



Rural Champions 2024

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO BOTH FARMING
& COMMUNITY THROUGHOUT THE SOUTH ISLAND.



Rural Champions



They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. So apologies, glass-half-full girl Emma Crutchley, but I'm going to filch one of your lines from the following pages. The one about accepting the things you cannot change — "because you could dwell on them forever and they make you really unhappy."

The world is a crazy place and it seems to be getting crazier by the day. For us in New Zealand, a tiny island at the bottom of the world, there is little individually we can do about the devastating Ukraine conflict, the sideshow of American politics, or China's economic weakness. There is also little farmers and growers can do about weather, commodity prices — although a shout-out to those fabulous southern on-farm businesses which are diversifying their wool clip into an array of home and fashion products — I'm looking at you The Clip, Ater, Lora & Flok, Mt Nicholas, Davaar and Co, West Ridge, and McIvor Hill to name just a few — and ever-increasing on-farm costs.

But what we all can do is take a minute to focus on the positives and raise a glass — be it of Taieri pasture-raised milk, a Central Otago pinot noir, or a whisky produced from Southland barley — to our Rural Champions; those who have chosen life on the land, with all the challenges that entails while also making their rural communities a better place to live.

We can heed the words of mental health champion Sir John Kirwan, who officially launched the Otago Daily Times-Rural Life Rural Champions campaign at the Wānaka A&P Show in March by encouraging farmers to stop worrying about factors out of their control, share their issues, get off the farm, and do other things.

Last year's Year of the Farmer campaign was a resounding success, capped off by naming the indomitable Myfanwy Alexander, from Duntroon, as our inaugural Rural Champion. Since then, Myfanwy has continued her fabulous work in the agricultural sector, including launching a podcast with her friend Emily Walker called Ag in Conversation, and being named a finalist in the Dairy Woman of the Year. I am excited to see what other great things are around the corner for her.

It seemed that Year of the Farmer would be hard to top but, after making the call for

nominations for our 2024 Rural Champions campaign, they flooded in from the north and south of the South Island, and the east and west.

This year, we added an additional category — those who work in rural support; the often behind-the-scenes folk critical to the smooth running of farming and growing operations — and we were delighted with the breadth of nominations.

During these uncertain times, the stories captured in this publication are a salient reminder of all that is good about New Zealand's rural sector. Humble, hardworking folk who persevere among a myriad of challenges, adapting and innovating to sustain their farms, support their families, and contribute to the wellbeing of their communities.

Now our judges — Myfanwy, Rabobank's acting chief sustainability officer Blake Holgate, a representative from Landpro, and myself — have the hard task of deliberating.

In October, one outstanding food producer will be named our Rural Champion — along with our champion rural services provider — and we will again celebrate their contribution to the rural sector. I can't wait.

Sally Rae
Business and Rural Editor
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How to grow a growing business

SIMON AND TRUDI WEBB

Orchardists
Otago

It has been a journey of setting strategic goals and reviewing objectives for Cromwell orchard owners Simon and Trudi Webb.

The couple have had to be brave and back themselves as they had a vision to expand the family business over the years.

Simon and Trudi were nominated for Rural Champions for their vision and hard work expanding their orchard business.

Both sit on governance boards for the industry and Trudi is involved at a national level.

The orchard now grows 60ha of summer fruit and pip fruit on the outskirts of Cromwell.

Around 35% of the fruit is sold locally from their roadside shop and local supermarkets and the remainder is sent to the North Island where it is distributed to supermarkets under a home brand.

The Webb family has been synonymous with fruit growing in the Cromwell area for 110 years.

Simon's great grandfather purchased the land in 1914 and each subsequent generation has taken the operation ahead with innovation and tenacity.

It isn't an easy industry to be in; sensitive to drought, floods, economic disruption and ever-changing market tastes.

Simon's parents John and Ainsley took over the orchard in 1974 and were responsible for a lot of development and innovation.

Simon said his parents showed great foresight and nerve to use water from overhead sprinklers to protect crops from frost damage; a



Drive and tenacity . . . Cromwell orchardists Simon and Trudi Webb have expanded their family orchard from 15ha to 60ha since taking over in 2002. PHOTO: SHAUN JEFFERS

concept his grandfather Jack had been experimenting with since the 1950s.

Simon and Trudi met at Massey University while studying horticulture and they worked overseas before returning to the orchard in 2002.

Simon enjoyed 10 years working alongside his father John on the orchard while also setting up a large cherry orchard nearby.

Simon said had his father not become ill and died within six weeks, he would likely still be "tinkering away at something", working on the orchard.

"Dad was a great mentor to have. I probably miss him more socially than for any other

reason.

"A Friday night beer or a Sunday cup of tea. We were pretty good mates in that respect," he said.

The business growth has been a steep and deliberate expansion with the couple setting themselves clear strategic goals.

When they moved home in 2002, 15ha of land was in orchard and they have since expanded this to 60ha.

Simon is a strong numbers man and enjoys analysing data.

"You have to earn the right to grow a business and put yourself in a good position in order to do that."

An orchardist is also a patient operator; the first lot of fruit

will come 18 months after a tree has been planted but peak production will not happen until year seven to eight. Simon has been involved with the development of new varieties and has ensured the business is well-positioned with fruit the market wants.

"A lot has changed in that respect over the years.

"Some people say the new varieties just aren't as tasty, but I would tend to disagree.

"We now have fruit that stays firmer for longer and I believe with a superior taste. It means less wastage for both supermarkets where the fruit has a longer shelf life and, in the home, where the fruit will go the distance in a lunchbox."

The orchard now has 10 full-time workers year-round and employs 80 seasonal staff through the summer.

Their three children are keen workers.

"We focus on employing our local students when they are on school holidays and, when they go back to school, we will employ backpackers".

Simon enjoys taking on the students, "some of them are with us right through their teenage years. You see them come in as shy 15-year-olds and six or seven years later they do their final season confident, hard-working adults. That's a pretty cool thing to be part of," he said. — Alice Scott

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Creating culture . . . Silver Fern Farms Finegand plant manager Bronwyn Cairns has had a long involvement in the red meat sector.

PHOTO: GREGOR RICHARDSON

Teamwork key to managerial success

BRONWYN CAIRNS

Meat plant manager
Otago (although lives in Southland)

IT might be 4.20am but Bronwyn Cairns never doesn't want to get out of bed and go to work.

Bronwyn is manager of Silver Fern Farms' Finegand plant, just out of Balclutha, where she is responsible for a workforce of about 1200 people.

Her nomination said she had made a significant contribution to Southland communities over an involvement in the red meat industry which spanned more than 40 years.

That included site manager for Silver Fern Farms Waitane, near Gore, before she took on the "big beast" — as she calls it — that was Finegand.

Bronwyn grew up in Mataura, the youngest of four girls, and recalled tagging along with her father to his job at the freezing works where a highlight was running through the plant to choose what piece of offal she wanted for her lunch.

After leaving school, she went straight to Southland Frozen Meats' plant in Mataura in 1984 to work as a laboratory technician. After five years, she embarked on her OE and, on her return, joined Waitane Meats Ltd in quality control in 1992.

She moved up the ranks as technical officer and then technical manager, production supervisor and then production manager before being appointed plant manager in 2017.

Initially Bronwyn was asked to help out at Finegand for a few weeks when the previous manager left. But then she realised she "actually couldn't leave".

"I felt like I needed to stay here, I felt they needed someone to care for them and to be there to help."

So after six months of managing both

sites, she became a permanent fixture at Finegand, travelling each day from her Gore home to the plant, a significant employer in the Clutha district.

Such a large force came with responsibility, something she keenly felt. She was fortunate to have an "amazing" team around her; there was a common thread of people all wanting to be on the same journey, to see improvements and to work for Silver Fern Farms because they were proud of what they did.

She acknowledged at times her job was "bloody tough" and also that she had "incredibly bad imposter syndrome".

It had taken hard work and some sacrifices to get where she was. There was a fair bit of stubbornness involved as well.

She was passionate about what she did and also keen to share the opportunities available in the industry. Her own journey had seen "fantastic" wider support and training.

Her nomination said she was known for creating strong team cultures within the sites she has managed and ensured the company supported many local goodwill initiatives.

A believer of getting out in the district and telling people that Silver Fern Farms was the employer of choice, that included introducing the Local Legend initiative.

So does it consume her life?

"I guess it does. . . you do have to be that way inclined, you have people working 24/7 so switching off isn't easy," she said.

While pleased with what she had achieved at Finegand, she said it was still work in progress and she wanted to see out what she had started. — Sally Rae



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Solar farm a massive undertaking

HAMISH HILLS

Dairy farmer
Tasman

HARNESSING the sun's energy has gone to the next level for Hamish Hills and his dairy farming family who have developed a solar farm with just under 3000 panels at Golden Bay.

After three years of planning and logistics the solar farm was turned on last year.

"We did it before it was cool, if that makes sense, and quite early on.

"The reality of it was that we knew absolutely nothing about solar. At first we were going to do it for the effluent pump at our cow shed that we were relocating from Marlborough and I still actually haven't put it in.

"The idea of the solar farm started around the kitchen table and the old man and I were having a yarn at the end of the driveway and thought could we go bigger? My parents, John and Betsy, have done a lot of different things as well and have worked bloody hard to allow us to be in a position to take this on."

He rang up the local network company and asked how large an operation they could put in and after a few weeks was told 1.2MW.

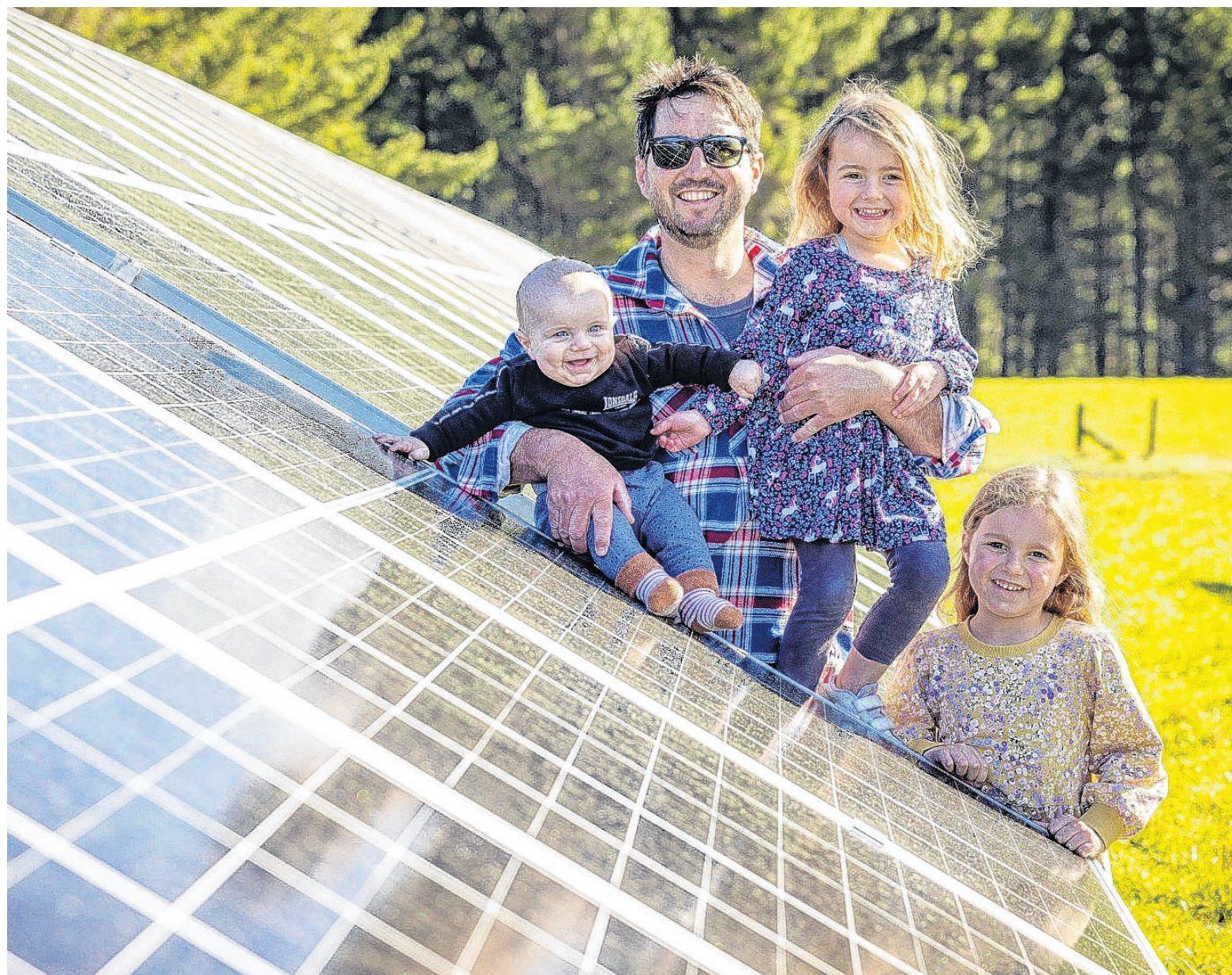
The 2.5ha site ended up producing 1.43MW which supplies the energy needs of just over 310 houses.

Chugging through the resource consent process and even a union strike on an Australian wharf delaying their solar panel shipment failed to derail the project.

Months of work dealing with power retailers, the council and bank — including over Covid lockdowns — were needed to get it over the line.

Mr Hills was working in construction management in Australia when he returned in 2017 to take on the farm with partner Monique and their children Georgia, Macy, and Austin.

The chosen site is on heavy, wet soils, less than ideal for farming and perfect for a solar farm.



Family affair ... Golden Bay dairy and solar farmer Hamish Hills at the family's 3000-panel solar farm with 1-year-old Austin, Macy, 5, and Georgia, 6.
PHOTO: ALEX WALLACE PHOTOGRAPHY

The Hills farm 280ha where they milk 370 cows, rear young stock including replacements, breeding bulls and beef animals, with another 500ha consisting of 350ha in regenerating native bush, and forestry blocks.

The people, animal health and land are the first priorities, with milk production "fourth down the line". Milk quality is high on the list. Once-a-day milking was introduced in the 2017-18 season and they have managed

to maintain their production on a low-input system, he said.

