

I had a scallop boat. Some time later I was privileged to be part of the initial development of our local disability service before retiring from full-time work.

HOW DID YOUR CHILDHOOD INFLUENCE YOU IN LATER LIFE?

I had a good childhood. I was an only child but had lots of uncles and cousins, plenty of interaction with extended family members, and I was a bookworm so it suited me to be on my own. We lived with my grandparents so I did not lack attention.

WHO ARE YOUR ROLE MODELS?

I have great love and respect for my Dad, who had real integrity and always endeavoured to do the right thing for his community. There is also a woman called Mahboba Rawi who is an Australian citizen born in Afghanistan. I read her book 'Mahboba's Promise' (see page 19). It describes how she set up a project to keep Afghani children off the streets. It really struck a chord with me as there are common links to our Loomgrowers. By going out and talking about our projects they have developed a life of their own.

The women belonging to the Loomgrowers are also a wonderfully diverse and inspirational group to work with.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS MEAN TO YOU?

Success for me means feeling good about what I have achieved. This is a lucky country where, even on a limited income, we are able to support overseas rural women in their endeavours, and by joining together we can support a child through school. It has nothing to do with money, it's the goodwill.

WHAT HAS BEEN ONE OF THE BIGGEST BARRIERS YOU HAVE HAD TO FACE, WHAT HAPPENED, AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

The biggest barrier we continue to have is based around communication. We are currently getting some formal documents translated into English professionally but it all takes time. None of the Loomgrowers can speak Chinese. However, my neighbour across the road, Lynndal, is Singaporean Chinese and

speaks seven Chinese languages. She is a warm, generous, outgoing woman who volunteers to sort out our problems by popping over and chatting directly to the Women's Federation on the phone. We have also used 'babel fish', a free translation internet site, which has helped for simple written translations (<http://babelfish.altavista.com>). Things come together in amazing ways!

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN 10 YEARS TIME? WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE?

We have now expanded beyond just supplying looms to awarding three-year school scholarships for bright kids so that they can complete their education. The children want to learn and are very eager to go to school — there are no dropouts! Their parents just don't have the cash. School in China is free as it is here. The scholarships (from \$175 to \$475, depending on school levels) cover the purchase of books, uniforms and transport to school over a three-year period. I really hope the scholarship program develops into an ongoing one for the children of minority nationalities. It would be nice if it could be extended to all students, not just the bright ones. We feel through education we are making a difference in the life of the whole family.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY TO OTHER WOMEN WHO MAY BE JUST STARTING OUT ON A DARING TO DREAM JOURNEY?

Just go for it. It will happen. Keep focused. You don't have to do a lot if you have the right concept and the right people around you. Keep talking about what you are doing and it will grow by itself. If the idea is right, other people will want to go along with you. This dream has not gone where we thought it would originally, but it seems to have a life of its own and we are not disappointed at where it is headed. Seek help for the nuts and bolts. South East Training and Enterprise Service, SERTEC, assisted us with strategic planning and has been a useful community partner. So use your community assets to develop a support base, and be brave.

I think of my childhood that distant land on the other side of puberty. My family moved house the same year I got my first bra. When I think of Australia I think of star shaped cakes dusty with icing sugar of homegrown tomatoes and loud Greek voices. Our neighbours, three generations in one house. A bungalow like ours, maybe smaller. They always brought us food. I think of the deli on the corner racing my sister on our bikes to buy icy poles and eating them, half melted in the backyard wearing bathers running under the sprinklers sopping wet and sticky. Summer seemed hotter in those days. Just like winter seems colder and colder. Australia is getting colder. I switch on the TV and see wire with children behind it. If this isn't their country it isn't mine. I came here on a boat smuggled piece by piece like a jigsaw, in many boats over more than a century. I came as a refugee, persecuted I came for work, a better life I came from Prussia from Germany, Scotland and Ireland. I was born in Australia. But my bones were already millions of years old and bones remember everything.

