Sailing for STEMM

Mother Nature needs her daughters and women from around the world are answering the call.

Words by Samantha Alleman
If you want something done, ask a woman—famously said by Britain’s first female prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. And when it comes to tackling climate change, something needs to be done, and soon. That’s why leadership expert Fabian Dattner started Homeward Bound, a leadership initiative supporting women in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine—sometimes the latter is excluded and the acronym referred to as STEM). The program aims to help increase the influence participants have on the vital decisions that shape our planet. “Our planet is in strife, and the voice of women in STEMM might just tip the balance for our children,” says Fabian. “It is in all our interests that women with a STEMM background are influencing decisions globally for the greater good. Women leading may be the most significant investment in sustainability we can make.”

“‘What is needed is action, not words,’” she says. “Acknowledging the dearth of women in leadership is one thing; doing something about it is another. The need for traits such as strength, perseverance, adaptability, determination and empathy (often ascribed to women leaders) are starting to be recognised.”

With the slogan ‘Mother Nature needs her daughters’, Homeward Bound attracts women from across the globe (its headquarters is based in Melbourne). Participants take part in a year-long program of collaborative learning which culminates in a three-week long voyage to Antarctica. Since its launch in 2016, three cohorts have completed the program, with HB4 starting this year. Dr Tina Schroeder, a Senior Research Officer at The University of Queensland, was part of Homeward Bound’s first cohort. “The program taught me a lot about the kind of manager, leader and scientist I want to be,” says Tina. It also connected her to other women in STEMM who, while having unique experiences, also face similar challenges. “I think most of the issues arise from being in a male-dominated field, and with that comes a bit of a lack of understanding of the flexibility that’s needed for women to progress after returning to work after having children,” she says.

Despite completing the program several years ago, Tina has stayed in touch with her shipmates and has also since connected with women from other cohorts. “I have tapped into many contacts over the last few years,
asking for advice or guidance, and I’ve been emailed by others participant for advice as well,” says Tina. “We have meet ups, and every time I travel I reach out to Homeward Bound women all around the world.” While Tina’s interest in the program stemmed from its leadership learnings, she came away with a deeper understanding of the impacts of climate change. “We visited research stations and talked to the scientists there about what it’s like to be a female scientist in Antarctica, and how they’re seeing the impact of climate change in Antarctica,” she says.

“That was particularly powerful – you know climate change is happening, but they showed us photos where the research station was right next to a glacier and now 20 years later it’s hundreds of metres away, almost having disappeared.”

The trip to Antarctica was also memorable for Fabian, being the highlight of the program. “I remember we were dealing with a profound moment of self-reflection and all the women were deep in thought, then someone yelled, ‘whales!’,” she recalls. “We laughed, sighed and shouted with excitement when these behemoths came up to breathe, and we watched them glide and slide close by, eyeing us as we eyed them.”

In that moment, Fabian saw the magic of Homeward Bound. “What greater incentive to be the most able leader you can be, to protect this gracious and stunning world of ours, than this rare moment together,” she says.

Homeward Bound is steaming ahead, aiming to build a global network of 1,000 women to work on solutions to leadership and environmental issues. Its alumni are working away on various projects, including research and presentations, with eight Homeward Bound participants having since been nominated as Superstars of STEM, an award highlighting inspiring scientists, technologists and educators. Tina says programs such as Homeward Bound are needed to raise awareness of the changes needed in the STEMM fields, noting the challenges women face in their careers, such as less pay than their male colleagues and fewer opportunities.

“Hopefully one day we’ll get there,” says Tina. “It’s not going to be solved overnight in terms of gender equity, but I think there is a change in the air.”

For more information on Homeward Bound, visit homewardboundprojects.com.au