



NSW DEPARTMENT OF
PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

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of social isolation in the current climate – having said this, no one is eliminated from the risk of social isolation that drought can impose.

Our network of volunteers comes from various groups – the common link is that we are all currently living and working on the land. Part-time workers, mothers, registered nurses, receptionists, clerks, administration officers and contractors – our mix of skills, passion to support our local people, positive outlook and understanding of our local residents makes the voluntary work enjoyable.

It is always the starting point for these networking programs

that seems insurmountable. How do you get people to come to events? What is the best event to attract as many people as possible to attend? How do I contact people? And the list goes on.

Local fire brigades are a good way to regenerate a social network and make contact with local people by defined areas. Creating a flyer and asking your mail person to deliver the flyers to specific people, or districts of people, is an inexpensive and inclusive way of spreading a social message. The local newspaper is always looking for news and articles – it doesn't take much time to write a short article for the paper and send in a photo or two of upcoming

events, or to share the success of a completed event.

Perhaps one of the trickiest issues to overcome when linking people affected by drought is who should and should not attend these social events? Some district residents may live on 100 acres and work in the local township; other residents may come to stay on their 10 acres for weekends only. Perhaps the philosophy to adopt is that everyone contributes to the survival of the local community and township in some way – working locally, spending locally or bringing money into the community – therefore these social opportunities are a great way to link everyone and even

break down a few barriers or perceptions about who is actually living on the next property.

This type of volunteer work is as self-rejuvenating for us as volunteer coordinators as it is for those attending the social event. Everyone in a drought affected community is impacted by the drought, whether you live in the district day-to-day, are transient within the community, whether you are young or old, single or married, with children or without. While drought tries to tear us apart, networking and socialising will bring us back together – give it a go within your community and reap the rewards. ■

The Christmas Surprise

By Jane Russ, Warren

We were in severe drought and things looked very grim. With Christmas on the doorstep and money extremely tight, our extensive family all racked their brains of how to make Christmas special. With no money it was hard to think of anything, especially for our six young grandchildren.

It was two days before Christmas and still we had no idea what to do for them and with hand feeding and watering the remaining stock daily, we were all extremely tired.

At the back of the house we had a small acreage of lucerne that was watered, at great expense, to keep our previous breeding stock alive. It was the only bit of green to be seen anywhere.

This morning, as usual, my husband hopped out of bed and walked over to the window to look at the sky, in hope of seeing rain clouds. When he called out to me, 'Quick, come and look at this', I ran to the window expecting to see rain clouds; instead, I saw two deer happily grazing away in the lucerne. The buck was huge with magnificent antlers, the doe sleek and dainty beside him. They both shone a brilliant auburn in the early sunlight, their small tails wagging contentedly. We could hardly believe our eyes as we live hundreds of miles from any known deer farm. We had no idea where they came from. They just appeared as if by magic.

I grabbed the phone and rang the whole family and I told them it was very urgent that they come and see our special Christmas surprise. We kept them in suspense until they had all gathered

at home and then we showed them the deer. I explained to the children that Santa knew how hard things were this year so, instead of presents, he sent his favourite reindeer Prancer and his wife. He had sent his leaders, the most important deer of all, until he needed them on Christmas Eve to take him around the world on his sled. He knew we could be trusted to do our best to look after them until then, and the fresh lucerne would keep them in good nick for the long trip ahead. The children wanted to get close to them and pat them. We gave them bread and carrots and the usually skittish deer stood quietly and ate out of their hands. Many photos later, the families went home. They returned for our family dinner on Christmas Day.

As luck would have it, the deer were gone Christmas morning. This has been our Christmas story now for a few years. I do wonder sometimes if this was a special gift for our family at Christmas or just luck! Does it really matter?

