



"WE DIDN'T WANT TO  
WAIT UNTIL WE WERE OLDER  
TO STAND UP FOR WHAT WE  
BELIEVE IN, SO WE DIDN'T."



# MELATI AND ISABEL WIJSEN

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## THE SISTERS WAVING BYE-BYE TO PLASTIC BAGS

Melati and Isabel grabbed their towels and sprinted from the house into the rice paddies. The path led them past fields of gleaming water and bright green shoots, then into the jungle. Birds called from the treetops and thickets of bamboo. Minutes later they emerged on to the beach. There was no one around. Dropping their things on the sand, the sisters dashed down to the water and threw themselves into the turquoise waves, whooping with joy. It was Saturday so they had all morning to play. Isabel rolled on to her back while Melati started to swim across the bay. But Melati's heart suddenly sank when she saw plastic bottles, bags

and bits of plastic floating in the water.

It was 2013. Twelve-year-old Melati Wijsen and her 10-year-old sister, Isabel, were in the bay near their home in Bali. The island is one of 17,508 that make up the country of Indonesia and is hugely popular with holidaymakers. Recently this tropical paradise had faced huge issues with plastic pollution. It was everywhere the girls went: piled on roadsides, blocking drains and clogging rivers which then carried it into the sea. It was strewn on the beach when they hung out with friends. Indonesia is the world's second biggest source of ocean plastic (after China). It is killing and endangering sea life and reaching people's dinner plates through the fish that eat it. The girls were upset and angry that their beautiful island home was being strangled by plastic.

The girls had always felt a deep connection to Bali's jungle, mountains and sea. When they were small, their dad sparked their love of nature. He taught them to dance in the rain and paint their faces with mud and told them Indonesian tales about people and nature. They looked up to their mum too; she taught them to work hard, be kind and do what they felt was right. The sisters were best friends, playing outside and building treehouses in the village, but developed

different interests. Melati was the quieter of the two and enjoyed reading and writing. Meanwhile, Isabel was more sociable with a passion for dancing, singing and acting. Both loved going to Bali's Green School, where the teaching had a strong focus on the environment.

It was their school that inspired the sisters to become youth activists. One morning they had a lesson about people who had changed the world, including Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr, and went home that day wondering what *they* could do to help their community. Then the answer struck them. Of course! They would try to solve the plastic pollution problem. They did some research and found that many countries had banned plastic bags, so why not Bali?

The girls recruited six of their friends and started a campaign to ban plastic bags from the island and persuade people to stop littering. They named it Bye Bye Plastic Bags. The first thing the team did was set up an online petition asking the Governor of Bali to support the ban. Within a day they had 6,000 signatures, increasing over the following months to 77,000. To boost numbers, they went to Bali airport, where they eventually persuaded the manager to allow them in to collect another 10,000 signatures.

Alongside the petition, the friends set up information

booths in local markets and organised beach clean-ups. Many other students started to join in, and the team – who called themselves the Bye Bye Plastic Bags Crew – decided to work with a nearby village, Desa Pererenan, to show what a plastic-bag-free Bali might look like. They talked to shopkeepers about the hazards of plastic waste and gave them weekly deliveries of bags made out of cotton to hand out instead of plastic ones. They also created an education booklet about plastic pollution for the primary school.

After a year, the petition had nearly 90,000 signatures and Desa Pererenan village had reduced its plastic bag usage by over 60 per cent. However, Bali's Governor still had not responded to the sisters' request for a ban. In autumn 2014, on a trip to India, they visited the National Gandhi Museum, where they learned about how he reached his goal for change in society by starting a hunger strike. Melati and Isabel wondered whether they might stage their own version of this action. They decided to fast between sunrise and sunset to get publicity for their request. News of their protest spread quickly and the next day the Governor sent a car to collect the girls from school. After meeting them, he signed an agreement to work towards a plastic-bag-free Bali.

The success of their petition had demonstrated that the people of Bali supported their campaign. Now the sisters wanted to involve businesses too, so they launched the 'One Island One Voice' campaign. This invited shops, hotels and restaurants to publicly commit to reducing their own plastic use, and to display the campaign sticker in their window. In June 2015, Bali's government announced that plastic bags would be banned by 2018, and that July, Bali airport banned them too.

