sense of community that has built around this simple idea, I have been told, may have even saved lives. I am incredibly humbled, but as always, it is about the mums and families first."

She holds the values of acceptance and honest communication as principles of engagement and believes this preserves the intent and safety of the MOTHs group. "We are all here because we love our children. When we come from a place where our thoughts and opinions are based on the shared love of our children, it helps everyone to listen and accept differences."

"The Hub embeds us even further in the community and gives us agency and the ability to stay connected when all else fails. Our experiences during and after the storms really showed both our vulnerability when telecommunications go down, and the importance of being in touch with one another." Belinda has incorporated the need for connection into her PhD thesis, advocating for telecommunications to be considered an essential service, just as electricity is, in communities such as hers.







"I love living in this forest, on a mountain, among this community. It's our home."

Earlier this year, Belinda was awarded with an Australian of the Year 2023 (Victorian state recipient Local Hero) for her work caring for and connecting her community. When advised of her nomination, she says she nearly fell off her camp chair in the cubby house in astonishment! "I was touched that someone felt moved to nominate me."

"Every day is so different for me. I find myself with a chainsaw in hand one day, and in high heels the next. I have to take advantage of the opportunities as they present themselves. You never know when an MP is going to announce a visit to your area, and I want to be right there advocating for our beautiful women and this community. Our people are incredible, passionate and strong and we live in a spirited place that has vulnerable areas. There are some things we have to deal with that other people do not."

Belinda experienced many natural disasters growing up and witnessed her own family members volunteer to help others. "I am a reflection of what I learned as a kid. Seeing the resilience of communities and that any contribution lightens the load helped make me who I am today. Every contribution big or small helps – after all, it only takes one drop of water to start a river...I love living in this forest, on a mountain, among this community. It's our home." ■

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