The early adopters of technology who like to nudge farming forward pride themselves on their small carbon footprint.

All their power goes to the main grid and does not feed their own needs because of their location, although a 20KW system is about to go into the cow shed.

Mr Hills insisted on their own electricity connection being 100% renewable and

switched to a certified company to achieve this.

"To get a return on investment everything has to be viable otherwise it is not sustainable. We really care about the environment. There's a point in time when you have to look at your kids in the eyes and farming cops a lot unfairly when there's some bloody good farmers in New Zealand leading the way in initiatives, and I don't think they get a lot of credit for what they do."

Mr Hills won the Nelson Tasman Chamber of Commerce environmental award.

He sits on the steering group for the Farmers Across Marble Aquifer catchment group and is an executive director for the Rural Service Centre, a country store and vet clinic.

On top of co-coaching his daughters' under-6 rugby team, he co-coaches the senior Takaka side and is vice-president of the Takaka Rugby Club. — Tim Cronshaw

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Much more than just a veterinarian

AMY WATTS
Veterinarian
Otago

“**A**N exceptional human with a love for the rural communities she serves.”

That endorsement refers to veterinarian Amy Watts, who took the plunge in February 2021 to launch her own veterinary practice — a brave move in an industry dominated by large businesses.

Not only did Central Otago-based Black Sheep Veterinary provide veterinary support to the rural sector, it also filled a rural support role — “like so many trusted advisers, veterinarians and identities do in isolated communities”.

“Amy’s willingness to act not only as an experienced veterinarian but often as a friend and confidant to people is something that she does not take for granted.

“She has a natural ability to be an ear for both farm issues and those which fill a typical rural lifestyle. This has led to a reputation as a community identity of huge value and a character alike.

“This unofficial role of ‘rural support person’ is also fitting for the nature and model of Black Sheep’s business. Because of Amy’s trusted individual relationships with each client, farm manager and staff, they feel they are able to openly discuss rural issues such as health and wellbeing, financial pressures, employment issues, animal wellness, *Mycoplasma bovis*, flooding, droughts and the impacts of these on their lives. This resonates immensely with the farming community.”

It was also a business that went “above and beyond for the client.

“There is often baking left in a



Happy in her work . . . Central Otago vet Amy Watts goes above and beyond for her clients. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

letter box if times are tough or as a thank you, a thoughtful Christmas gift for those loyal clients with a handwritten card or a trusted voice on the end of

the phone when it’s all a bit much.”

Originally from Hawke’s Bay, Amy took pre-veterinary science classes at Massey University but

failed to get into the vet course. So she worked on a dairy farm and travelled for four years, before returning to vet school. She worked for veterinary

businesses in Southland, South Canterbury and Otago before launching Black Sheep. She works mainly with sheep, beef and deer and also does some dairy and horse work.

Amy loves the Central Otago community, where she was well supported by some amazing clients. She acknowledged it was a big risk for them to leave large veterinary companies and give a little one a go, and she found that “pretty humbling”.

“I never chased business, it’s their choice. I’m not a salesperson,” she said.

While Amy had worked in some amazing teams in the past, her team now was her clients. Getting invited to a staff Christmas party was also humbling, because that meant it was that step beyond “just being the person who comes in and helps”.

It was a challenging, stressful, fun and exciting industry to be involved in and Amy quipped that most people knew her surname as The Vet.

The nomination said she was often on the sports sidelines cheering kids on in her local community and she regularly volunteered behind the bar at the local rugby club.

Black Sheep also supported local businesses, rural farming events, facilitates and organises workshops for relevant farming matters, including drench resistance information sessions, and recently held a midwinter social event in the community hall as a way to get people off-farm for an evening.

She is a director on the Deer Industry New Zealand board. She is also one of 11 New Zealand Members of Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Science in Medicine of Sheep, and she is a past president of the New Zealand Veterinary Association deer branch. — Sally Rae

Growing connections, opportunities to help farmers

DAVID ECKHOFF
Technical field officer
Otago

“**D**AVID exemplifies the old-fashioned value of customer service and putting your customer first.”

David Eckhoff, a senior technical field officer based in Farmlands’ Mosgiel office, treats each farming client’s business like it is his own, something which is appreciated by his clients.

“He is constantly looking for ways to help improve our farming practices and look for new opportunities to grow our farming business,” one grateful farmer said.

David tried never to tell or suggest anything to his farmers that he would not do to his own farm.

“I think if this was my paddock, or my sheep or cows, what would I do?”

He was raised in Balfour until he was 10 when the family moved to Roxburgh. After working for Ravensdown for seven years, initially in



Beet that . . . David Eckhoff’s role is all about helping farmers grow. PHOTO: LINDA ROBERTSON

Southland and then North Canterbury, and a stint in rural banking, he returned home to manage the family farm at Coal Creek.

That property was later sold to enable succession and he and his wife Pip spent time in both Wānaka and at Berwick before

moving to Dunedin.

At Farmlands, his role was all about helping farmers grow; the main aspects were around agronomy, nutrition and animal health and he also dealt with infrastructure like fencing and water schemes.

“I spend a lot of time

preparing for visits and finding the best possible solution no matter what the subject may be — crop protection, dairy detergents, stock water systems, seed varieties, fencing systems and so on.

“I take the time to find the best pricing from suppliers and within the Farmlands network of stores which involves lots of phone work.

“We want the same thing which is what’s best for the farmer.

“I want to be part of their business for the next 20 years, not just a sneaky cheap deal today,” he said.

David spent a lot of time challenging his farmers around what they were doing, particularly around animal health programmes to make sure they were “getting the best bang for their buck” and using the right products.

With clients ranging from large-scale to much smaller holdings, and from dairy farmers on the Taieri to dryland blocks out the back of Middlesbrough, it was about helping them grow the

best crop for whatever suited their farming situation.

Many clients placed “free-range” trust in him. It was an important role and one that could be quite stressful at times.

“Everyone relies on you to do your job and you want to do the best job for them. I want to grow a crop I’m proud of,” he said.

While David missed the physicality of farming, he had been known to jump on a handpiece and help crutch lambs and he was a regular fixture in the tailing pen.

“It’s a great way to have some fun with your farmers. You’re not just there talking to them about grass seed or chemicals, you’re out there helping them and doing it with them. I’m quite capable of doing anything they are doing.”

He enjoyed helping train new reps, saying the hard thing about on-farm was that everything only happened once a year and it had to be “right that once and everything will flow from there”.

“I love what I do, it’s the closest thing I could get to farming,” he said. — Sally Rae

Mum 'deserves all the kudos' for farm

NATALIE CAMERON

Sheep and beef farmer
Southland

AT Limehills School in Southland, hands-on learning is taken to a new level.

And while she is quick to deflect any praise, most of that can be attributed to local farmer and mother-of-four Natalie Cameron, who has been the driving force behind breathing new life into the school's farm.

"Natalie puts a lot of time into this wee group to ensure they are learning as much as they can. Part of the way she does this is by using her own connections with rural professionals so that they are able to come in and help out with teaching the kids that wee bit more. Natalie herself puts in a lot of work . . . both with general maintenance as well as with looking after the sheep and chickens. She fully deserves all the kudos and recognition for all of the hard work she puts in," the nomination said.

Natalie and her husband Dougal are sheep and beef farmers and, as well as being involved in the couple's own farming operation, Natalie puts



Learning on the land . . . Natalie Cameron is surrounded by the farm group at Limehills School.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

time, effort and resources into helping grow the Limehills School farm group.

The school has a small farm the group uses for learning opportunities and it had somewhat fallen through the cracks in recent years until Natalie took over at the beginning of last year.

It's about 2ha and runs 16 sheep at present. Natalie wants to bump that up to 20 given the

free fertiliser supplied by Ballance has resulted the grass pumping along — while she is looking at replacing the school's chooks for the spring.

Eggs are sold by the group at Friday assemblies, giving them money to buy feed, and the children also collect food scraps at the school for them.

This lambing season, the children are responsible for checking the lambing ewes,

while Natalie is on hand every morning and night for additional oversight.

There are 12 children in the group and the older children train the younger ones. At the school's pet show day, the year 7 pupils ran an open day and had questions in every paddock.

Every child in the group had a turn of setting up a break fence, which gave them a sense of

achievement and responsibility, as it was "their farm", not hers and she was happy to facilitate anything they wanted to do, Natalie said.

There was a field trip to look at tractors and a trip to a lime works, which included some science work, and the children designed and made their own boot rack — with a little help from a school dad — so they did not leave their boots lying around at the school.

With her own children ageing out of primary school at the end of this year, her days were numbered, Natalie said. She hoped there could be a committee to share the load and she could work with the group occasionally and still "keep a finger in".

While a commitment had been involved, "the more we get it sorted, the better it is going" and it had been "real fun" and rewarding, particularly when she could see their brains engaging.

"It's cool to see how far they've come," she said.

She also looked after junior rugby at the DLS club and it was the connection with people through her community involvement that she loved, she said. — Sally Rae

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Fight against Tb 'hugely satisfying'

PHILLIP HUNT

Sheep and beef farmer
Otago

MAUNGAWERA farm owner Phillip Hunt was nominated for his tireless voluntary work for various organisations over the decades.

He was president of Otago Federated Farmers from 2015 to 2018, involved in the initial start-up of the WAI Wanaka catchment group and the Freshwater Improvement Fund which was linked to the catchment group.

He was also involved with Tb Free NZ (Otago committee) from 1995 and chaired the committee for three years from 2005.

He has followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and father as a committee member and president of the Upper Clutha A&P Show, been part of the St John area committee for more than 20 years, now also on the South Island board, and most recently he has become a trustee on the Otago Rural Support Trust.

Committing to these organisations often meant time off-farm and evening meetings, which Phill said would not have been possible without the commitment to their farm and livestock from his wife Lizzie Carruthers.

"Lizzie is a far better farmer than I am, I have no qualms admitting that; she won the national ewe hogget



Solution focused . . . Phillip Hunt, pictured with Cleo, has been an active and committed volunteer for many organisations over the years.
PHOTO: SUPPLIED

competition in 2011."

Lizzie grew up on a farm in South Otago and when they first began farming together, they engaged the

services of a farm adviser.

"He helped us separate out our roles based on our passions and skill sets and it's been great, we've been a good

team ever since."

There have been many highlights in his voluntary roles over the years and the work Phill was involved in with the Animal Health Board in 1995 has been one highlight that stands out in his memory.

"Communication is so important in any organisation.

"In the early days, we needed to get landowner buy-in and collect a levy which funded possum control.

"Back in the early 90s, we had about 300 farms with Tb [tuberculosis] in their cattle herds, now we only have two or three in the region.

"It's been hugely satisfying work and it hasn't always been easy; in every organisation there are differences of opinions and there can be conflict at times.

"When it becomes unworkable, it's a matter of focusing on finding a solution and having a hearty but respectful discussion."

His work as a trustee in the Rural Support Trust has been another important role in recent years.

"Making a living off the land is a lonely existence and the profile of the trust has increased in recent times, it's gone from being the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff to being extremely proactive with initiatives that get farmers connecting with each other and sharing the mental load.

"It's a very rewarding role," he said.
— Alice Scott

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Luke Kane - Westholm Dairies

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'Huge' community involvement noted

NICK AND ALEXIS WADWORTH
Sheep and beef farmers
Southland

IT'S a long way from Japan to the rolling hill country of Southland's Otapiri Gorge.

But one of Nick and Alexis Wadworth's three key values at Bare Hill Farming is "kaizen", the Japanese business philosophy that focuses on continuous improvement. That sits along courage and stewardship.

Their nomination lauded the couple's "huge" presence in their community groups, contributing to catchment groups, training and local initiatives.

"Regenerative and sustainable focus but with a common sense boots-on-the-ground mindset," it read.

Bare Hill Farm spans 2000ha but only 800ha is effective. They run about 3700 ewes, 1200 hoggets and 300 breeding cows.

From Taranaki, Alexis met Nick at Lincoln University, where she did a commerce degree in agriculture. Nick had been working as an engineer before his tertiary studies.

Then they went their separate ways; Nick overseas and Alexis to start a banking career in Waikato before they ended up in Southland. Nick wanted to give farming a crack on his family property about the same time a banking job arose for Alexis.

They eventually bought the farm from Nick's parents in 2020. Their 3-year-old junior shepherdess Addison — who wants to be a tractor driver when she grows up — is the sixth generation of the family to work on the farm.

The couple's purpose statement was redefining possibilities together and Alexis said the "together" part was key, particularly during the early part of their career, using the community and the people around them, their farming team and each other to achieve that — "not just doing the same old, same old, and expecting things to be different".

Community is important to the couple and they try to limit themselves to three volunteer

**Educating the next generation . . .
Southland farmers Alexis and Nick
Wadworth with their daughter Addison
(3).**
PHOTO: SUPPLIED



things each. Nick is on the southern South Island Ospri committee, the Otapiri Hall committee and the Browns Sports Day committee, an event where Addison won the baby

show.

He was also involved with organising the Kuana farm discussion group and was overdue to organise a catch-up, visiting different properties.

Both were involved with the Makarewa headwaters catchment group, which Alexis chaired.

Alexis is also heavily involved with netball; she is

umpire co-ordinator at the Central Southland Netball Centre and a member of the centre's management committee. She is also an umpire and coach assessor.

And she seemed to "just jump on and off relevant working groups as they pop up. Anything from Thriving Southland through to Beef + Lamb to local women in a farming group. I tend to pick these up as I'm able".

Sustainability was as much about their own farm performance and environmental sustainability as it was about a sustainable community and they wanted to ensure there was "something there" for their daughter in the future.

"We've both been so fortunate to have some pretty amazing mentors or people willing to jump in and share their knowledge with us. If there's aspects we can offer . . . different skill sets . . . it's about doing it as much to give back as anything else," Alexis said.

They had a farm Instagram page which started to keep friends and family up to date and led to developing an "amazing" online community which they shared the highs and lows of life on the land with.

Nick enjoyed being self-employed and liked the quote "farming is what you make of it". They were creating their own destiny, making the calls as to what direction they wanted to take their operation and it was always the challenge that got them out of bed in the morning, his wife added.

Alexis may have been a self-described import to the area but she loved life in the South and its rural communities.

