



# Light Bulb Moments: Getting young people involved in community

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Presentation by  
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Firstly, thank you so much for having me at Our Communities in Control. I've actually been really excited about this for at least the last couple of months, ever since I was asked to speak. I think that was back in February or March, ages ago. I remember thinking back then, "Great! I never get so much notice before any of my speeches. I'll have many, many months to think about what I wanted to say, do some research, prepare my speech, maybe even practice a couple of times." Yeah. Last night, I'm still up at 1am figuring out exactly what I was going to say.

Before Denis or other people from Our Community get too alarmed, last night really was just me figuring out my final words. It wasn't me starting my speech again from scratch. Not at all.

I was speaking to some people yesterday, before 1pm, before lunch, and I was really calm; I was really looking forward to speaking. I'm still really excited to be here. But it was at about 1pm yesterday that Julia Gillard was speaking on that side of the stage, and it just finally hit me – oh, I have to speak tomorrow! On the same stage! And I started to get a little bit stressed.

I guess there were a couple of reasons why I was feeling a little bit nervous and feeling a little bit angsty about exactly what I was going to say. The first reason that, I guess, I was feeling a little bit weirded out was I can't remember the last time I was in front of an audience similar to the one that I'm in front of today. The biggest reason why this audience is really different for me is that you all work largely in the non-profit and also community sectors.

By and large, on a technicality, I also work in the non-profit community sector. But I work for a really, really big environmental NGO – one of Australia's biggest environmental NGOs.

It's really different to work on that sort of national, leading Australian environmental NGO basis, compared to some of the work that I know many of you are doing.

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I spent yesterday at the conference getting to know a couple of different people, introducing myself to lots of people, normally over morning tea and afternoon tea.

So, sorry if I interrupted your time with tea and coffee, I was getting a little bit of a better sense of, I guess, why you're here today, why you were here yesterday, and what you are hoping to get out of the conference.

And for me, what's lovely but sometimes also terrifying about working with communities is that communities are so diverse and you all come from different communities. You're all working on different community projects.

You're not, for want of a better word, as homogenous as other groups that I've been speaking to recently.

You're not the same as the Year 9 group at Xavier that I spoke to a couple of weeks ago. You're not the same as a corporate that I recently addressed. Or a government meeting that I had in Canberra.

Even though you all work in the community sector, the thing is you're all from very, very different communities. For me, that diversity is beautiful.

But at the same time, it's also really terrifying, because you have very, very different experiences. Yes, you might all work with people, or with people that might also be your neighbours, but not necessarily on the same issues.

That made me think about what is the one message that I can impart that will actually be applicable to the hundreds of you in this room, rather than a small, small number of you.

So I was really lucky to be able to take some time off work and spend yesterday here, and get to know you all a little bit better, and also listen in on some of the presentations.

Which, I think, also got me thinking about exactly what is missing from this room at the moment, and potentially what I could do to fill that. For one, I guess I am the youngest speaker. That was quite obvious.

That said, I don't plan on talking a lot about, I guess, how to get more young people involved in various communities today. Although I've left a lot of time for questions and answers, so will be happy to take questions on that later.

When I was asked to do this presentation, the organiser Denis Moriarty was like, "Just share a bit of your story, Lihn. It will be fine. Just talk a little bit about yourself." Normally, that's really easy. I talk about myself all the time. I really enjoy not talking about myself, but I really enjoy stories. I really enjoy telling people my stories so that I can later hear their story.

Normally, that is a really easy ask, but I wasn't quite sure which story I wanted to share with you today. But I guess the one that I plan on starting off with is something that you will probably also all know about me. And that is that I have a really weird relationship with light bulbs.

The conference program sort of highlights that even more. There's my smiling picture, a little bit of a blurb about what I might be speaking to you about today, and a whole bunch of pictures with light bulbs.

My weird relationship with light bulbs spans about eight years now. It's a very, very unusual relationship to have with an inanimate object. It's the longest relationship I've ever had with anything. Inanimate or otherwise.

Regardless of how I came to, I guess, find myself in a long term relationship, it is ongoing. Light bulbs will still follow me everywhere I go.

It actually started out really normal. I guess my story started about 23 years ago, when I was born in Melbourne's west. Life for me was pretty normal. I had two parents; I have a younger brother who I fight with all the time. And I have parents that I also fight with all the time. I went to primary school and, before you knew it, I was in high school. I played the French horn at school. I performed in lots of musicals. I played tennis and netball on the weekends.

