# EVERYBODY HAS A STORY

marita davies is a reluctant climate activist and proud i-kiribati.

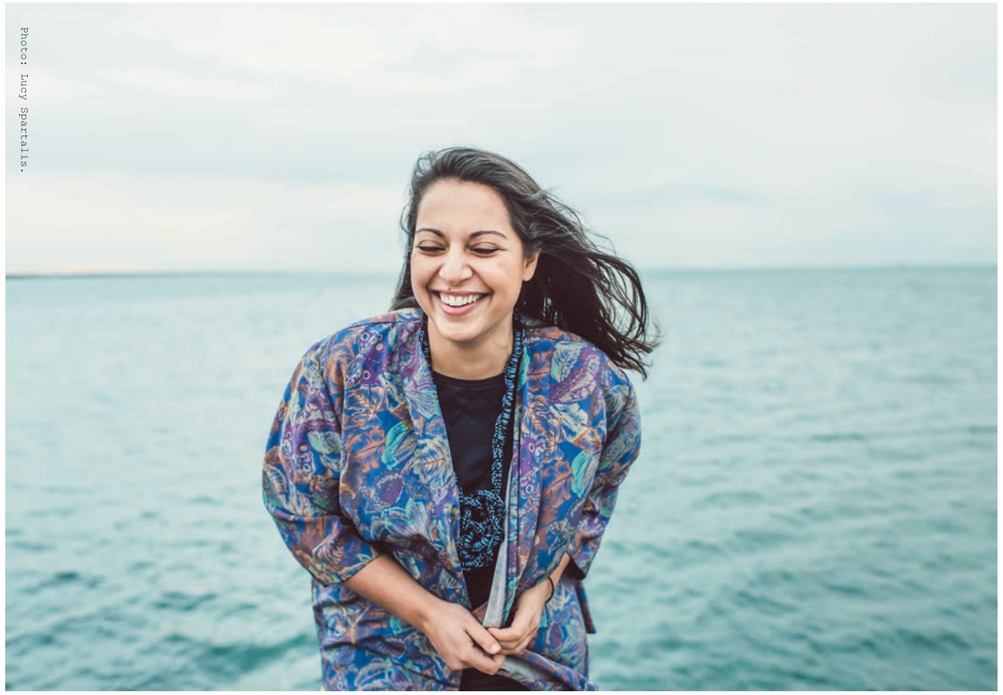

Photo: Lucy Spartalis.

**A couple of years ago, a friend wrote an article about me and described me as a "climate change activist". I remember reading it and feeling really awkward. I rang him up and asked him whether that was the right description to use: "Can't you just say something like, 'Interested in a country that has climate change issues?'" He was silent for a while and then just stated casually, "Marita, in this case, you are what you do."**

I suppose the description sits funny with me because I never set out to be a climate change activist. To be honest, I didn't really know exactly what that meant.

My mother is from the tiny Pacific nation of Kiribati – a group of 33 low-lying islands that sits at the intersection of the Equator and the International Date Line. People often ask me what my ethnicity is, and my general spiel is, "Kiribati is halfway between Brisbane and Hawaii, in the middle of the Pacific, and we're Micronesian – so hair like the Hawaiians, but skin like Fijians." That's what I've pretty much been saying all my life.

I grew up in Gippsland, Victoria, so as much as my mum tried to nurture and encourage Kiribati culture in the household, my sister and I grew up with more of a country Australian influence. When I first moved to Melbourne in 2004 for uni, I met a girl in my class who was half Papua New Guinean. She had such a strong sense of Islander identity and, embarrassingly for me, she assumed I had the same. We became close and she would always say, "It's because we're island sisters." This really stuck with me because I didn't speak much of the Kiribati language; I didn't really know the stories of my ancestors; I didn't know how to dance like an Islander; I just didn't feel 'I-Kiribati' (from Kiribati). So even though I looked it, I didn't feel very 'Islander'.

I was living in London in 2011 when the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan. Reading all the reports about it, I noticed that people were worried that the tsunami would cause a wave reaction across the Pacific – ripping straight over Kiribati. Ringing my parents in Australia, my mum reported that she'd called the family in Kiribati and told them to prepare for the worst. In a panic, my grandma had climbed up a tall coconut tree – the trees being the highest point on the island – and decided to stay there for the next few hours. She had actually forgotten her false teeth, though, so ordered a child to climb up the same tree to deliver these to her and then quickly followed with: "Find your own tree because this one isn't strong enough for the both of us."

As odd as it sounds, this is such a typical Kiribati story. The tsunami never did hit the island, so the tale has become one that's passed down throughout the family – a hilarious tale of what not to do should a tsunami ever hit Kiribati.  Seeking refuge in a coconut tree is not recommended.