This story was reprinted from the book 'I Carried the Teapot, My Sister Carried the Cat: A collection of women's stories, poems and artwork', produced by the Lithgow Community Projects Inc. Available for \$30 + \$9 postage from Lithgow Community Projects Inc., PO Box 438, Lithgow NSW 2790, Ph: 02 6351 2230 or Email: lcpinc@bigpond.com

To be in the running to win a free copy of *I Carried the Teapot, My Sister Carried the Cat*, write to us and tell us in 25 words or less your most memorable moment with your family. Entries must be received by 22 January 2008. Send your entry to: **The Country Web, Locked Bag 21, Orange NSW 2800. See page 2 for competition terms & conditions.**

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THE DUSTY ROAD OF DROUGHT

As I drive along the dusty road,
I feel the farmers heavy load.
He works from dawn to red sundown,
but all around the land is brown.
It seems so long since he has seen,
waving fields of yellow and green.
It's been so long since he gave thanks –
for the sound of rain filling dams and tanks.

It costs so much to feed sheep and cattle,
balancing budgets – a constant battle.

Further down this dusty road of drought –
a woman stands – tall and strong,
she won't give in – she'll carry on –
to work as hard as she is able –
to put the food on her family's table.

To hear her story – her bright eyes with tears,
to witness her strength – her hopes and her fears.
It's time to give a helping hand –
to all the farmers of this great land.
So governments get your cheque books out,
and help our farmers through this drought!

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MILVALE

Triumph over adversity

Article by Anne Love, State Coordinator NSW Good Grief (www.goodgrief.org.au)

During my many years of involvement in education, first as a teacher and later in school administration in both rural and suburban areas of NSW, I have witnessed many examples of change, struggle, trauma and hope. I have chosen to share two particular stories which illustrate the ingredients that contribute to a positive and hope-filled life, incorporating the 'hard times' and moving through to the hopeful times.

The first experience involves an ordinary family in the 1980s, living in rural NSW, who were delivered some very difficult news. The family was living as 'normal' a life as any – Dad working, Mum blending the home, school and town involvement with three young children – when their eldest child, who was 11 at the time, was diagnosed with leukaemia and given only months to live. She underwent many months of hospital treatment and missed months of school, but with her mother always at her side. Despite being separated from home, her family and her friends, the support she received from visitors (when possible) and the messages

of love, concern and prayer for her recovery gradually saw her outlive the diagnosis! She eventually went on to complete her schooling, gain employment and now enjoys a family of her own. What a story of triumph over adversity!

The second experience was of a migrant family with six children, four of whom were born in Australia. The family had moved many times in an effort to gain appropriate housing prior to settling in a city suburb. When I first met the family the four eldest children were at school and the Dad worked only intermittently. They attended the local church where they were befriended by a priest from a similar cultural background. This led to wider support from the community on financial, practical and personal levels. Over a period of time there was much disruption in the household and cultural anguish was experienced by the mother before an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) was finally taken out against the father. The mother was left facing many challenges as she struggled to care for the family on her

own, with severe financial constraints and uncertainty as to accommodation. She did the best she could, however, with the support of the local church groups. She even managed to become involved in church support activities while the youngest children were at school. Eventually, with her new-found support, the mother was able to negotiate the necessary systemic bureaucracy to gain residency for her family and look forward to citizenship.

Both of these cases illustrate the need for support in times of crisis, or change from the familiar. That support provides encouragement, clarity and care while the normal effects of change and grief run their course. Life and its daily occurrences present a smorgasbord of events, some pleasant and others full of adversity. Some people bounce back from adversity while others succumb to its power. What contributes to this difference? An attitude that embraces the positive side of difficult situations becomes the focus for some people, while others are drawn to the negative aspects. That ability to bounce back, recover from, or

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adjust to misfortune or change is termed 'resilience'.

Resilience includes our physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing – our ability to reflect upon our experiences and to gain meaning from them.

Our pattern of approach or attitude to circumstances plays a vital part in the formulation of our perceptions. Research has shown that resilience is ordinary not extraordinary. It involves thoughts, behaviours and actions that can be learned and developed by anyone.