Most things were pretty normal. Now I know the French horn isn't the most normal of instruments, but, you know, playing a musical instrument seemed like a normal thing to do.

I had a really great family, I had really great friends and life wasn't all that bad at all. Life certainly fit in with all conceptions that I had of what it meant to be normal.

That is, until one day I realised maybe I wasn't that normal. I think this happens for all teenagers. I think teenagers, anywhere from the ages of like 12 to 18, experience a lot of, you know, teenage angst and they get really angry about the world. They get really confused about their identity and who they are, who their friends are, who they're going to become in life.

I certainly had that. But my realisation was a little bit different.

My realisation was maybe I'm not normal, not because I'm changing so much now, but because my upbringing was really, really different to my peers'.

At home, I had to do chores, I had to help my parents out, I had to be nice to my brother and occasionally babysit him – these were all relatively normal things.

One of the other things that I used to do quite a lot growing up was reading. I remember distinctly reading in my room one day, and the light went out.

That obviously is not a very rare occurrence. Lights go out all the time. There was nothing special about it. I told my mum, "Hey, we need to go pick up another light bulb. Can you take me down to the shop?"

So we went down to the shops, and it was then that, for whatever reason – most supermarket visits are not this crystal clear in my head, but this one was – my mum was picking out the lights and she put in a couple of fluorescent lights into the shopping trolley.

For those that don't know, fluorescent lights are the artistic, swirly kind as opposed to incandescent lights, which you would often see in cartoons when people have bright ideas. So I remember my mum putting a fluorescent light into the shopping trolley. And I asked her why are we spending \$8 on a light bulb when we can get that one for 50 cents? Like, you know, maths is simple. That's a \$7.50 saving!

So there was me, the 15-16 year old, clearly thinking about budgeting already. It was something that really struck me. I was like, I don't understand why we're doing this at all. It doesn't seem logical. Shouldn't you be aiming to spend less money as opposed to more money?

I remember my mum's answer. She sort of just looked at me and was like, "Well, obviously, Lihn" – I think she actually rolled her eyes at me as well, which was a fairly typical response to some of the questions I used to ask of her, "It's really simple. This light here, the fluorescent light, uses less electricity. Therefore, it means that we won't have to spend as much on our electricity bill, and we also

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won't be using the necessary resources that you would have to put into an incandescent light bulb to generate the same amount of light."

For me, that was just sort of like, oh, right. Okay. Clearly life isn't run according to economics and what's cheaper and, you know, what, in the short term, might cost you less, could in the long term costs you more.

And it was around that time that I started putting two and two together, and observing more of the things that we were doing at home that I had always thought were normal, because that was how I was brought up – everything from having a limit to how long my showers could be (well before Melbourne had a drought) and we had to have water targets and save water.

I always had to eat everything off my plate. I had to help out in the garden because, of course, we had a garden. I had to turn things off at the plug.

These were all things that I thought were really, really normal. Wasting things was just not an option at my house at all. It was never an option. And purchasing superfluous stuff was never an option either.

I don't think I ever had a brand named toy, for example. I never had any of these things that a lot of my other friends had. You know, Christmas or birthdays were not about gift giving. They weren't necessarily about throwing more stuff at my brother and me.

It was more about experiences, I guess, and doing these things that weren't that wasteful and weren't that resource wasting. That was my experience at home, in my home life, where I was learning.

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This is not necessarily how everyone lives. When I go over to my friends' house, they all have incandescent light bulbs. Their parents are okay with them not finishing off all the food on their plates.

I sort of combined this with what I was learning at school at the time. I was in Year 9 at Braybrook, and it was in some different science and humanities classes where I was learning about climate change.

There was something about climate change, it wasn't the polar bears and it wasn't the cute animals. There was something about it. I think it was, I guess, the enormity of it as a problem that really got to me. It really stuck to me. I can't always necessarily explain why I decided, at that moment in time, to suddenly care about climate change, to care about the environment, but I did.

And it was like, wow, climate change is a huge issue. It's still a huge issue today. I didn't really know what to do about it then.

Eight years later, I still don't really know what to do about it. And obviously climate change is still a really big problem. It's a really big problem because climate change isn't very tangible. It's too much carbon in the atmosphere. We can't necessarily see carbon. Carbon is something that actually also naturally exists as well. So explaining it and understanding it and how it actually impacts people and environments has always been like a tricky thing for me.

I was really lucky though, that I actually did, ironically enough, one day have a light bulb moment. I had this light bulb moment when I realised all of these little things that my mum and dad were making me do at home were, essentially, stopping climate change in a very, very small way.



