

ALL CREATURES GREAT & SMALL

SHE HELPED STOP THE INDONESIAN BEEF
TRADE BUT SOUTH AUSTRALIAN LYN WHITE
IS FIGHTING ALL ANIMAL CRUELTY

Speak for the animals

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Lyn White. Picture: Calum Robertson *Source: The Advertiser*

FORMER Adelaide cop Lyn White had to find her own voice so she could fight against cruelty.

LYN White makes a silent pact with each animal that dies in agony before her. It is the only way she can cope. "I will be your voice," she promises. "You are dying horribly and I cannot help you but your death will not be in vain."

You never get used to watching animals being harmed, she says. And just when you think you have seen it all, along comes something worse. The torture of a grey and white Australian steer this year - she calls him Bill to give him an identity - was the worst White has come across in eight years of investigations for Animals Australia. Bill's death at a slaughterhouse in Indonesia crossed the boundaries of ignorance and cultural difference into the realm of sadistic brutality.

The former Adelaide policewoman has the disciplined air of someone used to keeping her feelings under control, but tears well up as she remembers. It was in March this year in the Sumatran capital, Medan. White and her colleague openly filmed as the steer was roped around the neck and dragged roughly towards the slaughter room. Panicked, Bill fought back,

his eyes flaring in terror. Then he slipped and fell, breaking one of his legs. Then the torture began as the slaughtermen tried to make Bill get up and walk. The footage, shown on the ABC's Four Corners program on May 30, shows him being kicked in the face, having his tail deliberately broken and - horrifyingly - being eye-gouged. Time and again the slaughterman can be seen thrusting his fingers into Bill's eye sockets and roughly gouging, inflicting dreadful pain as punishment for the animal's inability to comply. Eventually Bill was killed where he lay. He suffered 25 minutes of agony before he died.

"My colleague and I have to live with that forever," says White, who works alongside an undercover British investigator. "I was thinking, 'this is going to stop now'. Why was he continuing to eye-gouge this animal that was in a state of collapse and obviously could not get up?"

To intervene would have been a personal indulgence when the animal was already doomed. It would make White feel better for a very short while, but the next night when she was not there, it would happen again.

In order to fulfil her pledge to the lost animals, White has learnt to be very strategic. So she braced herself and helped film Bill's death, maintaining her guise of a rather ghoulish Aussie tourist. Later she took the footage to Four Corners, the nation's most respected investigative program, and waited for almost eight weeks while they conducted their own investigations. Most people - including me, until forced to look at the footage for this story - could not bear to see such suffering. Yet more than a month later the impact of the program is still reverberating through the Australian and Indonesian communities. What White had filmed was so beyond the pale the livestock trade to Indonesia was brought to a halt. Animals destined for the Indonesian abattoirs are still grazing in feedlots up north, blissfully ignorant of what they have escaped. They will eventually be killed when the trade to approved abattoirs resumes but such flagrant cruelty may never again be allowed to flourish. The episode has left Meat and Livestock Australia, which takes \$5 for each head of livestock to represent the industry's interests and safeguard animal welfare overseas, embarrassed and exposed.

White's role as the protector of Australian animals is more than just a job. It is calling that she answered more than a decade ago on a wintry day at her home in the Adelaide Hills. She had grown up in the Adelaide suburb of Seacombe Gardens as one of four girls, all of them musical. Her two older sisters topped the state in music in Year 12 and her younger sister, Sherri, is a cellist in the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. Lyn was musical and led the state schools orchestra as a violinist, but she preferred sport.

Aged 17, she became a police cadet, one of six women among 27 men in only the second intake of female cadets. Two years later she was a constable on the beat in Hindley St, short on experience but learning fast. She loved the teamwork, the camaraderie and the unpredictability of a job that threw up new challenges every day. In the mid-1990s, she was a senior constable who worked patrols down south, in Norwood and in the Adelaide Hills. One day in 1995, sitting in her sunroom, she came across a magazine article showing a huge black Asiatic bear with a rusty catheter protruding from its abdomen. It was confined in a cage barely bigger than its body and could hardly move. "That photograph shocked me more than anything I had ever seen," she says. "The cage was so small. It was that sense of how anyone could be so cruel, because the cruelty was so obvious." She sat there with tears streaming

down her face, then decided to do something about it. It was the beginning of the next stage of her life.

The Asiatic bears with characteristic moon crescents on their chests are the shameful cultural baggage of the belief that bear bile contains medicinal qualities. They are captured and painfully milked for bile to sell to wealthy Asians in China, Cambodia and Vietnam. The practice is not illegal and some restaurants serve the golden liquid at the end of a meal. In parts of China and Vietnam, keeping a bear in a backyard cage can keep a family afloat. The associated cruelty was entrenched.

