



How to build community.

The island castaway: Building a community from scratch

Summary keywords

people, community, create, children, rosemary, year, island, conflict, food, school, responsibility, life, project, learn

Speakers

Jake Lloyd, Rosemary Stephenson

Episode 12: The island castaway: Building a community from scratch

Jake Lloyd 0:15

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Imagine someone asked you and your family to uproot your lives and move to a remote island that is cold, wet, windy and uninhabited. They wanted you to spend a whole year there with over 30 other strangers, where together you would try and create and live in a brand new community starting from scratch. What would you say?

I'm Jake Lloyd. This is the *How to build community* show. And today you'll hear from someone who was asked exactly this question.

Rosemary Stephenson 0:56

And we took a few months to really decide whether we wanted to do it. But eventually we just thought, 'Well, this is such an extraordinary opportunity. Let's go for it'. And we did.

Jake Lloyd 1:06

That's the voice of Rosemary Stephenson from the UK. In 1999, her husband saw an advert in a magazine. It had been placed there by a television production company because they were looking for volunteers to take part in a brand new reality television show called Castaway. In the words of the production company, the show aspired to create a new society for a new millennium. The Stephenson family applied, they were successful. And so they spent the first year of the new millennium on an island called Taransay off the northwest coast of the British Isles being filmed by BBC television cameras as they created this new community together. In this episode, you'll hear Rosemary reflect on this experience. So keep listening. And you'll find out how Rosemary and her fellow castaways went about building relationships, growing food, creating warmth and shelter, starting a school for the younger castaways, and how they kept themselves entertained. She will also tell me what she learned during the ups and downs of the whole experience, like what divides a community, what unites a community and how the experience changed how she lives in her own community now. And I've actually known Rosemary for a few years, she is a neighbour of mine and a friend. We've been involved in community projects locally where we live in the southwest of England. And so I began by asking Rosemary, not to introduce who she is now, but rather who she was then, back when this TV show took place in the year 2000.

Rosemary Stephenson 2:58

I had two young children, age six and four. And I was at a stage I suppose, where I was perhaps looking to do something a little bit different. My children had just started school, I was a bit uninspired by their experience at school, I felt they were a bit young to be at school. And my husband who's working as a GP, a sort of general practitioner, as a doctor, he happened by chance to see an advert in a magazine, which was looking for doctors to join a television experiment, to create a new community on a very remote island, off the Outer Hebrides, which is a sort of the tip of Scotland. So write really, really long way away. And they wanted a doctor to join this project. And my husband just said to me, Well, why don't we do this? And we'll Shall we have a go? And I just thought that absolutely no way could I go and do that live on a tiny island. But I was quite interested at that time in home educating my children, because I wasn't that pleased with the school they were at. And I just thought, oh, wouldn't it be great to do it myself. And I had a few friends who've done that. And I'd been to a conference about home education. And my husband said to me, Well, this in this way you could home educate your kids, because part of this project was to create a little school for our children. So anyway, to cut a long story short, we applied and we were interviewed, and we got through the first round. And then we were sent away for a week to a place called the Center for alternative technology in Wales, where we had to spend a week doing all sorts of challenges and being filmed with a whole lot of other people. And it was great fun, and we were completely outside our comfort zone. We had to sort of learn how to create compost toilets. We had to build shelters and then sleep under them to not get soaking wet. We had to do all sorts of orienteering challenges, and all sorts of fun things. and all the time we were being filmed and had to talk about what we were doing. And at the end of this week, we thought, Oh, well, we're useless at this, you know, we're definitely won't get selected. But we did get selected, we did get chosen to go and join this project. And we took a few months to really decide whether

we wanted to do it. But eventually, we just thought, well, this is such an extraordinary opportunity. We're never going to get a chance like this before. So we just thought, well, let's go for it. And we did.

Jake Lloyd 5:26

And we're not talking about just the short couple of weeks, or we're talking about a whole year, aren't we? Just take me through the first stages and upbringing your life and moving to this remote Scottish island? What was that like?

