

Petrice Jones (00:03):

What's up and welcome to another episode of 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast. I'm your host, Petrice Jones. Today on our show I'm talking to Melati Wijsen, a world-renowned activist, environmentalist and youth leader from Indonesia, who's gone against the current just about every day since she was 12 years old when she put the typical childhood aside to co-found Bye Bye Plastics.

Melati Wijsen (00:22):

No, it's not a nine to five. It's a 24/7. It's a lifestyle, not a hobby.

Petrice Jones (00:27):

Now at age 19, Melati is co-founder of three organizations; Bye Bye Plastics, Mountain Mamas and Youthtopia. She has spoken in front of the United Nations, on the tech stage and has been named among Forbes top 10 most inspiring women in Indonesia. We'll talk to Melati about youth empowerment, female empowerment and why she wants to rethink education.

Melati Wijsen (00:44):

Everything is changing and we know that the current traditional education system is no longer enough. It is not motivating our generation to get out there.

Petrice Jones (00:53):

I'm your host, Petrice Jones. Welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast. But first some good news from around the reef. A team of seven grandmothers in New Caledonia are proof that you can be an ocean activist at any age. Dubbed the fantastic grandmothers, these women, all in their sixties and seventies, spend their time helping scientists study the elusive greater sea snake.

Petrice Jones (01:18):

The venomous greater sea snake can reach nearly five feet in length, but that doesn't deter these grandmas from diving and documenting the sea snakes in the Baie des Citrons, a bay in New Caledonia. Together, these women have completed hundreds of surveys by snorkel, discovering far more sea snakes than the scientists ever expected to find. As of 2019, this motley crew of seven retirees had cataloged 250 snakes.

Petrice Jones (01:41):

So Melati, welcome to the show and thank you so much for being here.

Melati Wijsen (01:53):

Thank you so much for that warm introduction.

Petrice Jones (01:56):

It sounds like you're in the jungle right now. I'm hearing a lot of birds and sounds.

Melati Wijzen (01:58):
Yeah.

Petrice Jones (01:58):
Where are you right now?

Melati Wijzen (02:03):
Yes. I'm actually at home in Bali, Indonesia, and I get to wake up to this beautiful sound every day.

Petrice Jones (02:10):
All I get is trucks and vans outside my place. So I want to dive in and just start off at kind of, first of all what is Youthtopia?

Melati Wijzen (02:20):
After seven years on the front lines of change with Bye Bye Plastic Bags, we're now developing our new project, which is everything to do about youth empowerment and alternative education, really using peer-to-peer learning at its core. We also saw a huge potential of our generation inspiring and empowering each other to take action. When we were with Bye Bye Plastic Bags, one of the most amazing opportunities that we were given was to speak all around the world and our biggest audience was always young people. And no matter where we were, we would get the same question. And that was two things. One, how can I do what you do? And secondly, how can I be part of this bigger movement of change?

Melati Wijzen (03:03):
We started to grow a passion for how can we empower more young people to become young changemakers, so that's really what Youthtopia is. We're a community-centric platform with learning at its core. We work with frontline activists to build meaningful content for the rising young changemaker. So again, using exactly what me and my sister were inspired with from history but taking the present and showing real life examples of frontline young changemakers to show more young people what is possible and telling them how.

Petrice Jones (03:35):
And how's that going?

Melati Wijzen (03:37):
Young people are waiting for a project like this. We constantly ask, "Okay, after a strike, after a March, after a social media campaign, what is next? How are we going to make long-term change? And how can we lead that as young people?" We're getting these questions by the masses. We're just getting them every single day. And we're recognizing that now, especially with COVID-19, we are seeing a huge disruption in the way that we think, the way that we learn, the way that we work. Everything is changing, and we know that the current

traditional education system is no longer enough. It is not motivating our generation to get out there. And that's exactly where Youthtopia comes in providing those programs that schools and educational institutions currently don't. It's for young people by young people through young people.

