

style.

HUGH STEWART



SERIOUS IMPACT

"I'm acutely aware of my strengths and weaknesses," says actor and comedian Celeste Barber, who raised a staggering \$51.3 million in fewer than two weeks for the NSW Rural Fire Service via her social media accounts.

Gucci silk-polyester blouse. Earrings (worn throughout), Barber's own



Performer **CELESTE BARBER** has never pulled punches, but today she is more passionate than ever about speaking the truth. Here, the cheerleader for bushfire crisis fundraising explains herself



Gucci polyester dress, \$7,300; 1300 442 878. Agent Provocateur silk-satin corset, \$679; at porteavie.com. Briefs (worn throughout), Barber's own. Sarah & Sebastian vermeil necklace, \$3,600; sarahandsebastian.com

by **RACHEL SHARP** photographed by **HUGH STEWART** styled by **KATHERINE GREEN**

House of Holland
mohair and merino
wool sweater,
approx \$522; at
netaporter.com



Maticevski polyester top, \$1,400,
and cotton-silk skirt, \$3,750;
tonimaticeski.com. Bottega Veneta
leather heels, \$2,300; 02-9239
0188. Sarah & Sebastian vermeil
ring, \$495; sarahandsebastian.com.
Wedding ring (worn throughout),
Barber's own. Bengt Ruda leather
armchair, \$1,875; at collectika.com.au.
Wonderwall Beni M'Rirt wool rug,
\$11,400; at tigmitrading.com

Let it be officially known that Celeste Barber—actor, comedian, Instagram icon, concert host, and now legendary fundraising wizard—is not here for the naysayers. Quite frankly, in her own words, she gives “zero fucks” about them. (Caveat: if you’re one of her almost 7 million Instagram followers, you’ll know Barber’s rather partial to using expletives for emphasis.)

Nor—contrary to popular belief and ignorant comments from anonymous tabloid news site trolls—does she have any desire to be the poster girl for disaster relief fundraising. Not because she cares about copping flack—and cop-it she has, be it for her high-energy approach to hosting February’s Fire Fight Australia concert, or for exactly where and how the fortune she raised on Facebook for the bushfire crisis in January could and would be divvied up. Rather, it’s because she doesn’t feel qualified. “I am acutely aware of my strengths and my weaknesses,” says a straight-faced Barber, who also has 2.1 million followers on Facebook. “I am *not* the face of bushfires, nor am I the face of climate change. Because. I. Don’t. Know. What. I’m. Talking. About. I love that people are listening to me now and...I still say whatever I want, but only when I know what I’m talking about. I’ve been asked to do so many of these [climate awareness] things, and I’ve gone, ‘No. I don’t want to be Greta Thunberg.’ I want to be [American comedy actor] Melissa McCarthy and just do my thing.”

She mightn’t want to be a campaign poster girl, but Barber’s ‘thing’ sure does yield tangible results. Her history-making January bushfire fund appeal on Facebook—prompted as blazes bore down on her mother-in-law Joy Robin’s New South Wales south coast town of Eden—attracted more than a million donations from around the globe and, capped at almost \$52 million, became the largest Facebook fundraiser of all time. (Before that, the record was US \$20.8 million raised in 2018 by Charlotte and Dave Willner for RAICES—The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services—in Texas, with the intention of helping immigrant families split by President Trump’s separation policy.)

“I have to admit, I work pretty much purely on instinct,” says the 37-year-old of starting the appeal. “If I sit and think too long about something, the moment’s passed. I saw that there was a Trustee [for] NSW Rural Fire Service on [Facebook] that collects through PayPal. [Australian comedian] Em Rusciano had started [a fundraiser], so I asked her. I started out [wanting] to get to \$30,000 and that happened in a fucking heartbeat. It was really easy to donate and it just went bananas.”

But what began with pure intentions and delivered unfathomable results, also brought challenges Barber didn’t anticipate. It’s now well documented that, according to law, the RFS can only spend donations via their trust on training and equipment, not on additional disaster relief, wildlife rescue or to support the families of firefighters, as Barber intended. At the time of *InStyle* going to print, a bill had been introduced to the NSW Parliament seeking to change the way donations to the RFS

Barber wears: Dries Van Noten polyurethane cotton trench coat, \$1,999; at davidjones.com. Robin wears: his own shirt. Danish teak extension table, \$3,300; at foundfurniture.com.au

between November 1, 2019, and February 1, 2020, could be used; but its chance of passing is uncertain. Still, Barber, who engaged her own lawyers to help navigate the legal roadblock, is unapologetic. “I’m not a political comedian. Not because I don’t think it’s important; I’ve just always treated my social media as a platform to entertain. People enjoy me keeping certain things light, but when [the fires] happened, [I knew] had to do something.”