Rosemary Stephenson 5:43

Well, we there were 35 of us who had been selected to go and live on this island, we'd been told that there would be accommodation there for us. So it's an uninhabited island, there's really nothing they're very wild weather. So the winters are tough, it's cold, and it's wet, and it's very windy. So we had to go prepared with sort of appropriate clothing, we knew that we were going to have to create a school for the children that were going to be eight children. So there were four families with eight children. But we could each take a crate of personal belongings. So that's not a lot for a year, you had to put everything in that crate that you wanted for the year. So it's all your clothing, a few toys for the kids any sort of books you wanted. So that in itself was quite a tricky thing to decide, what do I need for one year, we were all allowed to take one luxury item. I took an arm chair because I thought, oh gosh, I really want to be able to sit somewhere comfortable. My husband said he wanted a piano. And we thought they would not, you know, not want to do that. But actually they said that's fine. So we had a piano for the school. And a lot of our friends thought we were mad. So there were people saying to us, you're absolutely mad doing this. I think the concern for people were that we were doing it as part of a television project that we were going to be filmed. And that inevitably, we would be edited in certain ways. And we could come out looking really bad. And I had worked as a journalist before, so I was quite realistic about that. And I did talk to the producers. And I said, Well, you know, I am concerned that you know that they have complete editorial control. And we could be made to look like anything really, we wouldn't be in control of that. So I did sort of go in with my eyes open. In fact, that side of it was very difficult, because we were edited in a way that was really quite negative, we were quite critical. When we got there, the infrastructure wasn't ready. So the first month was actually a bit of a disaster because they'd started preparing the project much too late. So when we arrived, none of the buildings were complete, there was actually nowhere to live, there was only one space for all 35 of us to sleep. And that after the first day, they said we are going to take all the families off the island. So the first month we didn't actually spend on the island, which was a very sort of upsetting for everybody. And it became quite divisive, because we were quite critical about the lack of preparedness. And we will be portrayed as trying to disrupt the project, and other people were shown to be mucking in and being much more prepared to put up with discomfort. And we were presented as these sorts of very difficult middle class family that were demanding. Luxury was actually all we were saying is that we need to have some dry buildings where we can with small children, because we all had very young children. And it was really not very safe for the kids. So the first month was difficult and presented a lot of challenges. And actually, interestingly, it affected the way the community developed. Because half the community, were prepared to put up with anything. They felt like we've been chosen for this project will just do what we're told. And half of us felt, actually, if this is going to work, we're going to need some basic things in place. And when I think if you have young children, you become a lot less tolerant of just discomfort and the fact that it wasn't safe.

Various people were getting quite ill somebody broke their leg because it was actually a building site. And there was actually nowhere for the children to play safely.

Jake Lloyd 9:36

In a moment I want to get on to the, you know, forging relationships with the other people on the island. But just going back to the producers and the television side of things as opposed to the relationship side of things. The title of the show *Castaway* and there's quite an interesting subtitle you mentioned, do you want to talk a bit about that and what that subtitle means to you?

Rosemary Stephenson 10:01

So there was a very ambitious vision for the project. They subtitled it 'A new society for a new millennium'. So it was obviously the year 2000. And the idea really was to put a bunch of people from all sections of British society, onto it onto an island and see what happened, and see how they created a community. And we were supposed to create a self sufficient community. Obviously, that was within limits. Because this was in the Outer Hebrides. So we arrived in midwinter. We couldn't be self sufficient from the beginning. So we were given we had food being sent to us. But we did have it, we had a wind generator, and we had hydropower. So in terms of power, we weren't supposed to be totally self sufficient. And by the, within the first six months, we did actually become almost self sufficient in food. So it was a very ambitious vision. And what they did is they chose people with a range of skills and from a range of backgrounds. So we had people who experienced of teaching people who had practical skills. So we had some builders, we had a guy who'd worked as a butcher. We had our own, we could set up our own server avatar, because we had animals and we could slaughter own animals. We had people who had experience of growing vegetables on a large scale, we had artists, we had people from different social classes. So there was there was posh people who'd come from very, very wealthy backgrounds. There were young people that were the youngest was age two, and the eldest was 60. So quite a range. Quite a few single people. There were four families with children. There was one gay guy, there was one black family from Birmingham, so that it was trying to create this microcosm of British society. But inevitably, when you do that you sort of use it's not it's not actually that realistic, because you're putting people together who haven't chosen to be together. And that inevitably led to clashes into problems.

Jake Lloyd 12:08

What was your approach going in about building relationships with people who were potentially so different to you? How did you navigate that?