White contacted the founder of Animals Asia, English-woman Jill Robinson, and volunteered to help. Still working with SA Police, she became Animals Asia's ambassador in Australia, giving talks and raising funds. She used her leave to help on investigations with Robinson in China and Vietnam.

She grew a thicker skin. In Vietnam she saw a freshly caught moon bear trussed up tightly in fencing wire, missing a paw, being prepared for bile extraction. "There was no way anyone in the world could not see that animal was suffering terribly," she says. "It still had blood dripping from where its paw was. Seeing things like that does make you question your own species as to how they could do something like that and ignore the suffering."

She began to understand the importance of strategy. Jumping up and down would achieve nothing. Instead, the foundation worked quietly and successfully with the Chinese Government, achieving a breakthrough in 2000 with an agreement to shut down the worst bear farms in Sichuan and release 500 bears into sanctuaries that Animals Asia would provide. So far, 250 bears have been rescued, some of them after being caged for 10 years or more. They require enormous rehabilitation, both physical and mental, but show a tremendous capacity to forgive.

White tells of seeing newly released bears with glossy black coats who began rolling over and over in the grass towards Robinson, greeting her as their saviour. "One of the great joys of that project was watching the animals learn to trust again, and appreciate the smallest gesture of kindness, whether they were still in their cage and you were passing them a small piece of fruit," she says. "Animals do understand kindness."

They also understand cruelty. White left the police in 2000 to work with Animals Asia but in 2003 became campaign director of Animals Australia, a position that was created after a South Australian animal lover, Necia Page, died and left a bequest. The flourishing and lucrative live export trade became her investigative focus. About 160 million animals have been shipped to the Middle East since the 1980s in circumstances that had virtually escaped scrutiny. White says she soon learnt that those who died on the way were the lucky ones. In 2005, she and her British counterpart visited Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain on a 14-day investigation that documented appalling treatment of sheep. But again it was the treatment of cattle that shocked her the most. Acting on information, they went to a huge abattoir called Bassateen that covers about 10ha on the outskirts of Cairo. They went in with an Egyptian leather trader, posing as potential buyers.

They were confronted with a scene from hell. The cattle were brought down for the kill by having their tendons slashed, and even when subdued they were tortured. Their eyes were

stabbed and White says there was a sense of excitement as the men strode around soaked in blood, swinging long knives like status symbols.

White catches her breath telling me this and wonders out loud how she can explain how it could happen. "Sadly, Egypt is known to be a very cruel place for animals, no matter whether they be domestic animals or wildlife or livestock," she says carefully. "It is the only place in the Middle East where I have seen gratuitous cruelty, the clear enjoyment of the battle of man versus beast."

The last animal they documented in Bassateen was so dreadfully slaughtered it got to its feet and began running towards them with a gaping throat and terrible eyes. Again, she made her silent pact to bear witness. "If you look into their eyes you are in danger of losing your soul forever, to be honest," she says, almost in tears. "It's too much. You have to draw breath and look at them and make that silent promise that while you are not going to be able to save them, their suffering wouldn't be in vain."

Australia had sent nearly a million cattle to Egypt to die in this way and her anger with the livestock industry knew no bounds. The footage of the sheep went to 60 Minutes and the live trade with Egypt was suspended for most of 2006. When the sheep trade was reopened White again was there, documenting sheep being trussed and carried on the roof racks of cars. The additional evidence stopped the trade.

Deciding what to do with the Indonesian footage saw White at her most strategic. She knew it was hugely political with repercussions for the government and the industry. The containment boxes being misused by the Indonesians to restrain Australian cattle while they were roped for slaughter were designed by and stamped with the logo of Meat and Livestock Australia, which farmers and cattle producers trusted to protect their interests abroad. "My initial thought was 'how could they?'," she says. "How could our industry have designed something that was so appalling and couldn't place the animals at greater risk? There is even a blood drain cut into the concrete for when the animals' head comes crashing down."

Within 10 minutes in the Indonesian abattoir, she knew she had enough footage to end the live trade. What was particularly chilling was that she was able to film openly. It was a terrible sign that the workers felt there was nothing wrong with their conduct because it had tacit Australian approval.

Before Four Corners went to air White sent the footage to an international expert on animal welfare, American Professor Temple Grandin. Grandin is a story in herself, a high-functioning autistic with an intuitive understanding of animals who has designed humane raceways and feedlots that minimise animal stress. Grandin, whose autism strips her of social graces, was horrified at how Australian cattle were being killed. "The conditions are absolutely terrible. I mean you've got a box designed to make cattle fall down. That violates every humane standard there is all around the world," she said on Four Corners. "What I want to know is why Meat and Livestock Australia's name is on the side of this chute?"