After Grandma was convinced to come down and the laughter subsided (admittedly at least a week later), I realised that it really was a possibility: should a tsunami ever hit Kiribati, the whole country would be wiped out. All the islands in Kiribati – except for one – are atolls: ring-shaped islands formed out of coral. The highest these atolls sit is three metres above sea level. So even if a wave reaching eight metres swept across the island, the country would be significantly threatened. It was this event that made me want to really explore what being I-Kiribati meant. The possibility of all this history and culture – that I was born into – literally being washed away. It really resonated with me.

After the tsunami, I began writing in depth on everything about the country: the mythologies, the politics, the people and the culture. I became obsessed with everything Kiribati. And so, naturally, I began writing about climate change issues as well.

Kiribati is predicted to be one of the first countries in the world to submerge under water due to rising sea levels. Only another 50 years is the prediction. The waves are getting higher, and with the main island – Tarawa – stretching one kilometre at its widest, the high tides are now at a point where they potentially could really destroy the country.

Our family has owned the same block of land on Tarawa for around 35 years. A beautiful block – facing the ocean – surrounded by coconut trees. When the water is gently lapping at the shore, it really is a tropical paradise. But it's a different story at high tide.

Over the years, my family has worked hard to build a secure wall that stops the sea water from flooding the house. This wall is beaten and battered by a relentless ocean. It is a daily task to maintain the wall. In the past 30 years, this wall has gone from being non-existent to sitting at 1.5 metres high.

Climate change is the one issue about the country that really sparks people's interest. I think because Kiribati is the country people watch to see whether it really will happen, whether it really will disappear. Maybe people look to it to tell the future of the rest of the world.

From my point of view, I just love the country. Over the years, through lengthy visits, listening to elders and playing with the crowds of younger cousins, I have learnt to really feel I-Kiribati. I am proud of my heritage, the unique island culture, and have worked really hard to uphold what it means to be a proud I-Kiribati woman.

I grew up in an artistic family and have worked as an arts producer for years. So I suppose it was a natural continuation that I start producing work that tells the stories of Kiribati. I have just finished my first children's book called *Teaote and the Wall*, set in Kiribati.

Once we committed to the idea of the book, the illustrator and I pretty much didn't sleep for two months – that's what it felt like, anyway! We set up a crowdfunding campaign to raise the printing and marketing funds for the book and we managed to hit our target of $4000 in six days, which was unbelievable. I think that the general public care about our world's environmental situation, but don't know how to contribute to it in a tangible way.

*Teaote and the Wall* is my mother's story: one woman who battles with climate change effects every day. I've realised that sharing this story has allowed people to connect with climate issues in a way that's relatable. I'm still overwhelmed by the response to the book – it has taken on a life of its own.

I used to work in children's entertainment, and I really love the challenge of creating work for young audiences. I don't know if this sounds ridiculous or not, but I'm a bit over the climate 'conversation' at the moment. It just seems really clinical and not at all personal. I think we throw around 'climate change' so much that we're a bit desensitised to it. I'm trying to make it more approachable and tangible by using words like "tremendous waves" and "hot, hot suns". I'm not sure if it will work, but I'm trying.

All I know is that my family's home in Kiribati is definitely under environmental threat, and that this threat correlates in every way to how the global community treats our Earth. I am 16th generation I-Kiribati, and I am actively refusing for this country to disappear without everyone knowing about it.

By now I've been called a climate change activist numerous times and I'm more than OK to wear that badge. To be honest, you can call me whatever you like, as long as more people learn that Kiribati is a country that could disappear in our lifetime. ✤

Photo: Johanna MacDonald

# everybody has a story

## GEOLOGY STUDENT STEFAN COOK BUILT HIS OWN TEENY TINY HOUSE.

AS TOLD TO **MIA TIMPANO**

**We had earthquakes in Christchurch a few years ago, and we're going through the whole rebuild stage at the moment. In some suburbs, the houses have been abandoned. Those areas have been classed as a 'red zone', which basically means the government has purchased that land from the owners and the houses have become the property of the insurance companies. Some of those houses are getting relocated and others are getting completely recycled or demolished.**

My flatmate and I were talking about all the abandoned materials around Christchurch and the thought came into my mind of building something. But it was like, "What would you build and where would you put it?" About six months later, we came across a YouTube video of a kid in America who was building a tiny house.

A tiny house is a small, self-built, portable home, which you can move around by yourself. They're predominantly made by people who want to create a space suitable for their lifestyle. And obviously it's got the benefits of being a lot more eco-friendly and resilient to natural hazards.

