

Fame a catalyst to take down taboo

By Lauren Novak

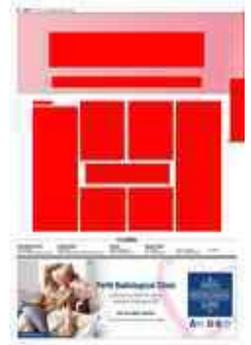
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Young Australian of the Year Isobel Marshall will use the spotlight to help women and girls overcome poverty and prejudice connected with periods

Isobel Marshall had completed just one week of a placement at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, as part of her fourth-year medicine studies, when she boarded a plane for a short trip to Canberra in late January.

“I was expecting to have this amazing weekend where I’d meet some really inspiring people and then get straight back into medicine,” the 22-year-old says. Instead, Marshall was named Young Australian of the Year and all her plans for 2021 were turned upside down.

The award swung a blinding spotlight on the Adelaide University student’s work campaigning to take the stigma out of getting a period and ensure all women and girls have access to pads and tampons.

It also presented the young social entrepreneur with enormous shoes to fill, as she takes the mantle from 2020 winner and world No.1 tennis player Ash Barty. Before that came the likes of world-conquering solo sailor Jessica Watson in 2011 and Olympic champion swimmer Ian Thorpe in 2000, as well as soldiers, tsunami survivors, engineers and astronomers.

Sitting in the CBD headquarters of the social enterprise she built from scratch with her best friend, Marshall confesses it was “a huge

surprise” to take home the honour — but she has big plans to make the most of the limelight. Instead of donning surgical scrubs and burying herself in textbooks, Marshall has deferred her bachelor of medicine-bachelor of surgery studies for a year to focus on growing TABOO, the organisation she began building with Eloise Hall when the two were still in high school.

When accepting her award on stage in Canberra, Marshall lamented that it “feels wrong not to have my co-founder and director” at her side. She says that she had been caught by surprise when an anonymous supporter nominated her, and had tried unsuccessfully to add Hall to the paperwork. But she’s adamant that the pair should share the recognition.

Through TABOO the duo sell organic cotton pads and tampons and pass all profits to charity.

Their mission is to raise awareness about the many women and girls who miss school or work, or suffer health or social consequences, because they can’t access or afford sanitary products.

“We went to an all-girls school, all of our friends are pretty open about this sort of stuff. I for one was very excited to get my period,”

Marshall laughs. “I actually loved the prospect of becoming a woman. I view a period as a very physical representation of a strong, healthy body. Learning about the biology of it . . . and how it happens every single month to create this new environment in a woman’s body — I’m quite in awe of it.”

But this is not everyone’s attitude. Periods are still a taboo topic for many, and the stigma has real consequences. A survey of more than 2500 South Australian school students and recent school leavers found half had not been able to buy, or access, pads or tampons to manage their period. A quarter had missed school because of it.

About two-thirds admitted they were uncomfortable talking about their periods with teachers and a staggering 70 per cent said they had, at some point, had to resort to alternatives such as toilet paper, tissues, socks, and even torn sheets.

The situation is even more dire in developing countries, such as Sierra Leone, where only 10 per cent of girls have ever even heard of a sanitary pad.

Marshall plans to use her time as Young Australian of the Year to advocate for solutions to this largely hidden problem of “period



poverty” and says schools, governments and employers should take greater responsibility.

“I would argue that it’s just as important as toilet paper,” she says. “If we all had to bring our own toilet paper to every public facility or school it would be that you have to take your own responsibility for something that’s completely natural. There are tissues in schools because it’s normal for people’s noses to run. It’s just how your body works. Why wouldn’t they (also) be providing pads?”

The survey of school students’ access to period products was run last year by South Australia’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly. She is lobbying for better education and funding for publicly available products and says the platform given to Marshall this year “will really spotlight this issue”.

“We think that we’re pretty open about discussing a lot of issues as a community but I don’t think we’ve gone anywhere near the conversation around menstruation because, when we do, people squirm,” Connolly says. “Until we can talk about it more openly I think we’ve got a long way to go.

“The more attention they (Marshall and Hall) can bring to it . . . it certainly takes away some of the taboo and stigma. They are really showing great community leadership in this space, now people up the chain need to also do their bit.”

Last month the South Australian Government committed \$450,000 to provide sanitary items to girls in Year 5 and older at every public school for the next three years. At the time, Education Minister John Gardner said a lack of access should not be “a barrier to learning”.

“Meeting the needs of students for sanitary products, whether they have limited access at home or get caught out (at school), gives

students less to worry about and allows them to focus on their learning,” he said.

Marshall and Hall welcome the recognition but question exactly how far the money will go.

