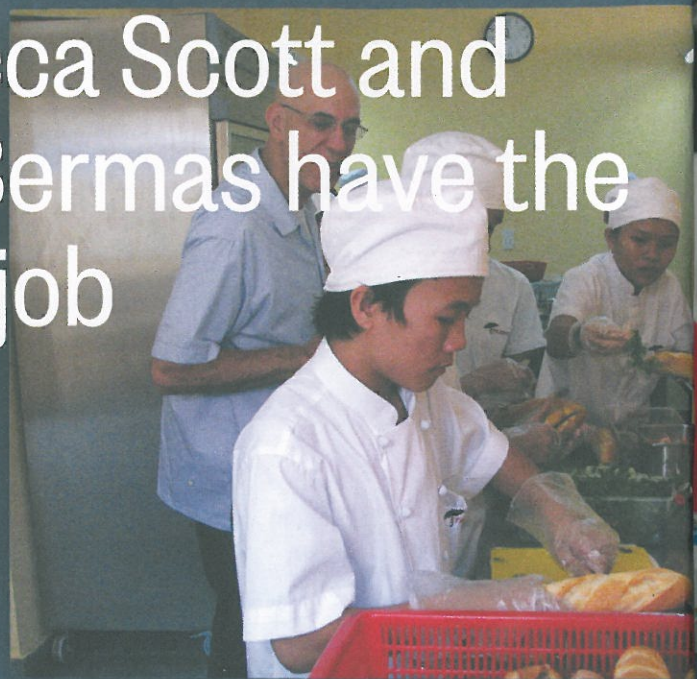


SECTION: SHORT INTERVIEWS
WORDS: MYKE BARTLETT
PICTURES: NEAL BERMAS (THIS PAGE),
LEAH ROBERTSON (OPPOSITE)
WHAT: STREETS INTERNATIONAL (THIS
PAGE) AND STREAT (OPPOSITE)

Rebecca Scott and Neal Bermas have the same job



Rebecca Scott and Neal Bermas share the same job, but they've never met. Once, what they do would have been called charity, but both prefer the term "social enterprise", a model in which businesses seek to improve lives by making money instead of giving it away. In different corners of the planet, both have looked to the food industry to help homeless youths off the streets and into careers, through programs designed to instil world-class culinary skills. Most importantly, perhaps, both Scott and Bermas are blessed with the curious gene that drives some to help, where most would look away.

For the most part, New Yorker Bermas speaks quietly, at the sort of volume reserved for people who truly know what they're talking about. Where some men would have mid-life crises and buy a convertible, Bermas instead found himself in Vietnam, setting up Streets International, a Hoi An restaurant that trains street kids to produce high-end fare. Two years on, Streets is a great success, with more than 150 applicants competing for 15 to 20 places in its training program.

MB—How exactly does a New York academic end up running a hospitality school for street kids in Hoi An?

NB—A touch of insanity helps, for a start. I came to Vietnam for the first time, as a tourist, over 10 years ago. The very first night I landed in Saigon, I went for a walk, and came across a small group of street kids, little girls and boys. It's not like we don't have poverty in the US, but I'd never really been up close with street kids. Here were these kids—eight or ten years old, with these beautifully dark eyes, begging for money to buy milk. There was something compelling, almost romantic about it.

That first night didn't haunt me, but it certainly brought me to the place where I wanted to do Streets.

—Certainly, the poverty of places like Vietnam can be confronting. I think a weird thing happens when you're travelling which is, really, you're expected to desensitise yourself. In a strange way, it seems caring marks you as being naïve. It seems to me that you've resisted that.

—Somebody wrote that the only travel worth doing is the travel that changes you. I've always felt that's really important. If part of the local scene is poor and uncomfortable, then one shouldn't shy away from that, one should experience that, even if it's difficult, or painful.

—So what happened between meeting these street kids and returning to set up Streets?

—Well, it's not like I invented the idea of a street kid restaurant. I visited others all over the world, but I was always a little disturbed that they were merely teaching street kids to do the more menial, entry-level jobs. You know, they could wash dishes or peel

vegetables. The idea seemed to be that 'you're a kid from a really horrible background, so if you could just do this, that's probably enough'. That always bothered me because, for one thing, those jobs don't take you very far out of poverty, anywhere in the world.

Why couldn't you take these kids with the most difficult, most dire backgrounds, but still train them to international standards?

—How do you identify students that you can help?

—We're talking about people who, at 18 years old, have already been so beaten down by life that there's not much left. They've probably been abused, or have never had enough nutrition. I have to at least see that there's some little twinkle in the eye, something that gives me the confidence we'll be able to hook into a little glimmer of hope that still exists inside them.