A lot of tiny houses are built from wood with a standard wooden house frame. I decided to go with a steel frame. Longevity is what it came down to. I started with a very rough pencilled floor plan – everything after that just evolved through going around these salvage yards and seeing what they had. I needed a bathroom shower tray, for example, and ended up going out to a house that was being demolished and helping the guys pull it out. In that case, I paid a box of beer and brought it back and installed it that night.

The house is only 20 square metres, about as much space as a large sailing boat. Other people would look at me as a minimalist, but I've got a tonne of storage in this place. And having a little bit of decking makes the tiny house feel even bigger. The interior furniture is quite simplistic, so it can quite easily be moved around. Even the staircase to the loft can be moved to the other side. I like the fact that it looks different to other tiny houses. It's just me. On the inside, it's a little bit industrial. It's got some rough edges, but that's me as well.

I don't come from a building background. I didn't understand how windows got lined up, how you put them in, or how to keep out water. But a friend's father had built his house and once I tapped into his knowledge, I was able to just go out and get on with the project. Knowledge is around. Once you find it and tap into it, you can stand back and say, "Shit, I've just done that and I didn't know how I was going to do it a month ago."

When I started building the tiny house, I didn't know where I was going to park it. Originally, I was thinking I wanted to be a two-minute bike ride to uni. But then I realised that would mean I'd be right in the middle of suburbia. And that doesn't really suit my lifestyle or the tiny house. So I've ended up on a farmlet on the outskirts of town.

The construction took around 12 weeks and ended up costing around 25 grand. Where I'm located, the price of housing is going up, especially after our earthquakes. You look at what a couple pays in rent in Auckland. They'd pay for a tiny house in maybe a year. If you've got a lot of outgoings and overheads, then you have to work a lot more, doing things that you don't really want to be doing. If you're able to be a bit more financially free, then you're able to focus your time and energy into your own life.

The items I had to give up were things that I hadn't used in years. Things that were sitting in the bottom of a closet or the back of the garage. It became a case of asking, "Well, if I haven't used it in the past three years, am I going to use it in the next year?" And if no, get rid of it. Either sell it or give it away. It's almost a release.

What I like about tiny houses is that you build them to suit your lifestyle. It's not about buying a caravan or a motorhome, which is mass-produced and doesn't necessarily suit the space that you live in or your usage of electricity, gas and water. I'm running mine off solar and gas. Solar will always be in this tiny house, but with the gas I may change over to a wood burner or pot belly stove in the future.

You really are a lot more conscious of your usage, because when the gas bottle runs out, you run out. I mean, sure, where I am at the moment, it's a half-hour drive to go get some more, but you're trying to save every last drop. You don't just flick on the gas bottle for the sake of it. Before I lived here, if I left a light on for an extra half an hour, I didn't really think about it. But here, if I'm not using the light in the bathroom, I turn it off straight away. I mean, when I'm brushing my teeth, do I actually need the light on? Because I know where my teeth are.

One of the things that you really need is water. Sure, you can say that you're going to catch it off your roof, which is great, so long as you've got a roof big enough and you've got the rainfall. Christchurch is quite a dry area and my roof isn't big enough, so on that side of things, I'm limited. But if I go and park on the other side of the South Island, which is very wet, straight away I could be living off caught water.

The most people I've fed in the house so far has been three. And it was nachos. One of the tiny house specials! In the flat I lived in before here, I relied a lot on frozen foods. I do have a freezer here, but it's ice-box size. Enough to keep some frozen peas and some ice cubes. But relying on frozen foods has completely gone out.

When I was living with flatmates, people would come over and say, "Right, let's go to the pub." Now, I'm relying a lot more on the phone and text messages. But on the plus side, I've got my space and I do what I want, when I want.

You've just got freedom. And you're a lot more in touch with the outdoors. The mountain bike's sitting there looking at me, so I'll go for a mountain bike. Recently, some of the paddocks where I'm located were used for stock while they were giving birth. I hadn't actually seen a cow giving birth before and I witnessed that from my window. I sent a text to the lady who owns the stock and said, "Oh, yeah, that brown cow just gave birth." And she was like, "Sweet, thanks."

There are people who want to build tiny houses, see mine and say, "This is really cool, but I don't think I can make this." I say, "Well, can you measure two distances, put that onto a bit of wood and cut that at the same length? And then can you get that bit of wood, put it on the wall and drill it in there?" Because that's pretty much 90% of it. It's not complex maths, by any means.

If you want to build a tiny house, just go and build it. You'll find a place. And if it's not the right place in the short term, you'll find something else in the longer term. Once word gets out, you'll be surprised at the contacts that start jumping out of the woodwork. It's all part of the process and the journey. It's a fun journey. ✻