





“WE  
REALLY  
ZEROED  
IN  
ON  
THEM.”

MEHRDAD BAGHAI

PHOTOGRAPHY JULIAN WOLKENSTEIN



*Mehrdad Baghai is a very smart guy. That much is obvious even after a quick meeting or the briefest of glances at what he's done in his life. That's important, but what we think is more important is that he has an imagination big enough to see a different kind of world, one in which all people respect one another and live as equals. He also has the drive to make it a reality. His current project, which is in many ways his life's work, is the High Resolves Initiative. Mehrdad and his wife Roya founded High Resolves together in an attempt to 'inoculate' the world's children from prejudice and conflict. The programme has been an amazing success and there's far more demand for it than they can deliver. They're rolling it out as fast as they're able. Here's their story...*

*Df* Is High Resolves the first project you've done together as a couple?

*Mehrdad* I think so. We support each other's things, but High Resolves is the first big thing. We're still funding it, and when you make the decision to do something like that, it really has to represent your family.

*Df* How did it all begin?

*Mehrdad* Well, if you want to know where it really starts from you have to go back. High Resolves is about teaching global citizenship - teaching's even the wrong word - it's about creating opportunities for students to learn about global citizenship. So first let me go half-way back and then I can go even further back if you want me to.

*Df* Go as far back as you need to.

*Mehrdad* I was at Harvard Law School and the work I did there and at the Kennedy School [of Government] was all around conflict resolution and negotiation. There was a professor at the Kennedy School at the time named Tom Schelling who a few years ago won the Nobel Prize for Economics. He's a brilliant guy whose work was all around the strategy of conflict. He wrote a great book which influenced me a massive amount called *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. This was before Chaos Theory and all that. It was all around how small changes in incentives can create vastly different outcomes. He used it to talk about traffic jams, and why hockey players don't wear helmets, and why people don't sit in the first few rows of an auditorium. If you use the principles and frameworks he laid out, you can actually think about society and why certain things happen certain ways, and

*what, if you want to create a  
different world, do you need to do that.*

If you can change things at the micro levels of individuals then you can actually get very different macro behaviour for society. So I thought a lot about that stuff and met a guy who's now a professor at [the University of] Michigan, Ted Parson. Ted and I decided that for our work we would research this. The way people had generally researched it was using computer simulation models, but we thought that by doing that you're actually taking the human element completely out... Wouldn't it be much more interesting to do this, not with computers, but with people? We said, let's do a simulation and see how people behave. This was in 1988...

*Df* Just the other day.

*Mehrdad* I know, it's amazing... Back then global warming was not an issue everyone was thinking about, but we decided that it was the perfect problem and wrote a game about global warming. The game's participants were all nominated as ambassadors of different countries who had committed to reduce their [carbon] emissions over 15 years, which of course no one wants to do because they want other countries to do it instead. We played this game over and over again with Harvard undergraduates, with Harvard Law School, with the Business School, with the Kennedy School... and the results

# \*The Games We Play

Here's a taste of what the students get up to with High Resolves. At the end of each of the four modules, they are asked to write a postcard to themselves (posted a month or so later) to remind them of what they've learned that day.

## Collective Identity:

The core ideas of this module are the biological unity of the human race and independent investigation of the truth.

Students play a game where they each wear a photo of someone from a different culture and are given clues about who their ancestors and descendants are. They then have to self-organise into different parts of the human tree. This shows them how few degrees of human separation there are and that the biggest conflicts are in very small, common parts of the tree. Then you ask, if we're that close as a family tree, why is there so much conflict? They do an exercise where they are shown how propaganda was used to create divisions during WWII. They get to try to apply that by finding current examples where similar messages are used. They make videos about how hate or division is used through speech. It builds up their antenna for propaganda, their ability to recognise it and then ask questions whenever they come across it.

## Justice:

Notions of justice are played out with cupcakes in a game called 'Cut and Choose' by pairs of students. Initially one person cuts and chooses and then

one cuts and the other chooses. Next they do a series of scenarios in small groups where they have to decide how to share \$100 between A and B. They start out with easy decisions which get harder, like what if A is a 16 year-old runaway in Sydney and B is a woman in Asia with eight kids. When it gets more complicated they have to look for guiding principles. For lunch they have a 'Hunger Banquet' designed by Oxfam. A randomly chosen 55% of them sit on the ground with a bowl of rice, 30% sit on a bench with rice and beans and a spoon, and 15% get lasagna, chocolate cake and salad and juice. Some will say, "Ok that was interesting now where's my lunch?" "No, that is your lunch, that's all that 85% of the world get every day and that's all they get for the whole day." What they also realise, apart from the unfairness, is that every one of them in real life is in that top group.