Rosemary Stephenson 12:18

Yes, I mean, I felt that it was really important to get on with people because you're living in such close, close quarters. So we all had our own living space. But essentially, we shared this big band called *The Steading*, which was where we ate, we had a shared kitchen, so we had to cook and eat together. So it was really important that that people got on. And we started really well, and that we had, we had regular meetings. In

fact, in the early weeks, we were sort of meeting every day to discuss things and trying to work out work rotors, you know, who does what, and we created subgroups. So we had a kind of vegetable group, we had an animal group, we had a kind of building group, people who looked after the buildings, we had a group who ran the school. So we had these eight children. And we had this old school house, which had been a school 50 years ago, and it was all derelict. And it was renovated just for us. So we had a special space for the school. So everybody sort of took on their roles. But what was interesting is very early on, one of the problems that emerged was about attitude to work. And there was a range of, I would say, agendas, so for some people, this was like a year out, they'd given up their jobs. And they saw this as an opportunity to sort of coast not do too much. And other people were just naturally workers, so they would just get on with it. And quite early on, it was evident that there was a small group of people who kind of just took on the main tasks, and took responsibility for making things happen. And others who were happy to just stand by and wait to be told, or actually not do very much. And that became a source of conflict quite quickly. And it did surprise me the extent to which people felt they could get away with not doing very much. I always give the example of one of the eldest people there was a chap called Pat, who was a postman by trade. That's what he'd been doing for all his life. And he took it upon himself to get up every morning at six o'clock and light the stove in our kitchen, which was an absolutely crucial job because every day we had to make bread for the whole community. And without that fire being lit, that the bread wouldn't happen. And nobody asked him to do it. He just did it because he was used to getting up early. And he understood that these jobs need to be done. And he just thought I'm going to do it and his wife who she'd worked in a school As a dinner lady, she realized that the kitchen needed to be kept working. And she sort of took responsibility for that. She was the one that planted a herb garden, we need herbs she got going on that she always had something on the go, she had a sort of job on the go. And both of them together without them. And they were the oldest people on the in the community, they kept us all going. And I was very striking how that they just did it because they had that kind of work ethic. And there were other people who did similar things. But on the whole, we relied on a very few people to kind of keep that keep the community going. And it kind of shocked me actually, that people were able to sort of just coast really and not take responsibility.

Jake Lloyd 15:53

And what about the leadership? Did people kind of self select themselves as leaders? Or did you vote on things? How did that work?

Rosemary Stephenson 16:01

And that was an interesting one, that there was no point at which we said 'we need a leader'. But there were certain people who I think felt that they ought to be leaders. And that again, created conflict. So it was obvious that people had experience in different areas. So they sort of naturally emerged in charge of a particular area. But that could also create resentment. So there was one person who had quite a lot of experience of growing vegetables. So he lived in a community before. And he, I think, saw himself as a natural leader. So he was a bit older. And he became quite authoritarian quite early on, and said, This is the way we're going to do it, this is what needs to be done. And then he got disillusioned because the younger people would not follow his sort of lead. And that led to conflict, because he felt that the younger people were not pulling their weight were not working. And he took on this sort of parental role, really. And he did

know a lot about growing vegetables. But he wasn't, he wasn't actually a very good leader. So the people didn't follow him. So actually, what ended up doing is he became isolated. And he had a little group around him who kept doing the vegetables, but people didn't want to work with him. So actually, it became a bit dysfunctional. So that was quite interesting, really, because he could have potentially been a really good leader. But he just kind of upset people by being quite, quite controlling, quite, quite rude, actually. So yes, that was a problem. And at no time, was there a single leader, I would say that we had areas of expertise. And the community gradually sort of settled into routines where certain people took charge of certain jobs. And it was accepted that one, there was one lady who took charge of ordering food. And she just offered to do it. And everyone said, Okay, that's fine, you do it. And then that was her job. And that became her job for the whole year. And people just accepted it. But we didn't ever have a sort of moment where we voted and said, right, you're going to be the leader, and we're all follow you. It might have been more effective to do that. I think we were reluctant to do that. We just felt nobody really sort of yet nobody had that confidence at the beginning to say I'm going to lead.

Jake Lloyd 18:28

And how did you kind of establish your own role in this group? You and I met locally, because you're involved in leading community projects. What was that the kind of role you looked to have on the island?