Written by Amelia, 21, Coburg VIC From 'Voices of Australia: A collection of real-life stories about Australians Living Together'. Published by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. October 2005. (First published in 'Voiceworks' #59)

Rural women shine

2006 RURAL INDUSTRIES RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION NSW RURAL WOMEN'S AWARD



Kate Schwager, Wee Waa

Kate Schwager, from Wee Waa in the State's north-west, is a woman passionate about rural communities and promoting the importance of agriculture to regional towns and cities.

It was this passion, along with her strong commitment to the future of rural communities and her efforts in promoting rural towns and their links to agriculture, that won her the prestigious title of 2006 Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation (RIRDC) NSW Rural Women's Award Winner.

Kate was one of the three finalists in NSW, alongside Mary Howard from Lughtondale and Cath Ford from Rosebank, who were chosen on merit for their visions, the benefits their work will bring to the individual industries and rural communities, as well as their leadership potential.

A special Gala Dinner, hosted by The Hon. Ian Macdonald MLC (Minister for Natural Resources, for Primary Industries and for Mineral Resources), to recognise and celebrate this year's award recipients, was held on 9 February at Parliament House, Sydney. The dinner was attended by more than 140 guests representing industry, government and the community.

Minister Macdonald performed the official duties for the evening and presented each of the women with a framed certificate and bouquet of Australian native flowers. He said Kate was an excellent example of a rural woman who has the initiative and determination to make things happen.

RIRDC's Managing Director, Dr Peter O'Brien, gave the Closing Address. He spoke of women being fundamental to Australia's human capacity and of the importance of supporting and developing the skills of all rural people if we are to have a sustainable and profitable rural Australia. He also said that while society seems to have accepted the fact that women have a valuable and well integrated role in the farm business, we don't seem to have made many improvements in terms of women's representation on boards and peak bodies. He believes that the Rural Women's Award can play a vital role in the future of rural Australia by recognising outstanding rural women and providing them with opportunities to learn and grow.

KATE SCHWAGER, WEE WAA

Originally from Blayney, Kate lived in Sydney and travelled overseas for a number of years before deciding to return to country life at Wee Waa with her husband Billy. In addition to helping her husband on their cotton and wheat sharefarming enterprise, along with their three sons, Kate is also involved in a number of farming and community groups.

Kate is currently the Publicity Officer for the Women's Industry Network Cotton (WINCOTT). Prior to this she was the publicity officer for Wee Waa Inc. during which time she set up a regular newsletter promoting local events and products, and coordinated two major festivals. She is also currently a member of the Wee Waa Chamber of Commerce.

In 1998, Kate set up the weewaa.com website as a way of promoting her community and exploring an off-farm income opportunity. Seven years later, Kate has now developed a Rural Towns Package (based on the weewaa.com website) which she hopes to share with women in other small rural communities as a viable business opportunity.

Kate will use her bursary to further develop and promote the Rural Towns Package, and to deliver training and assistance to women interested in setting up a community website. She believes this type of promotion will not only help promote the attractions and local produce of a rural town, but educate the wider community about agriculture in NSW.

Kate received a \$10,000 bursary to implement her project and will also participate in the RIRDC Australian Institute of Company Directors Course (valued at over \$5,000).



Mary Howard, Laughtondale

MARY HOWARD, LAUGHTONDALE

Runner-up in the 2006 Award is Mary Howard from Laughtondale. Mary has a background in farming and boat building, and along with her husband Graham, has established a local prawn trawl business based at Wiseman's Ferry on the lower Hawkesbury River.

Mary's involvement with the fishing sector dates back to the early '80s, and while she admits the industry faces its share of challenges, she couldn't imagine any other way of life.

With over 30 years experience in the commercial fishing sector, Mary has worked hard to promote the sector over the years. She also has a long history of community activity and industry representation and is currently a Director on the Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment Management Authority, an Associate Member and Minutes Secretary of the Hawkesbury Trawl Association, and a member of the Women's Seafood Industry Network.