## Conflict Resolution:

This module is about helping them learn the skills that are really critical in conflict resolution; humility and integrative thinking. Humility is about realising you're not always right, an important one for all of us to learn. Integrative thinking is about reconciling differing perspectives. The first set of exercises are designed to show them that their brain is flawed and not to trust it. They watch a video of two teams passing basketballs and are asked to count the number of passes. During the video a person

in a black gorilla suit walks through the game. At the end, when asked if they saw anything strange, only a few will have seen the gorilla because of the way our brains work to limit perception when focussed on a task. Then they're told the tale of the blind men who come upon an elephant in the jungle. One swears it's a long tube thing, another swears it's a tree trunk and so on. To get the whole picture they have to share perspectives and collaborate. They do an exercise in groups where they each get a photo of a part of something like a typewriter and then collectively have to work out what the whole is. Next they take a quizz individually and as a group. Can you do better as a group than individually?

## Collective Action:

This module is about how you put all the skills learned above together and mobilise a group of people. There are two games. The first is called 'Looking out for number one' and the other is the 'Global Warming Game' in which they sit around as ambassadors and role play 15 years of emission reduction. In each round of negotiations each country must indicate the number of emission units by which it will reduce its output that year. Their performance as ambassadors is evaluated using a score sheet. The more a country refuses to reduce its emissions, the better its score, but the higher the global total reduction becomes, the better its score.



*Roya Baghai is not only the co-founder of High Resolves; she has two degrees in architecture, is a mum, and has a very special design business called 'Roya Design.' [www.royadesign.com.au](http://www.royadesign.com.au)*



were very, very interesting. We got a real sense of the conditions under which cooperation emerges in groups. Two other people who were very influential in our lives at that point were Professor Abe Chayes at the Law School who's passed on, but was a famous human rights lawyer who argued in the World Court and his wife, Toni Chayes. She was at the Kennedy School at the time and was a former Under Secretary of the Air Force under Jimmy Carter - an amazing pioneer for women. What they cared about was conflict and how to deal with it. They liked the stuff we were doing and said, 'There's a Law School course on dispute settlement which is an entire semester long, why don't we take this semester and play the game?' So Ted and I cooked up a more complicated version and played it for an entire semester. It was like Dungeons & Dragons - people were playing it 40 hours a week with each other. It got some attention and we were asked to train diplomats who were going to Rio for the Earth Summit [in 1992]. People started to get excited about it how it was helping them think about the dynamics of the problem. Now 20 years later it's interesting because we've recently seen a lot of the same themes played out in Bali [during the United Nations Climate Conference in December 2007]. What we saw was that adults didn't really seem to be aware of the dynamics of collective action. Even diplomats who were negotiators were approaching the problem without a great deal of familiarity or sophistication, but playing the game was interesting for them. We wondered whether we could do this with younger people and whether it would make a difference. I took it to a public school in Canada, a private school, a Catholic school and to Switzerland and Bulgaria - lots of different places. One of the things that became clear was that

*it was much more powerful  
with kids than it was with adults.*

Adults would play the game and have an intellectual response like, 'Oh, this is interesting, I understand this problem a little bit better...' Whereas, and it may be to do with the way the brain wires itself, with children

*you could see a transformative  
effect in the way they thought about things.*

The game got packaged up and ended up being incorporated into the curriculum in Ontario and 120 schools in Canada started using the it - I lived in Toronto at the time. I thought, there's got to be other games to write. I had a couple of university interns who wanted to help and we came up with a tonne of interesting stuff. Then I got an offer to work for McKinsey [& Company, management consultants] which I postponed for nine months until they kinda said, you either show up or give us the signing bonus back. So basically all the games went into a box, or several boxes, and went from garage to garage for the next 18 years.

*Df* Was that consulting life all-consuming?

*Mehrdad* It was and you lose yourself to it. It's wonderful, I don't want to criticise it, it was a great learning experience and everything else, but there wasn't time for some of these other things. Roya and I got married in '94 and we talked about the games but I was still at McKinsey. We moved to Australia in '98 and I left McKinsey in 2000. We did a few other things, I ran a company in Los Angeles for a few years and then did a few years at the CSIRO (Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) as a public service thing. The turning point came when I was asked to be a Fellow at the Aspen Institute. They've got this really interesting programme called the Crown Fellowship. They pick about 20 people who are about 40 years-old from around the world and bring them together three times in Aspen. You're





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away for a week each time. It's interesting because the people there are people who've had some success in their lives, but you're not talking about your success, you're talking about what you want to do next. One of the commitments you make to the programme is to have a project.