White did not go to the Minister, Joe Ludwig. She had done so last year over the mistreatment of sheep in Kuwait. Ludwig had turned the issue over to the industry and White was still waiting for a response. The problem, she says, is that animal welfare sits under the same minister as agriculture, whose primary stakeholders are the meat and livestock industry. The interests of animals will always come second.

Since the program aired, White has been run ragged meeting the media's needs. She never refuses a media request, remembering her promise to be the voice of animals who will not otherwise be heard. After a month in the spotlight, she has passed beyond normal tiredness and her voice, while still calm and regulated, has an exhausted edge she cannot conceal. She was back in Adelaide unexpectedly late last month after her mother had a stroke, the second in six months and a setback after progress had been made.

Now in her 40s, a vegetarian who runs to keep fit, White is living a meaningful life. She says it took time to find herself, and early in her Animals Asia days a friend presented her with a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote: "Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." It has served her well, she says, even though she never thought of herself as a leader. "I was the kid in school who never raised her hand because I was fearful of getting the question wrong. I completely lacked self-confidence," she says.

In the past few weeks she has done at least 100 radio, press and TV interviews and says she is so far out of her comfort zone she may never find it again. But she feels she has no choice. "I am able to do it only because they need me to speak on their behalf, so I find a way to do it," she says.

She is a deep and careful thinker who avoids the indulgences of emotion or prejudice. Her animal investigations, shaped in part by her police experience which taught her to know her environment and identify escape routes, are rigorous files of evidence. But after seeing animal cruelty practised on a large scale in a setting of cultural acceptance, how does she not become racist?

"Because in each place that I have worked I have also met good people," she says. "Especially in Egypt, there are a number of welfare agencies there that struggle against a tide of cruelty that you wouldn't believe and a tide of corruption at the government level."

One of her most surprising friendships is with Princess Alia bint al Hussein, the older sister of Jordan's King Abdullah. The relationship began in 2007 after emails were sent to his wife, Queen Rania, asking the royal family to intervene to stop cruel practices which White had documented in Jordanian abattoirs. When Princess Alia was shown footage Australians had seen on the ABC's 7.30 Report, she intervened and had the slaughterhouse closed. Since then, pre-slaughter stunning has been introduced at all big abattoirs. Now, when White assesses facilities in Jordan, she does so on behalf of the Princess Alia Foundation and attends with a royal guard. She is a regular visitor to the palace in Amman and has been appointed Princess Alia's chief adviser on animal welfare. "I adore her. I love her dearly," White says of Princess Alia. "She is one of my closest friends and we are in regular contact."

White's work will never be done and animal cruelty does not take a holiday. Her mission takes her beyond proclaimed welfare goals like ending live exports, freeing battery hens, getting rid of sow stalls and ending animal testing in labs. She wants nothing less than a permanent shift in human thinking. She likens progress in animal welfare to an evolution in consciousness, a progressive embrace of higher ethical ideas that raises our status as humans. Rather like we now look back with horror at a civilisation that once endorsed slavery, so she thinks we will one day feel shame over our history of cruelty to animals.

"The evolution of the physical form is well documented but there is also an evolution of human thought, and each time it is about steps taken to recognise the interests of others no

matter how different they are to us," she says. "Animals are going to present the ultimate challenge because they are even more different and more defenceless. But they share an important thing with us and that is the ability to suffer."

For 20 years White had an adored dog, Piper, rescued from a pound. Just before she left for Indonesia, Piper and a second pet dog died at the end of long lives. She is devastated, but won't attempt to replace them until the political fallout from the Indonesian footage has quietened and she can spend more time at home.

White, who is single, rents out her house in the Adelaide Hills and is now based in Melbourne. She has not lost faith in her own species and believes each human heart holds the knowledge that we are not meant to harm those we share our world with.

She has come to learn that like us, animals not only feel pain but also fear. The footage from Indonesia that touched people most deeply was the sight of the last animal to be killed and who stood there, quaking with abject terror at what awaited him. The distressed black steer from a station in the Kimberley could be seen poking its nose through the railings and watching in horror at what was being done to those who went before him. He was stricken by the knowledge that something terrible was happening and you could almost hear him asking why. He had not been physically harmed but his distress was painfully clear.

White fulfilled her promise to him that his suffering would not be in vain. "From hardened politicians through to producers to people in the street, they cannot forget this animal," she says. "It's because he so beautifully and importantly showed that animals do feel fear and terror and in that moment they were living what he was living. He won't be forgotten."

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