Mary is working to develop some new promotional tools including a promotional DVD and brochure, and a book featuring the history and stories of fisher families across NSW. She believes this could help better inform and educate the wider community about the commercial fishing industry and its contribution to the NSW seafood sector.

Mary also wants to provide information on environmental strategies and initiatives that are currently being undertaken by commercial fishers, who are playing an important role in protecting the sustainability of the fishing industry.

As runner-up, Mary has been awarded a place on the RIRDC Australian Institute of Company Directors Course (valued at over \$5,000).



Cath Ford, Rosebank

CATH FORD, ROSEBANK

Another outstanding finalist is Cath Ford from Rosebank in the State's north. Cath is an organic farmer with 110 acres of macadamia nut and coffee trees at Rosebank on the North Coast.

Originally from Sydney, Cath left the city for a 'tree change', and decided to try her hand in agriculture despite having no experience in the industry. Nine years on, Cath and her husband Chris are running a successful enterprise, which is going from strength to strength.

The focus of Cath's farm centres on production from 6,500 macadamia trees and 12,500 coffee trees. Determined to arm herself with as much information as possible to give the farm the best chance of achieving profitability, she undertook a TAFE course, which amongst other things, introduced her to the principles of organic farming and sustainability.

Cath's farm is now almost fully certified organic, and Cath is passionate about sharing her new found knowledge with others. In addition to the production systems she has established, she has set up a coffee processing plant, which saves neighbouring coffee farmers additional costs in time and travel.

Cath's project focused on the creation of a support network for women working in the macadamia and coffee bean industry and included producing a guide for fellow broadacre macadamia nut and coffee farmers to convert from conventional farming to sustainable farm practices.

Cath received a \$1,000 bursary and a gift certificate to Westpac's Beyond Survival Workshop Series (valued at \$999).



RIRDC Rural Women's Award. You could be the next NSW winner!

Are you involved in primary industries? Do you have a great idea for your industry, community or your own skills development but don't have the resources to move forward? The RIRDC Rural Women's Award could be the answer. Applications for the 2007 Award open 1 August 2006 and close 15 October 2006. Visit: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rwn, Email: rural.women@dpi.nsw.gov.au, or call the Rural Women's Network on Ph: 02 6391 3620 for more information.

International Women's Day 2006

Share your cake; it is more than you need. This is the simple philosophy of Mama Thope, a Xhosa woman who visited Hay on March 8 for a special International Women's Day event organised by the Women About Hay Group.

Thope Lekan was the first woman in Africa to pioneer township tourism. She runs a B&B and home-based restaurant in Khayelitsha, a sprawling township on the outskirts of Cape Town. Her modest two-bedroom home has become a favourite destination for overseas tourists.

Success did not come easily. As a woman she had to compete in a man's world to establish herself as an entrepreneur, but more importantly, as a black person she had to come up the ranks in tiny, difficult steps during the apartheid era.

Today she is in a position to help others, with a focus on women and youth. She trains

unemployed women in her town to become self-employed.

'My cake philosophy is this,' she said. 'I have created this big cake and it is much more than I need. So I share it around my people in Khayelitsha.

'I buy fresh vegetables from the street vendors in my township. We employ students to act as tour guides for our guests. The shebeen (bottle shop) down the road also benefits because my guests enjoy a glass of wine with their food.

'When we have large crowds for dinner, we get the local band in to play for our guests.

'We turn the carport into an open air dining room and give our guests a traditional African experience.'

Thope's cake philosophy is part of the Xhosa tradition of 'ubuntu' – everything is to be shared; it does not matter if you have money or not, everyone is equal and part of your community.



Over 200 women travelled to Hay, from as far away as Swan Hill, Balranald, Deniliquin and Coolamon, for International Women's Day on 8 March to listen to Thope Lekan (pictured above), a dynamic and inspiring Xhosa woman. Dishes from 13 countries were enjoyed by the guests and tables were decorated to represent many parts of the world.

