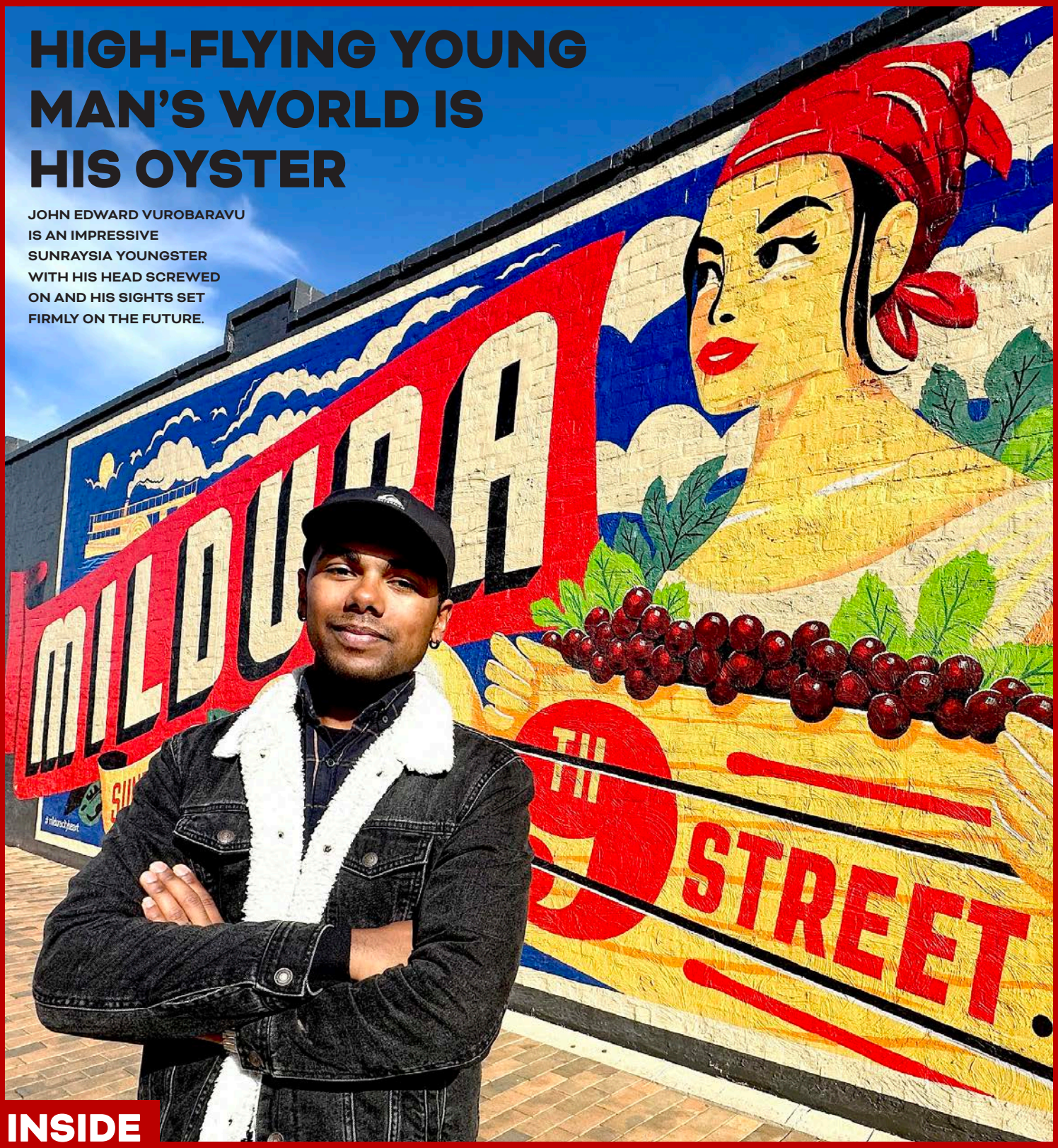
HEARTBEAT

FREE

MILDURA
BASE PUBLIC HOSPITAL



HIGH-FLYING YOUNG MAN'S WORLD IS HIS OYSTER

JOHN EDWARD VUROBARAVU IS AN IMPRESSIVE SUNRAYSIA YOUNGSTER WITH HIS HEAD SCREWED ON AND HIS SIGHTS SET FIRMLY ON THE FUTURE.

INSIDE

- **A SPEEDWAY SUPERSTAR:** At just 12 years of age Blake Schlein is a world champion.
- **MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE:** The story of an amazing young lady.
- **THE ARCHAEOLOGY STUDENT:** Louca's loving his uni life at Flinders.
- **RIDING THE CREST OF A WAVE:** Matt's a kneeboarding daredevil.

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MATT'S A MURRAY RIVER-LOVING KNEEBOARDING DAREDEVIL AND KITE SURFER. **STORY: PAGE 18.**



LOUCA'S STUDYING ARCHEAOLOGY AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY WITH PLANS TO EXPLORE THE DEEP BLUE SEA. **STORY: PAGE 43.**



FELICITY'S JOURNEY FROM KOKODA TO THE MINES AND BACK HOME TO MILDURA. **STORY: PAGE 64.**



MILDURA'S BLAKE SCHLEIN IS A WORLD CHAMPION SPEEDWAY SUPERSTAR WITH A BIG INTERNATIONAL FUTURE. **STORY: PAGE 86.**

From our Foundation Chairman >>

It gives me pleasure to welcome you to *Heartbeat* Edition 13, which I believe is an excellent publication, which I trust you will enjoy.

This year is fast disappearing and the work of the Foundation continues to deliver further benefits to the community of north western Victoria. As mentioned in my message in the last edition of *Heartbeat*, the screening truck is now well and truly up and running and visiting locations throughout our region and beyond.

The service is being hailed as a game-changer for the health outcomes of people who undertake precautionary screenings for skin, cardio and mammography. The truck has been booked out in all of the locations it travels to and the service provided by the onboard clinical staff is excellent and the feedback from patients has been overwhelmingly complimentary.

It was recently announced that the Cardiology Outpatient Clinic at Mildura Base Specialist Clinic is now open for referrals from the broader community. The clinic which was supported by the Foundation, commenced on June 15, this year, initially accepting referrals from the Emergency Department and inpatient teams, while the service was established and optimised. The service has now been extended to community referrals. The clinic compliments existing private cardiology services and improves access for vulnerable members of our community.

Now that October is upon us, I am reminded that this year's Foundation Gala Ball is not far away. The Halloween-themed Gala Ball, will be held at the magnificent, Quality Grand Hotel Ballroom on Saturday, October 31. It is always a spectacular occasion and another wonderful fund raising event in the Foundation's calendar.

The Foundation's Paddock Club Marquee was the place to be at the 'bet365 Mildura Cup' race meeting held on July 17. It was a picture, perfect day and the MBPH catering team provided a delectable luncheon menu complemented by a range of fine beverages. Special guest speaker, racing industry legend Wayne Hawkes from Hawke's Racing, made a popular return visit and was joined again by racing tipster, Jules Vallance.

Wayne related his personal experience in relation to a skin screening test he had undertaken previously, which identified some issues that needed attention. He spoke about this in context of the fact, that he was about to undergo another skin screening test at the Mildura Cup, where the MBPH screening truck was parked, offering free screenings to oncourse racegoers.

All of these events are important opportunities for our community to come together and support the work of the Foundation and I commend them to you.

Finally, as always, I would like to thank all our sponsors, donors and supporters whose ongoing generosity makes this work possible. Your contribution continues to make a tangible difference in the health and wellbeing of our community.



