

fortune favours the brave

WRITTEN BY FIONA STOCKER PHOTOGRAPHY BY DERMOT MCELDOFF

Deb Morice battled the odds and the milk price for decades as a dairy farmer. Now an area manager for a milk manufacturer, she uses her lessons learned and emotional attachment to the industry to help others survive in one of farming's toughest sectors.

Dairy farming was the last thing Deb Morice saw herself doing as a child. On getting home from school to her parent's farm in Meander, northern Tasmania, it was her job to hose down the yard.

"I remember holding the pressure hose with both my hands on it and flies all around my face, and thinking, why would you do this for a living," Deb recalls.

She laughs now when she recalls vowing that she would never to marry a dairy farmer.

"And I didn't marry one, but I turned him into one," she says.

Deb has needed the that big and ready laugh over the years, as she and husband Greig weathered their fair share of highs and lows affecting those whose fates are tied to commodity prices.

After dairy farming in northeast Tasmania for more than two decades, followed by a stint as logistics manager for Tasmanian cheese manufacturer Ashgrove, Deb needed all her years of experience and wisdom when the milk price was cut in May 2016.

At that point Deb had taken a big step and was the field officer for Fonterra, managing farms contracted to them in the northeast of Tasmania. She found herself answering to 68 farmers on the company's behalf.

As a girl, Deb divided her time between her parents' farm and that of her Auntie Doreen, by all accounts a bit of a character.

"She was on her own on that farm after her first husband left her," Deb explains.

"And my word her work ethic was unbelievable, the way she kept the dairy, the house and the farm was a credit to her."

There's every chance that Auntie Doreen's strong mindedness rubbed off on Deb, because at 17 years, when her father put his foot down and told her to either get back to school for Year 12

or get a job, she did just that.

Within a week she had a job and a driver's licence and started work at a local haberdashery and insurance office.

But the land was calling - and so was married life. Deb met husband Greig at the Elizabeth Town football club's annual dinner. "e met in the October, got engaged in the December and were married in the July," she recalls.

Although Greig had grown up on a dairy farm, he had never helped with the milking and was employed at the time as a farm labourer. Shortly after they married, that farm was sold and Greig was out of a job. Luckily, Deb had ideas.

Deb says at the time share farming was being talked about increasingly as a means of entry into dairying.

"It was big in New Zealand although it was still new to Tasmania," she says. Winning a job in nearby Montana for share farming at a 30 per cent share, they moved in and began from the bottom.