"A really unique group of people live down here . . . and just get it. They're looking out for each other, whether dropping off food to someone who's had a hard time or donating bales or whatever to help somebody through a rough patch. Just that understanding and supporting each other, it's never a problem. I think that's pretty special." — Sally Rae

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Vocational workforce training a passion

JOCK AND PIP FOSTER
Sheep and beef farmers
Canterbury

AS parents, Jock and Pip Foster know how important it is to foster young people's growth and development.

The North Canterbury couple have always employed younger junior shepherds on their 1400ha property, near Scargill, and historically taken them through to stock manager level or manager level in many situations.

While treating them as part of their own family and sharing meals with them, the couple also encouraged their young workers to get off-farm, join sports groups and become part of the community.

Both enjoyed helping people develop their skills and, in recent years, that has extended to Growing Future Farmers, a farmer-led vocational workforce training programme.

With their own children having left home, the timing seemed right to become involved with the programme and they now had their second GFF student.

The Fosters, who were the Silver Fern Farms 2023 Plate to Pasture winners, run a sheep breeding and finishing operation, and also finish cattle.

Jock left school and went fencing before studying at Lincoln and then going shepherding. He had a manager's job at Hawarden when his father died from cancer and he and Pip came home to the family farm in 1996.

Jock never had a strong desire to come home just because it was the family farm but, from a family point of view, it was nice to be there. He simply enjoyed farming and it was a real privilege to be on the land; whether he was farming in North Canterbury or elsewhere, it would not worry him.

Pip, who grew up on a farm at Hororata and met Jock in her last year of school, trained as a nurse. Their three children, aged between 22 and 26, were all involved in farming.



Taking their stewardship seriously . . . Jock and Pip Foster say it is a privilege to be on the land.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

The couple felt very fortunate that their children shared the interest in agriculture and it led to some great conversations with them about the sector.

"We have three farm advisers that don't live here; it's really lovely," she said.

Jock described the property as a "pretty typical" North Canterbury farm, with a balance of hill country and mix of downs and flats. Irrigation development had been a "game-changer" and had given

them the ability to be in control of selling decisions. It also gave them access to contracts they would not have previously have access to and meant they could commit to supply.

The farming philosophy was fairly simple — "eat the grass when it's growing". All areas had climatic challenges and their challenge was the dry and they endeavoured to have a stocking policy that allowed flexibility.

Jock felt positive about the long-term future of farming.

While there would always be "tough bits", there were already some green shoots during what had been a challenging time.

While their Plate to Pasture award included the quality of their stock and meeting their contracts, it also covered their philosophy around their staff, and their environmental commitments and community commitments.

Jock is chairman of the local community board and Pip

organises the local Anzac Day service each year. Pip described it as "just a typical small community where everybody has a crack at everything", including at the school and sports.

The Foster farm has a 6km boundary with the Hurunui River while the Waikari River also runs through the middle of the farm. Protecting waterways had been a strong focus for the couple. — Sally Rae

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Sisters thriving on family farm



Keeping it in the family . . . Laura (left) and Megan Whyte work together on their family's farm in Southland.

PHOTO: GREGOR RICHARDSON

MEGAN AND LAURA WHYTE

Sheep, beef and cropping farmers
Southland

THEY'RE sisters-in-farms. Megan (23) and Laura (22) Whyte, who work on their family's sheep, beef and arable

property at Otama in Southland, have been described as "the most hard-working, well-rounded skilled women".

"At their age, they have achieved skills that most farmers take years and years to

master. They always put themselves out there to give any task a go.

"Whether it is driving the stock truck or a header, moving sheep with their own dogs, or ramming posts and putting up

netting, these girls can do it. They have shown that women straight out of school can have a career in farming that can take you all over the country and world," their nomination said.

Both sisters considered heading to university but then they saw some of their contemporaries heading away for tertiary study before returning to the farm to do the same job that they were doing, while also saddled with student debt.

Megan spent three years working for her uncle on a sheep and beef property between Balfour and Dipton.

She also did a nine-month stint in Western Australia, seeding, harvesting and cattle mustering.

Laura went to the United States last year and taught water-skiing at a Camp America summer camp.

Asked how the sisters worked together on the home farm, Megan laughed: "depends on the day".

The sisters' social circle was also very similar and Laura candidly admitted there were "good days and bad days".

"Working with family . . . you get past it because you are family and you know you've got

to work in and get stuff done".

They could have a yelling match in the yards and then decide, later in the day, to go to the pub together, Megan added.

Asked whether they were stock or machinery-oriented, Megan said she probably floated in the middle, enjoying both aspects of farming, while Laura was probably keener on the stock side.

Asked what advice they would have to offer other young women keen on farming, Megan said it was just a matter of giving it a go — "as long as you're determined to learn, there's plenty of people . . . to teach you."

The sisters were both involved with Waitane Young Farmers Club, and had held office-bearing positions. That had been a great way to network with people while holding events like car trials, and giving money to charity, was rewarding to give back.

Laura is also a keen netball player while Megan plays rugby for the Southland Hinds.

The pair were full of praise for the support of their parents, although their father could sometimes be a bit fast with his teaching and they had to tell him to slow down, they laughed. — Sally Rae



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Leadership role in floriculture industry

JO ROBINSON
Flower grower
Otago

Jo Robinson is one popular lady, judging by the number of nominations received for her and her business Scrubby Gully.

One nomination said Jo played a leadership role in the New Zealand small-medium floriculture industry, where she championed sustainable and ecologically friendly practices and, importantly, created a friendly and open atmosphere where growers could discuss issues affecting their businesses.

"I discovered Jo through her New Zealand Flower Farmers Facebook page, which has been an invaluable resource and community for me personally and I know for many, many others as well.

"Jo donates her time willingly to managing this community because she is incredibly passionate about helping grow the small but thriving local floriculture industry in New Zealand."

Jo lives about 7km out of Alexandra on an 8.2ha property, where she grows flowers and fruit to produce preserves. She runs workshops to teach people how to grow and use their flowers.

The Facebook page, which has more than 1000 followers, was to help educate growers — "it's more about them being able to learn from our mistakes" — many were on smaller blocks where they were trying to make a side-hustle or find their way in a rural community. Many sold rurally, either at farmers markets or at their front gate.

Brought up in Dunedin, Jo spent a lot of time in Central Otago as a child. After heading overseas on her OE, she quips how she "brought back a Pom" — and the couple lived in Auckland where she had a landscape business and her husband was a national yachting coach.

Keen for land to grow things, they moved to Central more than 20 years ago. She had a passion for helping people



Framed ... Jo Robinson has a passion for helping other people grow things.

PHOTO: STEPHEN JAQUIERY

grow things, whether flowers for a bouquet, or food for the table.

One of her favourite things was selling flowers by the bucket-load to event organisers, or to people who wanted to "do their own thing". Affordable weddings was a particular favourite and the pleasure she got from people wanting to make their own

bouquets and arrangements.

Sometimes she helped with making the bouquets. Many came the day before the wedding and she loved to see the joy they got from the experience. "What I do in 20 minutes takes four hours but they love it and they are then connected to what they have done," she said.

Everything done on the

property was about protecting and enriching the soil. She endeavoured not to use spray; if the soil was healthy, then the plants were healthy and would fight any pests or disease — and she did not use floral foam.

Growing workshops were literally growing as people learned how to grow from seed. She loved the education

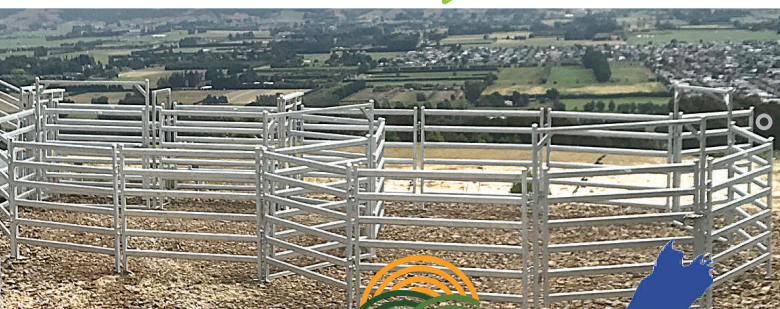
side and connection, talking to community groups about what they could do in their garden. With the high cost of living, people were wanting to grow things themselves if they had the space. Even if they were able to grow a raspberry cane, or some strawberries, they felt like they were contributing to what their family was eating.

— Sally Rae

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Beekeeper harnessing the power of ADHD

STEVEN BROWN

Apiarist
Canterbury

ADHD and dyslexia never stopped Steven Brown from building a 3000-hive business exporting honey around the world and a thriving beef operation.

The apiarist has learned to channel them to his advantage and often employs and gives advice to young people dealing with them.

"I'm horrendously dyslexic and have ADHD, so I don't really write much and I'm an appalling speller. On my father's side everyone is an academic, so I'm the odd ball on both sides of the family who doesn't have a degree.

"On saying that, I'm good in business and have, or had, more energy than anyone else which is my problem with ADHD — I just can't stop. For beekeeping this is amazing because there's always another bee box to lift."

Springbank Honey is run by a team led by himself and wife Tracy, with the business based just outside of North Canterbury's Cust.

They employ about 10 people over the winter, with staff numbers doubling in the summer when the honey is harvested, mainly from their farm, Glenburn, at Lees Valley and neighbouring properties.

On the 3700ha farm, rising to 1650m at the top, hives are placed in valley microclimates and closed native blocks on the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), while 400 head of Angus and Hereford cattle and deer are grazed.

"It is hard country — it's very good when it's nice to you and a hard mistress when it's bad."

Mr Brown said the bees were the main reason they bought Glenburn, because of its many stands of manuka and beech forest and tussock lands.

North and east facing blocks miss the harsh nor'west winds, while microclimates out the back provide a protected environment.

A blending and processing business run by the couple at Oxford produces 800 tonnes to 1000 tonnes of honey a year, for



All abuzz . . . North Canterbury beekeeper Steven Brown describes having ADHD as a superpower.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

themselves and other producers.

Mainly manuka honey is shipped around the world, exported to the likes of the United States, Germany, United Kingdom, Japan, Saudi Arabia and China.

Clover, thyme and honey dew honey also goes offshore, but manuka honey provides more than 95% of the overall value.

Some of this is sold under their own brand to the US, but most of it is shipped or air-freighted to packers who put their own or other brands on it for resale.

"We are pushing really heavily our own brand purely into the US . . . we want to increase our direct sales of

bulk honey and our packed honey for our value return for beekeepers. The amount of money we are getting is tiny and the retail price hasn't changed, but the wholesale price has crashed, so I have been trying to increase our margin."

Their own honey and cattle operations complemented each other by evening out income streams, as beekeeping was seasonal. Many of their team members also enjoyed switching from honey to cattle work.

Income from bees going on blocks of land being retired to the ETS went into opening up more Glenburn land for cattle, with plans to increase them to

1000 head.

Raised on a Rangiora lifestyle block, Mr Brown served a "sink or swim" apprenticeship after leaving school at 15.

His father's best friend was one of the largest queen bee raisers in the country and they shipped him to the West Coast and Whangarei to learn the trade. Three years later he bought out the partner of his mentor, Max Holden, in Oxford.

Mr Brown said he would change nothing as he had an amazing life beekeeping, working in the processing factory, going to sales meetings and trips around the world, living and breathing honey.

He has learned both conditions are a strength more than a weakness and to channel them so he has control in his life.

Being a balanced person was good for his family and business growth, while he has been told his dyslexia helps him think outside the square and come up with a new business idea every day.

"I really love ADHD employees and regularly hire lots of them and mentor on how to turn it from a negative into a strength.

"It's a strength as long as you know how to use it and it took me years for it to become this amazing superpower." — Tim Cronshaw

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Agri managing role all about people

BLAIR FIELDS

Banker
Otago

WHEN Blair Fieldes went to his job interview for the Rural Bank, it was a fairly simple process.

It was standard practice to ask four main questions; whether he was off a farm, what his parents did, what sport he played and at what level, and where he wanted to work in New Zealand.

It took about 10 minutes and no CV was required. Soon after, he was off to Invercargill which was to prove a good training ground with great people and understanding farmers.

Previously, he attended Lincoln where he graduated with a commerce degree in agriculture.

His father was an accountant in Gore and he spent a lot of time on a friend's farm at Charlton growing up, whetting his interest in the sector.

Blair worked as a relationship manager specialising in agri for 43 years, most recently with ANZ, before retiring in July.

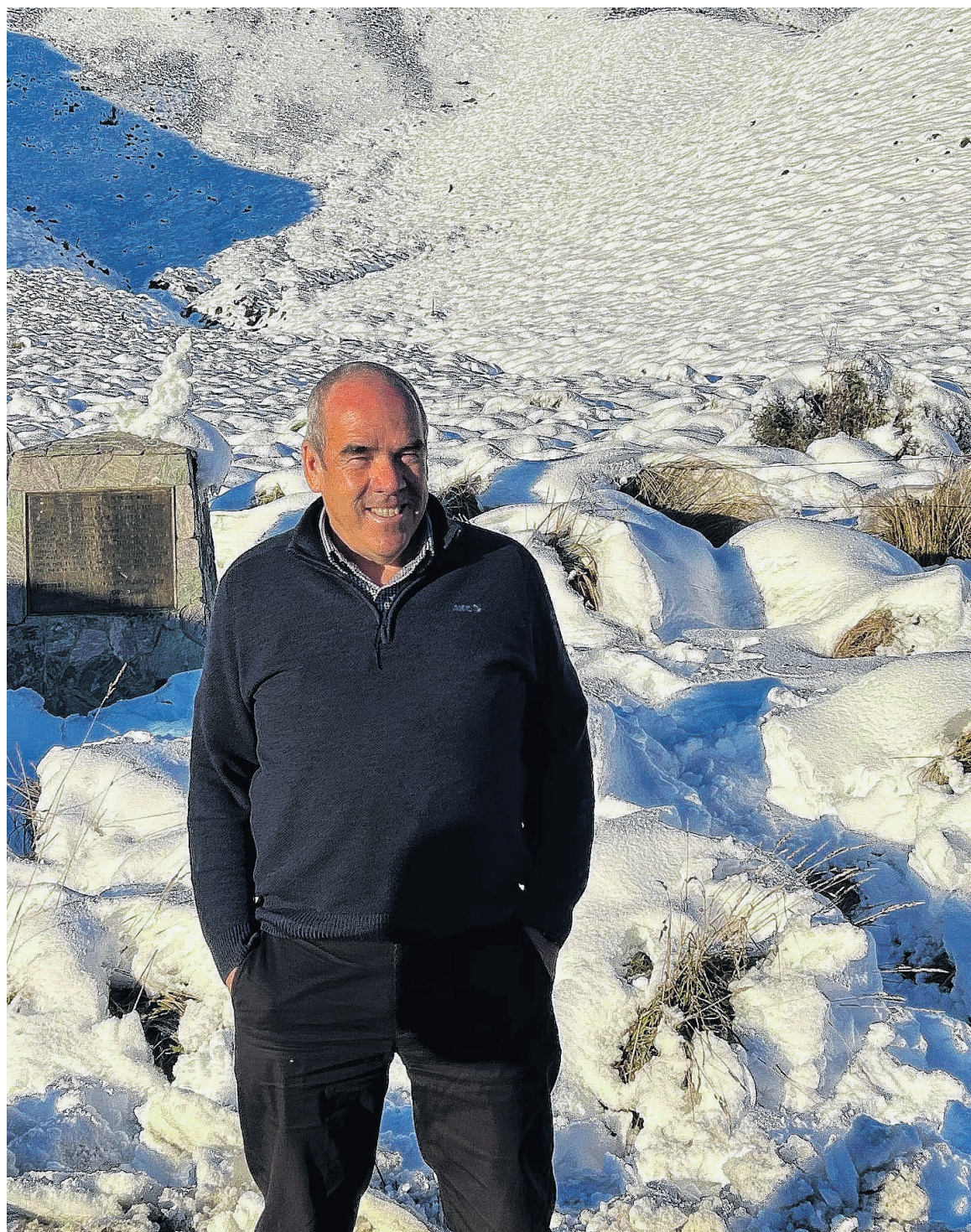
His nomination said he had learned his craft by time and experience, building strong relationships while still being a challenger and trusted adviser at the same time. Respected by his clients and professionals alike, he had great industry knowledge.