JOSEPHITE FOUNDATION NILS AND STEPUP LOAN

The Josephite Foundation's no interest loans schemes (NILS®), operating out of Bathurst, Lithgow and Cowra, are community-based schemes, funded by the Trustees of the Sisters of St Joseph, Perthville, Bathurst Diocese. The scheme helps meet the needs of people on a limited income who cannot access fair and affordable credit. Up to \$900 is lent for a range of household goods and services including electrical goods, furniture and items such as storage sheds and lawn mowers.

People who have a loan approved have the advantage of owning a new product. This can be one of the rare times they have shopped for a brand new household item. They then help others by repaying their loan at around \$25 per fortnight from their Centrelink benefit. When the loan is repaid, the client can borrow again for a new item.

stepUP Loan, funded by the National Australia Bank, is the Foundation's newest project where applicants can apply for up to \$3,000 to buy household goods and services. Only people

living in an area covered by the Josephite Foundation NILS® can apply for a stepUP Loan at this time.

People interested in applying for a no interest or stepUP loan need to have:

- Lived at their current address for six months and have a Pensioner Concession or Health Care card; and
- Live in one of the following postcodes: 2787, 2790, 2791, 2792, 2793, 2794, 2795, 2797, 2799, 2804, 2805, 2807, 2808, 2809, 2845, 2846 or 2847.

If the area you live in is not covered by NILS®, and you would like more information about establishing a no interest loans scheme, contact the Josephite Foundation who offer free information and support to groups interested in NILS®.

For more information about the NILS® or stepUP LOAN, Ph: 02 6332 4866, Email: mj.nils@binc.org.au or Visit: www.perthvillesisters.catholic.org.au or www.nilsnsw.org.au

health ■ don't go breaking your heart

Information from *Networking Women* (www.networkingwomen.com.au). Reprinted with permission

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in women. Globally, one in three women die from heart disease and one in six from stroke. In Australia, more than 12,000 Australian women die each year from heart disease. Yet many people aren't aware that heart disease is the number one killer of Australian women. In a recent survey, only 3 per cent of people nominated heart disease as the leading cause of death in women.

A Heart for Life

The underlying cause of heart disease is a gradual clogging of the arteries that supply blood to our hearts. This clogging process begins in younger years and can be well advanced by middle age.

But the good news is that heart, stroke and blood vessel disease is, to a large extent, preventable. It is estimated that one in five Australian women have three or more risk factors – tobacco smoking, physical inactivity, high blood pressure, or overweight and obesity – for heart disease. Simply follow these easy steps to a healthier heart.

Smoke alarm

About one in five Australian women smoke but the habit is much more common among younger women. Stopping smoking is the single most important thing you can do to reduce your risk of coronary heart disease and it's never too late to benefit from giving up. For information on quitting smoking, call the Quitline on 131 848.

Healthy eating

Cholesterol and fat contribute to the deposits that build up

in the artery walls and cause disease. You can help lower your blood cholesterol level and limit further artery clogging by reducing the amount of saturated fat you eat. Saturated fat is found in fatty meats, full cream dairy products, butter, two vegetable oils (palm and coconut oils), most fried take-away foods and commercially baked products.

Replace saturated fats with moderate amounts of mono-unsaturated and polyunsaturated spreads and margarines, such as canola, olive, sunflower and soybean oils. Also choose mainly plant-based foods, such as bread, cereals, rice, pasta, vegetables, fruits and legumes and moderate amounts of lean meats, poultry, fish and reduced-fat dairy products.

Let's get physical

We should all take note of Olivia Newton-John's 80's hit and get physical. Just 30 minutes or more of moderate intensity physical activity, such as brisk walking, on most or all days of the week will reap health benefits. The 30 minutes can also be broken down to shorter bouts, such as three 10-minute walks.

To keep physically active, incorporate it into your normal routine. For example:

- Walk to the shops if you're just picking up a few items
- Get off the bus or train early and walk one or two stops
- Walk with a friend during your lunchtime
- Organise active social events with family and friends, such as bushwalking or cycling.