Ross Lake
Chairman

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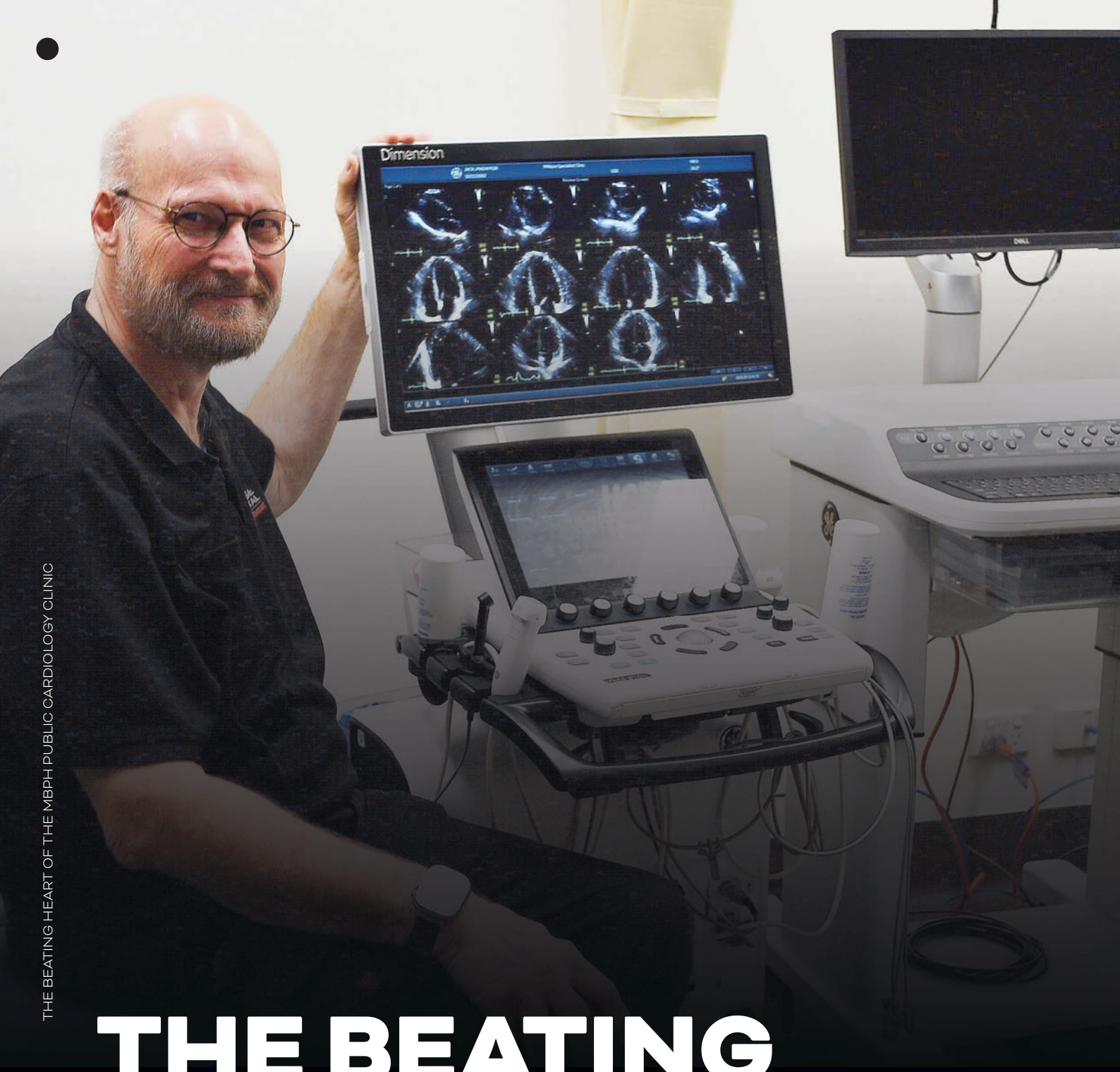
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THE BEATING HEART OF OUR PUBLIC CARDIOLOGY CLINIC

MBPH Director of Medical Services - Medical and Community Services; Clinical Director of General Medicine; and Specialist Physician General Medicine and Cardiology Dr Bernhard Kuepper.

WORDS
JOHN DOOLEY

<< IN THE MARCH 2026 EDITION OF HEARTBEAT, WE FEATURED A STORY ABOUT THE OPENING OF MILDURA BASE PUBLIC HOSPITAL'S (MBPH) PUBLIC CARDIOLOGY UNIT AS PART OF ITS SPECIALIST CLINIC. WE RECENTLY RE-VISITED THE UNIT AND ONCE AGAIN SPOKE TO MBPH DIRECTOR OF MEDICAL SERVICES - MEDICAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICES; CLINICAL DIRECTOR OF GENERAL MEDICINE; AND SPECIALIST PHYSICIAN GENERAL MEDICINE AND CARDIOLOGY, DR BERNHARD KUEPPER. HERE IS AN EXCERPT OF THE CONVERSATION THAT FOLLOWED... >>



MBPH Cardiac Sonographer Amy Standbrook at work in the MBPH Public Cardiac Unit.

Dr Kuepper opened our conversation by telling me that "since I spoke to you last, we have been able to slowly progress MBPH's cardiology project". Followed by: "We have been able to open up consulting for our patients although at the moment this is limited to patients who have been referred by inpatient services. That means that if somebody comes to the emergency department and gets identified with a cardiac problem which may not have been severe enough in the past to require instant admission but may have seen the patient transferred to one of the tertiary hospitals in Melbourne, we can now see these patients in our public outpatient clinic."

Dr Kuepper further explained how this enables the clinic to optimise medication or undertake diagnostic tests.

"This clinic is set up in such a way that we can now do all the tests that are usually offered and completed by the private providers," Dr Kuepper said.

"That includes getting ultrasound images of the heart and stress testing it to see whether they are areas - like the arteries of the heart - not providing enough blood supply.

"Or doing the 'electric' testing to see whether they are rhythm problems.

"If we can prove there are problems, then we can refer these people through to the Melbourne hospitals.

"That's a very exciting new component."

Dr Kuepper was also pleased to reveal that a second cardiologist had now started working with the unit.

"Our second cardiologist, Dr Naveen Roy, commenced working about three weeks ago," Dr Kuepper said. "He is attached to Bendigo Health and will be able to do angiographies* and treating patients in Bendigo as well.

"Therefore, if there is somebody who has an artery problem and will need a catheter with a balloon and a stent, Dr Naveen will be able to perform that procedure in Bendigo.

"The arrangement is that he will be three weeks per month with us at the MBPH clinic and one week in Bendigo."

Dr Kuepper continued: "Early indications are following discussions private providers at both Mildura cardiology and Australian Cardiology will consider referring elective and angiography patients to him as well," he explained.

"This will be helpful in regard to providing him with a reasonable workload when he goes to Bendigo.

"This will potentially be a win-win situation with Bendigo Health being able to increase patient volumes as well."

Dr Kuepper has extensive experience gained over many years in Germany as a pacemaker implant surgeon and as a pacemaker development researcher and designer.

He told Heartbeat that Bendigo Cardiology has offered to collaborate with him in this area of surgery.
"Bendigo Cardiology has offered to work with me to enable me to implant pacemakers in Mildura again," Dr Kuepper said.

"I am credentialled with Bendigo Health Cardiology for this, and we're now working on timing plans.

"This will see two Bendigo-based surgeons collaborating with me implanting pacemakers so that we can offer that service to our patients up here in Mildura again."

The establishment of the Public Cardiology Unit at MBPH is yet another example of the valuable contribution the MBPH's Foundation is making to facilitate advanced medical services provision on the Northern Mallee and all aimed at improving the health outcomes for residents.

**An angiogram is the image created by coronary angiography. An angiograph is a minimally invasive medical imaging procedure used to visualize the blood vessels. It plays a vital role in diagnosing and sometimes treating cardiovascular diseases, particularly coronary artery disease. A special dye called 'liquid contrast agent' is injected into the bloodstream to make blood vessels visible on a scan. Conventional angiography uses X-rays and contrast agent to produce angiogram pictures.*

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THE SPANISH GRILL: WHERE FIRE MEETS FLAVOUR

WORDS
ARYAVEER SAHANI

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FOR steak lovers, a great meal begins long before the first bite. It starts with a carefully chosen cut, a glowing bed of coals and a chef who knows exactly when to take it off the fire. At The Spanish Grill, that craft is at the heart of every evening.