His career could have been curtailed in his younger years when he went on an overseas adventure for a year, on leave without pay.

He was in North India and the year was nearly up, so he wrote to his manager asking for another 12-month extension. If denied, then the letter was to be treated as a resignation.

He then phoned his father to check if anything had arrived in the mail from the bank and, extension confirmed, he continued his travels.

Three days before the next year was up, he arrived in Auckland and hitch-hiked through the North Island before phoning his manager, arriving in a grubby old T-shirt



Time to kick back . . . Banker Blair Fieldes is now retired in Central Otago after a career focusing on the rural sector.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

and pink trousers. He was to start as soon as he could.

During the time the Rural Bank was getting prepared for sale, there were stressful discussions. He recalled the discount meetings when the

bank was writing off debt with creditors sitting around the table.

A husband and wife were sitting at the table, along with about 10 creditors, when the husband looked up, passed out

and fell off his chair, crashing on to the ground.

In a daze, his wife looked down at her husband on the floor, looked up at the creditors and shrugged her shoulders.

"We were acting more like

the emergency services do in major traumatic events . . . it's really after the fact it really hit home how traumatic it was."

From Canterbury, Mr Fieldes moved to various positions in Southland, including as a branch manager in Tuatapere, a place which was "lots and lots of fun".

That was where he learned a very valuable banking lesson, of being about to divide yourself between being good friends with somebody and then the next day having a client-banker relationship.

In latter years, Mr Fieldes has been based in Central Otago, living on a property steeped in history at Bannockburn. While they build a new house on the site, the more than century-old sod cottage his great-grandfather lived in when he first came to gold mine in New Zealand from the Shetland Isles will remain.

What he particularly enjoyed about his career was the people; being part of a farming business and seeing succession discussed and the successful movement of an asset from one generation to another, and also being part of growth within a generation.

The area had a variety of different farming and horticulture types, from intensive irrigated properties to extensive operations, and knowledge and skills were required to converse with clients.

Mr Fieldes has done a lot of tramping, climbing and mountaineering and used to be in Alpine Cliff Rescue and Search and Rescue. He also used to be a scuba diving instructor.

Since moving to Central Otago and being further from the water, he had taken up hunting. In his retirement, he had a "wet weather job" — a big shed and a Series II Land Rover to get back on the road.

He was looking forward to more hunting — "filling the freezer and other people's freezers" — learning to fly fish, and also kicking back and relaxing in an area he described as the couple's "happy place". — Sally Rae

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Humble nominee needed to be urged

BRIDGET McNALLY
Dairy farmer
Otago

BRIDGET McNally took some convincing to agree to be part of this publication.

She wasn't sure her nomination was a "worthy contender", as she felt she was not doing any more than anyone else in the industry.

Luckily Bridget's husband James gave her the push she needed and encouraged her to "just get on with it".

Bridget's nomination came for her commitment to her community and the North Otago dairying community. She has worked as the engagement officer for the North Otago Sustainable Land Management Group (NOSLaM) and has now transitioned into a volunteer role on the steering committee.

She was also on the committee which brought the South Island Dairy Event to Oamaru in 2022. Bridget gave a lot of her time to others, cared deeply about her community and deserved recognition for being a warm and empathetic person whom people gravitated to, the nomination said.

Acquiring a strong work ethic on her parents' sheep and beef farm near Waimate as a youngster, Bridget boarded at St Kevin's College in Oamaru; it embedded in her a strong sense of service to others and communities.

She studied communication studies at the University of Otago, completed a graduate diploma of teaching at Canterbury University and then went into a teaching career in North Otago.

After the couple got married, succession planning prompted them to convert the McNally family's sheep and beef farm at Maheno to dairy in 2007.

Now into their 17th season, they have continued to develop the business and added further blocks to the farm. They now milk around 900 cows.

The couple have three school-age children and when her youngest was old enough, Bridget took on the role of calf



Sense of service . . . Bridget McNally is passionate about community initiatives that are inclusive and make a difference.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

really well. People loved Oamaru and all that it offered."

Bridget agrees she often tends to be an ear for people when they are going through challenging times.

"It's not lost on me just how much of a privilege and responsibility that is. We all have our own battles going on — no-one is perfect."

Governance roles are not on Bridget's radar — she prefers to be part of committees and working groups.

"I am probably more of a doer than a planner. I do say yes to things which can sometimes be my downfall as I can spread myself thin a bit at times. I just see a need and think 'oh I can sort that out'."

She concedes those small things often snowball into much larger projects.

"I am motivated by initiatives that are inclusive and make a difference," she said.

An example of this is the Maheno Junior Netball Club. In 2019, when her eldest daughter Charlotte was 7, the club had not had junior players for a few years. Along with some other keen mums and support from Maheno Senior Netball they restarted the junior club and now in 2024 it has over 70 children playing.

As a qualified speech and drama teacher, Bridget has used this skill to empower the next generation through sourcing funding and working in some local schools delivering SpeechNZ oral communication assessments.

"I am passionate about public speaking and teaching those skills early to our rural kids, before the fear sets in." She has furthered her skill by recently completing a certificate in teaching professional speaking and would love, when time allows, to one day teach adults, particularly migrant communities.

"I love to build confidence in people and seeing how far they can go in life with that extra spring in their step." — Alice Scott

rearer.

This year she is teaching three days a week at Maheno School, "so I have demoted myself to just helping on the

days when I am not teaching", she said.

Hosting the South Island Dairy Event was a major feat for Bridget and the committee.

The conference attended by more than 400 delegates is usually hosted in a large city. "We proved a small rural town could pull it off and it went

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Couple setting others up for success

HANNES AND LYZANNE DU PLESSIS
Dairy farmers
Southland

HANNES and Lyzanne du Plessis arrived in New Zealand in 2003 with a baby, a suitcase and \$20 in their pocket.

The couple — who met at university in South Africa — slept in front of the fireplace for six months until they could afford a bed and wore clothes from the Salvation Army.

When their car needed tyres to pass its warrant of fitness, Hannes asked his boss if he could take two snow tyres from the silage stack.

“Our story is one with really humble beginnings,” Lyzanne says.

But the couple never saw the move as a big sacrifice. Rather, as Lyzanne recalls, it was a “dream come true”.

“For us, it was an adventure . . . a new life. It was so amazing to be here and see what the country offers, see what we could achieve here.”

And it was that passion for the dairy industry that had given them “everything” — a business, hope and a future. Now that future was open to their sons so they could do whatever they liked.

“We know where we come from, how desperate we were for just an opportunity. For somebody to trust us and believe in us.”

Hannes started as a farm assistant near Te Aroha while Lyzanne picked up night shifts at a local supermarket. Hannes progressed through the industry because he educated himself. He knew how to research things thanks to his university studies — he has a degree in horticulture and agricultural economics — and he picked out articles to read and he asked questions.

He would go to DairyNZ discussion groups and strike up conversations. When he was appointed herd manager, he would offer to help with other tasks once milking finished so he could learn other skills. Within five years, he had gone from dairy assistant to the couple being lower-order sharemilkers.



An industry that gave them everything . . . Hannes and Lyzanne du Plessis say the dairy industry provided them with a business, hope and a future. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

In 2011, the family shifted to the South Island and, the following year, the couple won the Southland Farm Manager of the Year title in the New Zealand Dairy Industry Awards, winning the award for human resources in the national final.

Their passion was employing staff and educating them in a way that set them up for success. Now contract milking at Woodlands, they had employed many migrant workers along with Kiwis.

Coming from such a multicultural country as South Africa had given them the edge to work with and understand different cultures and they loved

having that diversity among their team, Lyzanne said.

Their love of education paved the way for the couple to home-school their three sons but it has also extended outside their farm gate; the couple founded their own training business, AgriTeachMe, and partnered with Agracademy last year to bring affordable and effective agricultural training to Southland.

Whether it was skills needed for tractors, farm bikes, health and safety, effluent or pasture management — “you name it” — it was apparent that it was needed, and nobody was filling that need.

Often there was a language issue with migrant workers and even though they did receive training on farm, a lot got missed because they did not understand it.

The couple are involved with the Nepalese and Filipino groups in Southland and, as they began the training, they saw how much of a need there was.

Now Hannes is keen to approach machinery businesses to see if they would help provide a tractor for training. Farmers often were not training them in driving tractors because they were so expensive, but that created a health and safety risk. Educating migrant workers

came naturally to them.

“We know where we’ve come from and how we got there and the importance of training. Both of us are really good at talking to a group of people and giving them training. It’s something we love doing and we know the value of it, being the employers ourselves, having trained staff that can actually do the job,” Hannes said.

Sometimes, workers later returned with their families, to show the couple their children and tell them their achievements. That brought something into their heart, Lyzanne said. — Sally Rae

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Sights set on a veterinary practice

IROSHANA KULATHUNGA

Dairy farmer
Southland

HE'S a qualified veterinarian in Sri Lanka and now Iroshana "Shan" Kulathunga is working towards becoming registered as a vet in New Zealand.

Passionate about the dairy industry, Shan and his wife Sachini are now permanent residents and are happily settled in Southland with their two young daughters.

After graduating from the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka, Shan spent his first year working as a vet and then got a job as the extension manager for a Fonterra dairy farm in Sri Lanka.

It was learning about the New Zealand dairy industry, along with a desire to upskill in the industry, that were the drivers behind him wanting to come to New Zealand.

In Sri Lanka, the industry was very small scale; 10 or 20 animals or even less was considered a medium-sized operation while one or two was small, and it produced about 40% of the country's requirements.

In 2018, Shan immigrated to



New Zealand and his wife and eldest daughter came the following year. Their second child was born in Southland.

It was not too difficult to acclimatise because he did come with a dairying background and knowledge. What did take some getting used to was the weather, having been used to temperatures of more

than 30°C throughout the year.

Shan started as a dairy farm assistant and, over time, was promoted as a farm manager.

He has been on the same Balfour farm since 2019 but had stepped back from being a manager to have more time for studying to reach his vet registration goal.

His plan is to eventually start

a veterinary practice.

The nomination said he was friendly and hardworking.

He also had a strong knowledge about the dairy industry in New Zealand.

He was very helpful, and shared his knowledge with others.

Shan said he loved the area and Southland and the family

had embraced the Kiwi way of life.

He and Sachini — who owns a small home-based cupcake business called Sprinkles — are respected members of the region's Sri Lankan community.

Shan loves playing cricket in his spare time. — Sally Rae

No looking back
... Iroshana
"Shan"

Kulathunga has no regrets about leaving his home country of Sri Lanka to move to New Zealand.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

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References:

1. Health Promotion Agency and the Melanoma Network of New Zealand (MelNet) 2017: New Zealand Skin Cancer Primary Prevention and Early Detection Strategy 2017 to 2022.
2. <https://www.melanoma.org.nz/facts-risk-factors>
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Here to help . . . Janelle Davidson and Rocky Cormack with grandson Bodhi, pictured with their team, provide help for farming businesses.

PHOTO: MEGAN GRAHAM PHOTOGRAPHY

Helping out farmers where they can

ROCKY CORMACK and JANELLE DAVIDSON
Farm support business
Southland

THEIR motto is “whatever the farmer needs, we can do it”. Kelvin “Rocky” Cormack and Janelle Davison found a gap in the farming sector to establish a small business called The Gofer, providing relief staff for farming businesses.

The couple, both from farming backgrounds, have a small team of efficient, reliable and experienced staff who help out on demand with anyone struggling to find workers, cover short-term relief for sick or accident leave, or fill in while farmers take a well-deserved break with their families.

Ironically, the couple have sacrificed time with their own families to help a farmer in need.

Whether it’s relief milking, calf rearing, tail trimming, shearing, spraying, small digger work, tractor work — and much more — The Gofer can do it all.

The business started in June 2021 with two clients and grew from there through word of mouth.

Rocky, a truck driver who had previously managed dairy farms, had been in the office arranging stock logistics when he got the idea.

Talking to farmers every day, many sounded stressed, often not having anyone to help load or unload stock.

Janelle had been relief milking between and before jobs for years.

The overwhelming feedback from clients was gratitude.

“They can’t thank you enough, especially when we do farming minding and the whole family can go away together. The wife comes back and is nearly in tears thanking

us,” Rocky said.

They also provided work for university students on holiday and sponsorship to small communities.

The Gofer covers Otago and Southland and if a call comes from further afield they will work out if it is feasible or not.