Petrice Jones (04:23):

And you feel like you're bridging that gap, the sort of access to the knowledge that these young people are desiring that they're not getting from traditional education systems?

Melati Wijsen (04:32):

Yes. I mean, this week has been such an exciting week, so you're catching me on a positive vibe I'd say. But we've finished about five recordings of masterclasses. And this is one of our signature programs at Youthtopia. We've really secured an incredible lineup for our first batch. I can't say much more than that, but, you know, young frontline, young changemakers to really share their experience. We're really going to dive deeper into how we were able to create change, and then how in turn you're able to make change. There's a whole generation around the world that is standing up and I got to spend like 12 hours with them each in the studio just providing this exceptional world-class content, and I'm so excited for the rest of the world to see it.

Petrice Jones (05:17):

That's incredible. When should we expect to see that?

Melati Wijsen (05:21):

A month away from now I'd say. I'm very excited. 2020 has now shaped to be one of the more exciting years for me.

Petrice Jones (05:29):

Did you feel like that wasn't going to be the case given the start of COVID?

Melati Wijsen (05:33):

Well, yeah. You know what's interesting is it has really allowed me to kind of take a step back and look closer at what it was that I really wanted to focus on, and now I'm just sitting in this entire feeling of the potential that we have, the lessons that we can learn from COVID-19 in order to move forward towards a better normal. Not a new normal, but something that's better.

Petrice Jones (06:00):

Where do you think that starts? Like you said, not back to what we've been doing previously, but how do we take steps forward after this worldwide catastrophe?

Melati Wijsen (06:08):

I think it's pretty simple. I'm looking out at the most gorgeous view. We have the mountains peeking out of the clouds this morning and the rice fields right in front of me. You can hear the birds. And I think...

Petrice Jones (06:19):
You're making me jelly.

Melati Wijsen (06:21):
Just setting, just painting a picture. It's really about connecting, but more than that respecting the environment around us. We don't do that. Not enough. It's respecting the environment around us as well as respecting people around us. That's one of the biggest lessons we're seeing, whether it's the constant fires in the rainforest still happening, or the social justice movements that are rising all around the world. It's the environment and the people around us that we really need to become more in harmony with no matter what gender, no matter where you're coming from, the culture or the background. We have to understand the bigger binding force that connects us as a human society.

Petrice Jones (07:02):
I think that relationship is kind of what sets in motion the ideal of what hurts me hurts my environment and what hurts my environment hurts me.

Melati Wijsen (07:11):
Yeah.

Petrice Jones (07:12):
Has that been in the philosophy of these foundations that you guys have put together?

Melati Wijsen (07:15):
Definitely. You know, I think growing up here on the island, we grew up with no religion, only one philosophy and that was called Tri Hita Karana, which is actually living in harmony with the environment, the people and the spirit within. And this is a very traditional Balinese way of living. I remember the first time actually where I thought not everybody thinks like that. Not everybody has this opportunity to be surrounded by nature as me and my sister grew up. So we were in a classroom in one of the big cities around the world and we were talking about how we have to protect the environment. And I remember looking at the blank faces of other 10 and 12-year-olds. Living in that and growing up in that big city just absolutely disconnected. And that was the first real moment where I was like, "This is where we have to change things."

Melati Wijsen (07:59):
That's also where I say the education system doesn't inspire us

because we're not understanding when we're outside of school how we're connected to that world. You know, there is so much more than a four-walled classroom. There's so much more than a textbook. This is just something that I'm really passionate about because it's so obvious and we're not changing fast enough. We're not making our generation empowered. We're not accelerating the change because there is this massive disconnect. We have to live with more respect to the environment, more respect to each other in order to accelerate change.

Petrice Jones (08:32):

I couldn't agree more. Do you feel as though you've sacrificed a typical childhood? Do you feel like there's anything you've ever missed out on?

