



the ARCHIBULL PRIZE

I WEAR MANY HATS BUT FIRST AND FOREMOST I AM A FARMER

WOMEN IN BUSINESS — SUE MIDDLETON



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Sue Middleton

2010 Australian RIRDC Rural Women's Award winner

women in Business

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'The first time I ever went to a biogas facility, I just about passed out with the smell. *Anaerobic digestion* has its drawbacks but not when you can see the sensible, sustainable business opportunity in it.'

Sue Middleton felt bowled over by the attention when she won the Rural Industries Research & Development Corporations (RIRDC) Rural Women's Award for her state, Western Australia. She'd been asked in the past by the award co-ordinator to nominate, but had always felt she was 'too busy or it wasn't the right time'. Then in 2009 everything came together.

Sue was well into her biogas project – to turn piggery waste into energy and a few other beneficial outcomes. (The CPRS [Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme] was still high on the agenda, trading in Carbon Permits was on the cards, and Copenhagen was still to come.)

POLITICAL BLOWS

'I knew the project I was developing would work and even though things have changed priority in some ways – the announcement of the delay of the CPRS was a blow, however, I got up the next day and thought, we still need to do this. This project is important on all levels, for business, for sustainability, growth and the

environment. The key issue for the planet is to create closed loop cycles within businesses wherever possible.

'Biogas is about converting waste into electricity, producing costs savings for us and allowing us to potentially sell green power into the grid, because it's no secret, oil resources are dwindling.

'There's a way of syphoning off water from the process and we've begun researching the use of heat/cooling in sow housing. Profitability is dependent on stock being in optimum health, reproducing and feeding efficiently. Our major costs are in feed and staff. If we can use technology to keep the pigs warm, and produce fertiliser from the 'waste to energy' conversion to grow feed, it makes sense.'

STUNNED BY SUCCESS

Sue and her husband's family manage a diverse range of farming operations, including pork production, and while she sees the state and national rural women's awards as the perfect platform to progress her research and to educate others on the enormous opportunities associated with biogas, it's the ambassadorial aspect of the role that has surprised her the most.

'I'd never seen myself in that way. I love and enjoy watching others take centre stage for their achievements but I didn't see that as my place. I'm happy to

play a role but being the focus stunned me. I had to learn to talk about what I'd done, what I'd achieved, my abilities.

'Women, and I include myself in this, live with self-doubt. Finding I can inspire and influence other women to get past that doubt and that my position provides them with the leverage they might need to talk about their own projects, initiatives and ideas, that's the most powerful part of the Award.'

LIFE LINKS

For Sue, three key points in her life have brought her to where she is now. She grew up in a farming family in southeast Queensland where she was exposed to community membership and leadership (her father was mayor), farming and innovative farming techniques. Her family was also the type to ignore the gender card: 'Everyone just got in and worked. It's the same with living in a community. To belong you need to know what is going on. If you participate less then you'll have a different experience.'

Her role modelling and familial experience led her to an interest in developing farming communities and in those projects that help bring about positive outcomes for rural people and her then major interest, rural tourism.

'I went to work in Barcaldine as an economic development

officer. It's where I cut my teeth in something I still do today, consulting on grass roots community development and infrastructure projects that are sustainable. It's no good getting a project up and going only to find two years down the track it's too expensive to maintain or the need was not properly assessed.'

From her role in Queensland Sue saw an opportunity to work on a broader stage in Western Australia, where there was a call for rural practitioners to manage a community capacity building program across a number of communities, and teach people in those communities how to manage change.

It was here that she met her husband and made the decision to settle down in one place and commit. It was pivotal because it 'rounded' her.

'I still consult and do voluntary community building work but the family farming business is my main role. It's about being part of running a diverse agricultural business as its own entity not as a part of a community business development and that has its similarities and its differences.'