The idea was to franchise the Gofer to expand its reach. They were keen to get more people and investors on board to grow it to its full potential, Janelle said. — Sally Rae

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Pair 'keep it real' in showing challenges

STEVE AND TRACY HENDERSON
Dairy farmers
Southland

WHEN it comes to social media, it's easy to share a curated version of ourselves — the sunny days, when everything has gone to plan, and a world where all the angles are good.

Southland dairy farmers Steve and Tracy Henderson prefer to “keep it real”, using their own social media platform to share the realities and learning curves of a busy dairy farming enterprise.

The couple were nominated for Rural Champions for their “positive and informative social media platform Legendairies”.

The nomination also said they had been finalists in multiple dairy industry awards, and were a sought-after employer in the area as they offered their workers a supportive work-life balance.

“They also open their farm to school visits, helping the children understand dairying in the community. Like any farming family they have their ups and downs, and they show some of this on their social media. They are all-round great Southlanders deserving of this award,” it said.

Tracy hails from a sheep, beef and deer farm in Taumarunui in the North Island. After meeting at Lincoln University, the couple eventually settled back in Steve's home province of Southland and began a journey up the dairying ladder.

“I started the Facebook page just to share what was happening in my world with my friends and family up north. It seemed to garner good feedback and has grown from there,” Tracy said.

“I don't tend to share the sunshine and rainbows of farm life. Things are not always picture-perfect and I think people who follow the page like that. Curveballs are being thrown at farmers every day and for us, it's about sharing this side of the business while keeping it positive and talking about the solutions to overcome whatever challenge we have had,” Tracy said.



Warts and all . . . Southland dairy farmers Steve and Tracy Henderson use their social media platform to share the realities of a busy dairy farming enterprise. They are pictured with their children (from left) Annie (5), Gus (7) and Ruby (8). PHOTO: SUPPLIED

From dealing with an outbreak of rotavirus in their calves, dumping milk due to a turned-off vat or mitigating wet weather events, they only ever got positive feedback over their challenges from the community that followed the page, Tracy said.

“When you are new to the industry it can be very overwhelming, and the page tends to reassure people that they are not alone on their journey.”

“S... happens, but there's always a way through it,” Steve said.

The couple have been on a steep upward trajectory over the

past 20 years with a goal of farm ownership and they are soon to realise this goal.

“We 50:50 share-milk 850 cows in Awarua, where we currently farm, and just up the road we lease a 630-cow farm we will purchase in two years' time, which we currently have contract milkers on.”

Paying it forward is an important value of theirs.

“It's good to give opportunities to others wanting to get a start in the industry as that's how we got going”, Steve said.

Dairy awards and nominations have been a common occurrence for the couple over the years.

“In the early years, when we

were trying to get the good dairy jobs, it was so competitive, so any nomination or win was a good feather in your cap on the CV. These days we don't tend to enter any of those kinds of awards, but we have been nominated by others for a few, which does make you feel good. We must be doing something right,” Steve said.

In 2022 the couple won the MPI Good Employer Award. Fair and flexible rosters are important to the couple, and they make sure they recognise and reward their staff for doing a good job.

They started their working relationship off “on the right

foot” with a video on their Facebook page which showed their workplace and explained the expectations of the job, Steve said.

“It's a good drafting gate. You tend to only get those that genuinely keen on the job as they have a good idea of what they're coming into.”

Outside of their businesses, the couple are also active community members. Steve is chairman of the Southern Field Days and on their local school board of trustees and Tracy is an active member of the PTA.

“It is a pretty full and busy life, but it's an awesome one,” Tracy said. — Alice Scott

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Feeding the masses ... Serving diners at a community dinner last year are North Canterbury Hunting Competition committee members Cory Lambeth and Tash Thomas, Hunters4Hope organisers Steve Hill and Adam Kreisel, and hunting committee member Renee Dampier-Crossley. PHOTO: JOHN COSGROVE

Pair providing venison for those in need

ADAM KREISEL AND STEVE HILL
Hunters4Hope charity
Canterbury

QUITE simply, Adam Kreisel and Steve Hill are good buggers. The North Canterbury friends and keen hunters are behind Hunters4Hope, an initiative which

provides venison mince to feed those in need via the Rangiora-based charity Hope Community Trust.

As Steve says, it is “almost a responsibility of every person to be a good human”.

The two men got to know each other through their partners working together and discovered they had a

mutual interest in hunting. They began hunting together and they discussed what other hunters were doing with their surplus venison, questioning if there could be a system established to collect surplus meat, pool it together and donate it to the trust as venison mince.

They gained approval from New Zealand Food Safety, agreement from the trust to accept the mince, they bought a second-hand commercial mincer at a bargain price and placed freezers around the community for hunters to contribute their excess protein.

They also got support from the North Canterbury Hunting Competition and, in June last year, they received 50 deer carcasses from hunters at the weigh-in and, with the help of family, friends and members of the local Swannanoa Fire Brigade, all 50 were skinned and boned in one day.

The next day, after four hours of mincing and slicing steak, 870kg of venison mince and 52kg of venison backsteak was delivered to the trust.

In September, Adam and Steve, and several NCHC committee members, volunteered to help prepare and serve a Community Kai meal at the trust, using donated venison from the 2023 competition.

Now two hunting guiding companies have come on board, adding to the amount of venison harvested, and those businesses appreciated the meat was utilised.

About 500kg of mince was supplied each month and the nomination described the pair as “hidden rural champions”, along with the other volunteers involved in the project. They enjoyed giving back to the community, while also balancing their own businesses and family life.

Steve reckoned Hunters4Hope was definitely scalable, with potential to be replicated in other regions. The most important thing was that those involved had the same mindset — “people not doing something to get something for themselves but giving back because they can” — and one of the rules was that no-one could profit from it.

Children involved in the North Canterbury Kids Hunt gave meat to Hunters4Hope, which was done in a special batch making 275kg of mince. It was delivered to the trust with the help of North Loburn School and the children helped unload the meat. That was also a way of getting the next generation thinking about how to give back, he said.

Feedback had been “incredibly humbling” and it was rewarding to see quality protein “going somewhere”, rather than just in a hole. They were now also getting contacted by farmers who were having problems with feral deer.

Adam’s father and a group of his older mates volunteered to help out with the initiative and had been dubbed “Dad’s Army”. — Sally Rae

Congratulations to the Rural Champions nominees

We’re delighted to support and celebrate the innovation, resilience and community spirit of **South Island farmers, growers and rural services providers.**

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Couple inspired by Christian faith

PAUL AND TRACI PATON
Sheep and beef farmers
Otago

A strong Christian faith combined with life experiences have reinforced Paul and Traci Paton's intrinsic desire to pay it forward and do good in the world.

Paul and Traci were nominated for Rural Champions as a couple who freely give so much of themselves.

The couple host Christian youth camps on their farm every year and Paul has been on the board of trustees both at Palmerston Primary School and at East Otago High School.

He is also a trustee of Glenorchy Lodge, an accommodation facility owned by East Otago High which has been undergoing major development and upgrades in recent years, funded by the school community.

The couple also take young people into their home, teaching farming and life skills on their sheep and beef farm at Morrisons in the Pig Root.

Paul is quick to point out his off-farm commitments would not be possible without his mother Allison and brother and sister-in-law Mark and Liv Paton.

"We work as a team here and they will pick up my slack when I am busy with other things."

Traci is from the United States. The couple met at Lincoln University while Traci was here on an exchange.

"I chased her over to the States afterwards," he said.

Paul interned for a year at the Denver Rescue Mission followed by nine years at the mission's farm in Colorado. A Christian-based facility, the mission helps people overcome addiction and homelessness.

"I came home a different person. It gave me an awareness of how it can be for people who have experienced major trauma in their lives — they can look the same from the outside but inside they feel completely different."

"It made me realise what is



Paying it forward . . . Traci and Paul Paton have generously shared their home and farm with many young people over the years.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED ALICE SCOTT

important in life. It's not material things — it is love and people."

Paul reflects on a prose in the Bible which summarises his view on life.

"It says who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did

not receive? It's about being grounded and knowing you are not above anyone else in this world."

The couple have four adult children. Each has excelled in their studies and sport.

While boarding school would have been an easy option due to their isolated location and sporting passions, the family stuck with the local high school.

"Some people think it is education that makes the person, which I believe is wrong."

"It is character that is important and surrounding them with that love and support and not outsourcing it. I also believe a smaller school offers its own advantages with leadership and other opportunities that a might not present themselves at a bigger school."

Paul credits the huge support they have received from other local families for their children's success.

"We've had some amazing people in our lives who have driven our kids around to things and encouraged them to go further with their sports."

Paying this kindness forward, the couple often host gateway students for work experience and over the years they have opened their home to young people who are going through a tough time.

"Teaching new skills brings a sense of confidence which these people can take through life. You employ the character; you teach the skill."

The Christian youth camps are also hugely popular each year. It's no holiday — they learn how to rough it a bit and gain a few life skills along the way. They all seem to leave with great memories and a new-found confidence.

Despite not coming from a farming background, Traci has embraced an isolated farm life.

She has overcome a cancer scare and embraced a healthier lifestyle since. She also breeds labradoodle and retrodoodle dogs and takes great pride in turning out quality family pets. — Alice Scott

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Global audience . . . A YouTube channel by North Canterbury farmers Genna and Alistair Bird has a loyal following world-wide.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Reaching the world from the farm

ALISTAIR BIRD

Sheep and beef farmer
Canterbury

WHEN North Canterbury farmer Alistair Bird set up a YouTube channel to promote everything good about farming he was thrilled to get 100 views for the first video.

"Then we got 50 subscribers and we were stoked and it's just sort of grown organically," he said.

"We haven't had massive jumps or peaks, it's just been steady. We are sitting around 13,200 subscribers now with views for an average video of 6000 to 8000."

Home-made footage on daily farming life has caught the imagination of a far-flung audience stretching to Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as local followers.

The top-viewed video had 186,000 hits for a grumpy cow at calving time trying to chase him down.

"You try and recreate a video or think 'I like this one and it will do really well' and it doesn't and the ones you think are a bit average tend to go well so there's no rhyme or reason about what will do well or not."

If Mr Bird, known as Kiwi Farmer, had to put his finger on the channel's success

he would put it down to a candid portrayal of farming.

He and his wife, Genna fell into being YouTube creators when a few videos about their farm accommodation never fully fired on a Facebook page.

So they gave the the online video sharing platform a crack.

"We were trying to encourage people to get on farm and see our world by opening our doors. I'd been watching some of the American farm Youtubers for a while and thought 'why not give this a go?'."

"At the time there were only a couple farmers in New Zealand doing the same sort of thing.

"We thought we could show our perspective and try and promote Ag from our point of view and show people we are not environmental terrorists as farming was getting a pretty bad rap in the media then with the environmental stuff.

"No-one was telling the good we were doing. It was all negative and we decided to try warts-and-all what we go through and bring our side of the story out there."

Three years later and they film and edit videos weekly in between running a soon-to-expand agri-tourism accommodation venture and their dryland sheep and beef farm, The Grange, between Oxford and Ashley Gorge.

He is often the one in front of and behind the camera and she has been known to make the odd cameo appearance, as does one of their daughters, with another daughter wanting not a bar of YouTube life.

Weekly videos lasting 20-odd minutes are sometimes stretched to twice a week and sponsors liking their story have got on board.

The Grange near Ashley Gorge ranges from flats on the bottom end of the farm to steep, hard, native hill country sealing

up to 880m above sea level. The 560ha breeding farm is partnered with a nearby 65ha flat dryland lease block for wintering and early lambing on August 1 to get their offspring away to the works before Christmas.

Split lambing is delayed on the home farm until September 25 as they can get late snow storms and to reduce market risks.

Angus cows roam the hills with regenerating native and planted tree blocks set aside for the Emissions Trading Scheme.

A canopy camping site for the high-end market will be followed soon with hut-style accommodation next to a waterfall for families with tracks being developed for bush walking and horse riding.

Multiple revenue streams outside of protein are needed to gain value from the land and keep the "lights on", he said.

Mr Bird has developed a thick hide against fault-finding keyboard critics, but finds loyal followers soon put the record straight if anyone gets out of line.

A deep well of informed and well-meaning advice can be tapped into via the comments and a personal spin-off from the YouTube involvement is getting out of his comfort zone.

"I'm an introvert and it's really helped with my communication skills. Putting myself out there is something I've been working on since I was 15 so it's just a facet of that really.

"There's a to-and-fro of information so it's not one-sided. I ask people for advice and it's pretty cool in that regard."

Occasionally he delves into mental health messaging as his father is involved in Rural Support Trust in Marlborough, but is conscious to tread lightly as viewers come to the channel to be entertained. — Tim Cronshaw



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The extra mile . . . Agronomy specialist Scott McIlroy, pictured with his wife Lauren, goes above and beyond for his farming clients.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Going above and beyond for clients

SCOTT MCILROY
Agronomy specialist
Canterbury

THEY CALL him Scones. That's because Canterbury-based agronomy specialist Scott McIlroy actually started his working life as a baker, a job he loved "every single minute of". And he can still pull on his apron.

After the Canterbury earthquakes, when his old boss at Darfield Bakery was struggling with power outages and staffing, he rolled up his sleeves and helped out for a couple of days.

Scott acknowledges he never thrived in the education system — "me and school probably didn't see eye-to-eye to be fair" — but what he did have was a work ethic and enthusiasm for what he enjoyed doing.

He had been working at the bakery after-school cleaning up when he suggested the boss give him a baker apprenticeship. He was there for about five years and qualified as a baker.

Mad keen on rugby — he played his first game for Darfield at 5 and later racked up 251 division 1 games for the club — he would burn the candle at both ends; up at 2am to go baking, then play rugby before the post-game socialising sometimes until the early hours.

He spent two years on his OE, where he did some baking, played rugby and travelled the world.

Returning home, he got a job in the CRT (now Farmlands store) in Dunedin and later a move to the Darfield store, having always had a passion for farming and the rural services industry.

He did a lot of listening and learning and, when his very experienced boss sadly died at work one day, he was told he was "it" — "I was either going to sink or swim" — and he worked hard to establish what he needed to do to service clients.

In 2015, Scott joined Hazlett

which, at that stage, did not have an agronomy arm. That division was created "out of nothing" and the company now had about seven agronomy reps on the road and it was "doing very well".