Lyn Worsley, Child and Adolescent Psychologist, in the *Resilience Doughnut* – 2006, identifies seven external factors which have been shown to build a person's resilience – the Parent Factor, the Skill Factor, the Family Factor, the Education Factor, the Peer Group Factor, the Community Factor and the Money Factor. She says that an individual needs to have three of these external factors working well for them to be able to build the level of resilience they need to manage in the world.

Some Individual Protective Factors surrounding resilience include the ability to communicate, to plan ahead, to learn from mistakes, to have creative interests, to problem solve, to have the capacity for humour, to have a sense of purpose in life, to be guided by spiritual beliefs and to feel connected to family members, peer group and friends.

Environmental Protective Factors involve a warm, positive relationship with at least one adult, high but not unrealistic parental expectation of family members, safe and positive routines and rules, appropriate

family responsibilities, family traditions/rituals, adequate parenting and supervision, positive community norms, opportunities for involvement, access to resources (people or things) and extended family support.

Building blocks of resilience include:

- **Self-esteem** – the appropriate regard and respect for self and others;
- **Coping skills** – managing feelings, thoughts and behaviours;
- **Problem solving** – viewing the situation as a large picture with many segments and listing alternative approaches to allow a better alignment of the scene;
- **Confidence** – adopting the attitude that 'I can be responsible and reliable, accepting mistakes as a learning into growth and reality';
- **Social skills** – communicate at a range of different levels, developing and maintaining community networks and relationships;
- **Optimism** – a real and balanced yet positive view of circumstances;
- **Moral development** – a sense of responsibility and self-control for one's speech, behaviour and actions.

Aids to improving resilience can be constructed around the following:

- **I HAVE**
 - ☑ Trusting and loving relationships with others – parents, siblings, teachers, friends;

- ☑ Structure at home – praise when rules are followed and fair sanction when they are breached;
- ☑ Role models – adults, peers and siblings who model good behaviour and morality;
- ☑ Encouragement to be independent – people who offer praise for increasing and responsible autonomy.

I AM

- ☑ Loveable – possessing or being helped to develop qualities that appeal to others;
- ☑ Loving – able to express affection to others and be sensitive to their distress;
- ☑ Proud of myself – feel a capacity for achievement and resist discouragement;
- ☑ Responsible – accepts and is given responsibilities and believes their actions can make a difference.

I CAN

- ☑ Communicate – able to express feelings and thoughts and listen to those of others;
- ☑ Solve problems – can apply themselves to problems, involve others where necessary and be persistent;
- ☑ Manage my feelings – knows and understands emotions, recognises the feelings of others and controls impulsive behaviour;
- ☑ Understand my own and other's temperament – has insight into their own and other's personalities.

Resilience research is positive, strength-based. It is not about fixing deficits, but building assets. People who are able to behave in a resilient manner

are less likely to experience depression or engage in: substance abuse; anti-social behaviour; suicidal thoughts; or emotional distress.

Resilient people are healthier and live longer, are more successful at school and work, happier in relationships and less prone to depression.



The Seasons for Growth Program, run through the Good Grief Foundation is an educative approach to change, loss and grief for young people and adults.

The Seasons for Growth Program develops protective factors that enhance resilience in the face of adversity, including: healthy self-esteem; problem-solving skills; decision-making skills; and coping skills. It strengthens social skills, provides companionship and peer support, and the opportunity to reflect on, and change, self-image and assumptions.

As people move through adverse situations with a positive approach they accumulate skills which provide more confidence for future occasions either for themselves or in supporting others.

Change is inevitable; a resilient approach to it eventually encourages others to challenge their assumptions, thoughts and behaviours, so that moving through the 'hard times' brings one to a more hopeful stance to life and all it beckons from us. ■

HELPFUL WEBSITES:

- www.goodgrief.org.au
- www.voicesforchildren.ca/report-nov2003-1.htm



Western Institute's Aboriginal Student of the Year

By Adam Bennett, TAFE NSW – Western Institute

When Shilo Barker started studies with TAFE in 2000 she didn't expect to go on to study the Diploma of Community Welfare Work, or to be eventually named Aboriginal Student of the Year as part of TAFE NSW Western Institute's Outstanding Graduating Student Awards.