Melati Wijsen (08:38):

I mean, the question I always ask is what is normal, right? It's not normal for a generation to be growing up hearing about the melting ice. It's not normal for...

Petrice Jones (08:49):

Right.

Melati Wijsen (08:49):

... us to be growing up and hearing we have a climate crisis on our hands. We have a refugee crisis. So what is normal really? I think that my sister and I were always brought up with the philosophy that if we saw an injustice or we felt that something was wrong, we had to speak up for it and we had to stand up for what we believed in, and so that was simply what me and my sister were doing. And we were always driven by this large passion to protect what we love.

Melati Wijsen (09:16):

So for me, it never felt like a sacrifice. I think maybe when I got into the more like teenager vibes, I was like, "Ah." You know? Then long-term motivation maybe kicked...

Petrice Jones (09:27):

Right.

Melati Wijsen (09:27):

... in a little bit as a challenge. But at the end of the day, I'm 19 and I love what I do. Sometimes, especially COVID, it's making it feel a little bit more like an office, but the work that we do as young changemakers is so much bigger than that. It's not a nine to five. It's a 24/7. It's a lifestyle, not a hobby.

Petrice Jones (09:47):

I love that. And I think that's the best way to produce change long term.

Melati Wijsen (09:52):
Yeah.

Petrice Jones (09:52):
Because you've been doing this for what seven years now and that's a long time to be fighting for something. And maybe that's something you can teach other people on how to maintain the life in this world because it's hard and it can grind you down.

Melati Wijsen (10:05):
Yeah, definitely. I think also that's the whole purpose of Youthtopia. We're not about creating projects and passion projects for it to look good on your university application. It's all about long-term sustainable change. And it took I think a little bit more energy than it would if an adult started the movement because when we would get on stage, the audience's reaction would be "Aw, they're so cute. Aww." But we were serious, 10 and 12-year-olds. Being taken serious as a young changemaker, requires that persistence, requires that commitment to the movement, and that's why I feel like we know a thing or two about long-term sustainable change because it can't be for one hashtag movement. It's got to be for the long run.

Petrice Jones (10:50):
Has there been times where you've lost hope?

Melati Wijsen (10:53):
For sure. Changemaker burnout is a real thing. So you're not hearing my sister on this podcast right now, but she is definitely the ying to my yang.

Petrice Jones (11:02):
Right.

Melati Wijsen (11:02):
I'm definitely more the I can't take a break. I really am so addicted to the work that we're doing because I just simply feel like it's never enough. My sister, on the other hand, she likes to keep things fun and she always pulls me back up when things get too difficult. So I think having a best friend like that is so beneficial when you're starting something so heavy like a movement to say no to plastic bags. Leaning on your team has always been important. You can't take care of others if you're not doing okay yourself.

Petrice Jones (11:33):
So you're basically saying we all need an Isabel in our life, essentially?

Melati Wijsen (11:36):
Exactly. We all do need an Isabel in our life.

Petrice Jones (11:39):

You've gone on this journey now. You're seven years in, and I imagine you've learned a lot. If you could go back to 12-year-old Melati, what would you do different before you started Bye Bye Plastics?

Melati Wijsen (11:51):

I would have probably sat myself down for a real deep conversation saying like, "Don't worry, Mela, you're going to keep doing this for the rest of your life, so don't think that you need to get the change happening so quickly. It's a marathon, not a sprint." I get so frustrated when things don't happen fast enough. I have a real patience problem when it comes to life and death problems as in the climate crisis and we're not seeing those in power use their potential.

Petrice Jones (12:19):

Just based on this conversation, to me you feel very much like a leader. Do you consider yourself a leader in the environmental space?

Melati Wijsen (12:26):

I think that I'm part of a larger movement. By walking our talk, each and every one of us have a role to play and my role and my responsibility is in empowering other people to start taking action.