Scott's nomination said he "goes above and beyond for his farming clients, making sure they have everything they need to operate their businesses to the best of their ability".

In spring, it was not unusual for him to leave home at 6am and finish his day with zero emails in his inbox at 10pm or 11pm. Family was important to him — he and his wife Lauren have two children, Ella and Jed — and he would head into his office after they went to bed.

While his work life was busy, that did not stop him from putting his hand up in his local community. He is on the board of trustees at Sheffield School.

Now strapping for the Darfield senior rugby side, he spent about 12 years on the committee and was president for two years. He also did the Coast to Coast teams event with his twin brother.

Asked how he managed his own wellbeing, Scott said his work kept him in check.

He enjoyed going to work "every single day" and it was almost not really a job for him. He got to talk to and help great people and that was something that kept him fresh and motivated, he said.

Rural folk were "pretty well grounded" and they understood he was not a magician — if he was, he could change the weather and interest rates — but what he could do was make sure that what he did was to the best of his ability and that might mean they could get a better price for their product or increase their yield. Sometimes it was about providing a reassuring ear and he was well aware of how difficult it was farming.

He was also involved with the social side of work, organising cricket games and a few beers, saying it was "good to get together and laugh". — Sally Rae

CONGRATULATIONS

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Resilience a way of life

JACK AND KATE COCKS

Sheep and beef farmers
Lake Wakatipu

WHEN it comes to farming, resilience isn't just a trait—it's a way of life. Jack Cocks, a sheep and beef farmer from the shores of Lake Wakatipu, knows this all too well.

Jack and his wife Kate, of Mt Nicholas Station, were nominated for their positive influence in the rural industry despite the challenges they have faced.

In 2013, Jack suffered a brain aneurysm. He then survived a cardiac arrest, went into coma for two weeks, spent a total of eight months in hospital and had 15 major brain surgeries over a period of six years.

"This sounds pretty bad; it was, and I am incredibly lucky to be alive," he said.

It was a slow process of learning to walk and talk again and there were many health setbacks along the way. In 2021 Jack underwent the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme. His research project looked at how resilient farmers thrive despite adversity.

Through his research Jack discovered three crucial strategies among resilient farmers: clarity of purpose, strong social connections and a keen awareness of personal wellbeing. These insights formed the foundation of his resilience model—a practical tool tailored for the rural sector to move beyond survival and thrive.

Jack is regularly invited to be a speaker at events to share his story and research findings. Most recently he was invited to be a keynote speaker in Saskatoon, Canada at the International Farm Management Association Congress.

"That was a little nerve-racking as they had flown me all the way out there, but it was really well-received."

Jack said the ultimate display

of resilience in their situation was exemplified by his wife.

As his health improved, Jack was able to share the workload at home and he enjoyed teaching his children while Kate was out on the farm or in the office.

Being 100km from the nearest school, the couple's two children have been homeschooled through the Correspondence School for their primary and intermediate years.

"We share the teaching through the week, and I really enjoy spending that time with the kids. We are now very close because of it."

Kate is also chairwoman of the High Country Accord which is a not-for-profit trust advocating for the rights of pastoral leaseholders in the South Island.

"There are only 160 high country leaseholders left so we're a bit of an endangered species. The trust's role is about being a unified voice. The 1.2 million hectares of high-country pastoral leases have become somewhat of a political football in recent years, so we advocate for these families and the iconic land they are stewards of."

Jack and Kate work alongside equity partners Phil and Latisha McMurray—all four have defined roles in the business. They have recently diversified their farming business with the introduction of Mt Nicholas Merino producing woollen garments, throws and knitting yarn.

"It's important to us, as New Zealand wool growers, that we support the wool manufacturing industry that is still operating in New Zealand," Kate said.

She said it was hugely rewarding to create a product they could get enjoyment from and share with others.

"People want to buy New Zealand-made. We are still very early on in the journey, but it's been a great way to add diversification... while still being closely linked to our core business of producing beautiful, sustainable wool." — Alice Scott

Survive and thrive . . . Kate and Jack Cocks have learnt what it means to be resilient when faced with adversity and Jack now shares his insights with others.

PHOTO: FRANCINE BOER



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A team effort . . . Jan Keeling, pictured laying a predator trap at the Duntroon Wetland, enjoys working in the community as part of a team.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Duntroon woman a community stalwart

JAN KEELING
Dairy farmer
Otago

“AN amazing community woman! Without her, Duntroon would fall apart!” That was the opening line to the nomination for Jan Keeling, who plays a key role in the wellbeing of the small Waitaki Valley village.

A radiographer by trade, Jan grew up on a farm at Duntroon with a sense of community instilled in her. Her parents were heavily involved in the community and, when she had her own children, she did not think twice about involving them.

“Our kids still do community stuff because they see it as normal,” she said.

Married to dairy farmer Geoff, Jan describes herself as a traditionalist, or a farmer’s wife, and said she was privileged enough to not have to work on the farm.

Her community work was a way of having a purpose and setting an example for her daughters. She also enjoyed it and liked to see a community held together.

Arguably much happier out of the spotlight, Jan was quick to stress that she was not doing it alone — “it’s a team effort, because these things have to be a team effort”.

Saying she was too self-conscious to be a leader, Jan loved working as part of a team. An enthusiastic gardener, the village’s community garden — which she set up in a corner of one of the couple’s paddocks — was her happy place.

About five volunteers were there regularly over the summer and excess vegetables were put in a “share shed” in the village.

With an avid dislike for food waste, she encouraged others in the village to

add their excess food. At one stage, one of the volunteers was taking vegetables from the community garden to Whalan Lodge rest-home, up the road in Kurow.

Jan’s involvement with the historic Nicol’s Blacksmith Shop began coincidentally at the time she was reading the *Little House on the Prairie* books to her girls about 2008 and it led to them discussing the “olden days” in Duntroon and what it would have looked like.

“I knew nothing about blacksmithing, but I’m a bit of a pyromaniac,” she laughed.

Later, when her daughters were at boarding school and she had some more time, she decided to learn how to forge and for several years could be found working in the forge at weekends.

“It’s so cool. It’s a bit like any art form . . . anyone can do it, but to make something it’s just practice. It’s such a powerful feeling being able to bend steel and make it bend.”

She is a trustee on the Nicol’s Blacksmith Historic Trust which was established to preserve the building and history of one of very few accessible authentic working village blacksmiths.

She keeps an eye on the St Martin’s Anglican Church, a prominent building in the town and visited regularly by tourists. The Keeling family mows the church lawns.

She has also been a driving force behind making the local hall more usable.

Jan quips that water quality is her hashtag and the family has undertaken widespread plantings on their property. They have also undertaken a planting project with Ngai Tahu and Meridian Energy by a Māori rock art site, and she is involved with the Duntroon wetlands, including predator trapping. — Sally Rae

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On the family farm . . . Emma Crutchley and husband Kyle Hagen with the couple's two children, Evelyn and Reuben.

PHOTO: SIMONE JACKSON PHOTOGRAPHY

Enabling positive change the goal

EMMA CRUTCHLEY

Sheep and beef farmer
Otago

“**E**mma takes leadership seriously and does it for the better of rural communities even if this means being a part of decisions that may not be a popular view at the time. These type of leaders are the true heroes of our communities.”

So reads the nomination for inter-generational sheep and beef farmer Emma Crutchley, from the Maniototo, who leant her weight to the relaunch of National Lamb Day in February, alongside her other farming and community duties.

Emma acknowledges stepping into hard conversations, when she knows it is the right thing to do, can be “bloody uncomfortable” — “it feels like I’m cursed to be unpopular at times” — but she can sleep at night knowing she has stuck to her values and has not just taken the easy path which would be to stay silent.

Emma is all about enabling positive change and enjoys working with positive people on positive projects.

“I really enjoy getting stuck into stuff — even if it’s complex stuff — that enables healthy rural communities and the

primary sector.”

She particularly enjoys big wicked conversations around freshwater, where it was often very hard to see solutions. She loves relationships she has built almost outside the sector, where those threads of common ground could be found and built on, for it was sometimes those hard conversations “where the gold lies”.

Emma is a director of Irrigation New Zealand and was previously involved in governance of local irrigation schemes. In 2020, she co-founded and worked to establish a \$6 million multi-stakeholder catchment restoration project, Tiaki Maniototo, for the Upper Taieri Wai catchment group.

A Kellogg Rural Leadership scholar and Agri-Women’s Development Trust Escalator graduate, Emma farms with her husband Kyle Hagen, on her family’s sheep and beef farm at Puketoi. An agronomist by trade, she came home to the family farm, which totals just under 3000ha, in 2009.

Life was also about striking balance with family and the couple’s two children, Evelyn and Reuben, were priorities. As she chased her children around school and sporting

activities, she reflected how her dogs were not getting the work they used to. Sometimes the best thinking time was that time spent in the hills with her dogs.

“I have an incredible amount of gratitude for the people I get to work with on a

lot of these topics. It just gives you so much energy. The people that have supported me have given me so much momentum towards supporting others that are coming through. I love doing that where I can.

“There’s such an incredible amount of awesome people

just getting on with solutions,” she says.

It was about accepting the things that you could not change — “because you could dwell on them forever and they make you really unhappy” — and it was also “not just all about the hui, it’s about the do-ey.” — Sally Rae



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Community focus . . . Glen Riley's upbringing in rural North Otago influenced his later move into conservation.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Linking 'people and places to nature'

GLEN RILEY
Conservationist
Otago

IT describes itself as a small company doing big things — reviving biodiversity, improving water quality, restoring ecological

function and healthy habitats.

The man behind Habitat Restorations Aotearoa is Glen Riley, who grew up on an organic market garden near the Kakanui River, something which influenced his later move into conservation.

For more than a decade, Glen and his

team have been working closely with farmers, iwi, catchment groups and local and central Government to restore habitats in Otago and beyond.

His nomination cited his knowledge of native plants and their role in riparian areas and his use of long-lasting plant guards which increased survival rates of seedlings and reduced maintenance costs.

As well as planting, the HRA crew undertook weed and pest control, including revolutionary ideas like floating stoat traps and kayaking for willow control to encourage ecosystem-wide restoration that could only happen with native plants, no weeds and no pests.

"By working with local communities, and employing hard working young conservation professionals . . . Glen links people and places to nature. He has been resilient, innovative and collaborative in the space of restoring Otago's habitats," the nomination said.

Providing habitat made Glen feel good and he got a kick out of seeing places where there were healthy plants, plenty of bird life and streams full of fish.

As well as a love of plants and animals, he also enjoyed people and working in restoration allowed him the chance to do things with people where the environment was the main benefactor.

He enjoyed working with catchment groups and supporting farmers. Having grown up amid a horticulture operation,

he understood small business and growing food.

HRA could come in and support what a property would benefit from, meaning farmers could concentrate on what they did well and that made real sense in a world where people were increasingly time poor. Everyone wanted the same outcomes, he said.

"We also forget not many of us grow our own food — we need food. I'm really grateful I can eat cheese and drink milk and have an ice-cream . . . I also like to swim in the river or kayak in the river without getting sick."

At this point, HRA's work had been from North Otago to Southland and west to Queenstown and Wanaka.

"Work doesn't come to us, we go to them. We move wherever we need to. It allows us the chance to see some pretty special places and a lot of variety."

Describing the work as both interesting and rewarding, Glen said the job was not finished, nor would it ever be finished.

"People in conservation often forget, it's easy to think of things that haven't been done; we also need to take ownership of what we have done," he said.

He has been instrumental in creating and delivering restoration programmes and outcomes to high profile Otago reserves Penguin Place and Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau Sinclair Wetlands, as well as playing roles in other conservation sites around Aotearoa. — Sally Rae



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Highly respected in the community . . . Balclutha accountant Jimmy Johnstone is a lover of open spaces.

PHOTO: EVELYN THORN

Rolling up his sleeves to help others

JIMMY JOHNSTONE
Accountant
Otago

HAVING moved around a lot as a child, Jimmy Johnstone was keen to put down roots in one place as an adult.

That place was South Otago, a district he first moved to as a stock agent and later returned to as an accountant, the rural lifestyle it afforded suiting him.

"I feel a bit uncomfortable being in the middle of a city. I'm not sure I could live in an apartment . . . drinking latte coffees. It's not really me. I like open spaces," he said.

Jimmy's father was a bank manager, hence the family's move every two or three years.

After completing an agricultural commerce degree at Lincoln, his first job was as a Wrightson NMA stock agent in Clinton.

He later switched to studying accounting at the University of Otago and spent three years in a large Dunedin accounting practice and seven years in the rural sector, principally in rural finance.

In 1991, he joined Balclutha firm Shand Thomson where his wife Susie, who was from the Catlins, was already working. He became a partner in 1999.

Jimmy was widely recognised for his work in the agri-sector; as a pioneer and leader in key performance measurement, benchmarking and improvement metrics

for farming businesses and for his wise and practical approach to farm succession solutions.

His nomination said he was highly respected by his clients, professionals and communities in which he worked.

His broad agricultural expertise was acknowledged with his appointment to the Institute of Chartered Accountants' primary sector committee where he served for five years.

The Institute (now Chartered Accountants Australia & New Zealand) recognised his community and professional contributions by awarding him fellowship status in 2006.

As a result of large-scale health sector reforms, Jimmy has a long history of assisting community-owned organisations to successfully take over and maintain the provision of health services to rural communities.

"I think it's really important rural communities have access to health services commensurate with what's available in urban settings, it just has to be structured differently," he said.

South Otago had been very good to Jimmy and Susie and he enjoyed working with rural communities. At Shand Thomson, the team were also encouraged to work with community organisations.

Jimmy was the inaugural chairman of Sport Clutha and served on the Rosebank Primary School board of

trustees. One of his most satisfying projects had been the development of the museum in Owaka, recognised as one of the best small museums in New Zealand.

More recently, he had been involved in an advisory capacity with the Clutha Community Hub development — a

"fantastic" building which was for "everyone" in the Clutha district.

South Otago was not alone; other rural communities were filled with "really good people, all working to do their bit".