Located within the historic Mildura Grand Hotel, the restaurant has made charcoal cooking its signature. Its steaks are hand selected, locally aged and cooked over red gum and mallee root coals. The result is the rich, smoky flavour and satisfying char that make a visit to a steakhouse feel like an occasion.

Chef Jay Perera leads the kitchen with an appreciation for both the ingredients and the fire.

Guests can choose from cuts including eye fillet, scotch fillet, porterhouse and a generous T-bone, then make the meal their own with sauces and sides. A glass of Australian Toro wine or a beer completes the experience.

While steak is the star, there is plenty for the rest of the table to enjoy. Small plates invite guests to begin with grilled oysters, house Argentine chorizo or an empanada. Lamb, seafood and a vegetarian pasta offer further choices, while desserts provide a fitting end to the evening.

The setting has its own appeal. The restaurant's place within the historic Mildura Grand Hotel adds character to the evening, whether guests are enjoying dinner for two or gathering with friends. The Murray River is just a short walk away, perfect for a stroll before or after the meal.

At The Spanish Grill, the pleasure is straightforward: excellent steak, cooked with skill over real coals, served in a landmark Mildura setting. Visit us at 10 Langtree Avenue and come hungry for the fire!

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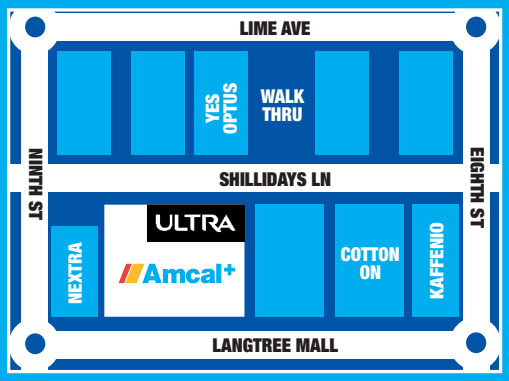
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Edward is interested in Mildura's history and enjoyed a visit to Rio Vista.

JOHN EDWARD VUROBARAVU IS AN IMPRESSIVE SUNRAYSIA YOUNGSTER WITH HIS HEAD SCREWED ON AND HIS SIGHTS SET FIRMLY ON THE FUTURE. BORN TO PARENTS FROM VANUATU AND THE PHILIPPINES RESPECTIVELY, HE HAS TRAVELLED EXTENSIVELY AND LIVED IN MANY DIFFERENT PLACES, BUT RECENTLY TOLD HEARTBEAT...

MILDURA IS NOW MY HOME

WORDS
JOHN DOOLEY

HE may call Mildura home these days, but John Edward Vurobaravu acknowledges he is currently not here that often given his fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) lifestyle as a mine worker in Western Australia's Pilbara region.

Heartbeat was fortunate to catch up with the 22-year-old on one of his one-week-a-month breaks at home in the 'river city' and it soon became obvious that I met someone special. Edward (he prefers his second name) oozes enthusiasm and ambition – and it is immediately clear he considers his life is just beginning.

Born in Australia, to parents originally from Vanuatu and the Philippines, Edward identifies as proudly 'Pure Aussie'.

He begins our chat by telling me how he came to be in Mildura.

"I've pretty much been here in Mildura since 2013," he explained. "My family had been moving around Australia quite a lot before that. You name it. Darwin, Alice Springs, Townsville, Adelaide and Brisbane for example, but Mildura was to become our last stop!"

Working in the mining industry can be a very exciting and lucrative occupation for a young single person, looking to put some real money together, Edward tells me.

Before moving into mining, Edward says he had been trying to figure out "what I actually really wanted to do my life".

"At one stage I did want to become a pharmacy assistant, so that's the reason I moved to Darwin in 2023 for a year and worked as a pharmacy assistant," he reveals.

"In 2024, I moved back to Mildura, thinking that I would like to study to become a pharmacist. But I just lost interest and thought I'd try something different instead."

Fly-in, fly-out mining it was.

Located in the Chichester Ranges of Western Australia's Pilbara region, on Palyku and Nyiyaparli Country, Edward is employed by power transmission company RSGx and working at Fortescue mining company-owned operations.

One of them, known as 'Cloud Break', was established in 2008 against all advice. Advice that said the location was untouchable. No rail so no mine was the catch-cry.

But as Fortescue proudly announces: "We built it anyway".

To make the Cloud Break ore body viable, Fortescue constructed a heavy-haul railway of more than 260 kilometres and port facilities at Port Hedland.

Cloud Break, alongside 'Christmas Creek' and 'Solomon', forms the backbone of Fortescue's massive Chichester hub operations in the Pilbara.

Today, these sites are scaling renewable energy, deploying zero emissions electric excavators and helping prove heavy industry can run without fossil fuels.

Cloud Break is one of the sites where Edward is working today.

"I am what's known as a 'Linee'," he tells me.

"I'm pretty much doing everything in that role, helping build power transmission lines from 80 to 100 kilometres long.

"The team I am with uses machines called EWPs - Elevated Working Platforms – a bucket from which you work 50, 70 up to 80 metres in the air."

Then Edward shows me photos of a helicopter 'flying' the cables between the pylons and explains that he and his team have the cable ready for the helicopter to intercept it and drag over the insulators and onto the next pylon.

CONTINUED PAGE 14

FROM PAGE 13

"The work we do can be dangerous," he acknowledges, despite there being no power running through the cables.

But he says the upside of the work is the pay cheque he receives each week.

"The money is great and I am setting myself up for my future."

Other benefits FIFO employees enjoy include free travel to and from the mine as well as free accommodation while onsite and all meals provided.

Not all companies in the region pay for flights in and out, Edwards says.

"It varies from company to company."

"The company I work for pays for my flights, which is good. We are well looked after with accommodation, and they provide us food and a range of amenities including WiFi, a gym and a pool.

"While some alcohol is allowed it is limited to mid-strength beer. And you've got to be 'zero' on the job.

"Every day, before you start your shift, you've got to undertake a breath test. So, I thought there's really no point drinking, and I rarely do."

When it's time for Edward to return to the Pilbara, he flies from Mildura to Melbourne, then Melbourne to Perth where he usually overnights before catching his employer's own aircraft to take him to Cloud Break.

He is one of 40 to 50 people doing the same job and explained his very full work cycle.