I didn't know this at the time but, I guess, in the last eight years of having worked within the environment space, I quickly realised climate change exists for a number of reasons.

Some of the key drivers as to why climate change is still an issue today is because of how we over-consume resources, and it's about the resources that we're choosing to over-consume as well. We're over-consuming in terms of the material things that we choose to constantly be purchasing. We're picking the wrong resources in terms of our energy.

So Australia is in the middle of a great minerals resource boom at the moment because we choose to invest in coal and various fossil fuels, as opposed to solar, even though we're the country that has the most like direct solar sunlight hitting it.

These were all things that didn't quite line up for me. I realised that wasn't how I was raised at all. Sure, it was on a much smaller scale. Like, doing little things such as not taking long showers or turning things off at the plug. But I guess that was my contribution to not over-consuming and not consuming the wrong resources.

It was then that I realised, well, okay, this light bulb thing. It seems fairly easy. If an incandescent light bulb is that energy inefficient and will over-consume unnecessarily poor resource choices, why don't I just get people to change over to fluorescent light bulbs? Easier said than done.

That year – I was in Year 10 at the time, so I think it was 2006. I had a really great opportunity at my school to be able to design a local community project, and do something within my own community. Instead of deciding to do something small, like changing a couple of hundred light bulbs, I decided that I wanted to change a million light bulbs.

See, every time I still tell people that, I sort of think back and just go Lihn, you were so naive. How did you ever think you were going to change a million light bulbs? I don't know a million people.

Even with the advent of the internet, I do not have a million friends across all of my social networks. A thousand at best. [Audience laughs.] I have friends, but I didn't have a million friends. I didn't know how to reach a million people. I don't think I'd ever seen a million people in my life. I mean, the most that I probably would have ever seen was maybe going to a game at the MCG. So maybe 40,000 people. That's certainly not a lot of people when you're thinking about trying to change a million light bulbs.

I didn't necessarily know how to go about changing light bulbs. I was 16 at the time. I had no experience in anything aside from going to school, doing homework and rehearsing scales on the French horn. That was the extent of my worldly experience and knowledge.

So how I planned on changing a million light bulbs, how I planned on making my impact and trying to do something good for the environment in terms of climate change – I have absolutely no idea.

The one thing that I had, in terms of skills, that I didn't mention earlier, was I was really good at speaking to people. I was really good at having essentially no shame when it came to speaking to people.

I had no problem introducing myself: "Hello, my name is Lihn and I'd like to talk to you today about light bulbs." And I would do that in a way that didn't make me sound like a salesperson. But it also did not make me the most popular kid in school because who wants to be friends with a girl that is only talking about light bulbs? Fair enough. I understood that. But that was basically what I did. Knowing

that I could never reach a million people myself, I told a lot of people about what I was working on.

So I talked to people within my school. I talked to people in my local community. The people that I played sports with. The people at the school next to where I went to school. People in local councils. People in the environment space. And slowly, they started to talk to people as well.

And the more people that I started to speak to, the more people were willing to speak to me. Suddenly, I found myself speaking to local councils, speaking to small businesses, medium sized corporations, large sized corporations like Philips. I found myself speaking to all of these people, and that's probably still the only skill I have. Speaking to people.

And as I was speaking to these people, it was interesting. I wasn't asking them to do anything drastic and different. Yes, most – some of them – understood what climate change was. Some of them understood the enormity of climate change. But many of them, all of them, understood what it meant to go to the supermarket, buy a different light bulb, and change it within their own homes. It was that simple.

Well, solving climate change isn't that simple. But I had boiled down what I was hoping to get people to do – change their light bulbs – into a really simple ask of "Hey, can I talk to you about light bulbs?" I gave them some facts about the lights. I gave them some facts about climate change. Then I would ask them, "Would you be okay changing your light bulb at home later tonight?" And most people said yes, because it's a very non-confrontational ask. It would've been weird for people to have said no, no I will not change my light bulb.

Although that did happen to me once – it was a very cute 80-year-old Italian grandmother. She was quite angry, and she hit me with a wooden spoon. I know that sounds like I’ve just generalised an entire generation of like old, Italian nonnas, but that did happen to me, and I was, quietly, quite terrified.

That was the most confrontational experience I’ve ever had from speaking with someone. Since then, I have avoided that community. This is a sad but true fact of my life. It means that I just have to go to Lygon Street to eat my daily dose of Italian food now.