“At the end of the day it will stop girls from skipping school because of their period,” 21-year-old Hall says. “(But) I think the funding that’s been committed more reflects a back-up, rather than a constant supply.”

In comparison, the Victorian Government has committed \$20.7 million to provide products, dispensing machines and menstrual education to all public schools until mid-2023. Both the Scottish and New Zealand governments also pay for free sanitary items in schools. A New Zealand survey found 29 per cent of girls aged under 17 had skipped school because they could not afford pads or tampons.

“There is huge demand in our own backyard,” Hall says. “A lot of girls don’t have the confidence to approach their teacher for (a) product. They often don’t have the confidence to ask their family, especially if they know that their family is under financial stress. They think I’ll manage it myself, even though it should not be an expectation of the child.”

Marshall and Hall met in Year 7 at Walford Anglican School for Girls and instantly bonded over a mutual disinterest in mathematics class and a shared love of musical theatre. The cheeky duo appeared together in classics such as CATS and Chicago and starred as mother Morticia (played by Hall) and daughter Wednesday (played by Marshall) in a Year 11 production of *The Addams Family*.

“We were both pretty confident and out there so we just kind of gravitated towards each other,” Marshall remembers.

At age 13, Marshall was able to travel with her family to Kenya and South Sudan. Later she and

Hall led Walford students in raising money for a hospital in Bor in South Sudan. The pair have since learnt that about 30 per cent of girls in developing countries drop out of school when they hit puberty.

Marshall was also inspired by Dr Catherine Hamlin’s book *The Hospital by the River*, about a program in Ethiopia treating women suffering from fistulas, a pregnancy complication. “That’s what made me want to do medicine,” Marshall says.

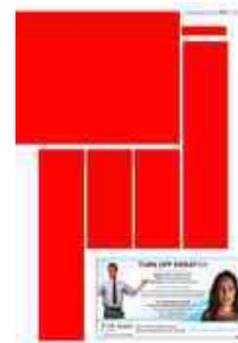
The real light-bulb moment

came during a walk together on Manly Beach in Sydney, not long after they first heard about the social enterprise model from ThankYou’s Daniel Flynn.

“We were chatting about what people buy all the time . . . coffee, toilet paper, chocolate, and just bouncing ideas around,” Hall says. “Then we thought, we spend so much money on pads and tampons, how much money does everyone else spend? And how do people go about their days without being able to afford this product? We realised, my goodness we make so much money in Australia selling pads and tampons and there’s such huge issues that really contribute to the poverty cycle. Why don’t we sell our own brand and see what comes of it?”

Marshall explains: “It was a product that we use, that we’re familiar with, that we have access to a demographic that uses that product. And on the flip side . . . around the world women are disadvantaged because they have a period. When we got into that we just got really passionate about it and thought there’s a beautiful business model that we can make out of this.”

Today, TABOO products are sold in 144 National Pharmacies and On the Run stores in South Australia, “a handful” of sites in Victoria and NSW and online. Visitors to the TABOO website can



also buy extra pads and tampons on behalf of those who need them, which are then delivered to charities including the Vinnie's women's shelter in Adelaide and Red Lily Health in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Net profits from sales of products to Australian women support the work of the charity One Girl, which works with girls and young women in Sierra Leone and Uganda.

With the extra attention from the Australia Day Awards win, Marshall and Hall are planning for "significant Australia-wide growth this year".

"We want to have a really good presence in a lot of the supermarket chains and stores, and chemists," Hall says. "Aussies spend \$300m on menstrual health care products a year so there's a huge opportunity for us in that market to make a great difference."

They also want the ear of politicians.

"I know that a lot of rural and Indigenous communities simply don't have pads in their stores,"

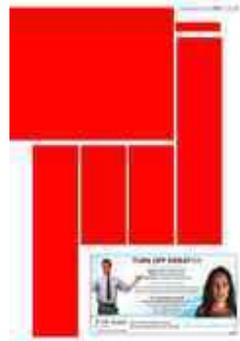
Hall says.

"Or if they do they are stupid expensive, that it's never worth anyone's money. Chux (washcloths) is one of the most common methods of soaking up menstrual blood in a lot of places."

Better support for the social enterprise model is on their agenda too, as there is currently heavy reliance on charities to "fill the gap".

Social enterprises "fall through the cracks", they say, because they sit between businesses which generate profit and can attract investors and charities which are afforded better tax arrangements. If governments are looking for more sustainable solutions to costly social problems, then finding ways to help self-funding enterprises like TABOO get off the ground and grow should be higher on their agenda.

"It's kind of like help us to help you," Marshall says.



Young Australian of the Year Isobel Marshall.
Picture: Matt Turner

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