The other seemingly disparate event, which when linked with the other two plot the path to where Sue finds herself, today, was her first board position. Asked to join the Regional Women's Advisory Council chaired by rural consultant, farmer and academic Cathy

McGowan, Sue discovered her liking for strategy, the executive level of board work, and for making a difference, where it counts, at policy level.

'Policy is a dark beast, untraceable. To influence policy and make a difference you have to learn the skills – it takes patience and tenacity. Having a chair like Cathy was a fantastic experience.

'She taught me the value of pinpointing what makes a difference to the people you want to convince to help you solve your particular issue. If you want results, discover what engages your audience, find where that intersects with what you're after and speak to that.'

BEING BIPARTISAN

Having stitched together this satisfyingly rounded business life story we spring into discussing some of the larger philosophical and personal angles surrounding Sue's choices. When she was first in WA, she remembers the excitement of being part of the rural development program, Progress Rural, targeting 25-45 year-old members of rural communities with the aim of developing leaders in every facet of rural, industrial, political and cultural life in Western Australia. It was the initiative of a particular minister and Sue regrets not pushing for it to become bipartisan. Her belief is that by letting it remain 'owned' by one side it was doomed to fail when and if there was a change of government and it was her duty to make sure this did not happen.

'I didn't achieve this and in 2001 the program was cut. I feel I've failed a whole generation because, in my opinion, there really was no government investment in leadership in rural

Western Australia after that.

'But, life turns, everything comes back, including flares and perms, I believe, which I'm not revisiting.'

RISKY BUSINESS

Sue is also very committed to the 'successful diversification' message for women and especially those on the land to ameliorate the risks of perverse weather conditions.

'I'd love to see something documenting the impact drought has in all our lives. It really teaches you about the need for backup plans. Some years ago, I made a few off-farm investments and they've been successful. In hindsight I wish I'd made more. Thinking about what you need to retire is a serious calculation to make as a woman and my advice is start now. Don't wait, because the sooner you start the better off you'll be.

'I don't know how to resolve the live now prepare for the future dilemma, except maybe acknowledge there is no solution...'



Applications for the 2011 RIRDC Rural Women's Award are open and close 15 October. If you have a great idea for a project or would like to develop your skills further contact RWN for an application package and a list of past NSW/ACT award winners and finalists who have kindly offered to mentor women applying.

WHO'D BE A FARMER?

'Who'd be a farmer', I hear you say.
Well, it's really quite hard to explain!
While we scan the sky and the weakest stock die ...
We're hoping and praying for rain!

So many decisions just have to be made;
What to sow, when to plough, what to cull.
Unreliable markets for livestock and grain,
Indeed, life will never be dull!

Long hours in the paddock and office as well.
The seasons dictate what we do.
Custodians only of this fragile land,
Demanding the best we can do!

Yes, prescription farming's the name of the game,
For cropping's a whole new frontier.
Alone, on a tractor, the moon coming up,
No chance for a sleep now, it's clear.

Mustering sheep, marking calves, spraying weeds or whatever,
There's always more work to be done.
But despite the long hours, there are many rewards,
And farming can also be fun!

A sense of achievement... a job well done,
When you've put up a brand new fence.
Or sinking a dam, maybe sowing a crop,
Well, it's hard work ... and yes, commonsense!

When you pull a live calf and the odds were not good,
Then he takes those first steps to his mother.
Well, it makes it worthwhile and you can't help but smile,
Farming's a life like no other!

It's a joy to be tailing a big mob of sheep
When the land wears a mantle of green.
On a horse, or a bike, with a good dog in charge;
Other farmers will know what I mean.

At the end of the day when the light ebbs away
And the quick pulse of life seems to slow.
In the hush of the night all the cares of the day
Seem to melt with the sunset's warm glow.

Despite droughts, floods and bushfires, the spirit lives on.
Most farmers just never give in!
'Cause, despite the frustration, we're feeding the nation
And that's quite a battle to win!

Makes you soon realise, what matters in life.
'Who'd be a farmer?' you say.
Well, if I had a fresh chance to do it all over ...
I still would choose no other way!

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