But that was all I did. And I spoke to a lot of people. And lo and behold, for some reason, the campaign really did take off.

Slowly, it wasn’t just me talking to people anymore, but it was the people I was talking to also talking to other people, talking to people within their own communities as well. And over the course of 18 months, I, obviously, did eventually grow tired of speaking just about light bulbs.

Over the course of 18 months, I started to see lights change all across communities. I saw it happen – well, not in my own home. But I saw it happen in my neighbour’s house. I saw it happen in my friend’s house. I saw it happen across whole communities. It was really interesting to watch.

As soon as one local city council would say sure, we’re happy to change the lights over in our office building, the local city office building in the next suburb over would be more than happy to do exactly the same. It’s sort of that idea of, I guess, dominoes, when one person does something, the ripple effect does happen quite quickly.

For me, one of the coolest light bulbs that was changed out of the million was when I – because we did a lot of internet tracking as well – when I heard that

someone in Sweden had randomly heard about the campaign through a friend they had in Australia through I believe it was a high school exchange student from Sweden who was staying with this host family. And this person decided to change their light bulbs within this Swedish community, and, as well, within their local school.

I had never been to Sweden at the time. I didn't know anyone in Sweden. But there I was, slowly reaching out, amazingly, to a million people.

Part of that was through the internet. Part of that was really just through the ability to speak.

The other part was – that's what communities are really great at – uniting individual actions into a greater big thing. And that's how a million light bulbs were, amazingly, changed.

What was really interesting for me about changing the million light bulbs was, I think, by that point, I had learned a lot more about the political system as well, and I'd learned a lot more about climate change. I quickly realised a million light bulbs is awesome, but it's probably not going to fix climate change. If anything, climate change is worse now. So obviously, I haven't solved the world's problems yet.

The group of people that I was working with – it was just a group of young students that went to all different schools across the inner Melbourne region – we started to do some letter writing. We started to not just write letters at random to one another, but we started to write these letters to politicians.

Maybe it was because we were young, and we were naive and we were cute looking, and would be great for the media, but a lot of these politicians also agreed to meet with us. I now know this is advocacy. But back then, I was just like

great, I'm writing someone a letter, I'm meeting with them. I don't really know who they are. Sure, I've seen them on TV once or twice before. But I don't think they're that important. Like, they're just like me. They're just like anyone else that I've talked to. And we started to have a lot of these meetings with politicians.

A couple of big environmental NGOs were also working on similar issues around the time. In 2007, Australia actually became the first country in the world to ban the sale of incandescent light bulbs. For a country that, at the moment, has really protracted and reductive environmental policies, it's amazing that we were once the world's first to do something really environmentally positive.

Australia was the first country in the world to do this. And this, at the time, blew my mind. I went from this girl that had to change one light bulb in her bedroom to somehow changing light bulbs in her community, to somehow being, wow, through this campaign I've been working on; we've change a million light bulbs, to suddenly no one in Australia being able to buy incandescent light bulbs anymore.

Next time you're in a supermarket, check out your supermarket aisle. I remember the first time I went down the supermarket aisle and I noticed the light bulbs. I was like wow! You actually can't buy incandescent light bulbs anymore! It didn't really hit me until then. And that was only a couple of years ago. It turns out people don't buy light bulbs all that often, so there was a lot of stock that they still had to get rid of. Something I had not factored in.

I eventually went on to graduate from high school. When I was at university, I was lucky enough to do a lot of work with the United Nations. I did a lot of work with the United Nations Environment Program.

Now, the United Nations Environment Program is a huge, huge, big, intergovernmental organisation. It's based in Nairobi. What was really cool was

that UNEP decided to adopt this campaign as one of their flagship programs that they were going to run – they were going to try to convince countries all around the world to also ban the selling of incandescent light bulbs. They brought me on, I guess, in part, as a consultant, someone that had some experience of doing it at the community level within Australia, to combine with their more, I guess, senior, hob-knobbing with ministers and things like that. Since then, about 40 countries in the world have banned the selling of incandescent light bulbs. And yes, there are about 200 countries in the world. But that, for me, is really phenomenal.

I feel really privileged to have been able to work at the super, super local level, where I grew up in West Footscray, to hanging out in Nairobi and talking to environment ministers from Mexico about how they should consider banning the selling of incandescent light bulbs. Because Mexico City surely needs fluorescent light bulbs more than anything else.

I guess that the stories that I wanted to share with you just then really were true stories that were quite pivotal in my life. One story was about how I worked with my local community. The other one was how I ended up working with the UN.