—Do you find it hard to recognise that there are street kids that you can't help?

—It's the only job of the entire thing that I'd like to give to somebody else. It's a very painful, difficult experience. During the course of the interviews, we all leave the room from time to time with tears in our eyes. We know, if these kids don't get into Streets, there's nothing else for them to do. That's not a seat anyone wants to sit in, to make those kind of judgement calls.

—I can see how that would wear at you. You've also spent the last couple of years moving between New York and Vietnam. I can imagine it would put a strain on, say, family relationships.

—Oh, sure. My father, who lives in the States, still says, "well, why can't you do it here?"

—It's an interesting question. Given the homeless problems in the States, why go all the way to Vietnam?

—I grew up at the tail end of what they call here the American War. That war somehow registered with me. It wasn't part of history, it was part of my life. So when I came here, I felt I had some commitment to do something good. But, really, why do you fall in love with one woman or man and not another? We live in a world of McDonalds and Barnes and Nobles, where most major cities start to look the same. In Vietnam, I found authenticity. It pulled at my heart.



To many, Rebecca Scott might seem a strange sort of capitalist. Rather than chasing success in the financial sector, she's spent much of the last decade working with the most vulnerable in communities at home and abroad. Yet, when we talk about STREAT—a training program that sees homeless youth front mobile cafes on busy Melbourne pavements—she talks passionately about social enterprise unlocking the power in the customer's dollar. There's no reason to wait for the government to do something, she says. When your dollar is your vote, the simple act of buying a meal can be a blow for social change.

MB—I find it interesting, this idea that your cafés are based on Melbourne streets, run by people who, potentially, live on the streets. Was it important to you to have that sense of proximity?

RS—I'm really interested in the politics of street space. We don't have a strong street food culture here, but streets are often far more accessible and inclusive of everyone in the community. There's the not the same kind of expectations or mindset as when you're sitting in a high-end restaurant. The other thing for me was thinking about what happens when you don't have walls. I often go down to the cart, and I can see the power of that direct interaction between customers and our young people. Everyone is equal.

—I suppose there is something incongruous about taking kids off the street and putting them straight into a posh restaurant.

—I think what you're doing there is you're putting these young people through a big jump, going from very precarious living arrangements into these fine dining environments. Most social enterprise projects we see are high end, but our trainees are getting experience, without the added pressure of having to serve up a \$50 meal. We've had young people move on into high-end restaurants, but I doubt they could have jumped that span, struggling with the issues they have, without STREAT being a bridge.

—In looking at other social enterprise projects, what did you feel they were doing right or wrong?

—One thing I saw was that, virtually no one has reached the financial sustainability they're striving for, which is understandable. The local café you're competing with doesn't have to employ psychologists, youth workers and social workers to deal with its staff. In one sense, that makes us highly unprofitable, because

we're working in such a low margin industry and we're bringing in all these extra costs. The reality is that our trainees have come from the most disadvantaged situations. What we offer is six months of customised case management, working with someone to overcome their issues.

—Despite that, there must be trainees that you can't help.

—The hardest thing for us is when you have a young person spiralling out of control, when they're a danger to themselves or to others in the program. That's distressing for everyone, but we have to have lines you can't cross. You know for some of them, they've reached the end of the line. The things they're doing are the direct result of the trauma and the disadvantage that brought them to us, but there are times when we have to say, we can't have you here. When you have to tell a 16 year old they're being dismissed and you know there's absolutely nowhere else for them to go, that's the hardest thing.

—When you're dealing with that level of disadvantage, when your students are sometimes suddenly left homeless again, how do you avoid taking on too much responsibility?

—If we have a trainee who will be homeless tonight, the reality is, if we ring up a welfare agency and try to get them a bed, they've got more chance of not getting one. We know how broken the system is. I find it really tricky to know that, when we all go home at night, we have an office with great facilities sitting empty and we potentially have a young person homeless. That throws up a whole range of moral challenges to me that I'll probably never get over.

You can't meet every need of our trainees. It's always the weakest link in the chain that keeps you up at night. I love the idea that, in a few years time, we might have a whole network of social enterprises to plug the cracks in the system. But the reality is, right now, there are some very big holes.

—You've talked about how hard it is to realise you can't always help. What fuels that urge to try help in the first place?

—I think it's two things. One is creativity, thinking how we can find ways to solve apparently intractable social problems. The other, equal part is anger. I'm really, really angry about the fact that we're letting so many young people down. I'm fuelled by saying it's got to stop and, until all of us roll up our sleeves, it won't stop.