

Rebel with a cause

*In the wake of her win as Telstra woman of the year and the UTS Alumni Award of Excellence, Violet Roumeliotis has become the face of next-gen Not for Profits (NFPs) – social enterprises battling bias and inequality, with heart as well as corporate smarts in their arsenal. Here **DANIELA AROCHE** picks the brilliant business mind that drives Settlement Services International.*

Getting an interview with Mrs Violet Roumeliotis is harder than securing a sit-down with the head of Hermès. It's no easy feat.

As CEO of Settlement Services International (SSI) – an organisation that has supported the settlement of more than 10,000 refugees in Australia, helped hundreds gain work and spearheaded an impressive array of support programs from educational scholarships to small business initiatives and even multicultural foster care – her schedule is perpetually packed and her time is, understandably, increasingly in demand.

Yet, when we finally connect – a few months from my initial request – there's no air of self-importance and not a hint of hastiness to our interaction.

This is all the more striking, given that our interview occurs on a Saturday via a shaky Skype connection from my makeshift office in Paris to her home in Sydney, where Violet (as most people know her) has taken my call during her personal time off – moments that she admits are, these days, precious but nonetheless punctuated with work-related wanderings every now and then.

"Sometimes you wake up dreaming at night because something's popped into your head about work and you've got to stop and say: 'No, no I'm not gonna do that now,'" Violet says.

"But I think that's part of the package when you're in a leadership position like this, inevitably you're always looking at opportunities and new angles, no matter what time of day it is."

Indeed, it's Violet's ever-ticking business mind thinking outside the square that's been the most potent

tool in spinning the fortunes of SSI from a small support start-up to the thriving organisation of today.

Since she's been at the helm, her astute strategic vision and uncanny ability to pinpoint opportunities and nurture them to fruition have turned an organisation that had one prime area and a single line of revenue into an expansive social enterprise with 13 program areas and a robust and diversified revenue stream.

This has let SSI become more independent by not relying on just one, single funding source — and allowed the organisation to share work with other support services and local community providers, while contributing to a greater collaboration and increased co-operation in the not-for-profit (NFP) and human services sector.

"What we have now is a system where, once [a program] is working, we look at putting our surplus into gaps that the market won't address," she says. "That's what the vision always was – to be able to build something sustainable that grew the pie for SSI and our members, our partners and our sector – and not about SSI being at the centre of everything."

Financially, Violet's inclusive and innovative strategy for SSI has paid off. The organisation has achieved more than 1,100 per cent revenue growth, totalling AU \$113 million over the past five years, and she's grown staff numbers from a team of fewer than 70 at inception to more than 600 today.

These accomplishments are all the more impressive given that SSI's development comes at a time when reduced government funding, coupled with the increased difficulty of fundraising, has many non-profits struggling to survive, much less flourish.

Against this backdrop of a constantly changing



Photo courtesy of Violet Roumeliotis

landscape for non-profit service providers, I ask Violet about the formula for sustainable growth and a profitable NFP structure that can handle the bumpy fiscal roads to the future. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a visionary leader at the heart of a community-led business, she responds that the four keys are diversification; networking; knowledge-sharing with peers and potential partners ... mixed with forward-thinking, and a generous sprinkling of “spiffiness”.

“We are really quite a spiffy company,” she says. “Far more sophisticated in our infrastructure, our governance and our approaches than society’s idea of what a not-for-profit often is. I think it’s important to change the view of not-for-profits and let other businesses in Australia know that we’re [NFPs] not in this 1970 mindset of volunteering and answering the phone, not running things efficiently. I think we’ve shown it, and there are similar organisations that do it really well, too.”

“But you always need to be a few steps ahead of the curve. If you’re embedded in your sector and your industry and you have an open mind, listening attentively, networking, connecting, having deep relationships with bureaucracies, other not-for-profits, corporates and the like – then you get a sense of what’s coming and you can act on it.

“You can then think, ‘Okay, how is that change of governor or the new privatisation of services going to collide with – in our case – human services, employment, and so on?’ If things have an impact on the nation, they will also have a flow-on effect in our sector and business. Keeping aware of policy shifts is critical.”

Just as crucial, Violet adds, is the ability to stay grounded and connected with the communities and the organisation services, how certain policy developments may impact on their access to resources, opportunities and basic living conditions.

The ability to tune in is a trait Violet says has kept SSI relevant over the years, and something which she believes governments can improve on. She has been vehemently vocal about the importance of advising and advocating through consultative and advisory structures to change social policy for the better.

A case in point – speaking to Telstra’s Smarter Business [smarterbusiness.telstra.com.au] team earlier this year on the subject of reporting to government on migrant and refugee issues, Violet’s comments were refreshingly candid:

“Governments of all colour are moving more and more to codify what not-for-profit organisations shouldn’t do. I think politicians have lost touch with how ordinary Australians are living – and what they’re feeling.

“When organisations are engaged with communities

they can add extraordinary value. So I think we’re obligated to give honest feedback to the government about the impact of policy.”

