

Sinem Saban

Personal Biography

Gypsy is the name given to me by my Turkish parents when they realized I could never sit still – always preferring to explore the world and my home country Australia; in all of its diversity and natural beauty. I am very grateful to have experienced so much of the world, and to continue to do so; with such a supportive and open-minded family.

I have been passionate about social justice from an early age. In my teenage years I was especially interested in racial relations in Africa and the USA; reading the autobiographies of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela before I was 16 years old. The life stories of these amazing advocates for equality live on as inspiration for me today.

I vividly remember watching the news in 1991, when I was 14 years old and seeing 4 white policemen brutally beat an African American man, Rodney King. The news footage of this has been imprinted in my memory to this day. What was most disturbing was the acquittal of the 4 policemen who beat Mr. King into a pool of blood. Watching the LA riots that followed ignited the flame in me to work for social justice. At that age however, I never knew exactly what I was going to do, or how I was going to do it.

Although never persecuted myself I could relate to minority groups, and how it felt to be judged as I grew up feeling very different to my friends. I was born in Australia to Turkish Cypriot parents who migrated there in the early 70's. My home life was very different to my school and social life. At home I was a Turkish girl, speaking in language, eating different foods, experiencing different cultural practices and enjoying extended family values. In the outside world, I tried hard to fit in with what everyone else was doing, eating and wearing so that I could feel 'normal' and 'accepted' in the dominant Western culture of Australia.

When I was 16 years old, my Legal Studies teacher presented our class with a case study on Australia's Aborigines. This was the first time I ever learnt anything about the First Peoples of

Australia. My eyes were opened to the institutionalized racism and brutality that was happening in my very own country. I was shocked. Why did we not learn more about this? Why wasn't it being shown in the media? I, like many Australians was ignorant about what was happening in my very own country. Until then, a lot of my interest had lain in what was happening in the USA and Africa. But from that time onward, I committed myself to learn more about Aboriginal culture and the social justice issues surrounding the lives of Australia's First Peoples, both past and present.

I began to notice more and more that our own media, our own institutions, our own structures did nothing to respect the differences, nor protect the rights of our First Peoples. Most disturbing was witnessing the racism toward Aborigines held by my friends, associates and some family members; based on ignorance and stereotypes presented in the media.

Always being a good communicator, I often ignited and participated in heated discussions in the classroom. I was not shy of speaking in front of crowds either, and I enjoyed writing essays and journalistic papers and found it a great way of expressing my passion.

In 2002 I completed 5 years of University education, obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree with 3 majors - Media Studies, Aboriginal Studies and Legal Studies. I also obtained a Graduate Diploma of Secondary Teaching, as I felt a pressing need to teach others what I learnt in my studies. I was blessed to have had such inspiring teachers when I was growing up, which if you ask many youth today, is rare. I too felt that I would like to be inspiring to youth as my teachers were for me.

For 2 years I worked as a Senior High School Teacher and Course Coordinator of Media Studies; teaching students about the ways of the media. We looked at media's manipulative and influential powers in stereotyping, propaganda and advertising as well as its great potential in independent reporting, truth-seeking journalism and creativity. I also introduced them to the basics of film analysis and film-making using iMovie.

During my second year of teaching I co-wrote, directed, filmed & edited the first feature length school film in Australia, titled 'Premonition.' A story looking at the current issues of war in the Middle East, fear of Muslims and media control - and how a group of youth overcome their fears

to become courageous leaders of truth. Over 150 high school students were involved in the production and post-production of this film, and it was screened for 3 nights at the local Village Cinema. This was one of the most rewarding experiences I have had as a teacher.

In 2004, I took time away from teaching to dedicate myself to more creative and active projects; in particular I journeyed to Iraq, Palestine & Israel with American musician and social activist Michael Franti to film and document the 'human' cost of war. I then lived in San Francisco for seven months while assisting in the editing of the documentary, titled 'I Know I'm Not Alone.' For me, this journey reinforced what I had previously thought, that media could never capture the reality on the ground, but that it certainly has a responsibility to present both sides of the story. And for those of us in the Western world, we as individuals and a collective have a responsibility to not judge situations based on our own ideologies. There is always two sides of the story.



Flying to Baghdad, Iraq (Photo by Sinem)



Checkpoint in Baghdad (photo by Catherine Enny)



Filming in Palestine (Photo by Catherine Enny)



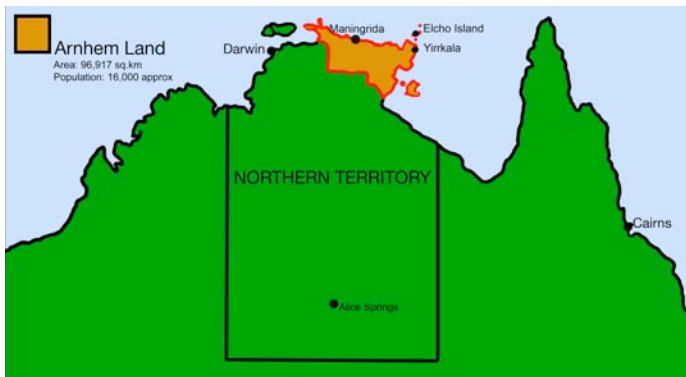
Filming in Baghdad, Iraq (Photo by Catherine Enny)

Since then, with a fire in my belly, I have chosen to work freelance, combining my teaching, photography, film, writing and community work, which has taken me across the world and my beautiful home country of Australia.

The most important and rewarding aspect of my work so far has been in remote Aboriginal communities in North East Arnhem Land, Australia.

Although I did very well at University, particularly in Aboriginal Studies, my lecturer once told me that I would never know a 'real' thing about Aboriginal culture until I actually spent time with them, on their own land, where their culture is still vibrantly practiced.

So when I finished my degree, I moved to Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia and visited Arnhem Land for the first time in 2001. And yes, the experience I had threw everything I learnt from the books out of the window.



Map of Australia and Arnhem Land.



My first time in Arnhem Land, Daliwuy Bay (Photo by R. Pearson)

This first community I visited was Yirrkala, a stronghold of Yolngu culture and the home place of the yidaki. (didgeridoo) Here I was adopted into a Yolngu family and from that time onward, I became part of their kinship system, which gave me the foundation to learn about their culture and their livelihood. To this day, this family who adopted me are close to my heart, they are literally like my extended family. Over the years I have visited and worked in Yirrkala, Maningrida and Galiwinku communities as a teacher. English is usually the 4th or 5th language for these children, so bilingual education has been important in their learning. I have made lasting friendships with the beautiful people living in these places and I have also had the pleasure of documenting their lives in video and photography.

I have always enjoyed photography, and have learnt some useful tips off my father who was a photographer when he first came to Australia. I particularly enjoy taking photos of nature and all of its fine beautiful details as well as places and peoples of different cultures. Natural light, fine detail, color and interesting composition are the things that inspire me to grab my camera and start snapping. It is also very relaxing for me, which makes it a great way to spend my time.

I am now making my first documentary, *Our Generation*, which was inspired by my friends and family I have met in N.E Arnhem Land and their struggle to be genuinely respected in Australian society. Australia is home to the youngest and the oldest living cultures in the world. It is a very unique place, and I dream that one day we will truly be able to give the respect to Australia's First people, which they deserve. It is time to truly listen to the voices of these people, as their gift to our lives is immeasurable. *Our Generation* sets out to present their heartfelt story to the Australian and international community. I look forward to sharing it with you all upon completion in 2010.

Written by Sinem Saban, 2009.



Banthula, Elcho Island (photo by Jenny)



Maningrida (photo by Damien Curtis)