"That's what people do, roll their sleeves up," he said. — Sally Rae



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Win, win . . . Dansy and Greg Coppell are repurposing timber waste from vineyards into affordable fencing for farmers.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Accidental business cutting waste

GREG AND DANSY COPPELL
Fence-post suppliers
Tasman

THIS is the story of an accidental business. Repost — which turns treated timber waste from vineyards into low-cost fence posts — was born

inadvertently when Greg and Dansy Coppell needed to address a fencing problem on their St Arnaud farm.

The couple bought the 500ha property about nine years ago and needed to fence it to help improve both stock management and pasture control — but the couple were on a tight budget which did not include brand-new

fence posts.

Greg's father Allan had used discarded vineyard posts for decades on his farms and so the couple found a stockpile of posts at a Marlborough vineyard and spent days picking over it and loading up a truck, returning to the farm to repurpose the broken posts.

Before they knew it, farming friends around the country were asking for a unit-load of posts and — nek minnit, as the saying goes — they had a fence-post business.

Greg and Dansy's nomination said Repost was working at reducing the treated timber from vineyards and repurposing them into affordable fencing for farmers.

Their innovation in sustainability was helping save the environment and farmers' budgets.

"They have a strong community mindset and are actively taking part in initiatives to help farmers."

The viticulture industry disposed of thousands of tonnes of durable wood into landfills each year and Repost was now changing one of the industry's largest waste issues.

Since its launch, Repost has saved more than 6500 tonnes from landfill and fenced more than 6200km, including on the North Island's East Coast in the aftermath of the devastating Cyclone Gabrielle in February last year.

Initially, the couple were told that Repost would not work on a commercial scale.

But, as Dansy said, there was nothing a farmer liked to be told more than that he could not do something.

Dansy particularly liked the number of repeat customers, as well as the word-of-mouth referrals.

There were also catchment groups and other rural neighbourhood groups that would order a unit load and there was a "feeling of community coming together to make it happen".

The couple's aim was to keep the business low key but be a company that everyone could relate to — "doing something that helps everyone".

Greg, who still also has a building business, met Dansy at a Kiwi barbecue in London. She recalled him in his stubbies, cooking sausages.

She grew up on a lifestyle block in England and hated living in the city — "I'm a country girl by heart".

When she moved to New Zealand with Greg more than 10 years ago, she was working in earthquake recovery work in Christchurch and Greg was building, and they wanted to get back to rural living.

Quipping he was a hermit who liked being up a gully, Greg had a passion for farming albeit he had not had a great deal of time recently for that.

"The farm will be there, it's going nowhere," he said.

And the concept of Repost was really nothing new in the farming world.

Rural communities had been living and breathing the circular economy for 150 years, he said. — Sally Rae

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'Town girl' fierce backer of rural sector

SIOBHAN O'MALLEY

Dairy farmer
West Coast

SIOBHAN O'Malley reckons she's a "jack of all trades, master of none". The humble mother of three owns a dairy farm with her husband Christopher near Hokitika and despite growing up a "town girl", she has embraced the rural sector and has become a fiercely loyal advocate for it.

Siobhan's nomination said she was a well-known campaigner for the rural sector. She co-founded the Meat the Need charity and more recently co-launched the innovative knitwear company Hemprino.

She and her husband sat on several community organisations, "and she is one of those people that say yes to everything", the nomination said.

Siobhan graciously accepted the nomination but was quick to add she was not perfect.

"I don't have a big garden or an immaculate house. It's just not where my priorities lie."

Her involvement in the well-known Meat the Need charity came about while the couple were on their journey to farm ownership.

"We moved around a lot as sharemilkers and ended up in the Tasman region, which is where I got to know Wayne Langford.

Wayne had this vision and I got on board to help him make it happen. New Zealand grows so much food it just doesn't compute that there should be Kiwis that are going hungry."

Over four years, Meat the Need has



Want a job done, ask a busy person . . . Siobhan O'Malley says productivity comes in the form of keeping her workload achievable as "small, bite-sized chunks". PHOTO: SUPPLIED

gone from strength to strength. It supplies foodbanks around the country with packaged mince and recently added milk to its offering.

"I helped set up the strategy and governance of the charitable trust and worked on the logistics, making sure it was extremely easy for farmers to donate

and extremely easy for food banks to accept. For example, the staff and volunteers that run the food banks can't be expected to lift big heavy boxes, so we keep the packaging under 12kg.

"The way the country has embraced the charity has been phenomenal. We have achieved in the last three years what I expected might take five to 10 years to do. But there is more demand than there is supply — we still have around 100 foodbanks on the waiting list."

Now the trust was set up and "ticking along nicely" she had stepped back from her involvement to focus on a new business called Hemprino, which she launched with Harriet Bell and Paul Ensor whom she met while doing the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme in 2018.

"Hemp is extremely strong and holds its shape so replaces the need for polyester in a garment. Combined with the merino we are producing warm, sustainable New Zealand-made garments."

Asked how she achieved so much while also being involved in the dairy farm with her husband, a mother to three children and working full time as a teacher at Westland High School, Siobhan said it was about doing things in small and achievable bite-sized chunks.

"I don't watch television at night. I will use that time to write an email or do some research. I still get imposter syndrome and feel out of my depth at times, but it's all growth. All those little pieces snowball and suddenly you realise you are getting somewhere," she said. — Alice Scott

Making himself heard for the sake of others

SIMON DAVIES

Sheep and beef farmer
Otago

SIMON Davies has never been afraid to ask questions, speak up and be heard.

When opportunities for leadership in the rural sector have presented themselves, he has taken them.

The nomination for Simon said he works tirelessly for the good of the local and national farming community.

He chairs the South Otago River Care catchment group and the Clutha Development Trust.

"Despite sheep farming being a tough gig at the moment, Simon still puts his hand up to lead organisations that work for the collective good.

"Our community absolutely needs people like Simon to take the lead.

He is always well-prepared, punctual and inclusive," it said.

Simon farms 8500 stock units on 1000ha of effective land with his two daughters and wife Jo at Toko Mouth.

He was encouraged into governance by the late Terry Brosnahan, editor of *Country-Wide* for many years.

"We were at an AGM of some kind, I guess I was asking my fair share of questions.

"I have always figured that if I am questioning something in my head, then chances are other people in the room are thinking it too, and I have no trouble being that person who speaks up.

"Terry came up to me afterwards and asked if I was journalist and when I said I wasn't, I was just a passionate sheep farmer, he said I should think about using my skill set in a governance

role."

Heeding Terry's advice, Simon underwent a leadership course sponsored by Federated Farmers and 18 months later became president for the Otago branch.

Simon said governance roles were not for everybody.

"It can be dull, dreary policy work but it's critically important. It's a lot of work that gets you little recognition and can be thankless.

"You need passionate people in these roles advocating for the industry so that people higher up the chain making decisions about agriculture in this country fully understand.

"Being the farmer's voice is so important and I have made it my mission to offer pragmatic, solution-focused options."

Despite being open to new governance roles in the industry, he didn't get them all, he said.

"I don't play games to get the job which sometimes means I don't always succeed, I won't compromise when it comes to maintaining my integrity, accountability and honesty."

Calling a "spade a spade", he has developed his leadership style over time.

"I have probably dampened down my blunt approach over the years."

Communication is the most important aspect of any form of leadership, he said.

"It is key. It develops relationships and gives people the ability to question things.

"Informed people are always more useful than uninformed people," he said. — Alice Scott

Passionate advocate . . . Toko Mouth farmer Simon Davies says he has no qualms about standing up and asking questions. PHOTO: SUPPLIED



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Love of outdoors led to life on farms

RUTH STEELE

Farm worker
Southland

“YOU don’t necessarily have to own a farm to enjoy farming.” Farm worker Ruth Steele is proof of that, having been involved in the rural sector since leaving school, despite not coming from a farming background.

Ruth grew up near Mosgiel and always enjoyed being outdoors; that has never changed — give her a job outdoors, rather than indoors, any day of the week.

Back then, having friends on farms meant holidays were spent in the country and she loved it. When it came time to leave school, she was adamant she wanted to work on a farm.

Ruth spent a year at farm training institute Telford — the only female student that year — as it was very difficult to get a job without experience.

She got a job on a farm in West Otago, and later worked on a Maniototo property, worked on a skifield, did some farm work in Australia and then had a stint at the Fortex meat works as a meat grader to earn money to go on her OE.

She ended up in London, which she did not particularly enjoy, and was a supervisor at a lettuce harvesting business, before heading to Scotland for five years. She worked as a shepherd in the Borders and really enjoyed it. She was preparing to come home when she met her now husband.

His family farm was not big enough to support another family so they decided to return to New Zealand after marrying, and the arrival of three of their four boys in Scotland, to try dairy farming. That took them to Oxford, the West Coast and finally Southland.

They now live near Greenvale and Ruth does relief milking and other farm work, including shifting break fences — “I’m the king of the fences”, she quips — while her husband has a lawn-mowing and gardening business in Tapanui.

While three of their sons have left home, the couple have a high-needs son Murray who is at school at Blue Mountain College and they care for him between them. During school holidays, Ruth takes him on-farm and he loves it.

The nomination said Ruth demonstrated strength and determination and, with the challenges she faced each day, her commitment to her work was devoted.

It also said she showed strength in responsibility, trustworthiness and reliability in her work and she was well liked and respected in the community.

“She grows all her vegetables, composts, grows a magical garden, preserves, makes jam, chops wood, bakes and really cares about the animals.”

After all these years, Ruth still enjoyed working with animals and being outside.

“I just couldn’t imagine myself doing anything else. I just like getting out on the bike and having a dog . . . just the freedom.” — Sally Rae



In the right place . . . Farm worker Ruth Steele has always enjoyed being outdoors.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

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Humble beginnings . . . Ron Alderton has worked hard to purchase four farms in the Lawrence area.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Through highs and lows

RON ALDERTON

Sheep farmer
Otago

IN 1979, aged 28, Ron Alderton had saved \$60,000 and managed to buy his first farm, in Waitahuna near Lawrence.

Ron's nomination said he was a good example of someone who had not only achieved farm ownership under his own steam of frugality and with an eye for efficiency, but also he also the family's land holding over time with the purchase of three additional farm blocks.

The nomination said he has also been a strong community man as a member of the Lawrence Lions Club for 42 years and became involved at a high level as the district governor.

He has battled a genetic back issue which could have ended his farming career had he not been proactive and thorough with his surgeries and rehabilitation.

Ron and his family are hardworking and have a strong desire to care for their properties using sustainable farm practices.

Unapologetically from the "old school of thought", Ron and his wife Carol have successfully sheep farmed through the highs and lows of the industry over the decades.

Ron was one of five children and grew up on a farm in West Otago. Dispersal of his father's holding in the farm was divided five ways which gave the couple a small hand up but the bulk of their first farm deposit came from their hard-earned savings.

"We went into the farm with 38% equity and lived very frugally in order to pay the farm off."

He credits his wife Carol for her thrifty mindset.

"We are very much a team with the same vision, we are not wasters," he said.

Carol has enjoyed her life as a farmers wife, "keeping the vegetable garden full and

making do with what we have around us", she said.

"There is something to be said about being there to support your husband; being on call to help when needed.

"I think many women nowadays feel this pressure to be a superwoman with their own careers.

"Farming is not a 9-to-5 job; it is relentless, and I have always believed the backup support we as farm wives offer is very important."

In 1998, the couple had paid off the first farm and had saved enough capital to buy a second block with a 50% deposit.

Ron lifted production significantly over the seasons and the property was paid off after three years. A third farm was bought in 2011 and the fourth four years ago. Each average about 300ha in size.

"Farming has been a little more frustrating lately, with a few dry seasons, we have had to drop capital stock numbers.

"It's certainly a different place to be in compared to what we have been used to, but we'll get through, things will come right," he said.

The couple's sons Bruce and David and their families now also farm alongside.

Each of them oversee the day-to-day management of their own blocks and they talk regularly and help one another out with the big jobs.

"We do as much as we can in-house. For example, we have two sheep handlers for weighing and crutching."

Forestry is a large component of the farming business and over the decades they have planted a total of about 140ha of the steep faces and gullies into trees, doing the pruning themselves and eradicating the broom and gorse with a knapsack and sheer hard slog.

"A solid day or two on the end of a knapsack, you can achieve a lot," Ron said. — Alice Scott

SPEIGHT'S

GOOD ON YA MATE

Working to better rural mental health

KATHRYN WRIGHT

Rural mental health counsellor and researcher
Southland

GROWING up in Te Anau, where her father was one of the venison recovery aviation pioneers, Kathryn Wright experienced a lot of peripheral loss.

Deaths from air accidents in Fiordland during the Deer Wars were common and she knew many of them, something which stayed with her.

Initially, she had a career in hospitality and spent 10 years as a professional cake decorator but, about a decade ago, she decided she wanted to “do something more”.

Having been good at writing and English at school and always interested in how people thought and psychology, she enrolled in a double degree at Massey University in psychology and sociology, studying from home.

It was during that time she realised there was a problem with rural mental health and, as a farmer’s wife living on a beef and deer farm, it was a natural progression to start working on that topic.

While commodity prices and the weather all affected farmers, that was not the main demographic or problem; it was young men in the 18 to 30 age group, mostly concentrated on 18 to 24-year-olds, she said.

Kathryn dived straight into a social services degree in counselling to become a counsellor and then decided more needed to be done.

“Somebody needed to research why these young men are dying, what is happening that they feel they can’t get help?”

Her masters research was on barriers to young rural men seeking help. Now she is doing a PhD through the University of Otago on the mental health of small rural communities and what helps and harms them, something she described as her purpose.

Kathryn wants to be able to “make a change and leave a mark”.

On the surface, her previous career as a cake decorator and her current roles might seem roads apart, but both have an artistic element.

“I need to think outside the box, I need to think of different ways to reach people who are hard to reach, make use of my knowledge.”

“I get a huge amount of satisfaction from the different roles I do, I love what I do,” she said.

She understood farming, living in an isolated area and that farming and



Finding her calling . . . Kathryn Wright’s career is now focused on rural mental health.

PHOTO: MG PHOTOGRAPHY

home and family were so interconnected — “someone in an office in Auckland may not get that”.

“I believe farming is a culture . . . it’s a way of being, of people and traditions

and land and history.”