I didn't really focus a lot on the UN side of things, mainly because it's a very, very weird world. And we're here, today, to talk more about community. So I wanted to focus on that. And it sort of sums up most of my life, actually.

Almost all of the work I've done has either been in a really direct sense, working with the people, on the ground, with people that potentially could be my neighbours – people that I could see, you know, going on my morning run or whatever – to people in this completely different world, where I'm in the UN and I'm meeting people that I've only ever read about before. Yet, there I am, talking to them in a very weird and different international space.

Both of these things are really, really different. So it's funny that my professional experience now spans these two sectors. They're really different. I'm sort of okay with them being different. I'm sort of okay with having to use different parts of my brain. Having to use different skills that I have. I'm not particularly fussed as to, you know, which one I should be working on.

Should I be working on local action or, like, international diplomacy? For me, it doesn't matter because climate change is still the issue that I really care about. All I'm looking to do in life is actually making an impact on that matter. So I'm not too fussed as to how it works.

And having worked with communities before, I sort of have a pretty good understanding of how to best work with people. How to best work with people that could also be your neighbours. How to connect to people and how to connect whatever the issue that we're working on is to their own personal experiences. I get how you can create change through working with communities, and having spoken to many of you, I know that you get how the work you're doing is making an impact as well.

Yet, at the same time, I've also worked at the UN, and I've worked with a lot of governments, and occasionally corporates as well. But a lot of it has been with governments. I understand how lobbying and advocacy can also work. I understand how going to Canberra can sometimes be really important. I understand how going to like these big international UN conferences and talking about policy, and often the rhetoric of policy, can be really important. I can see how that has made changes as well.

One great example of that is the Millennium Development Goals, and some of the work that that's led in reducing extreme poverty. I get how both of these things work, even though they're really, really different. I get that both of these worlds



work. And I get that you can work in one or the other and work towards creating change. That's really important. I don't think the question is about, do you have one or do you have the other?

So that's why yesterday's great debate was really funny to me, in terms of should community groups be merging to form bigger NGOs or become part of bigger NGOs. I don't think the answer is obviously that black and white and that simple. Although we know which side won the debate yesterday, it doesn't necessarily reflect what's going on in society, and what's going on in our day to day work.

I've been thinking a lot about this. This was, in part, why I was up at 1am this morning. I was thinking about how the community space – how people working with their communities, on the ground, can actually intersect with what's going on in this multilateral space. I do think that you need both.

Community initiatives are often great at actually delivering really tangible, project-specific things that are really relevant to people within that community. You understand your situation more than anyone ever will, and that's why the work of communities is really important. That said, climate change is the issue I care most about.

A lot of my friends also really care about global extreme poverty, or access to the internet, or access to clean water, and things like that. A lot of these global issues, unfortunately, can't be tackled just at a community level. A lot of these global issues are happening because there are broader, systemic changes that need to occur. We can't just drive that through 7 billion different individual community projects, unfortunately.

Those changes do need huge institutions to be part of. Not just huge NGOs, but huge things like the UN. Huge things like, you know, the Australian Government and other governments around the world, to also be involved.

And yes, I don't think it's about one or the other. But at the same time, the question that I keep thinking about – and I'd love to have some thoughts on this when we go into questions – is how do you really connect the two?

A lot of people ask me all the time, "What do you want to be when you grow up? Do you want to keep doing community campaigning in, like, local Melbourne, or wherever it is you happen to be? Or do you want to work for the UN one day?" I think my answer is really neither.

I love both worlds for very, very different reasons. I hate both worlds for very, very different reasons as well. Often, sometimes, it's complementary and opposites and things like that. But the question that I keep asking myself is how do these two different worlds intersect?

I'm in a really unique and lucky position, where I've been able to work with people directly. But I've also been able to work with senior, you know, policy decision makers and things like that.

And that's the question that I keep asking myself. I guess I'm really lucky in my day job. This is what I'm working on at the moment – how can the work of what you're all doing here today, in your own local communities, feed into these bigger governmental processes, whether it be international or national? How can, you know, these big institutions better incorporate your work, to better listen to what you're hearing from the community, rather than making decisions just through academic or like policy or economic advice?

That's something that I haven't quite figured out yet. I'm sort of hoping that one day that can be sort of the third story that I share with people. Not just how I figured out how to work with local communities, or how I figured out, you know, I could be effective within the UN space. But how I could actually link up these two very, very disparate but, for me anyway, hugely important lines of work in creating change.

I'm going to end it there.

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