Elizabeth Reid: transforming adversity into impact

By Cleo Fleming

Elizabeth Reid’s extraordinary life has traversed academia, politics and development, and she has made a lasting impact in each.

A Canberra girl, vibrant and full of promise

In 1960, after matriculating from Canberra High School, Elizabeth Anne Reid gained a place as a Statistics Cadet with the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics. She was 18 years old and the only girl to be admitted to the program, which had been inaugurated that year to train future Commonwealth Statisticians.

Enrolled to study at the Australian National University (ANU), Elizabeth quickly became active in student politics and joined the editorial team of Woroni, the student newspaper. She remembers this as a time when “life was vibrant and full of promise”. I imagine this is also an accurate description of her as a person. A fellow cadet recalls Elizabeth as always exuding an air of self-confidence, and Elizabeth describes her youthful walk as a stride, filled with energy.
At the end of the first term, Elizabeth was involved in a serious train collision in which her head was pinned between an internal train door and its frame. Placed under the care of a neurologist, she was diagnosed as having suffered brain damage. Her family and the university were advised that if she returned to study, the strain could be so severe that she may end up insane. In place of statistics, economics and pure and applied maths, she was encouraged to learn to knit and warned not to contemplate a future that involved study or too much thinking.

This could have been the last we heard of Elizabeth Reid. We should be grateful that she didn’t take to knitting! At this young age she showed the tenacity and intelligence that would see her become an adviser to a prime minister and a princess, carve out a distinguished career with the United Nations and earn her a place in the Order of Australia for her service to international relations, the welfare of women and to HIV/AIDS policy development both in Australia and internationally.
Through resilience and determination, Elizabeth recovered from the accident and set about proving to herself and to the university that she was capable of much more than the life of quiet contemplation that the neurologist had consigned her to. These are character strengths that she would draw upon time and again throughout her life.

In 1961 she taught herself Fortran and became the first operator/programmer for the spanking new IBM 1620 at ANU. By 1965 she had received a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) First Class from ANU and was on her way to England on a Commonwealth Travelling Scholarship to study philosophy at Oxford.

When she returned to Australia in 1970 to take up a role as a senior tutor in the Department of Philosophy at ANU, she was a busy young mother to her first child, Kathryn, and deeply immersed in the women’s movement.
Social and political action were in Elizabeth’s blood. Her parents, both teachers, were committed to the trade union movement, the Labor Party and the reform of the Catholic Education System. Elizabeth had absorbed the stories they brought home and the passion associated with them. By the early-1970s, she had been involved in a range of issues including abortion law reform, homosexual law reform and rape within marriage. She was a member of the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Women’s Electoral Lobby, which represented a growing political constituency of Australian women concerned with the restructuring of society and personal relationships.
So, when Gough Whitlam, in his ‘It’s Time’ policy speech for the 1972 Federal election, issued a challenge to Australia to make a choice between “the habits and fears of the past, and the demands and opportunities of the future,” we might imagine that it felt like he was speaking directly to Elizabeth. Less than six months later, she was accepting a role in Whitlam’s new government as Advisor on Women’s Affairs, a position for which there were more than 400 candidates.

The period during which she held this role is the most written about of Elizabeth Reid’s life. Her biography in the Australian Women’s Register describes it in the following terms:

“From the time of her appointment, Reid and her work came under extreme pressure, both in the way of accolades and criticism. She attracted a high profile in the media, as well as the hopes, expectations, scrutiny, gratitude and criticism of feminists and women all over Australia.”

She had applied for and accepted the position so that she might bring the women’s movement inside the system to implement change. It was her first experience of using a bureaucracy as the vehicle for pursuing her ideals, a strategy she was to use throughout her career. She achieved an enormous amount in the time she had.
Elizabeth’s advocacy led to government funding for women’s services including health centres, child care, refuges and rape crisis centres; greater protection for women by the law; and the advancement of women’s rights in areas such as equal opportunity, education and training, employment and housing. However, what she ultimately hoped for was a revolution in attitudes about women and their place in society. The chance to begin presented itself when the United Nations General Assembly named 1975 ‘International Women’s Year’ (IWY).

The Whitlam Government allocated $3.3 million over two years for IWY activities, with Elizabeth as convenor of a National Advisory Committee to publicise and coordinate the program. The signature event in Australia was a conference on ‘Women and Politics’, which took place in September 1975.

Some 800 women from all over the world attended the conference and it was a robust and sometimes raucous event. Australian Indigenous activist Pat Eatock called it a “triumph of feminist sisterhood”. The media was scathing. The coverage drew the conference and the budget given to IWY into the growing scandal around the national debt. In turn, the old guard within the Whitlam Government tried to have Elizabeth moved from the PM’s Office.

