

*Justine Railton is the coordinator of the Reactive Team and of the XR Disabilities Network*



Justine Railton has taken on many roles in her life. One of those roles is as a doula.

A doula - as many a born and bred Londoner will know - is someone who takes on a supporting role to a mother during the latter stages of her pregnancy and the early stages of her parenthood. A doula can perform many tasks: anything from going to the shops to pick up supplies to nursing the baby when the mother is tired; from counselling the mother upon things like breastfeeding and vaccinations to advocating for the baby's family at a GP's surgery or with social services.

Justine may have become something of an expert in this field, but it is doubtful she could have imagined that she would perform the role of doula for a radical environmental activist group!

And yet, on 31st October 2018, as the Extinction Rebellion burst on to the world stage for the first time, that's exactly what Justine found herself doing!

But before we tell the story of that day, let's see what led Justine towards this moment.

## **An Affinity With Nature**

Justine found she had an affinity with nature early in life. And it was this affinity, coupled with a strong moral compass that was remarked upon by her family, that caused her to make drastic changes as she entered her teens: starting with giving up meat.

"At the age of 13 I became a vegetarian, and I've been vegetarian or vegan ever since," says Justine, "That same year I attended my first political demo and got myself a boyfriend with a green mohican hairstyle. Living a conventional life was never on the agenda!"

To further prove this point, when Justine left school 3 years later (sadly now bereft of her “bae” with the green mohican), she and a group of friends moved into a squat. “I did get a normal office job after school,” Justine recalls, “but after each working day I would go home to the squat.

“Me and my friends got into a pattern of moving into a property, and staying there until we were evicted by the council. Then we’d go to a magistrates court the next day to fight the eviction! But we never had any intention of trying to get digs for free. In fact, when we moved into an unoccupied house or flat, we would find out from the neighbours what the rent was in that area, and then we would ring the council and offer to pay the same rate!”

## **Call the Midwife**

This way of life continued until Justine became pregnant for the first time, at which point she left work.

Again it was her affinity with nature that influenced Justine’s decisions about how she wanted to bring her first child into the world. “I was determined to have a natural, home childbirth, and to breastfeed my child; things that were not practiced in my family or in my area at the time,” Justine remembers, “I was even told that my child would be the first baby to be born at home in Enfield, North London in living memory!

“I will admit that, as this was my first baby, I was a bit scared, and I certainly didn’t want to do it on my own; but fortunately we found an independent midwife who offered to help us with the home birth.”

This experience caused Justine to move towards the world of natural child rearing in a more dedicated capacity. She trained as a breastfeeding counsellor, and, later, a doula. “I strongly feel that home births and breastfeeding are part of our connection with nature, and that birth, growing and death have become too medicalised and state directed. Natural child rearing helps us get back in touch with a part of ourselves that has been lost through over reliance on technology; it helps us ‘take back control’ of the process. Though I realise that because of Brexit that saying has become much maligned in recent times!

“All 4 of my children had home births, and my older children were actually present at the births of their younger brother and sister.”

## **Community Organising**

As well as nature, the other part of life that Justine connects most strongly with is community. After leaving North London where she originally grew up, she fell in with another group that lived outside the confines of conventional society. This group were squatting in an abandoned hospital in Hastings, situated in the South East of England.

Justine used her skills to help the families that lived within this community. And as well as teaching, Justine was also a pupil. Through encountering experts in other disciplines, Justine trained to be a midwife, a reiki master, a tarot reader and a gardener! And just for good measure, she learned how to juggle!

## **Down Under**

As time moved on, Justine met the man who would become her husband, and they felt a greater adventure calling. “So we moved to New Zealand.

“It seemed like an amazing thing to do, though looking back maybe the timing wasn’t great, as I was pregnant with my 4th child at the time.

“The place in New Zealand where we lived was amazing. It was very rural, and, per capita, our locality had the highest number of university graduates in the country. But nobody had any money as we were all society dropouts! The people were amazingly friendly, but unfortunately that didn’t stop us feeling very homesick. It wasn’t long before we realised we wanted to return to Britain.

## **Domestic Bliss**

When Justine and her family returned to the UK with 4 children in tow, they moved to the home they live in now, located in West Wales.

And what a home; an eco house with a biomass boiler (“perhaps not the best for curbing emissions but very energy efficient”), it has a 2 acre garden that adjoins 10 acres of woodland!

It was here that Justine enjoyed domestic bliss for a while, and she spent her days sharpening her gardening skills and practising her latest acquired skill, jam making!

Alas, the domestic bliss would not last.