The decision for Shilo to undertake TAFE studies was part of a plan to change her life. 'I wasn't working and decided I wanted to change my life and get work,' she said.

'I read the handbook in 2000 and picked welfare – it was an area of interest but I'd never taken any steps.'

Shilo started study in the Certificate III in Community Services (Welfare), after which she progressed to higher levels, eventually completing the Diploma.

Speaking of the qualification levels leading up to the Diploma, Shilo said that she looked at them as stepping stones toward what she wanted to do.

'It's been a long but happy journey which isn't over yet,'

she said. Next year Shilo is planning to continue study by undertaking the Bachelor of Social Science (Social Welfare) with Charles Sturt University.

Based on her completion of the Diploma Shilo will receive credit for 12 subjects in the degree, accounting for half the course. The university will also recognise all of the 400 hours of work experience she completed during her time at TAFE.

Shilo is currently a Senior Community Engagement Officer with the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs.

She credits TAFE with preparing her for the role, and through her studies she has progressed from being an unemployed sole-parent pensioner to being a full-time working sole-parent.

'There's no way I'd have had the confidence and skills to even apply for jobs like this,' she said.

'My studies have been relevant and transferable and have enabled me to build

confidence to push myself professionally and personally.

'I model behaviours, goal setting and achievements not only for my daughter but also my whole extended family.'

Shilo said that she loves learning. 'TAFE has given me the drive and now I never want to stop learning,' she said.

'I love TAFE. I'm forever telling people how great it is.'

Deanne Davis, Head Teacher of Welfare in Dubbo, nominated Shilo for this award. In the nomination she wrote that, 'Shilo is a great example of someone who knew where she wanted to go and when she got there made the most of the opportunities that came.'

Shilo has now added to this significant recognition with several new awards, including the Award for Academic Excellence in the prestigious 2007 NSW Gili Awards. She was also named the NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student of the Year and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student of the Year at the Australian Training Awards. ■

HOW TO 'GRADUATE' TO AGEING & RETIREMENT

Success in growing old requires an attitude of acceptance rather than a path of resistance or denial. Here are some tips adopted from a great book by Stephan Rechtschaffen called *Time Shifting: A revolutionary new approach to creating more time in your life*.

☑ Visualise your retirement before it comes. Look to the future without fear and see yourself as you want to be.

☑ Before retiring, take extra holidays or reduce your working hours so you begin to ease into the concept of having more free time.

☑ Engage in the process of learning regularly just for the joy of it without worrying about the results.

☑ Exercise your mind and body. Reading and exercise are equally important.

☑ Experiment with truly being alive and try to be spontaneous from time to time letting the day unfold without planning.

☑ Try new things so you don't get set in your ways.

☑ Listen to the young. You don't have to agree with them or follow their example. You are wiser, but they can have wisdom too.

☑ Spend time with small children. Play with them and share their delight in simple pleasures.

☑ Volunteer. Helping others gives life purpose and meaning.

☑ Allow yourself time to appreciate your life today. Ageing is part of the cycle of life so enjoy!

From sea change to tree change

By Barbara Newton, Tullamore



Barbara & Rick Newton, Tullamore

Barbara Newton lives in Tullamore with her husband Rick who is the local General Practitioner. They moved from Sydney at the end of 1998 and say that it has been a very fulfilling tree change. A registered nurse by profession, Barbara has also been a member of the Australian Opera. She stood at the last local government election and was elected as a Councillor in the Shire of Parkes.

It's funny how life wanders on and you find yourself up a path you never thought you would follow. Many paths have come my way over the years, short ones, interesting ones, challenging ones, and now I am on a long pleasant one. In the past I have had careers ranging from nursing to professional theatre. Now I am a country woman in a small town; a really small town.

Tullamore? Where is that? What will you do? These were the usual responses when my husband Rick decided to take the position of General Practitioner (GP) in the town of Tullamore. Of course, these questions crossed my mind too.