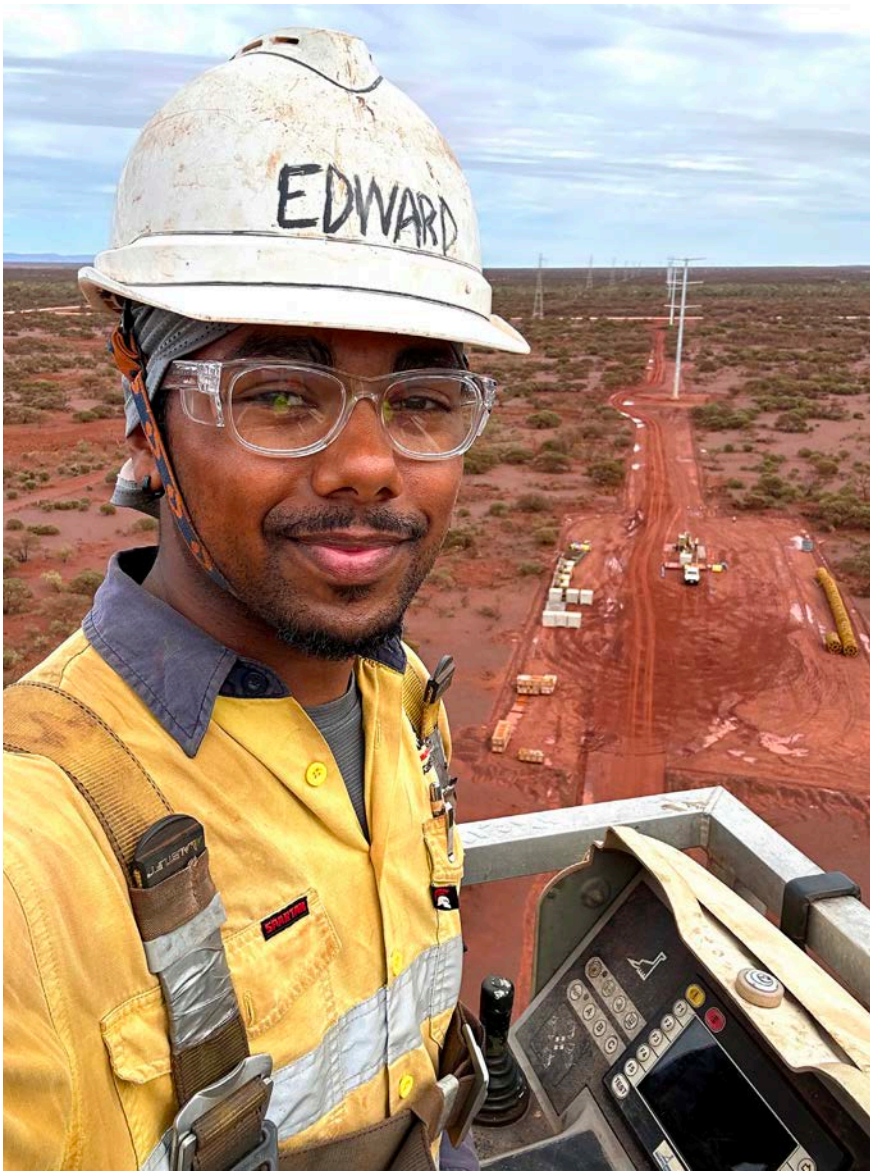
"For three weeks we just go, go, go. No stops. The only time when we can stop is when there's nothing happening, and that will be like five or 10 minutes... 15 minutes tops," he says.

"At the end of the day all you want to do is eat and go to bed."

After three weeks on comes a one-week break. Then the cycle repeats.

But it's well worth the effort, Edward reckons.

"I say to any young person that if they're interested and wanted to get experience in FIFO work, I'd say give it a go.



Edward's job gives him a bird's eye view of his surroundings.

"If you really want to retire early, and of course money's a big thing for everyone nowadays – do it."

I met Edward at the Mildura Arts Centre and apart from having our chat for this article, we spoke about the history of Mildura and later toured Rio Vista.

Edward was incredibly impressed with the former home of the W.B. Chaffey and his family. I explained to him how the Chaffey Brothers had established the irrigation district that is now Mildura and how Rio Vista translated to 'River View' from the Spanish.

All the while I was with him, Edward exhibited an unbridled entrepreneurial spirit. He's an ambitious person with aspiration.

So, I asked: "Where do you think you might go in life? What do you think you'd like to do?

"I'd like to travel around Australia. I want to do a tour. I've got a good car and everything I need to do that," he tells me.

"I want to take my time. Take six to eight months, go right around and catch up with family across Australia.

"I might go back to pharmacy one day. I am still passionate about it because I do really want to help people who need medicines and advice about their personal health.

"But I am enjoying my life at present and just letting it take me wherever it leads me."

CONTINUED PAGE 16



Inside Rio Vista - W.B. Chaffey's family home.



Fortesque's Cloud Break mine where Edward works.



Helicopters are increasingly used to string cables between power pylons due to their efficiency and environmental benefits.

Here are some key points about this method:

Efficiency: Helicopters can string conductors quickly, often within one to two days per tower, compared to traditional ground-based methods that may take longer.

Environmental Impact: Using helicopters reduces the need for bulldozers and earthworks, minimizing ground disturbance to properties and state forests.

Safety: Helicopters provide a safer alternative to ground-based stringing because they fly close to the top of new transmission towers, reducing the risk of accidents.

Cost-Effectiveness: The use of helicopters can save network operators time and money by reducing the need for heavy machinery and earthworks.

Flexibility: Helicopters can support multiple lineworker teams and can be arranged for heavier lifting tasks if needed.

The use of helicopters to string cables between power pylons is a growing trend in powerline maintenance and construction, offering a modern and efficient solution to string powerline conductors.



Edward's enjoying his high flying job.


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Matt McPherson on his wake foil.

MATT MCPHERSON STARTED KNEE BOARDING LIKE SO MANY DO – PLAYING AROUND BEHIND A SPEEDBOAT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS. BUT HE WAS DESTINED FOR BIGGER THINGS AND HAS SINCE TAKEN WHAT WAS ONCE A WEEKEND SKYLARK TO MUCH GREATER HEIGHTS...

MATT'S LEAVING THEM IN HIS WAKE

WORDS

JOHN DOOLEY

IT all started, Matt McPherson tells me, with family and friends and a speedboat on a river or lake.

"I just got better and better at kneeboarding," he says without an ounce of a boast, while acknowledging more traditional water skiing was not his forte.

"Then I got invited by one of my mates to go over to Taylorville – the rural locality in South Australia's Riverland on the north bank of the Murray River opposite Waikerie – for a weekend of knee boarding with Adrian Meus, the head of the O'Brien Watersports team in Australia and a professional board rider with more than a decade's experience.

Adrian's back story shares similarities with Matt's.

The 'Reader's Digest' version on the O'Brien website goes something like this.

"I spent many years sitting along the bank up at my grandparents shack on the Murray River," he begins.

"I'd watch all the sparkly speed boats going up and down with kids being towed on kneeboards and I wanted to be that kid getting towed," he said.

"Pops used to pull me behind a dinghy on a boogie board. We didn't go very fast, but it still put a smile on my face.

"I made it my mission to get my own tow boat and spent my late teens and early 20s doing just that.

Now, 25 years later Adelaide-based Adrian is "representing the best water sports company in the world!"

Matt takes up his own story again, revealing that Adrian had invited a bunch of riders from all over to meet on the Murray at Tayorville.

"I didn't know him or most of the people there, but he liked the way I rode," Matt recalls.

"A couple of months later he asked me to join the O'Brien Watersports kneeboard team and things just progressed from there."

Born and raised in Swan Hill, Matt has called Mildura home since November last year and is now a brand ambassador for what is arguably the world's most recognised name in water sports, building on a legacy that began with the company's first water ski in 1964.

O'Brien Watersports is an American-based company on a mission to "create products that offer the ultimate family fun on the water".

The company continues to manufacture water skis along with wakeboards, wakesurf boards, stand up paddleboards, tubes, and life jackets "spending countless hours designing, testing, and perfecting each product to meet the demands of our athletes as well as their friends and families".

These days Matt spends a lot of time producing social media content showcasing his skills on the kneeboard and O'Brien Watersports products.

"It's about posting as many videos as you can... progressing the sport, getting the O'Brien Watersports name out there and showing people what you can do," he says.





Matt with his O'Brien sponsored kneeboard and on his wake foil.

Matt has also spent time knee boarding and producing content in the United States where the sport is huge.

And he now counts American knee boarding icon Jordan Adcock as a friend after spending time with him in the 'States.

"Jordan put out a call out saying he was going to host a kneeboard event based at his home on Lake Kerr in North Carolina USA," Matt recalls.

"He just asked anyone that could make it to let him know and we sure were interested."

The 'we' Matt is referring to is himself and his partner of three years Shelley Thompson and a fellow kneeboarding enthusiast from Mildura.