Rosemary Stephenson 18:45

Yeah, I don't think I wasn't really looking for leadership role. But I my priority was because I had two young children. And I was just aware of the responsibility of taking two children into this environment. And I suppose my priority was setting up some kind of school for the children and keeping the children entertained, because we went from a situation of, you know, living in a lovely big house in a village with lots of facilities, lots of toys, lots of activities for children, to a place where there's nothing, there was nothing. Essentially, we had one box of Lego, and that was it. There were no toys or anything. So I was well aware that we had to put a lot of effort into making sure that the kids were entertained. And were sort of an integral part of the community. And that this the schoolroom that we had had to become a space that you know, the kids wanted to be in. And we had to set up some kind of structure. And when I say school, that's sort of probably an exaggeration, because it was in eight children aged two to 11. You know, we had no idea when we went what we were going to do with them. And we had one person who was a trained primary school teacher, so it was experienced, and we got together with the parents And we kind of created this slightly quirky system where lots of the adults got involved in teaching. And we divided the children by age group. So we had the two five-year-olds together with one teacher, we had the two eight-year-olds together. And then the nine-year-old was on there on his own, and the 11-year-old having one to one. So the schoolroom would have about four or five adults to with these eight children, and all of them doing different things, and all slightly improvised, you know, we'd say, Okay, we have a rough kind of program, we'll do a bit of maths in the morning, always nice weather, we'll go out on the beach. But the amazing thing is that we did involve a lot of the adults in the community in different roles. If somebody was artistic, we'd get them to come and do art, one of them did cooking with the children. So we got them all doing different things. And that was really my role. I mean, my role was kind of coordinating all of that. I obviously did some of the teaching. I mean, I'm not a teacher, but I kind of made it up. And I also got involved in, we

all had to take a turn in the kitchen, you'd have to spend one whole day cooking, which was incredibly hard work. So you'd have to cook for 35. And you'd have to get there very early in the morning and do a lunch for everybody, and then an evening meal. So that was one day a week. And then I also got involved in the vegetable growing. So that was again, I wasn't very experienced at that. So I was just doing what I was told learning from other people. But my main sort of most of my energy went into the kids, and making sure that when they weren't in school, that they were kind of okay, I'm having said that what tended to happen was the children just roamed free. And because you have a lot of adults around doing various things, the kids would just sort of hang around and pick up on what was going on. And various adults would involve them in things or they would build their own dens or they would just kind of play in quite a creative way. And I now have coming back here, I'm now find it hard to believe that they had so little really, we didn't have any window, there were no swimming pools, or there were no cinemas, there's no television. Of course, there's no internet or anything like that no screens. And somehow, they just got on with it. And they made up their own entertainment. And I guess increasingly, yeah, I took responsibility for making sure that the school was sort of functioning. But I don't see myself as particularly a leader, I think we were all pretty equal, actually all. Because everybody had a slightly different skill. We just shared that. And actually, that worked really well. So the things that the community, I would say succeeded at which was feeding ourselves really well. And looking after a bunch of kids. We're not really that much in evidence in the TV programs, what we were seeing on telly were the big arguments and the big clashes. And the focus was on the sort of negative. And of course, you didn't really see what was going on meanwhile, that most of us were just getting on with the boring stuff of everyday life.

Jake Lloyd 23:14

And what did you learn through doing this, how's it shaped how you live in a community now and the relationships you made? What did you learn through all this?

Rosemary Stephenson 23:25

I think, I think on a very sort of personal level, I kind of learned what I was capable of. And even now when I think about it, I find it hard to imagine how I did that. Because you very quickly when you come back into society, and you have all these sorts of comforts and, and of course, when we came back very quickly, the internet took off. And so life changed massively. And so it's very hard to imagine how we live with so little, I think that's one thing it taught me that I can, I can live with very little input. And I can live a much simpler life. And once you kind of get rid of a lot of complications, and you get down to the basics of feeding yourself and keeping warm because we had to spend quite a lot of time gathering sort of driftwood and cutting Pete's to create warmth. But I sort of learned how I can simplify my life I can live a much simpler life and I am capable of doing that. So yes, and I guess I've come I've learned on a more negative side, the way communities operate this thing of how people there are always people who do things and people who don't. And it's sort of still surprises me how some people will just get on with it and do it and other people just don't, but I sort of expect that now. And that was a really, really steep learning curve when we because I assumed when we all arrived on this island that everybody would be absolutely knuckling down and we'd be really keen to kind of do that. Best. And actually, it sort of didn't happen like that it felt like only a small handful really took responsibility for making things happen and other people were just happy to ride on

their backs. And I think that happens in all communities, I think you'll find that in whatever group I've been in whatever community I've, I've worked in, there's always that sort of core people who will just take responsibility, and then other people just kind of are happy to not do so.

Jake Lloyd 25:30

So as you experienced, there's not necessarily much point in trying to motivate those people to do stuff. It's just, this is just natural. There's that one group of people and another. Yes.

Rosemary Stephenson 25:42

I think, yes, I think that's probably right. I think that I mean, I think you can improve on that situation. And I think good leadership can bring out the best in people. But it's very, very quickly, you know, if you don't get have good leadership, and if you have the wrong kind of approach, you very quickly lose people. So it is quite a skill to kind of keep people enthused and on board.