At first Rick and I said that we were going because our adult children wouldn't move out of home, so we would. In reality we were ready for a change and coming to Tullamore was indeed a change.

Rick and I were born and bred in Sydney but both of us thought we could enjoy living in the country. We had spent two years in Young in 1974/75 when Rick was a school teacher at St Clements College, Galong. However coming to Tullamore and the Central Western Plains was very different.

Rick had been a GP in Gladesville for many years and then worked for the Health Insurance Commission for three

years. One Saturday morning while looking through the employment section of the Sydney Morning Herald Rick saw a ad for a GP position in Cudal.

After visiting Cudal, Rick received a call from The Rural Doctors' Network saying that a position was available in Tullamore. 'Where's that', we thought. We arranged a visit to Tullamore and that was it. The community of Tullamore welcomed us and we have been here now for almost nine years.

The questions we are now constantly asked are: What do we like about being here? What do we do? and What do we miss about city life?

There are so many things to like about country life apart from the wide open spaces, stunning sunsets and passing of seasons.

One thing that I noticed when I first moved to Tullamore was the women and their cohesiveness. This was not common in the city. You have your friends, but don't really relate to other women as a group. Here I found that there is a common thread to womens' lives and purpose.

There is a great sense of belonging, whether it is to Tullamore, Parkes Shire, the Central West or just the bush. I have been surprised at my reaction to this sense of belonging, becoming very passionate about the issues of living in a rural area. It was the reason I stood for local government.

I never saw myself in the role of councillor, but it has been so rewarding and challenging. The more I have to do with other councils, The more I realise how fortunate we are to have

a non-Party political council. Being in local government and learning about the diversity of its functions and roles, I know that it can only benefit by more women being in local government – it is not all roads and garbage anymore.

Not only has council been a very steep learning curve, I have learnt many, many new things since moving into a small town. Coping with plagues of mice and locusts and experiencing drought never happened in Gladesville. Other things I have learnt are that everyone is related somehow, so be careful. When invited to lunch you stay for dinner as well and the esky is an essential item when socialising. Of course there are things I haven't learnt, such as how to drive a tractor, but I can help with fencing (if really pushed). Standing, singing on the Sydney Opera House stage, I never thought I would feel confident with a bit of poly pipe shoeing some steers.

Rick is like so many other GP's; he likes farming, so we now have land and cattle, hence the shoeing.

As to the question of what I miss from the city, apart from family, really only home delivered food and the movies. Shopping is also higher on my list now!

As time moves on Rick and I feel very much part of our town. We can't see ourselves living in Sydney again – we still love to visit of course but we don't consider it home anymore. Our move to the Central West has been very positive and rewarding for us. Now we just want to let other doctors' and especially their partners' know how good life can be when you try it in a country town, little or big. ■

Need a holiday but can't leave the farm?

Getting away from the farm for a much needed holiday, or even a short break to drop the kids off at boarding school or to attend a course, is a constant challenge for many farming families. With the ongoing drought though it's now more important than ever that families have the opportunity to take time out to focus on their health and wellbeing without the constant everyday stresses that come with farming in today's climate.



Let's face it though, there's a lot to consider before you can even begin to think of taking that much needed break – such as who is going to take care of the place when you're away?

Well, that's where Kim Kelly and Farm Sitters – Australia come into the picture. Recognising this age-old problem, Kim and her husband Phillip from Inverell in the state's north established Farm Sitters – Australia in 2003 as a way of connecting property owners who needed to leave their farms for whatever reason with experienced reliable people to 'farm sit' while they were gone.

'Back in 1999, Phillip and I were living in St George in Queensland. Friends of ours at Bollon needed to take their children back to boarding school and wanted to spend some time with the family away from the farm. Phillip's parents were selling the family farm and were able to help out by looking after the property while our friends were away. It was summer at the time so it was important that the stock waters were checked regularly, the dogs were cared for and someone had their eyes peeled for bushfires', said Kim.