"We booked the flights and flew over. He picked us up from the airport and drove us back to his lake house... we didn't really have to do anything.

"Jordan drove us around, showed us around and made sure we were feed and watered and had a place to stay."

Quite a bit of the action filmed on that trip went viral on social media, further cementing Matt's reputation as a force in the sport.

"We went over and I met a heap of upcoming kneeboarders and some of the OGs as well... the originals."

For the uninitiated kneeboarding began in the mid-1960s in Southern California when surfers used homemade belly and knee boards behind motorboats. Now a sport and a popular pastime, it has continued to grow ever since.

As a competitive activity, kneeboarding is relatively new sport, having developed most rapidly during the past two decades.

In 1983, a group of traditional waterskiers from America's lower Midwest banded together to form a club that would encourage kneeboarding as a competitive sport. They chartered the American Kneeboard Association (AKA) and produced slalom and tricks events that were modelled closely after events sanctioned by USA Water Ski.

As news of competitive kneeboarding spread, interest in the sport grew tremendously and today there are thousands of recreational and competitive kneeboard skiers across the world.

That of course includes Matt, who told Heartbeat another highlight of his 2024 American trip was landing a world-first trick that earned him a lot of respect from his peers.

That achievement was the result, Matt admits, of a lot of practice. "You've just got to keep doing it," he says, "Until you nail it."

And the inevitable crashes until you do nail it?

"Eventually you just get used to it. Yes, even the crashes. You learn how to crash so you don't hurt yourself so much," Matt said.

"Years ago, I did some water skiing, and I must say once I got up and started to get the feel of it, I quickly progressed to one ski."

He admits he "wasn't a great skier".

However, what he did find out was that having a good boat to pull you out of the water cleanly is a must.

"I nearly got drowned by a few that pulled me early in the piece."



Matt's flying on the mighty Murray.



Matt on his kneeboard.



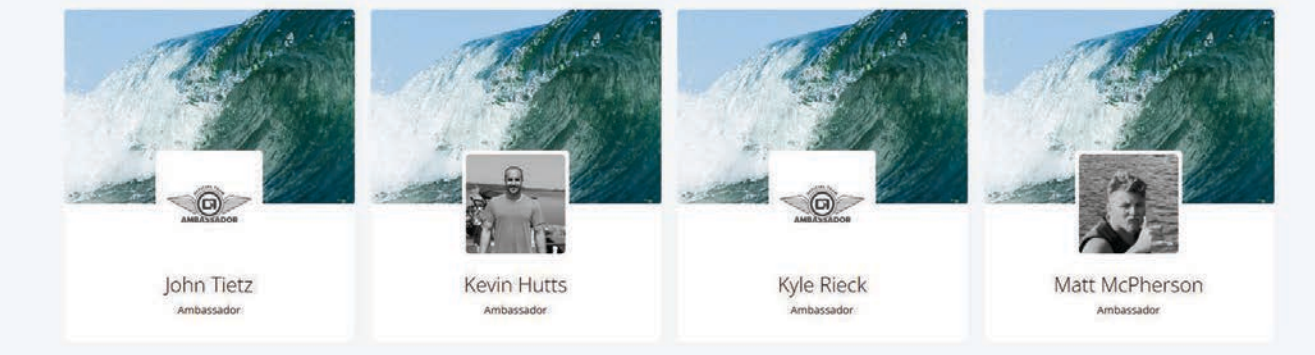
But even superstars like Matt make a big splash as they crash.



Matt is never more at home when he's behind the wheel of his powerboat. Look carefully in the rear vision mirror that's Shelley.



Matt rides his wake foil.







Adrian Meus. Head of O'Brien Watersports.

He can shrug it off now considering his ability behind a boat and on the water, but at the time it wasn't a laughing matter.

For his kneeboard trick riding Matt tells me his tow boat speed is usually about 21 or 22 miles per hour or 35kph, nothing like the speeds ski racers used to do taking part in races like the Mildura 100. For the record, skiers in the Mildura 100 used to reach top speeds averaging over 195kph (121 mph), with elite boats and skiers hitting bursts between 170kph (105mph) and 220kph (136mph) along the course.

"I'm usually consistently doing 22, but if I'm going to try a new trick, I might slow down a bit to get a feel for it," he says.

Matt acknowledges there are similarities between his former hometown and his new home in Mildura.

"They're both Murray River towns but the river here is very different to Swan Hill," he points out.

"Swan Hill's for fishing. Here's for skiing (and kneeboarding)," is his opinion.

When he's not out on the water honing his already formidable skills, Matt is mowing lawns and fixing small engines. He was a small engine mechanic for 10 years before moving to Mildura.

What about outboard engines considering his proximity to boats and the water?

"I haven't really got to work on too many boat motors," he confides.

Besides that, he'd rather be camping with Shelley and their three dogs.

"We do a fair bit of that whenever we get the chance. We like getting away and exploring," he says.

In fact, the couple's first date was a camping trip.

"It was only supposed to be one night, but we ended up spending three nights out there camping," Shelley reveals.

"We both love being outdoors."

Shelley's is Murray-Darling Basin Authority's Senior Project Officer Riverine Ecology Team, a job that ensures she spends a lot of time outdoors.

"That's probably one of the reasons Matt and I connected, because I've always loved outdoors, the environment and being on the river," she says.

"And then I met a man who does a lot of sports on the river as well, so that was pretty nifty."

Shelley's job also ensures she sees plenty of Australia's riverine environments from the Coorong in South Australia to Warwick in Queensland.

"I've travelled all across the Basin in my job, connecting with the community and engaging about fish recovery and trying to go to conferences, connect with scientists and researchers on how to do a lot of trying to restore fish populations."

The couple now have their own Instagram presence dubbed 'Wake Society' that is working to promote kneeboarding as a recreation and a sport.

"We want people to give it a go," they told *Heartbeat*.

"We're encouraging people to come out in the boat, even if they've never done it before and have a go.

"So hit us up," they chorus. "We're always happy to take people out."

Scan the QR code to see more of the action.



Relaxing after an exhilarating day on water.



Matt's partner Shelley is real talent on the kneeboard too.



Shelley in serious concentration as she gains control of the wake foil.



Shelley is quite an accomplished wake foil rider.



Shelley is the ever dilligent observer and skipper of the boat.



SRS Manager Clinical Care, Learning and Development Julie Gentle.

SRS EXPANDS INTO IN-HOME SPECIALIST NURSING CARE

WORDS
VINNIE RODI

SUNRAYSIA Residential Services Inc. (SRS) is broadening its commitment to supporting local people to live independently, with the introduction of specialised in-home nursing services designed to bring essential healthcare directly to people in their homes.

The expansion marks a significant step forward in SRS' growing suite of services, providing professional nursing care for people who may otherwise face challenges accessing regular treatment, follow-up appointments or ongoing health support.

Delivered by SRS' Nursing Team, the new services will include wound care, medication management and subcutaneous injections.

The service will be available to National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants, aged care participants and members of the broader community seeking professional nursing support in their own homes.

SRS Safeguarding Manager Sara Avery said the service was developed in response to increasing demand for flexible, person-centered healthcare options.

"For many people living with disability, chronic health conditions, mobility limitations or recovering from surgery, travelling to appointments can be difficult and time-consuming," she said.

"By providing specialised nursing care in a familiar environment, SRS aims to make healthcare more accessible while supporting people to remain independent and connected to their communities.

"At SRS, we understand the importance of receiving the right care at the right time

"By expanding our in-home services to include specialised nursing support, we can provide

greater continuity of care and help people manage their health needs in a familiar and comfortable environment – their own home."

Ms Avery said the expanded service also recognises the important role that home-based healthcare can play in reducing stress and improving outcomes for individuals who may struggle to attend appointments due to transportation, mobility or health-related barriers.

"The service will also provide an alternative for those in the community who may have difficulty getting themselves to and from appointments for follow-up care following surgeries, minor injuries or who require regular medication," she said.