Take the pressure down
High blood pressure can significantly increase your risk of heart disease so make sure you have your blood pressure checked regularly by your doctor.

If your blood pressure is high, aim to achieve a healthy weight, be physically active, reduce salt intake, limit alcohol to two drinks or less daily and follow your doctor's advice. Medication may be required.

A weighty issue

Being overweight or obese is a risk factor for coronary heart disease and diabetes and also contributes to high blood pressure. Healthy eating and being physically active can assist weight loss. Talk to your doctor if you have had difficulties losing weight.

More Information

For your free Women and Heart Disease booklet contact Heartline on Ph: 1300 36 27 87, or Visit: www.heartfoundation.com.au

INFORMATION ABOUT MENIERE'S DISEASE

Meniere's disease affects one in every 1000 Australians and is most commonly found in adults who are in their thirties or older. The disease is an incurable but manageable condition where excess fluid in the inner ear upsets the ear's balance and hearing mechanisms. This produces symptoms such as: vertigo (a form of dizziness where your surroundings appear to spin); tinnitus (an abnormal ringing noise inside the ear); fluctuating hearing loss; and a feeling of pressure or fullness in the ear due to fluid build-up.

Early diagnosis of Meniere's is important so that you can begin treatments that may help reduce the long-term effects of the disease. If you suspect you have symptoms of the disease and have internet access, you can complete a self-diagnosis checklist at: www.menieres.org.au/diagnosis.htm

The best treatment for Meniere's depends on what stage of the condition you are currently experiencing. It's important to seek medical advice from an appropriate health professional before beginning any treatment.

MORE INFORMATION

The Meniere's Resource and Information Centre (Australia) maintains an extensive collection of information resources on Meniere's and related topics. The centre collects and disseminates the latest information on treatment options and research results. *Ph: 03 9775 2972, Fax: 03 9787 2963, Email: info@menieres.org.au or Visit: www.menieres.org.au*

The Meniere's Support Group of NSW Inc. is run by a volunteer committee and provides telephone counselling, information and advice, and produces the *Balance* newsletter. *To contact the Meniere's Support Group of NSW Inc, Ph: 02 4861 3751, or Email: info@menieresnsw.org.au* Support groups are located in Sydney, Newcastle, Dubbo and Mudgee.



By Gary Want, NSW Department of Primary Industries

PROfarm is the brand name for all training programs delivered by NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSW DPI) to meet the needs of farmers, primary industries, agribusiness and the community.

All PROfarm courses have been developed in response to industry needs. Courses are delivered locally by highly skilled and respected NSW DPI staff. Many of the courses are subsidised to reflect the public benefits provided by the adoption of more sustainable farming practices.

Through PROfarm, *Country Web* readers have access to a host of new and improved courses and training opportunities that will help you to enhance your skills and keep up to date with the latest advances in farming practices.

By participating in a PROfarm course you will gain valuable skills to meet the ever-changing needs and compliance requirements of today's farming and agribusiness sector.

Through Tocal College C B Alexander Campus, Paterson and Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre, Yanco NSW DPI also offers a variety of educational courses, facilities and activities for people working in the state's primary industries. PROfarm is an important part of NSW DPI's commitment to delivery of lifelong training and education.

A PROfarm Short Course brochure is enclosed in this edition of *The Country Web*. It contains details of 73 accredited PROfarm short courses that NSW DPI has advertised for delivery in 2006. A further 60 courses are also available. These courses may be tailored to meet the specific needs of industry groups and delivered under negotiated arrangements, subject to sufficient demand.

For more information on PROfarm and courses available, Ph: 1800 025520 in northern NSW and 1800 625 422 in southern NSW or Visit: www.profarm.com.au

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Fee for each course is \$270 (until July 2006). 10% discount for Country Web readers. For more information, write to: Green Images, PO Box 2080, Caulfield Junction VIC 3161, Ph: 03 9528 4978, Email: greenimages@alphalink.com.au, or Visit: www.medicaloffice.com.au

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COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA

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- Do you represent any community groups?
- Are you involved in making presentations to groups?
- Are you a member of any committees?
- Are you interested in community radio?
- Have you always wanted to be able to write effectively for the media?
- Are you interested in studying but don't want to attend classes?