To that effect, Violet now sits on the NSW Government’s Justice Multicultural Advisory Council, the Federal Government’s Settlement Services Advisory Council and co-chairs the NSW Joint Partnership Working Group, which coordinates the NSW component of the additional intake of 12,000 refugees from Syria and Iraq.

Despite so many projects and responsibilities to juggle already, one would think that Violet’s full plate, her tally of achievements, accolades and commitments has only grown this year.

In 2017, she was named 2017 Telstra Australian Business Woman of the Year after winning the NSW and national for Purpose and Social Enterprise category, and she has also been awarded the UTS alumni award of excellence and the title of Community Fellow from Western Sydney University for outstanding service to the community. To boot, she’s also twice been named on Pro Bono Australia’s list of the 25 most influential people in the not-for-profit sector.

In October she will take to the world stage as the chair of the 2018 International Metropolis Conference – a global gathering that will bring together more than 750 Australian and international experts, key decision-makers and community organisations to discuss migration, diversity and integration.

But this one-woman whirlwind who seems to have given the business world a wake-up call, and taken the Australian NGO sector by storm in her stride, still shies away from being called a trailblazer.

“I don’t know if I am. I know that this year has been important in terms of thought leadership — so, yes, I know that sometimes I have a view on things that is different from what people expect, and they tend to say, ‘Where is she coming from? What is she talking about?’ at first. Then I get on the track and when it’s become a reality, they understand it.

“But to be honest, being a daughter of [Greek] immigrants, I’m not really that fond of taking risks. Some people say: ‘Oh, you’re amazing because I would be too scared to do the things that you’ve done.’ So yes, I feel that I have a certain level of courage, but it has a lot to do with knowing what I’m good at. I know my strengths. Yet I also recognise that what we do here is a collaboration, there’s absolutely no way we could have achieved what we have if not all together – it’s not just about me.”

Violet says she acquired this characteristic humbleness from her parents, from being taught at a young age to never become “too big for her boots”.



Photo courtesy of Violet Roumeliotis

“I think it [remaining humble] was probably embedded in me as a young girl at home with my parents. They were very active in the community and the message was always about giving to others and thinking about others and to be generous with your time,” she says.

“Then, when I was a young graduate and new in the industry, I also had wonderful people – in particular women, but men as well – in my life like mentors or coaches, and I would really ask them some silly questions sometimes. But they would always give me time and never made me feel like I was asking a stupid question. So that kind of support was really important. It helped me to develop, then I took more risks and became a bit more courageous.”

Years later — having ascended through the ranks and in a respected management and mentoring role herself — Violet is now in a position to influence perception, instigate change and champion diversity on her own terms, in the boardroom as much as in the community. It’s a duty she does not take lightly.

“It’s interesting that when I got the phone call from the judges saying I’m a finalist [in the Telstra Awards], my first thought was, ‘Wow, I have no chance, particularly in this environment’. It’s that typical gender stuff. But it was an amazing honour. I feel like I accepted that award for all the women who had helped me, and my colleagues, and all the good people around me who had given me opportunities over 35 years in the sector. Now it’s time to think about that legacy.

“For me, that means having established a network that supports leadership for women – not just professional women, but also women who have great leadership capacity even outside of the corporate world: women active in the school yard, helping the poor, or who are activists in their own communities. They need to be supported with media skills, public relations, understanding how government works. For them, having a strong, encouraging network where they are mentored on becoming more business-like and savvy in their lobbying and advocacy is really important.”

At this point, I ask Violet about her experience carving out a niche in the corporate arena as a woman, whether she feels that attention has been focused on her gender instead of just to her mind, ideas and the innovation it’s taken to break free from conventional moulds.

“I agree with you,” she responds. “Unfortunately, I’ve got some amazing stories of the way I’ve been treated because I’m a woman in my role. If I were a male I know I would be treated very differently.

“Looking at these [business] honours, for example, 75 per cent are always males, usually Anglo. So I think

one of the steps we need to take as a society is nominating more and more women in a lot of these awards. We need to take that initiative and I think ‘we can do this’. Because it’s a challenge.

“These awards have provided the opportunity, and the joy, for me to be an example, so younger women can say: ‘Well, maybe I can do what Violet’s done. I can get an award like that. I can be recognised for my skills – not because I’m a woman, but for what I’ve achieved’.”

That said, the fact Violet has been able to break into the “boys club” of CEO circles and crack the glass ceiling that limits the number of women in boardrooms speaks to the notion that – for all her modesty, warmth and nurturing disposition – she is undoubtedly a hard-nosed businesswoman with a fiery resolve and will of steel.

Later in our conversation it becomes clear that it’s this side of her that ultimately alerted the Telstra Awards judges to her brilliance and gave her a vital edge over the 45 finalists and 4,000 entrants in the running.

As Joe Pollard, group executive media and chief marketing officer at Telstra and part of the Business Women’s Awards panel of judges said after bestowing the accolade “Her [Violet’s] business acumen is amazing.”