*Df* That you're already working on, or that you'll come out of the programme with?

*Mehrdad* You begin thinking about it in the first year. The idea is that the projects are ways of giving back to the community that are significant and can gather their own weight and momentum so that they're not dependent on you all the time. The exercise is to try to create something that survives and endures. Roya and I had lots of chats about what that project should be and we remembered the boxes in the garage... Also, I think at the time we were looking at the world and

*questioning the obsession with various Hollywood incarnations of the same character over and over,*

and why this generation doesn't seem to connect as much on these issues... We basically went to Kerrie Murphy, the Principal of International Grammar School (IGS) in Sydney, which is where our son goes, and we volunteered. We said, 'Look this isn't going to be a big deal but if you want, we're happy to work with some of your high school students, run some sessions, and see what happens... These games are 20 years old, there's no guarantee they're going to work any more.' She said there was a natural break in Year 10 in November when they've finished their courses and we could take them for that week. So we had the Year 10 class and played all kinds of games with them for a week (*see page 54 \*The Games We Play*). We were exploring, it was a pilot, and there were some things that just didn't work, but there was a handful of kids in that class who were really connecting. I hadn't been in front of kids for a long time. I have to say too, when you give speeches in the corporate world or walk into a CEO's office, because you've written a couple of books or you've been a partner at McKinsey, you've got some credibility, but

*you've got no credibility, absolutely none, when you walk in front of a Year 10 class.*

In fact to them you must not be doing anything important if you can just pop in and hang out with them for a week! It was really humbling but incredibly good. It's interesting, we've got one CEO who's been through the programme and has volunteered to help with the high school students because as a CEO you don't have many situations where people don't automatically follow you.

*Df* How did it go overall?

*Mehrdad* It was much more of a success than a failure. We had a consultation with the Principal and others at the school and said, 'Why don't we extend the programme, but instead of doing one intense week with Year 10, let's spread it out a bit and see how low and high we can go in terms of year groups?' What became clear to us in the second year was that Years 5 and 6 were too young, Year 7 seemed a bit distracted and Year 11 are too focussed on their HSC (Higher School Certificate). Our sweet spot is Years 8, 9 and 10, so we really zeroed in on them. I was also asked to give a talk at a conference of Vice Principals and describe our experiment. It was supposed to be a 45 minute session, but it ended up being almost two hours of discussion. There were 13 Vice Principals who wanted to take it to their schools. It made us realise there was real demand for something like this. There doesn't seem to be anything much that fits into the whole values-based education part of the curriculum and schools seem to be searching for something...

*Df* That isn't religion-based?

*Mehrdad* Exactly. Out of the 13 we selected six quite different schools. IGS was the easiest place to start. I'd say 80-90% of the kids in that school are from multi-cultural families so it was a good place for us to put our toes in the water and not feel completely rejected. This year we've got 11 schools and that means a whole bunch of other situations and things you've got to deal with. We learnt about scaling the programme up. It became clear that it was really important to have small group discussions and that dealing with hundreds of students in small groups was impossible with just me, John Bush, who's our programme director, and Roya... plus I've got a business to run. So what we did was... Well the universe sent us Dany Celermajer, a professor at Sydney University who runs the Global Studies programme which was offered for the first time last year. We met with the 70 students who'd signed up for Global Studies and 45 of them decided to become fellows of High Resolves and help facilitate the programme. That helped us scale up a little more. Then we connected with the International Studies programme at Sydney Uni which is led by Professor Lynn Carson. She offered up interns so we got another 10 from her group. Now the Peace and Conflict Studies programme is also offering up students... We basically started having a real foot at Sydney University and that made a big difference. We're talking to Melbourne University about going to Melbourne in 2009 and Glyn Davis who's the Vice Chancellor there and his team are interested. So that's basically been the journey and it now feels much more like a real organisation moving towards an NGO... One of our board members, Stephen Menzies, has generously helped us apply for, and we have been granted, charitable tax status. If it's going to grow there's a limit to how much we can fund it ourselves.

*Df* Do you charge schools to carry out the programme?