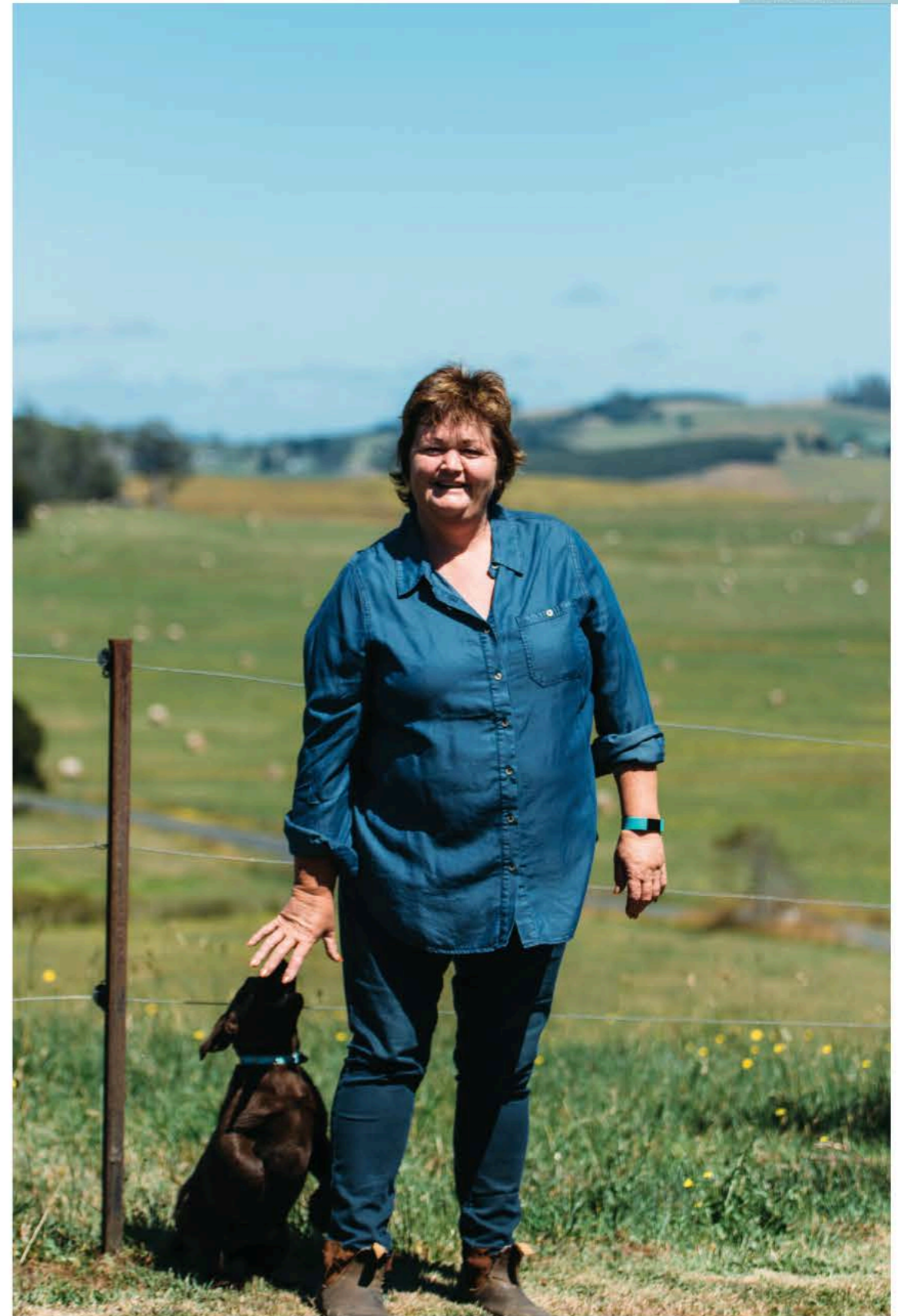
"I can honestly tell you, we had nothing," Deb remembers. "We had \$200 to our name, that was all. When you share farm at 30 per cent of the milk cheque income, she adds, "you're the labour".

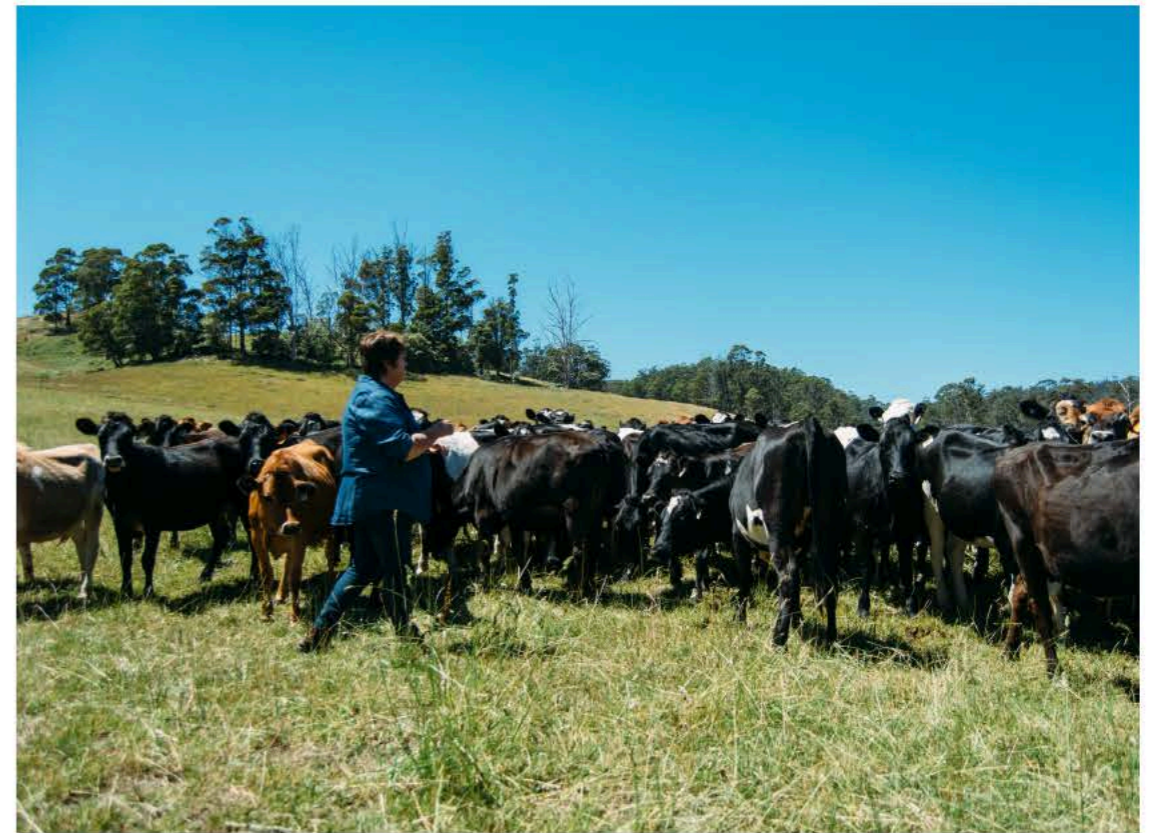
Staying on the 2000 acre farm for seven years, the couple turned their hand to whatever was required, not just in the dairy operation but with sheep and beef cattle and somehow fitted in having three children.