Petrice Jones (12:39):

Another layer to burnout I feel is eco-anxiety. Is this something that you've experienced yourself?

Melati Wijsen (12:46):

Yeah, I think that's a large part of what keeps everybody up at night, even if we don't know it. It's this over-consuming emotion that we feel like there's a lot happening and we're out of control. It's a, I don't want to say a humbling feeling, but it's a good feeling that you know that you're aware of it. Stepping into that power is the next step we have to do. I kind of use that eco-anxiety feeling that I have constantly at the back of my head as a tool to lift me up and keep me going because I know I am aware of it. I know I'm in control of those feelings but also of my actions. That is the most empowering way forward for me personally.

Petrice Jones (13:27):

And is that advice you would give to others is just to manage it and just to pay attention to it and not sort of fight it?

Melati Wijsen (13:33):

Yeah, I would say don't think that you can get rid of it or over it, actually look at face-to-face and then own it. Use that power. Understand why you're feeling that way. Sometimes when you do that you're able to overcome it.

Petrice Jones (13:49):

You had stated before that the time we're living in calls for women on the front lines and more female healing. Firstly, define what female healing is.

Melati Wijsen (14:00):

Female healing it's very feminine energy that we push outwards. I mean, it's ask yourself the question when you think about activists that you know around yourself, who are they? A lot of them are females. And even in the work that we do, for example, with Bye Bye Plastic Bags and we have 50 teams all around the world in 29 countries and about 98% are all female team leaders. I really felt like there was this bigger movement of females standing up all around the world because there's this understanding that we have to heal and it's more led by love than led by fear. For me those two things, being led by love and not by fear is what female healing is all about.

Petrice Jones (14:40):

And that makes a hell of a lot of sense because I think, I couldn't agree more. I feel as though the motherly essence of a woman and the desire to take care of things definitely plays into. Do you think that plays into the actual overall process of healing the Earth? Do you feel like there should be just more leadership from women and more men...

Melati Wijsen (15:03):

Yeah.

Petrice Jones (15:03):

... listening?

Melati Wijsen (15:04):

Yeah. I think Barack Obama said this actually. He said, "Imagine or picture if every country was led by a female president just for two years. Imagine the world that we'd be living in now." And you know, everybody kind of gave a little laugh and whatnot and was like, "Oh yeah, great." But I mean, think about it...

Petrice Jones (15:25):

It's true.

Melati Wijsen (15:25):

... right? Just that brings the biggest smile to my face, but I actually want to see it happen one day, at least more female leaders, more women in positions of power because I really believe that if we're going to create a world that we're actually proud of, a livable and just future, we need to lead by love, not by fear and worrying about how many votes we get, worrying about what people think about us, but understanding that it's about the bigger picture. And unfortunately, today with the leaderships that we have, I don't see

that happening. I don't see more love than fear. I see more fear and divide and leading from anger and frustration. And I don't think that that is powerful leadership.

Petrice Jones (16:10):

And what's Mountain Mamas? What is this and how does it work?

Melati Wijzen (16:15):

Yeah. The opportunities that were given to me and my sister weren't given to many other females across the country in Indonesia, right? The question that we kept getting asked with Bye Bye Plastic Bags was, "Well, what are we supposed to use instead?" And we didn't necessarily want to get involved or into the alternative bag-making process, but we did see an opportunity here to do that and empower women at the same time. So Mountain Mamas does that. It's a circular social enterprise where we empower women to make alternative bags from pre-loved material.

Melati Wijzen (16:48):

We have incredible partnerships with, for example, the Hilton hotels and they give us their sheets and their towels that would have otherwise ended up in the landfill because it had a coffee stain or it got ripped or whatnot. We get that, we turn it into bags and then 50% of the profit goes back to the community where the women come from.