*Mehrdad* No, you can't. If you look at the way the rules of procurement [for schools] are set up they're designed not to allow them to do these sorts of things.

*Df* I'd love to hear more about the programme itself.

*Mehrdad* Our motto is 'Our world, our choice', and it leads to this idea of High Resolves.

*'High' in the sense  
of global ambition, and 'Resolve' meaning you  
actually choose to make a difference.*

We've approached it through three critical questions. First of all, what's my role as a global citizen? Then the one that grabs most people's attention is this thing about,

*in 50-100 years, will my actions and choices  
be on the right side of history?*

We talk about how 100 years ago we condoned racial inequality, and how women weren't able to vote, and that there were pioneers who thought, that's not okay. Now 100 years later we don't understand how people thought slavery or women not being equal was acceptable. So then we ask the students, what are the things we're doing today that people in 50-100 years are going to think, 'Those people were crazy!' That takes you into all kinds of interesting areas because you're starting to push the boundaries of our collective prejudice, the things that are holding society back from evolving. For example if you



take this idea of religious supremacy, of believing that your particular beliefs are right and others are wrong... Are we going to feel the same way about that in 100 years as we do about racism today? So that's an interesting question. At High Resolves we don't necessarily take a point of view because who knows,

*what we're  
trying to do is get students to think about it.*

*Df* And sow those seeds.

*Mehrdad* ... of independent investigation of the truth. Then we go further to ask, how do you make a difference? This isn't about having just an intellectual exercise. There are four modules; Collective Identity, Justice, Conflict Resolution and Collective Action, and then there's a leadership programme. Students who have gone through modules three and four become what we call the High Resolves Leaders' Group. They continue to meet every month and become the club within the school that continues organising stuff. We're trying to teach them how to build community projects. They have lunch discussions typically about a couple of great paragraphs. It could be a piece by Martin Luther King like Birmingham City Jail or Aung San Suu Kyi, or even Aristotle, or sometimes we'll take a clip from YouTube. There's one called 'Stop the clash' [visit [www.youtube.com/dumbofeather](http://www.youtube.com/dumbofeather) to view], which talks about the clash of civilisations with Islam versus the West. They watch it and then we ask, where does this term come from? They don't know that it comes from a Foreign Affairs article by Samuel Huntington, so we give them a copy of that article with a few paragraphs highlighted and we talk about them. It's a way of engaging them in a discourse with a degree of depth. It's voluntary too, they're giving up their lunch hour to go. Last year, we did a Leaders' Summit for the first time but it will become a regular thing. We got over 100 of them together at Sydney University and brought in Tom Schelling. It was remarkable for them to have a Nobel Prize winner talking with them in small groups about nuclear proliferation... We then had panel discussions and as a group they had to decide for example, if they were going to make a recommendation on Health and Education, what would they advise the world's leaders to do. They had to come up with three recommendations which UNICEF actually put to the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) leaders because the 2007 APEC Forum was happening at the same time.

*Df* Are there any similar programmes anywhere else that you know of?

*Mehrdad* We've been trying to connect with other programmes around the world that are interesting and learn from them. For example, we based the whole idea of capacity building around the work of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. There's a programme in the US run by Dr. John Woodall who is an old friend of mine, called the Unity Project. He works in schools in New York and now in New Orleans and other places. One of the things he thought was really, really critical is, rather than just getting them excited about global warming and stuff, to get them to change something in their school. This year we're going to test out this idea that the High Resolves Leaders' Group will hold a forum where students from the school can say, 'Okay if there was one thing I could change about my school it would be...' Then as a group, pick and say, 'Okay we're going to change these five things' and have plans and make them happen. One of the biggest challenges with this generation is that

*they've checked out because the  
problems just seem so big*

so this is about empowering them to make change happen  
by starting with something small that's doable.

*Df* Do most kids get it despite generally having 'checked out'?

*Mehrdad* There was a moment when we were quite dejected because there were some kids we just couldn't reach but there was a teacher at IGS who said, 'Look Mehrdad, I hate to tell you but there's 10% who're going to be great and do wonderful things even if High Resolves never existed and there's 10% that no matter what you do you're not going to reach. The question is, can you get 40 of the last 80, because

*if you can, then you have  
half the world.'*

It's such an interesting way of putting it and it always stuck with me... the tipping point.

*Df* Even if you don't reach them now, at some point in their lives it may come back to them. They might be in a situation and think, 'you know what, that's like that game I played in Year 10' and react differently than they may have done otherwise.