'The following year, our friends took another family holiday, comfortable in the knowledge that the farm was being cared for and was in reliable hands. However, as time went by, the health of Phillip's parents left them unable to make the journey and the question was posed: Do you know of anyone else who would be able to help us out when we go away?'

Four years later Kim and her husband established Farm Sitters – Australia, a web-based business providing access to a database of people from across Australia (even in some of the remotest areas) who are available as short to medium term caretakers.

'Since establishing the business we have met some amazing people and get regular feedback from our members, including Bob and Ede Genders from Boggabri.'

'Once the plans were in place for our holiday we had to seriously think about the property, our animals and the need to have a presence on the place. Several options that we had fell through and then a Google search found Farm Sitters', said Ede.

'We were hesitant about leaving someone we didn't know taking control of our property, but we were put at ease when we met and discussed our concerns with Kim and Phillip.'

Ray Croft (who has a history in farming) and his wife Alison, are members of Farm Sitters and responded to Bob and Ede's call. They met up prior to them going away to discuss the finer details and it was agreed they would come down the day before Bob and Ede left for their holiday.

'We felt confident going away knowing that the stock and our pets would be well cared for. After a months holiday, we came home refreshed and ready to take on the workload. The farm was well looked after, the stock in good order and Ray even organised a bit of rain as well.

We will definitely use the service again!', said Ede.

As the business has grown Kim says they have identified several other high demand areas including property owners seeking permanent caretakers for additional homesteads and cottages on properties. 'There is also a demand for 'fill in' managers and overseers due to a seeming lack of workers willing to stay in the bush', said Kim.

'The other issue that has exposed itself is the issue of farm families being unable to get away from the farm due to the demands placed on them during or following the recent widespread drought. We recognise from a personal health and wellbeing perspective that these people are in desperate need of assistance.

'On the flip side, it has given many retirees and semi-retired people the opportunity to keep involved with rural life, travel and also provide some much needed assistance.' ■

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In the past, many farmers and rural people would have a social Friday night at the local pub or club. In this relaxed and familiar environment they would discuss, argue and comment on the weather, prices or any other subject that was relevant at the time. Over the last few years, the Friday night forum has shrunk or disappeared along with the opportunity for men to communicate, mix and possibly release pent up emotions amongst others who, often, are going through the same experiences.

In 2006, John Harper, a farmer from southern NSW, developed the self-help community program. Since then the Mate Helping Mate program has been very successful in raising awareness of the need for mental wellbeing in times of stress and anxiety, and has helped implement various activities that enhance social networking and the mental health of rural communities.

THE ISSUE

■ Many wives and partners of farmers have noticed that their menfolk are becoming withdrawn, isolating themselves socially as the drought continues. Opportunities for men to communicate, mix and release pent up emotions with peers, who often going through the same experiences, have shrunk or disappeared.

SOLUTIONS

■ Mate Helping Mate recreates the environment and atmosphere of a relaxed, informal social evening that encourages men and provides them with an opportunity to

open up and discuss issues that are affecting them, often with others in a similar position.

■ Mate Helping Mate takes the farmers out of their 'home' environment and allows them to relax personal restraints and use natural curiosity to enquire how other rural men, outside their own circle of friends, are handling and coping with similar circumstances. This often encourages the men to participate and share their experiences and problems.

■ Mate Helping Mate enables men to meet and mix with significant professional people in a relaxed and informal manner, and reduces the 'fear' factor most have when dealing with professional people in a formal situation.

■ Mate Helping Mate encourages each person to come to the evening with a view to helping or supporting each other in difficulties, without necessarily realising that by doing so they are helping themselves to cope better.

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR A SUCCESSFUL MATE HELPING MATE PROGRAM

☑ Take one small community to another

Buses can be used for this to enable groups to bond and interact on the trip. Service providers and professionals have found this to be a good time as it enables people to get to 'know' them as individuals, and helps break down possible barriers that can often occur if their first contact is at the function.

☑ It is important to identify natural leaders

Delegate to respected locals and natural leaders the responsibility of inviting people and encouraging them to attend.