As healthcare needs continue to evolve, demand for community-based nursing services has grown, particularly among older Australians and people living with complex health conditions.

Receiving care at home is not only convenient, but also helps minimise disruptions to daily life, allowing individuals to maintain established routines, remain close to family supports and recover in an environment where they feel safe and comfortable.

The introduction of specialist nursing services further strengthens SRS' ability to provide holistic support across a range of health and wellbeing needs.

"For many people receiving care at home means they can focus on their recovery and wellbeing rather than worrying about travel, transport or waiting times," Ms Avery said.

"We are proud to provide a service that not only supports health outcomes but also helps people maintain their independence and dignity."

"This expansion is about meeting people where they are and providing professional care that fits their everyday lives."

The service is expected to benefit a broad cross-section of the community. For an older person requiring medication monitoring, a participant recovering from surgery who needs regular wound management, or an individual living with a disability requiring ongoing clinical support, the availability of qualified nurses in the home can remove significant barriers to care.



SRS Complex Support Leader Kerrie McManus attending to an in home patient.

Ms Avery said the expansion reflects SRS' ongoing focus on responding to community needs and ensuring people have access to the services required to live fulfilling and independent lives.

"Our goal is to make quality care more accessible for local people," she said. "We know that every person's circumstances are different, and by offering specialised nursing services in the home we are creating more options for people to receive professional support in a way that suits their individual needs."

The initiative also reinforces SRS' long-standing commitment to delivering services that empower people to maintain choice and control over their lives.

Rather than requiring individuals to adapt to traditional service models, the organisation continues to explore ways to bring support directly to where it's needed most.

By expanding its in-home nursing capability, SRS is building on its 50-year reputation as a trusted provider of disability and aged care support services throughout the region.

The expansion of clinical nursing services creates greater continuity between health and support needs, helping clients, families and carers navigate changing circumstances with confidence.

Community members, families, support coordinators, healthcare professionals and referral partners seeking more information about the new service are encouraged to contact SRS on 03 5022 1741 or email intake@srsinc.com.au for more information.



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The Boat House.

MY FOODIE TOUR OF MILDURA

WORDS
GRANT MAYNARD

Let me start by saying I do not profess to be a food critic of any standing.

But, to paraphrase the famous line about art and knowing what I like, I do know what gets my tastebuds tingling.

I now reside in Bendigo, but a recent working visit to Mildura was a salient reminder of how well my former stomping ground 'does' food.

To my delight, but the chagrin of my waistline, my Mildura hosts managed to fit in an impressive array of dining and food experiences in between the work, and I complemented their efforts with various explorations of my own.

From the superb supermarket deli selection at Ritchies on Deakin Avenue - where I took myself on arrival to stock up the apartment fridge with tasty snacks - to the stonking coffee and toasted fruit bread at Nash's Lane the next morning I was impressed. That toast was so thick it hid half apricots as well as other fruity surprises!

I was similarly taken by the evening meals at 400 Gradi, The Spanish Grill and TicTek. Colour me impressed. All deserve their glowing reputations, and all can add me to their list of 'ready to return at the drop of a hat' diners.



400 Gradi.

I was also a guest of the Mildura Base Public Hospital's Paddock Club marquee at the Mildura Cup, an experience not soon forgotten for many reasons, not least of them being the delicious food provided by our own hospital kitchen team including a chicken naan bread wrap that tasted great and was healthy to boot. Well done team!

Oh, and the cold beer at a packed and rowdy Mildura Club on the Friday night following the Cup races was also welcome... particularly after working up a sweat just getting to the busy bar where patrons were rows deep. I am no regular there, but I had never seen the Club in party mode like that before.

I only have one question from that evening: How did former Essendon great Ron Andrews end up on the floor? And no, he wasn't 'under the weather'!

I visited Coward's Cakes on 11th Street for a Saturday morning smoko meeting with an old friend that comprised the obligatory coffee and the requisite vanilla slice. Both proved to be up to a 'tastebuds satisfying standard'.



400 Gradi.



Spanish Grill.



The Boat House.



The Brass Monkey.

I did the same another morning but this time at Irymple's Homeground Café where yet another superb coffee was accompanied by the best ham and cheese 'toasty' I can recall.

Another day, another coffee. This time at The Boat House where the smell of a fresh brew and another delicious morning meal complemented the spectacular views of the Murray River and the Mediterranean ambience of Mildura's riverfront precinct.

Mildura, and I mustn't forget Irymple, proved to be a food lover's cornucopia. The service at every venue was to be commended and the food recommended. Much of it was what I would deem 'simple' food, but the flavours were anything but.

Well done to you all...



Cowards Bakery 11th Street.







Spanish Grill.



Spanish Grill.



400 Gradi.



400 Gradi Louis Sarrou.



Nash Lane on Pine.



The Boat House.

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OFF AND RUNNING IN THE FOUNDATION'S PADDOCK CLUB MARQUEE

WORDS
JOHN DOOLEY

The running of the 102nd 365Mildura Cup on Friday, July 17 this year, was a star-studded affair, both on the racetrack and on the field.

The sun came out and the crowd was settling in for a great day with plenty of patrons in various marquees and vantage points around the track enjoying themselves from the get go. The feature race was won by 'Run Harry Run', ridden by top jockey Harry Coffey, who many punters had said ahead of the race they were going to bet on.

The Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH) Foundation again had its exclusive Paddock Club Marquee at the Cup, attracting everyone from serious punters to glamorous ladies, many of whom were entrants in Fashions on the Field.

Well-known race horse trainer and raconteur Wayne Hawkes, and celebrity tipster Jules Vallance, were the big-name attractions at the event for a second year. Guests enjoyed fine food prepared by the MBPH catering team and a variety of cold beverages, live music and the convenience of an in-marquee TAB.

A highlight of the Foundation's presence at the 365Mildura Cup, was having its screening truck on site, offering free skin and cardio screening. This was something that was close to special guest speaker and marquee MC, Wayne Hawkes' heart, having been required to have treatment after previous skin screening scans. While at the Mildura Cup, Mr Hawkes took the opportunity to undergo another skin screening check in the MBPH truck on course.

MBPH Ward Nurse Unit Manager Sarah Brady told guests about the CTG system being sought for the hospital's maternity unit. Sarah explained that proceeds from the Paddock Club Marquee event would go toward helping to facilitate the implement the system.

Then it was time for fashions on the field. That event saw some dandy looking men and some very glamorous ladies vying for the winner's sash.

We hope you enjoy the photo gallery of the day's highlights.

Scan the barcode to see the Sun City News coverage of the day.



If you weren't at the cup this year make it a bucket list item to meet in the Paddock Club marquee at next year's cup.



(L) Former SFNL President Liberal party candidate Paul Matheson was back in town for the cup.



Southern Cross Business Advisers Foundation partner Tony Jones was in fine form.



This cheerful couple were hoping for a nice win on the cup.



The mobile screening unit's Volvo prime mover is maintained by Foundation sponsor Johnsons Trucks.



The best place to be on the 365mildura Cup day.



These happy chappies were enjoying a coolaide or three!



This dazzling duo added a further splash of colour to the Paddock Club.



These two lovely ladies put in an outstanding performance in the glamour stakes.



These captivating young ladies were enjoying the hospitality in the Paddock Club marquee.



This elegantly attired lady was clearly going to be an entrant in fashions on the field.



Jules Valance joins Foundation team members Jack Madafferi and Jake Anstey.



A classic country race meeting gathering of Aussie punters.



Smiles all round after the Fashions on the Field winners were declared.



MBPH Nurse Uunit Manager maternity ward Sarah Brady telling guests about the CTG system for the maternity unit.



Member for Mildura Jade Benham enjoying a day out at the Mildura Cup.



The place to be on Cup day was the Paddock Club marquee.