If you answered 'yes' to any of the above questions, you may want to enrol in the *Communications and Media* course offered through TAFE's Open Training and Education Network (OTEN). Enrolment in the course is available all year round. Course materials are posted to your home and your teachers are available by phone during normal business hours to help you.

For more information and course costs, Ph: 02 9715 8599 or Visit: www.oten.edu.au/oten/home.htm

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Alex Anthony, from Moulamein NSW, is a Director on the Board of Murray Irrigation Ltd and a delegate to the Ricegrowers Association of Australia Central Executive.



WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO BECOME INVOLVED?

I have always been interested in agri-politics and found that representational roles provided an opportunity to take part in decision-making processes.

Policy changes can have a huge impact on rural communities, and in particular, the way that business is conducted within those communities.

I believe it's important that we influence our own destinies where possible. There are no special 'types' of people who can undertake such roles. We all utilise a variety of skills, in our lives, business roles, workplaces, and socially. It's a matter of refining those skills, developing some confidence and putting them to work.

WHAT DO YOU GET OUT OF BEING INVOLVED IN THIS?

Satisfaction. I am utilising a range of skills, learning new skills, and actively participating within my community of interest.

There are always challenges to overcome; however, I think that at times challenges provide opportunities, which often result in better outcomes. I also get to meet and interact with interesting people, all with their own story to tell.

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED ANY OBSTACLES?

Working in areas which have traditionally been male-dominated areas there are always obstacles. I have taken the attitude that gender is not an issue and that performance should be based on skill level and contribution. I prefer to get on and get the job done and enjoy what I do.

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR SUPPORT?

I receive a lot of support from my family, friends, those I represent, and my colleagues.

I believe that developing communication networks with like-minded people, regardless of gender, is essential. These networks should provide encouragement, support and challenges. I also believe you should seek out educational opportunities to support your efforts and to enhance your contribution.

WHAT IS YOUR FINAL MESSAGE TO OTHER WOMEN WANTING TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN DECISION MAKING?

We all have skills which we use in our daily activities. The future of our rural and regional communities depends on people recognising and utilising their skills, and having a go at shaping their communities. The most important ingredients are commonsense, commitment and confidence.

Constitutions: What are they and who cares?

Members of community organisation may identify with these scenarios:

1. We have 'the right' people, a flawed Constitution and our organisation is struggling.
2. We have poorly skilled people, a flawed Constitution and our organisation is in constant turmoil, often racked by politics and self-interest.
3. We have poorly skilled people, an OK Constitution and our organisation is surviving but losing members.

In these scenarios, the purpose of the organisation is not being realised and members may feel they are 'wasting their time'.

A strong Constitution can help an organisation achieve its vision by providing a strong and strategic framework for everyone involved.

To start reviewing your organisation's Constitution:

1. Don't ignore or hide your Constitution because it is problematic (and usually mind-numbing to read). Work out what's wrong with it.
2. Learn from others who have led change. Read stories of why organisations nearly

failed and what changes were made.

3. Research and engage in discussions about the governance features of successful organisations.
4. Invest in a resource which can show you how.

Talking About Constitutions: Questions to Ask when Drafting or Reviewing a Constitution (community and membership organisations) is a handbook that provides:

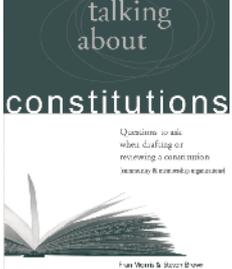
- The legal information for organisational structures
- Case studies
- Interviews with those who have led radical change
- Strategic questions
- A list of indicative clauses

Author, Fran Morris, wrote this book in response to the number of Constitutions she read which were causing governance problems. 'Constitutions are given little thought,' she said. 'We need to move from the concept of a Constitution being just a set of rules to it being a strategic framework and performance tool.'