☑ Those invited should be approached or phoned by several different people

This increases the networking and communication with isolated people who, even if they can't or won't attend the function, will benefit from the interaction and interest (and leave them open for future invitations).

☑ Promotion by word of mouth is best

Local media is always keen to publicise effective community initiatives.

☑ Provide an informal setting

Present information as simply as possible with an emphasis on quality not quantity. Encourage discussion and interaction to determine and discuss the group's particular interest.

☑ Ensure service providers make brief introductions

They should simply inform the group that they have the information on hand and the expertise to deal with an individual's problem if they are approached. As most problems won't be sorted out on the night, the providers need to be prepared to personally follow through requests for assistance.

☑ Prepare a simple budget

Put all expenses and sponsor money through a recognised non-profit organisation so that ABN, GST and proper accounting practises are used.

☑ Provide simple meals (BBQs) and minimise drinks

Both should be provided free as an incentive to attend.

MORE INFORMATION

The St Vincent de Paul Society has produced a DVD about Mate Helping Mate, available by contacting the St Vincent de Paul Society, Rural Taskforce Team on Ph: 02 9560 8666, Email: ruraltaskforce@vinnies.org.au or go to: vinnies.org.au

Bourke farmers take out joint NSW Young Farmer title

By Trudy Glasgow, NSW Department of Primary Industries



Western Division livestock producers Ben and Liarne Mannix of 'Gumbooka', Bourke, were named joint winners of the 2007 NSW Young Farmer of the Year Award at a special awards ceremony in Sydney in July.

In a first for the awards, now in their fourth year, the Young Farmer title was a tie between husband and wife team Ben, 33, and Liarne, 30, and Stuart Blake, 27, of Walcha.

Ben and Liarne, who diversified into goats and Dohne sheep to help cope with drought, were recognised for excellent farm and drought management skills and strong community involvement.

Stuart, a mixed grazing farmer who also runs an artificial breeding service for sheep and cattle, was named joint winner for outstanding

use of innovation and marketing.

Ben and Liarne manage their 18,000 hectare property, which is north-east of Bourke in the Western Division, together with Ben's parents, Paul and Patricia.

They also have a second property Corella, which is 16,000 hectares.

The couple described the win as a huge honour and said they looked forward to sharing some of their experiences and farming approaches with other young farmers across the State.

'My main message is to encourage other young farmers to get enthusiastic about farming and to learn more about the different approaches to sustainability and biodiversity,' Ben said.

'As far as managing your stock and animals and things, just be positive and keep questioning yourself, and keep looking for more information, because information is a fantastic tool.'

Liarne says it is important to stay in touch with friends and take a break from the farm, especially when coping with challenges such as drought.

'We try very hard to make a rule that we go away off the property at least one weekend a month. We take part in a rotating farm tour, where basically the idea is to go and visit other young farmers, and to try and harvest their knowledge and have a social catch-up as well.'

Traditionally Merino sheep producers, Ben and Liarne have diversified in recent years to focus more on goats and

alternative meat sheep breeds such as Dorpers and Dohne sheep to better suit both the local environment and ongoing drought conditions.

Ben and Liarne use the principles of Grazing for Profit and Holistic Resource Management in their farm management and are also involved in a five-year Enterprise Based Conservation Program.

Ben's use of a gyrocopter has helped reduce muster time from several days to just a few hours, and has provided an additional income source.

Good communication and planned regular breaks, including visits to other Western Division farmers, has helped them cope with six years of drought. Ben and Liarne are very active community members and have actively supported young farmer forums in the Western Division.

Rob Sinnamon, manager of a cattle farm near Casino, was named NSW Farmer of the Year at the gala awards dinner which was part of the NSW Farmers Association annual conference.

Rob took out the award for his efforts in boosting the quality of the cattle breeding enterprise, establishing increased market opportunities and implementing improved water and soil health management.

Farmer of the Year runner-up, Stuart Larsson of Mallingane, also in northern NSW, was recognised for his diversification into seeds and organic soybean production, and improved environmental results through use of compost produced on-farm.