The long arm of the law finally catches up with well known Mildura identity Mike Clancy.



Some of the lady's hats in the marquee were a standout feature of this year's Mildura Cup.



Paddock Club marquee special guest speaker Hawkes Racing's Wayne Hawkes with tipster Jules Vallance.



One of the many dashing blokes on course in the Paddock Club marquee.



The MBPH kitchen team provided the superb catering in the marquee.



There were some serious punters amongst these lovely ladies.



The main game was on the turf with some great performances being witnessed by the punters.



Event co-organiser Patrick Prentergast with Wayne Hawkes and Jules Vallance.



The ladies of Sunraysia were unbelievably elegant this year.



Not to be outdone, some dapper men lined up waiting on the judges' decision.



Here's cheers to a lovely day.



A couple of punters enjoying a cold beer.



That is a mighty fine fascinator madam!



Merbein's Travis Horsfall was in the mood for a fun day out.



The Pinnacle kit.

Each puzzle set is an original.



THERE'S NOTHING PUZZLING ABOUT JIGSAWS FOR DANIEL

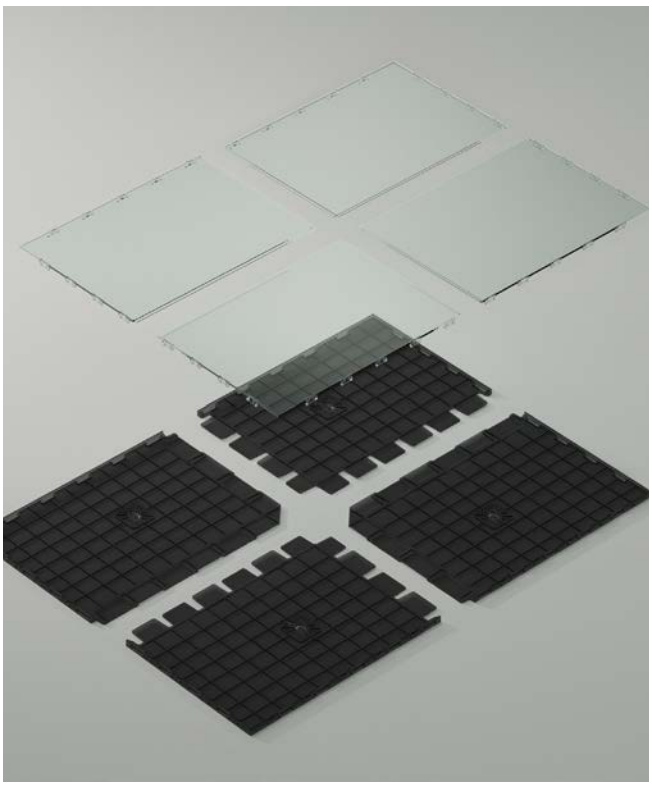
WORDS
JOHN DOOLEY

WITH Christmas on the way and with it the summer break and beach house holidays, it's a time when board games are traditionally brought out to pass the time and entertain on the days when it's not beach weather. Perhaps the ultimate way to pass the time is to undertake the sometimes arduous, challenging, but always rewarding, task of completing a jigsaw puzzle.

Perhaps with this in mind, managing director Daniel De Cianni established Pinnacle Puzzle, a South Australian-based company, providing a unique and previously unseen concept to the puzzle industry. Pioneering a new era in puzzles, Pinnacle Puzzle is reshaping a 300-year-old industry. From traditional wooden origins through cardboard innovations, we are now revolutionising the puzzle experience for a new generation.



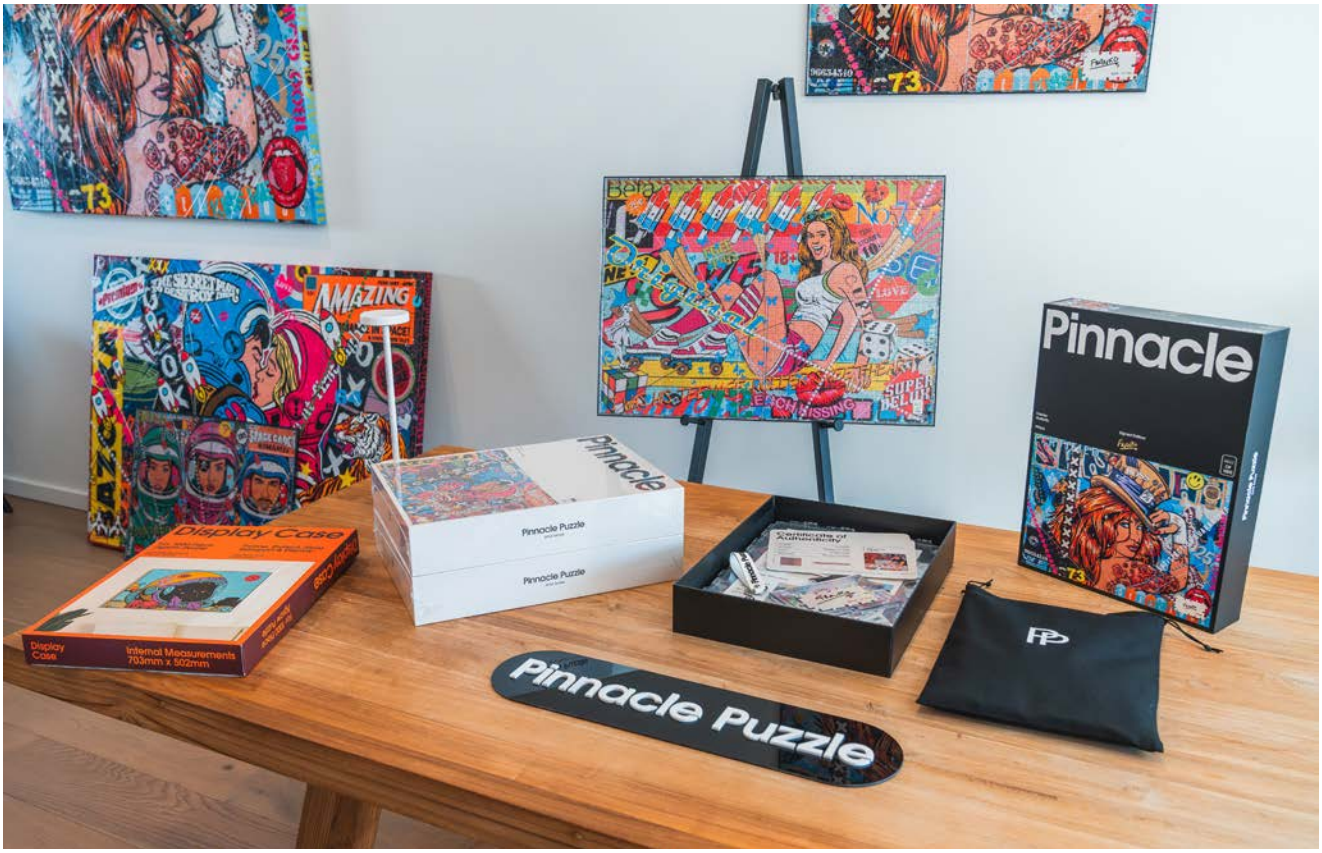
Are you up for the challenge?



The Pinnacle puzzle assembly panels.

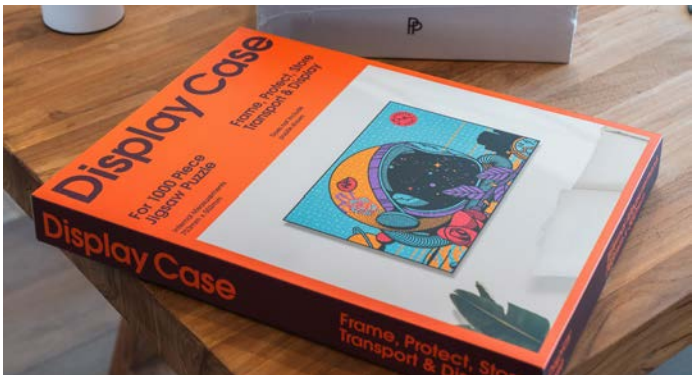


The Pinnacle puzzle componets.