## **Wasted Years**

“In my late 30s I was struck down by a number of maladies, leaving me desperately ill,” Justine recalls sadly, “I was diagnosed with severe Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) or ME, and I was also told I had Lyme disease. The combination of these two conditions triggered a hyper allergic reaction, leaving me almost permanently bed ridden. I was a helpless invalid for what felt like a very long time; wasted years in my life.”

And yet it is a measure of Justine’s stubbornness that, despite everything, she still managed to acquire new skills and knowledge, even during these “wasted years”: by studying from home part time for a degree in English Literature!

“After a while, my health began to improve, and I was eventually able to move around house unaided, although I needed a wheelchair when I was out and about. But I did manage to become more active again, and maybe started to feel not a million miles away from my old self.

“I had my improving health; I had my family; but at the same time I had spent so long virtually lost to the world because I was so ill. I felt like I needed a new purpose.”

And then, in August 2018, that purpose arrived.

## **Call to Rebellion**

Justine was reading through the Guardian newspaper one day in that long, very hot Summer, when she came across an article about a new movement that had formed to challenge the government’s neglect of the climate and ecological emergency. They called themselves the Extinction Rebellion.

“The first thought that occurred to me upon reading about XR was ‘Thank God! Somebody is actually doing something about this!’” says Justine, “And then my second thought was that I had to get involved and help in some capacity.”

And so, in a move that would prove fateful considering what was to come, Justine messaged XR’s Facebook page.

“I told them that due to my circumstances I could do one hour a day for five days a week, working remotely from home.

“I was assigned to the Reactive Team.”

## **Justine Gets Reactive**

So what is the Reactive Team? You may be asking yourself.

Well, put it this way: If you’re so incensed by one of XR’s provocative direct actions you feel the need to send a swearsy message or an email full of bile and abuse, it will be the Reactive Team you’re swearing at. If you see a social media post by XR and feel compelled to tell them they are a bunch of hypocrites, or deluded idiots, or corporate schills, or any number of derogatory terms, it will be the Reactive Team that bears the brunt of your scorn.\*

At times, the Reactive Team will tell you, it feels like a thankless task. However there are lighter moments too, and at times a “siege mentality” which forges a sense of camaraderie, even though all the team work remotely and rarely, if ever, meet in person.

But now we have come full circle, and are back at the beginning of our tale: that momentous day at the end of October 2018, when the Extinction Rebellion was truly born.

“So, on that day, I was given the task of reacting to the public comments as they came in to the live Facebook feed for the Declaration of Rebellion,” Justine explains. “And I logged in anticipating that I would be part of a big reactive team for such a significant occasion. How wrong I was!

“As the Declaration began, and as comments and reactions came pouring in from all around the world, I realised that everybody else in Extinction Rebellion was out, well, rebelling! I was completely on my own!

“It was very stressful but also an unforgettable experience: watching the birth of the Extinction Rebellion in real time, and having to explain and justify what we were doing to the whole world as XR’s sole online representative.”

See? Told you Justine is our Doula!

## **Looking to the Future**

Justine later became the coordinator of the Reactive Team, and still performs this role for XR. But that’s not all, because Justine is also the coordinator of the XR Disabilities Network Working Group.

“Like all of the Working Groups, the Disabilities Network is a microcosm of the XR model,” says Justine, “So we have our own media team, our own legal team, our own wellbeing team and so on. XR works hard to be a truly inclusive movement, yet at the same time I think there is still work to be done to genuinely integrate the Disabilities Network into the organisation.

“The disadvantages faced by disabled people are twofold: firstly they suffer the kind of prejudice and exclusion from society that all minority groups face; secondly they have their own particular physical or mental issues to contend with. It’s tough, but that doesn’t mean that the disabled rebels can’t make a real contribution to XR. I’d like to see our disabled rebels get closer to the decision making at the heart of the movement, and given a real say in our strategy and direction. That’s what I’m advocating for.”

And finally, looking to the future, what are Justine’s hopes?

“I hope there will be an end to, or at least a major reduction in, speciesism;” Justin replies, “it seems at times that everyone talks about the ecological emergency with reference to people, and discusses how humans will be affected, and the dangers that humans face. Its forgotten

that millions of other species of animals are under threat of extinction, and entire species are disappearing as we speak.

“Secondly I'd like to see what I would describe as the ‘haze of consumerism’ lift from society. Perhaps a positive aspect we may find from the coming crisis is that people might learn to do without the pointless material possessions that seem to obsess them at present; because this is another thing that leads to disconnection from nature.

“It would be great if we finally realised we just don't need so much stuff.”

Thank you doula!