Talking About Constitutions can be ordered from: www.directoreducation.com.au/publications/constitutions

BOOK GIVEAWAY

Fran has given two copies of her book as giveaways. To win a copy, write to: RWN, Locked Bag 21, Orange 2800 or email: allison.priest@dpi.nsw.gov.au stating why you'd like a copy of this book for your organisation.



Toughin' it out: Survival skills for dealing with suicidal thoughts

By Simon Bridge, Kamerunga Qld. Website: www.toughinitout.com

A general practitioner, living in Cairns, Queensland, Simon Bridge became increasingly frustrated that there was nothing he could hand to patients in order to help them stay alive when they admitted that they were having suicidal thoughts. So he decided to do something about the situation and has produced the 'Toughin' it out' pamphlet – a simple resource for people with suicidal thoughts. The pamphlet is based on years of counselling and Simon's own personal experience. It exposes the way that suicidal thoughts work and provides strategies to control the thoughts and to arrange a person's environment to diminish the likelihood of self-harm. Visit the website above to download a copy of the brochure.

I have spent many years in general practice. I have trained in Family Therapy, Narrative Therapy and Solution Focused Therapy. For many years I worked in psychiatry, private counselling and in Indigenous health. During this time I spoke to many people, who were struggling with suicidal thoughts. Some felt that they had good control over these thoughts as they had good reasons to keep living. For others, it was a real struggle as they were overwhelmed by the depression and saw suicide as a way out. For nearly all, admitting the presence of such thoughts was a matter of shame.

Working with these clients over a period of time, I was able to clarify what were the key points in describing the characteristics of suicidal thoughts and in organising their own situation so that it worked in favour of survival.

I also developed leukaemia and finished up on high dose steroids. This unleashed my own existing tendency for manic depression. I had several courses of ECT at different times and plenty of my own experiences with suicidal thoughts. In particular, I became aware that when the thoughts are most dangerous, they try to trick you into thinking that the rest of the family would be better off

without you. You feel you are not pulling your weight and that you are a burden.

These are particularly dangerous thoughts because they make it sound like suicide would be doing the family a favour, a noble act. This is never the case. Surviving family and friends never really get over the loss and spend years struggling to come to terms with the impact of suicide. So, some of my own experiences went into the pamphlet too.

The pamphlet is meant to be simple and to only contain a few key points, which the person can remember, despite their problems with concentration and memory. It starts by giving them an idea of how the suicidal thoughts work so that they can outsmart them. Putting the thoughts out there exposes them. It allows them to take a stand against the suicidal thoughts.

It suggests that they have a choice of whether they put themselves in a setting where they are more or less susceptible to the suicidal thoughts. Clearly, very few people suicide in company.

It makes the point that the depression will pass – a point often hard to accept by someone in the grip of depression. The pamphlet suggests that they will get stronger with time, if only they give it time.

Toughin' it out

Know the thoughts and outsmart them
Suicidal thoughts come in waves. The thoughts will reach a peak and then subside – usually over a few hours.

The thoughts try to stay hidden. They discourage you from sharing them with friends and family.

They isolate you.

Often the thoughts peak at night.

They will try and trick you into the idea that there is no future.

Worst of all they try and trick you into the idea that the family would be better off without you. This is NEVER the case.

To beat the thoughts and stay alive
When you feel them coming on, be with other people. People rarely suicide in company. Break the silence and talk.

If you are alone, use the phone. Ring a friend, family member or counselling service.

Be aware
Avoid alcohol and illegal drugs. These will often feed negative thoughts, that can make you feel sad or bad.

Remove anything in the house that could make it real easy to suicide if the thoughts have their way.

The depression will pass
Sooner or later you will get out of this hole and wonder how these thoughts ever got such a strong grip on you.

Getting stronger
Over time, with help, you will get back your old strength. This strength will put the suicidal thoughts in their place.

But it takes time. Having survival skills buys us time to work on turning things around.