The girls loved bringing together young people and seeing them take action and make decisions for themselves, but they also enjoyed taking the lead. This meant being the ones to talk to government staff – something they found difficult at first – and sometimes the sisters missed lessons to attend meetings about changing the laws in Bali relating to plastic bag use. For this, they started working with an environmental lawyer, Sarah Waddell. Their school supported them by allowing them time away, as long as they kept up with their studies.

From early on, the girls had found the most important skill was communicating well. They were regularly asked to speak at schools and community events, but in September 2015 they were given the chance to bring

their message to a much bigger audience when they were invited to give a TED talk in London about their campaign. They were excited and rehearsed many times, both together and alone in front of the mirror. The talk was a huge success.

On returning from London, they were contacted by young people from all over the world who had watched their talk and wanted to start their own Bye Bye Plastic Bags campaign. In Bali, their own crew had grown to over 30 young volunteers from across Bali. Based on their experiences, the team created a starter kit for other BBPB groups to use. The youth campaign had gone global.

In February 2017, the Bali crew organised the island's biggest ever beach clean-up, which attracted 12,000 people across 55 locations on the island and collected 43 tonnes of waste. Meanwhile, around their school lessons, the girls were still pushing the Government to meet their commitment of banning plastic bags by the end of the year, which they were frustrated to realise was now unlikely to happen. With the support of their lawyer, they demonstrated that the Bali Government had the legal powers to charge for plastic bag use, although the Government argued that they needed the Indonesian Government to change the law first.

The Bali Government failed to ban plastic bags by the 2018 target. In fact, in January 2018 the pollution problem was so bad that the island declared a 'Garbage Emergency' on its most popular tourist beaches. Here sunbathers lay on golden sand strewn with food packaging and bags, while surfers bobbing behind the waves dodged waste flushed out from rivers or brought in by swirling currents. That month, officials employed 700 cleaners with 35 trucks to remove up to 100 tonnes of debris each day to a nearby landfill site.

The girls were deeply disappointed, but continued campaigning and started new green initiatives, including a project teaching school groups to make river booms – special nets that trap plastic in a river and stop it washing out to sea. Finally, in December 2018, the Bali Government announced that single-use plastics – including straws, bags, cups, bottles and cup lids – would be banned from the island from July 2019. After six years of campaigning, Melati and Isabel were thrilled to finally have the result they had been working so hard for, and today these plastic items cannot be used in Bali.

The sisters have won many awards, including TIME magazine's 2019 Teens of the Year and Forbes Magazine's Most Inspiring Women. Their TED



talk has been watched over 1.5 million times online, and they have spoken at schools and events all over the world, and have even addressed world leaders. Today, Bye Bye Plastic Bags is a global youth-led movement, with 45 teams from Mexico to Japan, and Nigeria to the UK.

The sisters have also begun to look for other ways to support their community. When they were campaigning against plastic bags, they were often asked what people could use instead. Melati had an idea for how to answer that question while helping women on the island learn new skills and earn money. After getting some donated sewing machines, she set up the Mountain Mamas project in a hill village near her home. Here women learn to sew bags using fabric recycled from old clothing, sheets and towels, and make paper carrier bags from newspapers and magazines. The women are paid for each bag they make, and the bags are sold through retailers all over Bali, with half the profits from each one going back into the village to pay for health and education projects.

Melati, now 18, became a full-time activist after graduating from high school a year early. Meanwhile 16-year-old Isabel is working hard to finish her studies and, while still committed to her activism, she also

dreams of a future in dance and performance.

Melati and Isabel have achieved their goal to protect their island from plastic, but now they have an even bigger mission: empowering young people to become change-makers through a new project called Youthtopia. They think young people should start working *now* for the world they want to be part of. As they put it: young people may only be 25 per cent of the population, but they are 100 per cent of the future. These change-making sisters are living proof that you're never too young to take a stand – and make a difference.