Did it shock her to discover she had record-breaking global influence? “Absolutely! I have a following because I’m authentic, I’ve got my finger on the pulse and I represent the average person. I always [call out] shit for what it is and all that, so I think people trusted me and what I was doing. [The Australian fires] were kind of the first main catastrophic, international headline example of climate change. It is happening. It’s no longer, ‘Oh have you heard about the polar bears?’ which we all should have been paying attention to. Everyone was like ‘Oh shit, it’s hell on Earth. The koalas are on fire. What the hell?’”

Barber’s social campaign wasn’t her conscience’s only leap to action. The January Make It Rain fundraiser she hosted alongside Chris and Liam Hemsworth in Byron Bay, was a warm-up for Fire Fight in mid-February, which, according to organisers, sold out within 24 hours of going on sale and raised almost \$10 million for groups helping fire-ravaged communities get back on their feet.

When *InStyle* approached the 2019 *InStyle* and Audi Woman of Style award winner to front this special ‘Fire Crisis Support’ issue—her second cover with us in fewer than 12 months—we were patently aware every other glossy magazine in the industry was chasing her too, not to mention international news networks. She mightn’t be the face of climate change, but Barber sure does represent the pinnacle of collective people power. “I cannot tell you how much shit I’ve turned down,” she says, laughing. “But I was like, if *InStyle* come, that’s what I want to do. Even my mum said to me today, ‘Everyone’s asked you for covers’ and I went, ‘Yeah, but *InStyle* is my favourite,’ and my mum said, ‘It always has been, ever since you were a teenager.’ You guys are my jam.”

Even excluding the blue language, this was no typical celebrity cover interview. Her packed schedule meant we chatted mostly in a curtained-off area as she changed outfits between shots. In fact, a significant number of her heartfelt comments happened as she stood in her underwear, waiting for *InStyle*’s fashion director Katherine Green to help her into the next look. Barber, the consummate professional, didn’t skip a beat.

She travels with a passionate entourage, not limited to just her go-to glam squad: celebrity make-up artist Filomena Natoli and hairstylist Brad Mullins, who were both part of *InStyle*’s shoot crew. Over the eight hours she spent on our Gold Coast set, no fewer than four different family members popped in to say hello: her mother, proud sister and adorable niece, while her easygoing @hothusband, Api Robin—now an Instagram celebrity in his own right—chatted about local surf conditions with our videographer as he waited.

“Sorry, it’s how I work all the time. I’m like, just *do it*, just talk,” she says of our interview on the fly. By the same time tomorrow, Barber would be in a plane over the Pacific heading to Los Angeles for meetings around a show she’s writing, interviews, and close friend Tom Ford’s autumn/winter 2020 runway show. Within 24 hours of landing back in Australia, she was on stage for the marathon 10-hour Fire Fight gig, with barely a day to prepare and nail sound checks.

It’s a whirlwind, but then Barber—who is also a hands-on mum to sons Lou, 8, and Buddy, 6—has never shied away from hard work, according to her delightful mum, Kath Barber. “She’s a grafter, always has been,” she says, recalling that when Barber’s boys were babies, she worked three jobs: teaching drama, in a cafe and building her body of work as an actor. “What you see now is what she’s always been, even when she was little. She hasn’t changed.”

Barber found the #CelesteforPM hashtag that circulated after her fundraising efforts hilarious, but when I ask if she’d ever consider politics, she looks mortified. “No! Fucking hell, I have no idea what I’m doing. Plus, Oprah—because that’s right girls, I’m the Australian Oprah now, ha!—had a very good point when she said she’s got more power not in power, because she’s got no one to answer to.” That said, she has no trouble backing her own political opinions, as anyone who watched her opening monologue at Fire Fight knows. “I’m just going to take this moment now to acknowledge what it is that we have been going through for months, and how we have all leant on each other, because God knows the people in power haven’t really done much,” she told the crowd to rapturous applause. “It is the people who are making the change, specifically our volunteers...They are the ones who cancel holidays to stay here and look after us, and I will speak now very confidently on behalf of the nation when I say to those volunteers, thank you, thank you...And I also want to say that I’m sorry you had to do it all on your own.”

At *InStyle*’s shoot, slowing to choose her words carefully, Barber says, “I read somewhere that our government is causing climate suicide and we are being sacrificed. We *are* being sacrificed.” So what, then, would she say to Prime Minister Scott Morrison if she had his ear? “Do what Jacinda Ardern does or go home. I’d say that. I think [Ardern] is beauty and grace. She’s just got her finger on the pulse. She’s a mother and understands it and just gets on with it. Actually, no, I’ve got nothing to say to him [Morrison] personally. What I would say to people [in the public] is we have more power than we know, and not to be disillusioned. There’s a real groundswell in the world at the moment. We all have a fucking voice. I don’t want us to be disheartened by bullshit. We just have to band together and fight the fight. Power to the people!” she declares, emphatically, before stepping away for the final shot of the day. ■

“We all have a voice. We have to band together and fight. Power to the people!”

Marques’Almeida cotton-terry dress, approx \$470; at matchesfashion.com. Easy upholstered armchair, \$5,590; at tigmitrading.com

Hair: Brad Mullins
Make-up: Filomena Natoli