Kathryn was the 2022 recipient of the Educational Excellence Award for Otago Polytechnic for her research on young rural men and in 2023 she was

the winner of the Rural Women New Zealand Business Award. She is also a member of the Community Health Council for Te Whatu Ora Southern. — Sally Rae

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At the market hail or shine

JEFFREY AND ANDREA BRUCE
Strawberry and vegetable growers
South Canterbury

AT 3.30am on a Saturday, most people are happily snoozing.

So spare a thought for South Canterbury couple Jeffrey and Andrea Bruce who are up early every weekend to head to the Otago Farmers Market laden with produce grown on their Willowbridge farm.

Their nomination said the couple's horticultural skills and commitment to the Otago community was outstanding and deserved acknowledgement.

"Because they get up so early each week, city dwellers like us can enjoy delicious, nutritious, super-fresh vegetables. Andrea and Jeffrey have introduced a selection of vegetables in a reusable fabric bag, this is such a good community initiative for people living alone or to provide a gift to family members."

Jeffrey and Andrea's main crop is outdoor-grown hydroponic strawberries, a growing operation which came about by chance when one of their potato brokers, who was growing hydroponic strawberries in Nelson, suggested they get into it.

They got such a good response that they kept increasing plant numbers. They now have 48,000 plants and there are plans to take that up to about 120,000 over the next two years.

The strawberries are grown on outdoor racks made from recycled posts sourced directly from vineyards.

While the soil in the area was

excellent, and it seemed a shame to grow the berries above it, it was the most efficient way of picking, Jeffrey said.

The Bruces also grow vegetables, including carrots, potatoes, onions, brassicas and other greens.

When they started their growing venture, it seemed as if there was more opportunity and positivity than grain farming, he said.

Jeffrey and Andrea attend the Otago Farmers Market, their daughter Rebecca does the Geraldine summer market, and grandson Blair does the Waimate market. They are hoping to establish an on-farm stall on their property this year.

The couple had been selling potatoes and carrots to supermarkets for a long time and during their first year at the Otago Farmers Market they only sold vegetables.

It was a good venue for selling smaller lines that supermarkets could not take while the interaction with the customers was something the couple particularly enjoyed.

While it might mean getting up at 3.30am or 3.45am, Jeffrey described it as their day off the farm. They were never in a rush to leave the market — often they were last to leave.

They loved the sense of community at the market and how customers would turn up to buy half a-dozen onions and a bag of spuds even if there was sideways hail. During summer, when they were setting up at 6.30am, there were already customers turning up. — Sally Rae



Busman's holiday . . . Jeffrey Bruce at work selling vegetables at the Otago Farmers Market in Dunedin.

PHOTO: LINDA ROBERTSON

Following father's lead in navigating farm complexities



JOSH BROWN
Environmental consultant
Canterbury

JOSH Brown is following in the footsteps of his father Ian who spent decades working with rural communities and trying to get better environmental outcomes.

"He spent most of his career in different regional councils, most of that working directly with farmers and somehow."

"I don't know if it was intentional or not, I ended up doing something very similar," Josh said.

After working for Ballance in its environmental sustainability team and a couple of years as a representative for a pharmaceutical company working in animal health, he became involved in the Hurunui District Landcare Group.

Established in 2016, HDLG is an independent catchment group of more than 300 North Canterbury farmers.

It is run as an incorporated society to support farmers as they navigate an increasingly complex operating environment while protecting their land, water and native biodiversity for

future generations.

His nomination said Josh had rallied together and led the farming region through several challenges, both environmental and regulatory.

"He has a calm and articulate manner and exterior that hides his enthusiasm and courage to take on the hard topics."

"He leads by example, both in and out of the meeting room, and has given so much to our region in . . . his role as [the group's] facilitator and project manager."

"Josh has built a fantastic team around him who have delivered pragmatic and purposeful solutions to farmers in our region to help create educational and engagement opportunities while developing more sustainable and resilient farm systems."

"His ability to reach across meeting tables with clear and sincere messages has helped to bring together various parties."

"He has been a catalyst for continuous progress in our region and his lead has led to a range of well-funded and resourced projects in our region that weren't even considered before Josh's appointment."

"Josh and his team have

created a wonderful culture for HDLG, and often it is the small things that matter, taking the time to meet around the farm kitchen table, the genuine interest they take in our families, farms and business, and most importantly, their understanding that as farmers we often can't separate these aspects of our lives."

Josh is director and consultant at Rural Consulting which works with farmers, catchment groups, iwi, central and local government.

With a competitive streak, Josh liked "setting out to do something and winning" — and there had been a variety of wins with HDLG, including successfully getting a plan change and being able to draw in a large amount of funding.

If the group was not there, then Environment Canterbury would not be running a hill country erosion project, and that was just one example of what could be done with catchment groups.

Modestly describing himself as "just a cog in these processes", Josh said a collective approach was needed to address issues. — Sally Rae

Calm and articulate . . . Josh Brown has led the farming region through environmental and regulatory challenges.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Excited to be home, ready to help

LUTTE THYS
Farm consultant
Southland

SHE may have travelled and worked around the world but there's no place like home for Lutte Thys.

Lutte joined MilkMaP's Southland consulting team in 2022, armed with plenty of early exposure to the global dairy industry.

Having grown up on her family's Awarua dairy farm in Southland, where she was heavily involved in the farming operation — she was in the cowshed before she could walk — she set up a TeenAg Club while at school at James Hargest College in Invercargill.

She completed a science degree at Massey University, majoring in agricultural science and minoring in animal science.

But she felt she was not qualified to tell people how to do their jobs until she had experienced some different farming systems so she moved to Canada for 18 months to work on dairy farms which were indoors.

From there, she moved to Costa Rica for a three-month internship on tropical dairy production which she described as the best experience in her life.

Returning home for 10 months and working on a nearby dairy farm, she headed overseas again to complete a master's degree in animal science from Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

Her studies focused on two research projects examining the limitations of dairy cow production and reproductive performance across multiple countries and farming systems.

That included her thesis on dairy farming in Ethiopia where she went for several



No place like home . . . Farm consultant Lutte Thys, pictured with dog Chumu, has studied dairy farming around the world.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

months, looking at the limitations to the industry there and the uptake of technology.

It was not the easiest of

experiences, she said.

Returning home due to Covid-19 — she presented her thesis from home.

She then started looking for

jobs and a desire to help people led to her career path.

She worked at New Zealand Animal Evaluation during the development of the new BW

(Breeding Worth) System, based in Hamilton, on a 12-month contract.

By then, she decided she wanted to return home because her partner, whom she met while studying in the Netherlands, had been granted a visa and had a job in the South.

That was when she joined MilkMaP, in a role which was all about helping farmers to get the most profitability out of their system and to get the most out of their cows. For Lutte, it is a dream job.

"I don't like telling people. I like teaching but I don't want to teach high schoolers. I get to do this in my job and help people."

She thrived best in discussions where ideas were bounced around and she loved seeing farmers and their staff getting excited about those ideas.

She particularly enjoyed when farm staff were involved in meetings and showing them the reasons behind why they were doing what they had been told to do and what it meant.

Her nomination said Lutte thrived on helping people achieve their dreams and looked after their wellbeing too.

She was also passionate about getting young blood and enthusiastic young energy into the farming sector.

Lutte lived on the farm — she felt lucky to work from her office and look over the property — and loved being part of the neighbourhood.

Her partner, who is from Tanzania, was passionate about farming and loved the South — even if he was wearing three jackets over winter.

"I wouldn't live anywhere else in New Zealand," she said.

"I've tried the North Island. There's nothing wrong with it — it's just not home." — Sally Rae

Going the extra mile for livestock, sports and children

KATRINA SIMPSON
Livestock representative
West Coast

"EVERYONE says to me, 'I don't know how you do it' — you just do it."

Katrina Simpson goes to great lengths for her family — literally.

Living on the West Coast, and with three very sporty children, meant she was often on the road travelling long distances.

But the Silver Fern Farms livestock representative said she was "all for sports and activities", saying it was so good for their personal wellbeing and growth.

"If you want your kids to do stuff, then you just have to do it," she said.

Originally from Montalto in Canterbury, Katrina attended boarding school in Timaru before completing an agricultural science degree at Lincoln University.

From there, she joined PGG Wrightson's trainee scheme which covered all parts of the business, from livestock to real



Just doing it . . . West Coast livestock representative Katrina Simpson leads a busy life.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

estate and retail.

She was posted to Whangarei before transferring to the West Coast in 1995 and she has remained there.

Katrina now lives with her three teenage children on a 54ha farm at Rimu, just out of Hokitika, which she farmed herself prior to leasing it when life got a bit too busy.

She joined Silver Fern Farms in 2013 after returning from maternity leave and she acknowledged it was a male-dominated job then and it still was today.

"I love my job. I wouldn't want to do anything else and I love the farmers and I love being over here."

"When I first came over here, a

lot of grads, whether bankers or farm advisers, came to the Coast and did a year and then go somewhere else. I came here and then never left."

A previous finalist in the Dairy Women's Network community leadership award, Katrina is a former DWN regional convener for the West Coast. She and her former husband previously worked in the dairy industry, 50:50 sharemilking.

She has been involved as a judge for the New Zealand Dairy Industry Awards, an event the couple previously entered when farming, and she saw judging as a way to give back for what they got out of it. She is also passionate about seeing young people get involved in farming.

Katrina is chairwoman of the Ospri West Coast TbFree committee. When she first joined the committee, there were more than 200 infected herds and now it was down to one which was "amazing".

Now the key was to keep it at the forefront of people's minds, she said.

On the sporting front, Katrina

is registrar for the West Coast Hockey Association and compiles the hockey draw, she is the local Hokitika Hockey Club president and manages a youth collegiate team.

With her daughter in the Tasman under-18 hockey team, weekends during the season were spent travelling to Nelson or Marlborough for training. She is also on the Hokitika netball executive.

She is also group leader for the Greymouth Scout Group and is involved with fundraising for a jamboree in Australia next year which two of her children will attend.

Asked whether she ever had time to herself, Katrina laughed how she decided to start swimming during her many trips to Greymouth — but there was always some stock to look at or groceries to buy, so she still had not made it to the pool. But she was not fazed about that.

"They [her children] are not going to be this age forever . . . in a couple of years, I probably will be saying, 'oh my God, what am I going to do?'" — Sally Rae



Dunedin man big on keeping on top of mental health

KIERAN FOWLER
Sales manager
Otago

GET moving. For Dunedin's Kieran Fowler, physical activity has helped improve his mental health and he encourages anyone else who might be struggling to try it.

Kieran, who has the distinction of holding a New Zealand record for gumboot throwing (55m) and is a former world champion in the sport, has overcome depression.

His wife Julia said she was very proud of his journey and the personal development he has achieved battling the disease.

Kieran, who grew up on a sheep and beef farm in Mid Canterbury, has represented New Zealand in athletics at two world championships (Morocco

Paid to talk farming ... Kieran Fowler enjoys his role as sales manager for Australia and New Zealand for French firm De Sangosse. PHOTO: LINDA ROBERTSON

in 2006 and Beijing in 2008), and also played rugby for Otago B and Otago Colts.

His first job was with CRT (now Farmlands) in the grain and seed store, packing seed orders. Being a country boy, he worked his way through to being on the road as a technical field officer.

"It's pretty easy talking farming, I've done it my whole life. You may as well get paid to do it," he laughed.

Enjoying the agronomy side of farming, he joined French firm De Sangosse in 2020 as lower South Island territory manager and last year became sales manager for Australia and New Zealand.

He still plays some "old man's rugby" for Kaikorai and is still an open-grade discus thrower, ranked second in the country.

The new season will be his last as he concentrates on coaching athletes, several of whom have represented New Zealand.

Gumboot throwing — something he came across at a show and was egged on to give it

a crack — was on the back-burner, although he had given a demonstration at his children's school on Gumboot Friday.

He is involved in his three children's activities — "I don't coach their rugby because there would be too many arguments" — including coaching his elder two at athletics.

Kieran was grateful to have found what worked for him to help his mental health — "I'm not a talker, you'd never get me to go to therapy" — and he urged others, particularly young shepherds who often lived remotely, to find some sort of activity that suited them.

"It doesn't have to be rugby. Go play bowls. You've got to do something," he said.

Julia described her husband as a hard worker.

"He always manages to make time for our children despite having to travel a lot for his job which can be very lonely at times. I am so proud of Kieran and how far he has come in his professional career." — Sally Rae

Fitness studio aims to connect people

BLAIR AND JESS YOUNG
Fitness studio owners
Otago

“WHO would have thought you could have a job that doesn't even feel like a job?"

Jess Young is talking about the Shred Shed, a fitness studio she opened with her husband Blair in a corrugated iron-clad shed at the Tapanui

showgrounds in January last year.

Their nominator said the couple had done an "amazing job" of providing a service to the rural West Otago community to get people out and about and exercising in a safe environment and space where they could connect with others.

"They are providing a variety of classes to cater for all ages

and stages and the update has been incredible due to their openness and embracing attitude."

Jess said the aim of Shred Shed was to bring communities together through group sessions by motivating and encouraging personal wellbeing in a fun and positive environment. Classes focused on workouts for all fitness levels and age groups.

The success of the Shred Shed had exceeded her expectations and the demographic it was attracting was not what she had initially envisaged. Young people appeared not particularly bothered by their health but older people had "taken it on board massively".

I love it. It's given people so much confidence just coming to the gym

It was inspiring to see some of the older members of the community, up to about the age of 86, coming along to classes. There was a greater awareness of how important it was to keep active, and particularly the importance of strength training.

Rather than focusing solely on weight loss, it was more about mobility "and just being able to live". There were women who had not yet reached their 60s and had trouble getting off the ground — "it shouldn't be like that" — and she loved seeing their progress.

Shred Shed was intentionally a country gym with a down-to-earth atmosphere. Having felt

insecure at other group training gyms, Jess said she wanted to create a safe space for people to feel welcomed and not judged. "I love it. It's given people so much confidence just coming to the gym," she said.

She was keen to build a new shed to house the business and, eventually, she reckoned franchising the business was a possibility, to bring other rural communities together.

Blair, better known by his nickname Tubby, takes a couple of classes a week. The Heriot Rugby Club stalwart — who came up with the business name — has finally hung up his boots after notching up his 300th game for the club last year.

— Sally Rae



Fitting in ... Jess and Blair Young opened fitness studio the Shred Shed in Tapanui last year. PHOTO: TUAPEKA CAPTURES

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