Jake Lloyd 26:08

If you were to do something like this again, what would you do differently?

Rosemary Stephenson 26:14

I wouldn't do it with television cameras. So it does it inevitably, throughout the year, it interfered with our dynamic, and it became part of the community that divided us completely unnecessarily. So the attitude to the camera, created a constant distraction. So there were the basically we were split into two, really, by the end of the year, there were those who were prepared to do whatever they were told by the TV producers, because they felt that they had to and there were those of us, me included, who felt that we should, we were a community in our own right, and we shouldn't be dictated to.

Jake Lloyd 27:01

So final question, because it sounds like the TV producers a big part of their role is to create conflicts. What have you learned about conflict? And what kind of things quickly create conflict in a community in your day? Yeah.

Rosemary Stephenson 27:19

Yeah, I mean, it's often amazingly petty things. Food is a source of conflict, decisions about food, one of the big issues we had was, we were told, at the beginning that they would supply food until we could grow our own vegetables. And we noticed that we were not getting supplies regularly. So they kept saying, Oh, the

boat can't calm delays, delays, delays, and people that reactions to that, you know, some people said, oh, no, it doesn't matter. We can live on tins and doesn't matter. And other people got very upset about that. And, actually, yeah, it became this incredibly divisive, divisive thing, what sorts of how much are we prepared to put up with not having enough food, the other thing that caused conflict was children, different attitudes to parenting that's really, really quite divisive. So we had the full range of parents there and backgrounds. And, I mean, we personally felt and that was our opinion, were not being as well looked after by their parents as they should have been. And that became quite tricky. And then there was one family who, who were very religious, and they had certain views about what their children could and couldn't do, they often felt sort of victimized. And that was very tricky. And when you're living very closely with people, those sorts of differences can become really, really difficult. And then I think the other big area is, is work, and attitudes to work. And there were people who were very had a very strong work ethic, you know, we start at eight in the morning, and then we can stop at 12. And you must do that. And then if people breezing in an hour late, they found that really difficult. Again, I hadn't really expected that. And it was very, very stark, that sort of attitude of you know, we have to be very disciplined about it. And I would say it was a generational thing. I think the older people were much harder working than the younger people. So that that caused a lot of conflict.

Jake Lloyd 29:27

I've already said final question twice. I think I'm gonna say final question one more time, because those things you talked about, how those things could potentially divide people, what would bring people together?

Rosemary Stephenson 29:39

Food again, because you have to eat. And it was interesting how despite the we did have, you know, periods of conflict and periods of arguments and everything, but we always put food on the table and those meals happened every day and the kitchen teams turned up every day, and we ate well, and that always amaze me. And that never sort of broke down, we did often have chaos in the kitchen and a lot of mess. And there were arguments about washing up and the practicalities. But actually food was always produced and everybody ate. Birthdays, we just very quickly established this sort of tradition of, of celebrating birthdays. And because there wasn't a lot else to do, birthdays became very important. And rituals generally. So we, we used every opportunity to celebrate. So whether it was May Day, or the summer solstice, or even Christmas was a big thing. So there was a lot of celebrating of things, and a huge amount of effort going into creating costumes and cakes, you know, out of nothing. And people will make presents for themselves, not for themselves for each other. So out of nothing out of driftwood out of shells, people kind of created these presents, so there was a lot of creativity. So those were the things that I think, worked really well. And I think the children did have a fantastic time because they were sort of not aware of the conflicts that were going on. So I think when they look back on it, it was a kind of golden year for them. And that is, I think, a credit to the community that we managed to keep our kids safe and to keep them happy. And, and sort of get a bit of education along the way.

Jake Lloyd 31:26

I think that's a great place to leave it right. Thank you.

Great. Well, thank you. There we go. That was Rosemary Stephenson telling me about her experience of taking part in Castaway a year long reality TV show on the BBC in the UK back in the year 2000.

That's almost it for this episode. Before we go, don't forget, you can catch up on previous episodes of *How to build community* online or in your podcast player. Just search 'How to build community'. You can learn more about the organisations behind this show by visiting arukahnetwork.org or learn.tearfund.org. You can help support this show by making a small monthly donation on our Patreon page patreon.com/arukahnetwork. And finally, if you have some feedback on this show or suggestions for future interviewees, then you can reach me via email jake@arukahnetwork.org. But that's it for this episode. Until next time, bye for now.

But that's it for this episode. Until next time.

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