Melati Wijzen (17:08):

And that's the circularity part that I was talking about because that's where the funding then goes into a budget for three things; waste management, healthcare and education. This is where when we see women leading because the project really doesn't work if the women don't come. It's on a voluntary base, right? They come, they make five bags, they get paid directly for five bags. They make six bags, they get paid for six bags. But they're driving it.

Melati Wijzen (17:33):

The Mountain Mamas Center that we have, the workshop space that we have is so much more than that. It's not only empowering women, but it's empowering their children. They're starting to see their moms in positions of real leadership. And the community also sees it because with that profit they're moving forward with their economy and their environment and socially. Now it's also proven to be a sustainable model that can work literally anywhere. So here we have a female empowerment project that is scalable and that is the business model that is going to change the world.

Petrice Jones (18:07):

I love that. And is there, I know you obviously come to a bit of a halt right now with COVID, but is there next steps? Do you have plans for the next community or next town? What comes next with Mountain Mamas?

Melati Wijzen (18:19):

We've already secured a couple of spots wanting to launch a Mountain Mamas in their communities actually outside of Bali, so on the other islands in Indonesia, which we're really excited about. However, we're just going to have to wait and see the development of COVID-19 before we can launch this project to scale.

Petrice Jones (18:37):

How does someone get involved with this? I appreciate it's probably in its infancy right now, but is there any way of new people coming on board and getting involved with this?

Melati Wijzen (18:46):

We're looking for project leaders, project managers that can help us, especially Indonesia. So any Indonesia females that feel like, want to get behind a social enterprise growth, contact us at Mountain Mamas Bali on Instagram, and then always reach out to myself, Melati Wijzen, on Instagram as well. That's probably the best spot to go for daily updates on what's happening and where to go for next steps.

Petrice Jones (19:12):

And what's one tip that you would give listeners who might want to start their own nonprofit and follow in your footsteps.

Melati Wijzen (19:19):

I think step one is figure out what you're passionate about. What is it actually that sets a fire under your bum, gets you excited, that you're passionate about? And I only say this because I think that when people do things that they're passionate about, they're going to be able to create bigger impact than when they do something they really don't want to do. So find that.

Melati Wijzen (19:36):

And then second of all, come up with a tangible action plan. Take Bye Bye Plastic Bags, for example. We could have said that overnight we wanted Bali to be plastic free, all of the single-use plastic completely gone. We didn't do that because we knew we needed a tangible action plan, so we chose plastic bags specifically because we knew that we'd be taken more seriously and it would open the discussion for actually the long-term vision of actually saying, "Hey, how can we reduce more single-use plastic?"

Melati Wijzen (20:04):

So come up with that tangible action plan. And then honestly just get started. Don't wait for a business plan or a strategy that is nitty and gritty. Once you have the main goal in mind, the vision, just get started.

Petrice Jones (20:19):

I love that. That is beautiful. Melati, thank you so much for being on 52 Hertz. It's been such a pleasure talking to you.

Melati Wijsen (20:26):
Thank you so much.

Petrice Jones (20:28):
Hey listeners, just before you go, here's a quick ocean-saving tip for you from our guest.

Melati Wijsen (20:33):
I would say do not underestimate the power you have as a consumer. Do your research. Understand what it is you're taking off that shelf. Where does it go? Where is it coming from? You have the power to decide what world we're going forward in, so use it.

Petrice Jones (20:49):
Love what you're listening to? 52 Hertz is made possible by listener support like you. So go to lonelywhale.org and support season two. Your donation helps amplify the voices of ocean advocates all around the world. Thank you.

Petrice Jones (21:01):
52 Hertz is a podcast from Lonely Whale. Our show is produced by Emma Riley and Mindy Ramaker with writing from Kyrsten Stringer and audio engineering by James Riley. Special thanks to young hero Emy Kane, Kendall Starkman, and Danny Witte. Subscribe to 52 Hertz wherever you get your podcasts. I've been your host Petrice Jones. Thanks for listening. Until next time, tune in to 52 Hertz and tune out plastic.