In an interview for the Women’s History Network in 2017, Elizabeth explained the response as follows:

“They flashed in front of the Prime Minister all of the front pages of all of the newspapers, all of this outrageous stuff going on at the beginning and during the Women and Politics Conference, and said ‘Do you think you are going to get elected when you are associated with this?’ and of course they are the same old outsiders who had been there from the start kicking against these forms of social change. What they didn’t see was the radical changes that had occurred. That these events and policies were providing women with an understanding of why it was so important for them to go out and vote. And they could have got the women’s vote in a way they had never got before. So, their political judgement, I think, was flawed: they did not get re-elected.”

Decades later a friend wrote that: “The hugeness of Elizabeth’s vision of what could be was sometimes terrifying, so terrifying that grumpiness was the only possible response.” This seems a fitting explanation of the events of September 1975. Refusing to be sidelined, Elizabeth resigned.
Creating spaces for listening and validating local experience

International Women’s Year may have represented the closing of one door by Elizabeth, but it was the opening of many more. As part of the IWY celebrations, she led the Australian delegation to the United Nations First World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975. There she met Princess Ashraf Pahlavi of Iran, twin sister of the last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. When they reconnected a year later, Princess Ashraf invited Elizabeth to work with her as an adviser, tasked primarily with the establishment of the Asia and Pacific Centre for Women and Development (APCWD) in Tehran.

The Australian delegation to the World Conference on Women, Mexico, 1975. Elizabeth is third from left, front row.
Elizabeth’s relationship with Princess Ashraf marks the start of her work as a development practitioner, work that would eventually take her from Tehran to the United Nations in New York, throughout the Pacific, Middle East, Caribbean, Africa, Asia, Central America and Eastern Europe.

Elizabeth with Terri Kantai, former head of the Kenyan Womens’ Bureau, and Little Elizabeth, 1996. Elizabeth and Terri jointly cared for Little Elizabeth until her death from HIV in 2000. Her own mother had died of HIV.

In the role of adviser and later as Director of the APCWD, Elizabeth travelled across the Asia-Pacific region consulting with women and community groups, making recommendations to governments, commissioning research, running
workshops and getting “mud between her toes”, all the while acquiring the skills in listening, facilitating and re-framing perspectives that would form the basis of much of her life’s work.

This exciting and productive time was brought to an abrupt end in November 1979. The Shah had been overthrown in February that year and the threats to Elizabeth’s safety and that of her staff by revolutionary activists had become increasingly dangerous. It took seven attempts to get on a plane, but eventually she left Tehran for Nairobi to begin a consultancy with the UNDP evaluating the work of the Kenyan Women’s Bureau. The arrival terminal at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport probably never looked so good!

In a presentation that Elizabeth gave in 2013 as part of the National Museum of Australia’s Landmark Women series, she reflected that her work with the Kenyan Women’s Bureau enriched her approach to the practice of development, saying:

“I knew that a space had to be created in which the abuse of power dynamics in such an evaluation situation were resisted, a space in which they and I could work together talking over the lives of women and the ways in which the Women’s Bureau was responding to them, learning together, strengthening what was working and finding other pathways forward. But it also had to be a space from which a report could be written that would be both respectful to the staff of the Women’s Bureau and acceptable to the donors.”

She took this experience and applied it over the next five years in various roles in Africa with the UN, USAID and the US Peace Corps, establishing the knowledge and practice that would form the basis for the Community Conversations that she went on to pilot with the UNDP throughout Africa and Asia in the 1990s. These facilitated dialogues emphasised the capacity of local communities to identify the changes they needed in response to an issue, take ownership of these changes and transfer change to other communities. In doing so, they prioritised community experience and knowledge over the expertise of outsiders.

During this time, she met her second husband, Bill Pruitt. This relationship would also greatly enrich her development practice, even transform it, although the cost of the learning would be a profound personal tragedy.
Soon after Elizabeth and Bill met in 1980, they married and moved to Zaire (Democratic Republic of the Congo) where Bill was taking up the role of Director of the US Peace Corps. Working in the context of a despotic military regime such as that of Mobutu Sese Seko was not without challenges, but the HIV epidemic that was sweeping Africa created a particularly fraught environment. However, Elizabeth remembers this as a wonderful time in their lives and for their work, which they would not have left had they not been forced to.

