

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

As a feminist, community leader, commentator and face of the ABC in Canberra, Virginia Haussegger should be feeling rather content with her achievements as she approaches her tenth anniversary in the capital, but instead she's contemplating new challenges. LYNNE MINION finds out what motivates this true Canberra identity.

Virginia Haussegger

PORTRAIT BY ELIZABETH HAWKES

“We cannot congratulate ourselves and say feminism has succeeded when globally the plight of women around the world is as appalling as it was decades ago.”

There's still lots of things I want to do. I certainly want to make career changes. I certainly want to try new things. I certainly, before I reach 50, want to push new boundaries. So I don't know if I will be here.”

It may be horrifying for those who have grown accustomed to her inhabiting their lounge-rooms each weeknight at 7pm to learn that she's even thinking of moving on, let alone that she's looking towards her 50th birthday. After all, the tiny woman Canberrans have come to know for her warm authority has also earned their respect by campaigning for women's rights in Afghanistan, heading up the Canberra International Film Festival, speaking at an exhaustive number of events around town, as well as writing about her devastating childlessness.

“My job with the ABC is a very routine job. Every minute of the afternoon and evening I can tell you exactly what I'll be doing. And I don't think it's good for one's sanity or soul to stay in a very routine job for too long,” she says. “And that's the thing, I've never been routine.”

Reclining in her Campbell home, struggling with the humid heat and reflecting on the previous decade, Haussegger, 46, says she didn't expect to be here as long as she's stayed. “I was sort of on my way to elsewhere.” Still, she's remained. “It's the longest I've ever stayed in any job and it's the longest I've ever stayed in any one place.” And she's certainly thrived.

Carving out a reputation as a feminist in a time when the F-word had lost its popularity, she initially copped criticism from people of both genders. It appeared that some people didn't want to hear that liberation hadn't created an idyllic egalitarianism – except for a lot of women, who were grateful that somebody had finally written a book that described the idea of having it all as “a load of crap”.

Wonder Woman: The myth of 'having it all' placed Haussegger's personal life and her ovaries into the public consciousness with its details about the private pain behind her unflappable newsreader façade. As she wrote: “how do I make sense of my life and my future as a woman apparently destined to remain childless?”

The writing process was a cathartic process for her but once the book was published she found it hard to grieve in the spotlight she'd placed herself in.

“I didn't want to be interviewed about it. I really found the post-book period very, very difficult. I just wanted everyone to go away.”

But that wasn't going to happen because she'd given many women a voice, which is why they sought her out; they still do.

“People write to me and ask me all sorts of questions and I find myself sometimes thinking, 'Jesus, I don't know'.”

All these years later she says she still doesn't feel comfortable with being a poster girl for childlessness. “Oh, God, no,” she insists. “No, I don't. But I did become one.”

Events in federal politics, though, mean she's recently been overtaken in that regard. Funnily enough, Haussegger interviewed then shadow minister Julia Gillard for a chapter on politicians in Wonder Woman, but in what was perhaps a miscalculation: “I didn't actually use it in the end.”

Haussegger admits she didn't think Australia would have a female prime min-



Virginia Haussegger and Mahboba Rawi, Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan.

ister in her lifetime. Now that we do, she insists there is still a long way to go.

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Haussegger had broadened her focus to Kabul in 2007 when she'd famously taken leave from the ABC and paid for a trip to the warzone. She's been raising funds and awareness about the plight of women in Afghanistan since then.

“It certainly bores my friends and my colleagues and drives them nuts but everything comes back to Afghanistan for me.”

Now, in what seems to be a further widening of her lens, Haussegger's joined the Australian board of UN Women, the newly branded United Nations uber-agency tackling gender inequality worldwide. Launched in Australia by Governor-General Quentin Bryce on March 8, UN Women replaces UNIFEM and combines three other agencies.

The demanding voluntary role harnesses the principles Haussegger says she was born with and is another opportunity for her to speak on behalf of the voiceless.

“I have found myself in a position where I've had a little bit of a profile and, yes, I feel that it's important to use that well, to use it usefully.”

Use it usefully she does. “The fact that when we think of poverty, we think of women; the fact that the majority of those who are illiterate are women; the fact that violence against women is so present now still in people's lives; the fact that women own so little of the world's assets, own so little of

the world's property; our representation on government bodies around the world is appalling,” she says. “There is no reason to my mind, none whatsoever, as to why men still rule the world.”

As she speaks, it appears that for Haussegger, her role as an advocate for women – whether they be from the first world or the third – is like soul food for her. If the ABC has provided her with routine, the hours she spends on volunteer projects has given her a deeper purpose.

Perhaps that's why, as she approaches September's milestone, she's the one who's grateful.

“I love the fact that the ABC has support-

ed me in doing a whole lot of other things. I love that, and that's been a really enriching thing for me. In fact, it has helped shaped me, the engagement with community over the last 10 years, and I'm really grateful for that,” she says.

“The support and strength that I have felt from the community is what will help propel me onto my next chapter.”

Regardless of whether she stays or goes, however, a thought-provoked Haussegger can take some comfort in looking back at a decade in which she may not have managed to have it all, but to many she broke society's mould and helped to forge a new look wonder woman.



Europa at Hope House, Kabul photography by Virginia Haussegger



Lunch with Uncle Haji photography by Virginia Haussegger