Later, in a blog about Violet’s win, Pollard alerts my curiosity with her note that “Violet didn’t have a typical upbringing”. It’s an interesting statement, given the nation’s rich migrant history – so I ask Violet how her childhood may have been differed from that of any other Australian or child of migrants like me.

“That’s a great question,” she says. “I didn’t know what was in Joe’s head when she said that, and of course I don’t know what she might consider as typical. But if you ask, did I have a typical Western country, middle-class upbringing? – no, I didn’t.

“My sisters and me were latch-key kids. Mum and Dad worked in the shop, so we’d get ourselves to school and home. From primary school age we’d organised ourselves doing homework and housework, preparing meals and working in the family business. I know that when I went to school my Anglo friends were not expected to do those things. They were keen to do just what kids do. So in that context it was different.

“The other thing was that, like many children of my era, I was the family interpreter. When Dad had trouble in one of the shops that had a takeaway and used to be open till 2-3 am on a highway in western Sydney, with lots of young people coming in who had been drinking and got into fights, dad would ring the police if there was violence. The police never responded, because there was racism as well — so I’d have some Mondays getting in late to school because I’d be at the chamber magistrate’s with Dad to bring civil charges.

“The clincher to success was that I kept my eye on the vision and the purpose of the organisation, while making the most of the opportunities that came our way.”

“So I grew up with that kind of thick and thin. There was always a lot of love and it was a lot of fun sometimes as well, but it definitely fuelled that desire in me that everyone should have the right to live the life they want to live in peace. Whether they want to be a housewife, a dentist, a trainee – they should have those opportunities. It wasn’t a typical upbringing, but it certainly created a great resilience in me.”

In addition to sparking in her a desire to become a human rights defender and forger of opportunities for those less fortunate, Violet’s upbringing also helped cut her teeth in business – and accumulate a thick skin for the challenges and hardships of an often cutthroat corporate world. So these skills, along with a positive attitude and dogged determination, proved vital to Violet’s management of a period in her past which she describes as “very painful” — and it’s surprising to discover that, for all her triumphs, it is the experience of failure that has played a big part in her inspirational success.

“For me, I think that when I reflect on SSI’s growth, one of the big takeaways is that you learn something new every day and you learn a lot from your mistakes,” she says. “In fact, some of the best learnings I’ve had on the job are when I’ve had wonderful managers and leaders that – when I’ve stuffed things – have said to me: ‘Okay, what have you learnt from that and what have you acquired?’

“In particular, I had a hard learning when we first set up SSI 16 years ago. We applied for a tender – the Refugee Resettlement Program, our flagship program – and five years later when we had to re-tender we lost it. It was very painful for us, because we had to close. Seeing so many staff members – many of whom were refugees – out of work, and to lose something we had invested so much in, was very difficult.”

This hurdle was not enough to keep Violet down,

but she had to make some tough decisions along the way. “The board’s approach before was totally immersed in the day-to-day business, not on the bigger picture. They did not have a strategic view. They were thinking about running the program, and not about ‘What are we gonna do to ensure that we are sustainable?’

“At the time the SSI board members were mostly CEOs so they leaned towards very operational ways of thinking. The strategy was always around ensuring the program ran smoothly rather than looking outside of that, and ahead. That was our fatal error: we just didn’t see the policy shift in government which was privatisation, and completely splintering.

“The strip-it-all approach was very much needed.” This sentence is most revealing, because it encapsulates the essence of a tenacious business woman who has the foresight to assess what is required and the guts to push for change and take action where it’s needed, for the greater good.

Her efforts and intrepidity were not in vain. Five years later, SSI re-tendered for that same project they had lost, and won. A fresh board comprised of diverse thinkers and a lean, corporate-led structure focused on growth, collaboration and evolution meant the revolution had begun – with Violet leading the charge.

“My brief, when I went in as CEO in 2012, — when there was just that one program area, and just about 60 staff — was to diversify our funding base. The clincher to success was that I kept my eye on the vision and the purpose of the organisation, while making the most of the opportunities that came our way.

“I looked at what we were running, a refugee program, then said, ‘You know what? There’s another contract there doing the housing – we could do that!’ We tendered and were successful. Then we thought, ‘What other gaps are there? Well, there are projects for asylum seekers – what could we do there?’ And it just went on like that.”

Fast-forward to now, and this savvy businesswoman with a heart of gold has not only achieved her goals of expanding SSI’s horizons and creating a sustainable funding system that is going from strength to strength, she has also successfully challenged restrictive, inaccurate perceptions of migrants, women in business and how NFPs should act.

Yet anyone who speaks to Violet for more than a minute will know there’s bound to be more to come, as she rarely rests on her laurels – even at home, on a relaxed Saturday off and with 15 friends coming over for lunch.

As we move to wrap up our interview, I ask for her business motto. Violet’s response is as true-to-life and bare bones as they come: “I believe if you work hard, you get results.” 