



farmers talking to farmers

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY FIONA STOCKER

Rural Help@Hand is the Tasmanian charity supporting rural people in hospital, and the staff and families caring for them

In early 2008 Annette Reed spent months in a Melbourne hospital with her daughter Katherine, who had been thrown from a horse and sustained neck and back injuries which left her paraplegic, requiring many months of surgery and rehabilitation.

Alarmingly, the Reeds found staff at the hospital had very little idea of their particular needs as a rural family cast adrift from their home.

‘They had no idea of where we were from or what we were about, so they weren’t able to support us in a lot of ways,’ says Annette. She came to believe that rural people spoke a different language, one that wasn’t understood in the corridors of a city hospital.

One crucial thing medical staff had no understanding of was that farm life had to go on, with livestock, crops and family back home needing to be looked after, in Annette and husband Nevil’s case, four other children and an heirloom tomato farm. She noticed that rural patients often ended up isolated while their loved ones back home struggled with huge workloads.’

The unanswered needs of those patients were not just practical, but emotional and spiritual. The Reeds were torn about where they should be. When Nevil returned to the farm at Selbourne, it was with a sense of abandoning his wife and daughter. ‘It just tore us apart,’ says Annette, with feeling.

The longer they remained at the hospital, the more she saw rural patients with the same unanswered concerns, often desperately unhappy, stressed and grieving for their former life, with the prospect of not being able to return to the farm, and facing that fate alone. She witnessed patients who had no support available and families which fell apart because they couldn’t stretch to accommodate the distance, or the emotional harm of their situation.

There was clearly a need to support rural patients not just while they were in hospital, but after they returned home as well. ‘When farmers leave hospital they have to get straight back on the farm, and how do you adapt?’ questions Annette. ‘They have different



transport needs, and how do you access further medical care?’ She heard many stories of patients making choices about their care based on practicality, what would allow them to meet the demands of the farm, rather than what was the best option for them medically.

Katherine’s rehabilitation centre, on the banks of the Yarra, was itself an old farm property with ‘paddocks and bush up the back’ and Annette began ‘heading bush’ regularly for respite. Soon she was taking Katherine and other patients with her too. ‘The look on someone’s face when they first get that wheelchair off the smooth polished floor of a hospital and onto a rough gravel path – it’s terrifying and exhilarating, and there’s just a sense of huge freedom.’

Annette is guilty, she says, of wanting to fix a problem where she sees one. By the time they left hospital, the people who had cared for Katherine had a totally different understanding of their needs as people from a distant agricultural community.

This laid the foundations for the charity Annette established two years later, and the work Rural Help@Hand does today. Its goals are twofold, but the main focus is on educating the people looking after rural patients, this being the best way for a small organisation to maximise their efforts. Key personnel from a small network of volunteers with directly relevant experience give talks to medical professionals and students and raise awareness of rural people’s particular needs.

The charity’s other goal is in offering real assistance on the farm. ‘When the need arises, we put our networks into gear and see who we can come up with,’ Annette says. They work with the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, Rotary and Church groups – whoever has the relevant farm skills.

Rural Help@ Hand is supported in Tasmania by the Tomato and Garlic Festival which the Reeds hold on their farm at Selbourne annually as a fundraiser. The service is now well established in Tasmania and Annette would like to see it rolled out beyond state boundaries.

Hers is a familiar name and voice in Tasmania, as winner of the RIRDC Rural Women’s Award in Tasmania in 2014 after which she gave workshops on small farming initiatives, and as former President of Tasmanian Women in Agriculture. Whilst her personal and professional life has been about caring, family and farming, her passion is for educating and bringing people together. It has become a component of everything she does beyond the farm gate. We speak a different language in farming, she says. Rural Help@Hand is about ‘farmers talking to farmers’, and creating something for the greater good from her family’s life-changing experience.



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