We now know so much about the origins and transmission of HIV and its progression to AIDS, including that, by the 1980s, Kinshasa was a starting point for what would become a global pandemic. Yet at the time Elizabeth and Bill arrived there, the medical profession had only a basic understanding of the nature of the virus or how it was transmitted. So, in 1983, when Bill, who lived with haemophilia, was evacuated first to Johannesburg and then to Washington DC to receive massive amounts of blood products via transfusions, he and Elizabeth were told by the attending surgeon not to worry about the risk of HIV infection. They were not convinced, but they decided to return to Zaire with their baby son, John, and to the life and work they had become immersed in there and elsewhere in Africa.
With Bill, 1981.
When the test became available in 1985 their suspicions, based on Bill’s declining health, were confirmed: he was found to be HIV positive. In Elizabeth’s words, “We worked for as long as we could until eventually we had little choice, we had to find a place for him to die and that was when we returned to Australia.”
Bill died in Canberra in 1986. He is remembered in an obituary prepared by Kalamazoo College in Michigan, where he was Director of the African Studies Program, as someone who risked all doing the work he loved, and who worked in his last years for “a bigger understanding of the nature of AIDS, an understanding that was not tinged with hysteria or an ostracism of the people who had been in contact with the virus. He faced within himself the presence of the virus with the same integrity that he showed throughout his life.”

This deeply personal experience of HIV changed the focus of Elizabeth’s professional life. Initially in Australia and then throughout the developing world, she would go on to teach, encourage and facilitate a re-thinking of the HIV epidemic that shifted it from the medical paradigm traditionally applied to
infectious disease control and toward a developmental, community-based understanding that placed the virus within the social, economic and cultural contexts in which it is transmitted.

Thirty years later, for Elizabeth’s 70th birthday, a friend and former colleague wrote about Elizabeth’s work on HIV as follows:

“People were not used to thinking about HIV in terms of gender, governance and public administration, economics, public security, food security, human rights and law. In doing this you challenged established individuals and institutions to re-think their understanding of the HIV epidemic and the response it required. It was not always a happy position to take as it inevitably challenged the points of view and relationships of individuals and institutions. To undertake the basic work itself was hard enough – to do it in the face of opposition and questioning involved a whole other layer of effort.”

Elizabeth describes this as “the most bitter, nasty, raucous battle I had ever had in my life”. Like her approach to women’s rights in the 1970s, it was a battle she decided to fight from inside the system. First in Australia, where she worked as a consultant to the Australian government on its first national strategy on AIDS, and then throughout her career with the UN, which would see her become the Director of the UNDP Division for Women in Development, Founding Director of the UNDP HIV and Development Program, Resident Coordinator of the UN and Resident Representative of the UNDP in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

Learning from adversity

After formally resigning from the UN in 2000, Elizabeth turned her attention to a range of projects. These included research as a Visiting Fellow at the Gender Relations Centre and the School of International, Political and Strategic Studies in the College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU, and consultancies to organisations including the UN on HIV policy development and gender-sensitive and community-based responses.

Yet the projects that she is most excited about from these post-UN days are those related to the HIV epidemic in PNG, particularly the Serendipity Fund, which she
has been involved with since its inception in 2009. The fund was started in response to a gift from the Italian tenor, Andrea Bocelli, to the Asia and Pacific Business Coalition on AIDS. In developing a program to make the best use of the donation, Elizabeth sought to apply all the lessons she had learned working in PNG.

*Video on the work of the Serendipity Fund*

From the years she had spent working on and surrounded by HIV, she knew that Papua New Guinea had the highest incidence and prevalence of HIV in the region. She also knew that most people in PNG living with the virus are parents, and there are as many women as men. The children of these people are forced to leave school and look for ways to earn money. If children lose their parents to HIV or are infected themselves, they suffer from the discrimination associated with it. This means they have less access to basic services, will be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and are ultimately at a higher risk of becoming HIV-positive themselves.

Reflecting much of what Elizabeth learned in her practice of development and her personal life, her design for the Fund emphasised opportunities for self-empowerment, learning and creating alternate pathways in response to adversity. By covering the cost of school books, uniforms and fees, children are supported to start or stay at school and complete their education, through to tertiary or technical studies if they wish. This is implemented through partnerships with local organisations providing care and treatment to people living with HIV, which in turn creates stronger networks of support and a greater sense of belonging for children and their parents.
In a speech in 2015 to graduates of the Health Emerging Leaders Program of the Metro North Hospital and Health Service in Brisbane, Elizabeth focussed on the topic of adversity. She talked about her experience after the train accident in her youth; her response to Whitlam’s turnaround on making women’s issues a central policy area; Bill’s diagnosis with HIV; the challenges of undertaking development practice across different cultures, values and ways of being; and the grief and loss she experienced on being diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 2009. She told her audience that these experiences had helped her to understand that:

“Sometimes, being courageous, being resilient, embracing change, standing on principle or facing adversity does not require momentous or intrepid actions. Rather it is the persistent pushing back against the everyday boundaries you find around you that is heroic and necessary. Sometimes it is the small acts of resistance, of kindness, empathy and courage, rather than the grand gestures or stances, which enable us to overcome adversity.”

It’s a powerful, valuable insight to be able to offer young graduates, and it’s based
on a lifetime of pushing back against boundaries, courageously overcoming adversity and supporting others to find ways of their own to do the same.