*Mehrdad* I couldn't agree more. That's one of the reasons why we try to link it to current affairs. Every day in the newspapers there's something on global warming so any of the students who've done that simulation will have a completely different outlook on the challenges that the leaders face in terms of getting cooperation.

*It's so easy to say,  
'Why can't they all agree on that?', but once  
you've been in that situation*

where you've lived the difficulty of getting collective action, like they have in the programme, then I think they will have a completely different perception of why that is.

*Df* And then they can talk about it over the dinner table. That's exciting.

*Mehrdad* One of the best compliments we ever got was when someone said, 'Can you come and do this at my birthday party?' We'd said our standard was that we wanted this to be so compelling that people would rather do it than hear about the Paris Hilton thing or the latest video game or whatever.

*Df* Have you had any negative feedback, from parents or...?

*Mehrdad* That's a good question. If there has been any, it would be more likely to go to the principal than us. We know that at a camp [that we ran the programme at], which parents have to pay for their kids to attend, there was one child and parent who complained about the child only having rice for lunch (*see page 60 \*Stan's Cafe serves rice*). The organiser replied, 'I thought it was a very valuable learning opportunity for your child.' I think it was the same child who had refused to clean up after themselves and said, 'I don't have to do this at home why should I here?'

*Df* One in that impossible-to-get 10%?

*Mehrdad* Who knows? Maybe the seed was sown. No one is incorrigible. We do get a lot of feedback about how to make things better and we embrace that. We are creating a learning community of like-minded collaborators. We get more feedback from the students than anyone else and the programme is constantly evolving. There's very little pride of authorship; it's more about creating the conditions for this sort of thing to happen.

*Df* Was there something in your own childhood that planted the seeds for you to do High Resolves?

*Mehrdad* You know if you go way back to why I got passionate about doing something like this... There's the life story of how I did

this work at university and how it all ended up in the garage and all that, but if you go way back to what triggered it... I grew up in Iran and I was nine when we left, four years before the revolution. The treatment of Bahá'ís was getting worse and worse at that time and the injustice of that was not beyond a nine year-old. I remember that my older sister was attacked and so was my mum. There were ugly stories. You reflect back and you're like,

*what is it that  
allows a population to get so hateful of a minority  
which is essentially peaceful and non-violent?*

The Bahá'í Faith's whole purpose is for unity and peace actually (*see page 64 \*Technicolour Faith*). You could almost say that in that [Iranian] society some children were not inoculated against prejudice and hatred. Maybe there is a desire deep down in me to say, look... Having been schooled in the West and having studied Justice and Law, you think about democracy and the societies we're trying to create. Well those democracies and societies won't flourish unless there's a sense of civic awareness, responsibility, and unless the children are taught to be, or grow up to be, respectful of what they have and to participate in it. In more and more parts of the world that's actually in danger.

*Df* We take democracy for granted I think. There's very little conscious thought of what it actually means or what it demands from all of us in terms of citizenship so when it starts being eroded, we don't realise it until perhaps it's too late.

*Mehrdad* Yes. Also, Roya is of mixed parentage; her father's Iranian and her mother's English. She grew up in England and lived in a town and then a small village and then moved to Australia when she was 12. One of the things she's always been passionate about is that as a global society we have to accept and embrace difference rather than just tolerate it. To us tolerance is a horrible word. She felt different in many ways growing up, whether because she was from England when she came to Australia, or because her father was Iranian, or because she was a Bahá'í, or because she was a woman in the very male-dominated field of architecture... Because many children in many areas of Sydney, or anywhere in the world, grow up in a homogeneous environment, they don't get the chance to mix with people who are different and that's what breeds prejudice. If there's a way to get kids to think about that and not just in a purely theoretical way, but

*to experience the beauty of  
collaboration and difference, that's really inspiring*

(*see page 66 \*Pen Plan*). I think these things are deep in us and we don't realise the way they manifest in the life choices you make, and the way the circles of life connect. Stuff from 20 or 30 years ago, things and themes in your life come back and reconnect.

*Df* In both your cases, those past experiences have played out in a very positive way. You've taken what were essentially pretty negative or tough childhood experiences and created something very positive out of them, but for so many that's not the case... instead negative experiences breed negative outcomes. That downward spiral of hatred breeding hatred can be so strong.

*Mehrdad* I think that's true in the lives of all the students in the programme in different ways - we have to stop the blind imitation of the past. That is our individual and collective challenge. 🍌