But the day came when Greig arrived home early and announced that he had quit.

"He'd had enough of working for someone else and he wanted to go further," Deb says. "We both did."

Seeing the wisdom of investing early on, they had begun making small investments like purchasing farm machinery





whenever they could, building assets and offsetting costs against the business.

They would still have to borrow to buy into a 50-50-fifty share farming agreement, where the land-owner and share farmer divide the income from milk supplied equally, but they had made inroads into what became a lifetime habit of careful financial management.

To their surprise, the couple found there was a wealth of share farming opportunities in Tasmania as the idea had taken off. Deb was drawn to a farm at Derby in the state's northeast, where her grandmother had run the Weldborough Hotel. Invited to take the children up for Sunday lunch and view the farm, which belonged to Tasmanian Minister John Beswick, Deb and Greig found a warm welcome and a new homestead. The dairy itself, however, was another matter, says Deb.

"It was old, it faced the wrong way, there were no laneways, and there were heaps of rocks in piles from all over the farm," Deb recalls. "The only good feature of it was the view over Derby."

Borrowing the \$80,000 they needed to buy into the share agreement was 'a battle', with interest rates at 20 per cent. But they were eligible for a young farmer loan through the state government's development authority.

Even so, says Deb, "the fellow that gave us the loan still told us we'd go broke".

They set about improving the herd, which was a mix of good dairy cows which then calved to a beef bull, and unpromising heifers which somehow produced a beautiful Friesian calf.

Deb and Greig invested in 10 Friesian cross-breeds at a costly \$500 a head which formed the nucleus of a improved herd moving forward.

After the first three years they built a new dairy, with Greig doing the construction work by hand.

"They were tough years," Deb explains. "The milk cheque covered our debt, and what we had left was to run the farm. There wasn't anything to live on. But somehow we made it. We never employed anyone, we never took a holiday, we just worked."

Their first year was similar in conditions to the one just experienced by Tasmanian farmers, with drought, flood and a drop in the milk price.

"In the 15 years we were farming we had our fair share of ups and downs," Deb remembers, adding that it seemed to move in a three-year cycle.

Ten years on, the couple were on a 60% share but with milking capacity on the farm limited to two hundred cows, their potential income had a limit. With an eye on the future, Deb and Greig had increased the herd to around three hundred, leasing out the extra cows.

During the years at Derby they built their knowledge of the industry by joining dairy discussion groups, says Deb, meeting like-minded people, visiting other farms and coming home with new ideas to implement.

The both had a thirst for learning. "We never stopped studying," Deb says. "We both kept on doing courses and anything we could get our hands on."

