

Camila Batmanghelidjh

By Eve Menezes Cunningham



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Camila Batmanghelidjh founded Kids Company in 1996. They provide 14,000 London children with a safe space. Many of them not only deal with violence in their homes but are forced into prostitution or working as drug couriers - with a safe space. First they provide practical support to stabilise the children. Then, once they feel safe enough, Camila and her colleagues help them handle their feelings and emotions. They also see the children's potential and help them achieve.

Before founding Kids Company, Camila set up the school-based counselling and psychotherapy service, ThePlace2Be. “I set that up because there was a seven year old trying to kill herself when I met her,” she says. “She disclosed that she'd been sexually abused by three men when she was five. She was going through horrific experiences with no one to talk to so I decided to set up a model based on children self-referring. The provision was available in school. I wrote the manual so they could replicate it all over the country which they have.”

An inspiration to so many, I wondered who had been her biggest role models. “Ongoing, the people who really inspire me are the kids,” she says. “And the reason I'm so inspired by them is once you get to know them you realise how much courage and dignity they have and what they've coped with. Their ability to carry the burden is extraordinary and transformatory.”

When she was a child, Camila was inspired by her grandfather. “He was a paediatrician in Iran and people would queue up in the streets to see him. My other grandfather was an entrepreneur. He was a very competent person and had made first million by the age of 21 but I admired my paediatrician grandfather more. He had a glow about him.”

I think Camila has a glow, too. She laughs, “I'm ‘cursed with empathy’ as Ruby Wax says.” I wondered how she protected herself from the pain that must come from seeing children dealing with the after effects of

abuse and neglect each day while being stigmatised by so much of society rather than protected.

“I don't defend against any of it,” she says. “Instead, I try to aspire to excellence in what we deliver. When you do a job well, you get replenished with energy. What depletes you is when you can't speak the truth or do something well. I get charged with energy very quickly. When I feel sad with the children, I feel sad. When I cry with them, I cry. It's not a cold institution.”

While Camila is well-known now, regularly being honoured for her work, it wasn't always that way. “It took a long time, a good ten years, before people in the outside world really realised the scale of the problem. I was seeing stabbings and shootings long before the general public were aware. Kids were using firearms, knives and dogs as weapons. I was saying all this five years before public consciousness caught up. That made them think, ‘maybe she's not madly eccentric.’”

She sees their efforts to “make the problem visible” as a first step: “The next stage is to make the solution visible. There are 1.5m children in the UK who don't have a functioning parent in their lives. Consequently, 1.5m children are being abused or neglected. Because resources are so low, Child Protection only takes 32,000 or 33,000 a year. And they deregister about 31,000 a year to keep costs low.

“We need to strengthen, supplement or substitute parenting. Brain research shows that the greatest healer for children is a good quality human relationship. We can't take 1.5m children into care so let's create street level centres. It's so fundamental, it has an impact on the structure and neuro chemical function of the brain.

“Why don't we, knowing this, provide quality human relationships for these children? The model of providing them with one worker is not a good model. The worker gets exhausted or has to leave. But at a centre with numerous staff, children can narrow down to one while they can build attachment to others.”

This way, if a member of staff leaves, at least the children aren't left bereft. “My vision is to have centres like this in very poor neighbourhoods throughout England, for it not to be delivered just by therapists but as corridor therapy, on the go.

“Seeing the individual successes of children is still my highlight. I have lots of honorary degrees and awards but what the children achieve is the biggest gift. And their artwork that they send me.” ■



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Do something amazing yourself

It's easy to feel insignificant when reading about people doing extraordinary things but Camila believes that everyone can make a difference. “Thinking they can't make a difference is narcissism gone wrong,” she says. “You imagine that only great people can do things but that's not true. All people are just as significant as one another. Everyone is capable of doing something amazing on their own patch, in their own way with their own resources. It doesn't have to be setting up a big organisation. Don't be impressed by what I've done.”

This reminds me of Miep Gies, the woman who helped hide Anne Frank's family, telling schoolchildren that she wasn't heroic and that it's the responsibility of all of us to do the right thing.

- Take a few moments to sit quietly and think about the issues that you feel most passionate about. Children? The elderly? A health issue? Fitness? Peace? Equality? The environment? Poverty?
- What always gets you fired up and wishing you could do more? Allow yourself time to consider how you could use your talents, contacts and other resources to actually do something.
- Are there others who feel similarly strongly about this issue? Find like minded souls in your community, online and through organisations. You don't always have to reinvent the wheel.
- Keep an eye out. Maybe a colleague or neighbour is doing something amazing that you could help with. Even in your community, there will be people who need help and who you can help.
- Stop psyching yourself out by thinking of all the world's problems and getting overwhelmed. Focus on the little things you can do to make a difference. It's like the story about the little girl on the beach picking up starfish from the sand and throwing them back into the water. When an adult saw her and the thousands of starfish she hadn't yet reached, he asked if she felt disheartened about not being able to help them all. She confidently replied that she was making a difference to this one. Do something.

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Company

“The biggest challenge is fundraising. I work 18 hours a day, everyday,” says Camila. If you'd like to donate to Kids Company or want to find out more about how you might be able to get involved, please visit www.kidsco.org.uk