They reaped the rewards and were named Tasmanian Share Farmers of the Year, winning a conference trip to New Zealand. The trip opened their eyes and they returned with a clear new goal of milking greater numbers.

"The industry had started to boom and we were excited, I suppose," Deb remembers.

Opportunity loomed large when an investment partnership purchased Rushy Lagoon, 55,000 thousand acres of undeveloped land at the extreme north eastern tip of Tasmania.



With the backing of private investment funding, the partnership converted the land to dairy and offered three farms on a share farming contract, building the infrastructure within an astonishingly short period, including 32 unit herringbone dairies and houses for farming families.

"At Agfest in the May, I didn't have a house," Deb says. "But I moved into it on 4 July."

This time securing a loan to expand was easier and interest rates were lower. The couple moved to Rushy with 400 cows on a 50-50 share agreement. Over the next five years they grew their business to 700 cows and four employees, with Deb joining the board of Dairy Tasmania for three years.

When the dairy industry was deregulated and Deb and Greig's farm business received a payout, it seemed an opportunity to take stock. By this time, their children had grown and pursuing their own goals elsewhere.

When Greig's father fell ill back in the central north coast region, the couple took the chance to purchase the family farm, just 360 acres, and step away from dairying. Instead, they fenced, built a new homestead, planted a garden and converted the farm from dairying to beef cattle.

"I thought of it as long service leave and I think Greig did too," Deb says.

Before long, however, she grew bored of 'standing on the other side of the fence hanging onto the sledgehammer while he put the staples in.'

So she took a job at nearby Ashgrove Cheese, premium artisan cheese manufacturer. History repeated itself as she went in at entry level, making up boxes on her first day and worked her way up to the role of logistics manager, completing a TAFE course no other woman had ever studied.

After a brief spell working for two local politicians, her increasingly impressive skill set was noticed, and she was offered the role of area manager and milk supply officer in the northeast of Tasmania for New Zealand based milk company and manufacturer, Fonterra.

Deb saw the role as a chance to give back to the industry she had developed a passion for, and to work with farmers she had a personal connection with.

"That was a great draw," Deb says.

"And I knew it would be different from anything else I'd done."

Indeed it was. Every scrap of her experience and wisdom is put to the test nowadays, including her knowledge of financial management in the industry both at farm and company level,

the effects of international markets, and the relationship management skills she learnt at the Marcus Oldham College in Victoria, where she completed a week-long rural leadership course in 2013.

"You've got to know so much," she says. The job is possibly best described as one of managing protocols on behalf of both the farmer and the company, Deb adds.

Nowhere was this tested more severely than in May 2016 when Fonterra followed Murray Goulburn and cut its milk price from \$5.60 to \$5 per kilogram of milk solids, and then applied the cut retrospectively.

After years of experiencing such events as the farmers, Deb found herself the person representing the company and answering to farmers, often in person.

The announcement was made on the weekend of Agfest, Tasmania's agricultural show. Besides taking calls from farmers, Deb had to face them in person, both at the show and in the weeks that followed at their farms.

Deb admits it took its toll.

"That week in May was one of the toughest weeks I've ever had in my life," Deb recalls.

Many of those she visited, farmers she has known for years, were reduced to tears, in desperation and anger, she says. "It just played on your mind all the time how you could help them."

After 18 months in the job, Deb estimates she has driven 90,000 km and worn out two sets of tyres. Despite this, she's no closer to an answer on the future of the dairy industry.

"I think we're all looking for a more level milk price," she says.


Much rests on the company achieving the right mix of products for export, she believes.

Those she is most concerned about, she continues, are the younger farmers.

"Those who are not established, perhaps in their first year - they're the ones who are more vulnerable," Deb says.

Those who survive, she believes, are the ones who manage to persevere and invest.

"We learned our lesson early," Deb says, recalling how she and Greig put away what they could in investment, "so you have it to fall back on in the tight times."

Fortune favours the brave and the bold perhaps, but in this risk laden business there are no guarantees. And with that, Deb climbs into her four-wheel drive for another day travelling the lush pastures and landscapes of the industry she loves, still trying to lessen the burden for the farmer she used to be. 



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