Each puzzle set is an original.



The Pinnacle puzzle display case.

Heartbeat spoke to Daniel about the concept.

"Through the repeated process of building and dismantling puzzles, many of which were worthy of display, a seed was planted that blossomed into our vision," Daniel explained.

"This was to create the first limited-edition collectable puzzle that could be collected, traded, sold or proudly displayed. Each puzzle is a limited run, individually numbered, and highly collectable.

"We are focused on specialising in 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles. Our signed editions, however, are 994 pieces. This is due to the signed piece incorporating multiple puzzle pieces as one."

Daniel said the company's first collaboration was with established Australian pop artist, Franko.

"The plan now is to follow this with additional collaborations with artists, along with memorabilia printed puzzles and/or limited licensed prints," he said. "At Pinnacle Puzzle, we know the joy of completing a puzzle, and the frustration over having to dismantle your finished product," Daniel said.

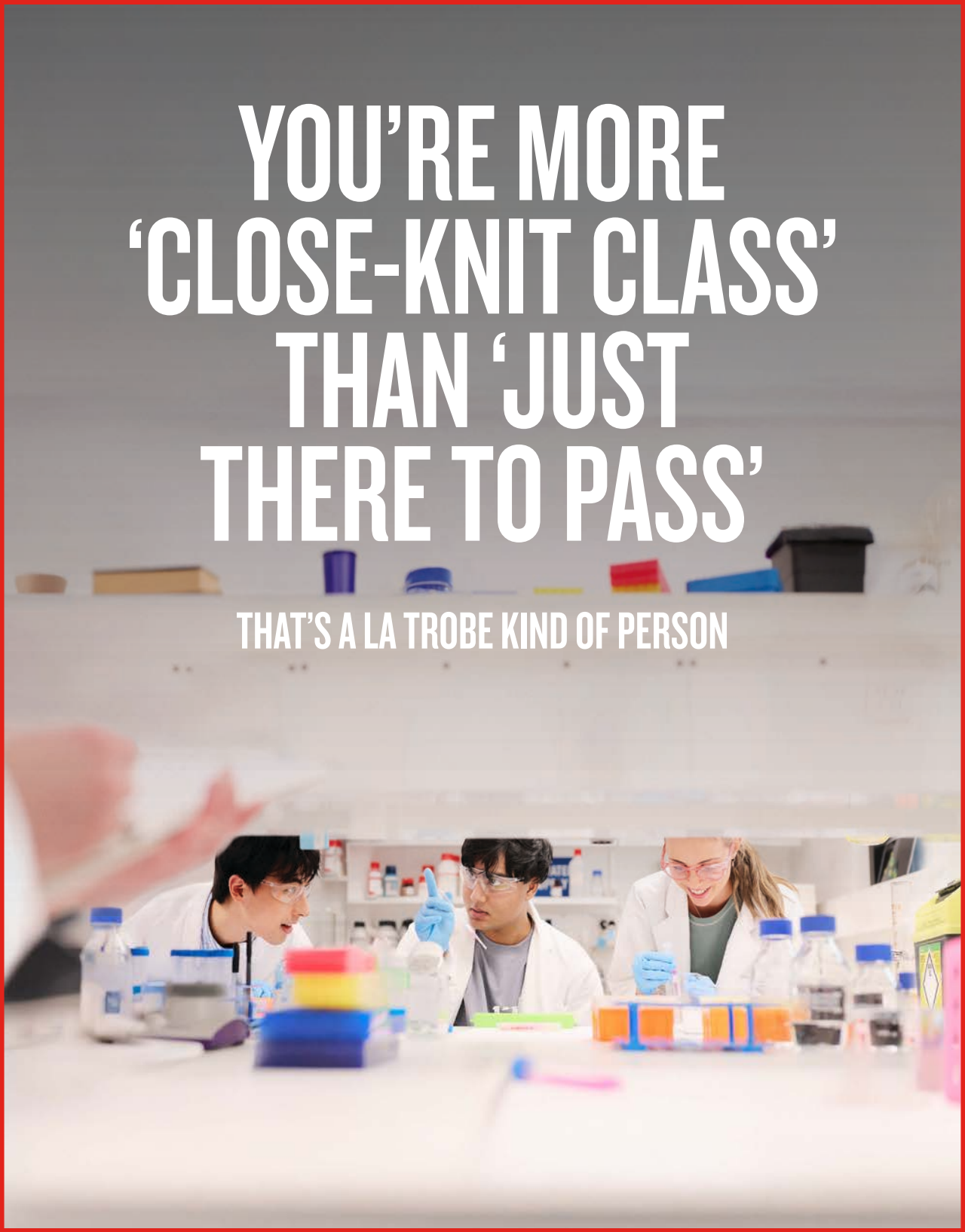
The Unique Pinnacle Puzzle

By any measure, Daniel's puzzles are quite literal works of art.

"We have ensured transporting, storing and displaying them is easy with the creation of our patented puzzle display case which is included with each puzzle," Daniel added. "This enables the finished puzzle to be permanently displayed while also maximizing the opportunity for the puzzle to become a collectable piece."

In summary, Daniel proudly told *Heartbeat* that the two key points with his brand of puzzles is that: "It's the first limited edition collectable jigsaw puzzle globally and the first puzzle that comes with a patented puzzle display case."

To learn more about this fascinating product scan the QR code to watch the video.



LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

SCAN TO LEARN MORE

NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD LOUCA PETERSEN IS AN IMPRESSIVE YOUNG MAN, AND *HEARTBEAT* IS TIPPING A BRIGHT FUTURE. HE IS CURRENTLY STUDYING TO BECOME AN ARCHAEOLOGIST, BUT WHAT WE WANT TO KNOW IS...

WHERE WILL HE BE 10 YEARS FROM NOW?

WORDS
JOHN DOOLEY

IT will be interesting to see where 19-year-old Louca Petersen is in a decade's time.

To understand why you must know his back story, the hurdles he has overcome and where he is in life now.

Louca was born at Adelaide's Flinders Medical Centre, a fact that will take on some significance later in his story.

Of his very early years, Louca sadly knows or remembers little.

"It is a bit hard because I was taken away (from his parents) at such a young age," he says estimating he was about three or four at the time.

Of his father he knows next to nothing, but he does know his indigenous biological mother.

"I am adopted, and in regard to my father I'm really not too sure," he says. "I've never meet him that I can recall."

He knows his mother but prefers to keep that part of his life private.

He is more forthcoming, however, about Mildura Aboriginal elder Uncle Peter Petersen. It was Uncle Peter who took charge of the youngster very early in Louca's life and found him a loving and supportive home with his adoptive parents Katrina and Rebecca who are both teachers.



Louca gave *Heartbeat* a guided your of the univeristy including some of the lovely garden areas where he likes to wander around.

"They are my mums now," he proudly announces.

Louca says it is an effort for him to recall much detail about his early childhood.

"I don't really remember much of that period," he simply says.

What he does recall more easily are his years at Ranfurly Primary School before moving to Merbein and attending the secondary college there. He remembers those years fondly, as well as his move to Mildura Senior College, where he completed Years 11 and 12 and earned his VCE.

Louca is self-effacing about his academic record.

"My marks weren't actually so

good," he says while adding that he did 'pass' every class he took.

"I loved every class and I made sure I didn't fail."

It is that determination that now sees him working through an archaeology degree... coincidentally at Flinders University right next door to where he was born!

"I remember looking at my birth certificate and that I was born at Flinders Medical Centre and thinking 'Gosh'," he says as he made the connection.

Louca chose Flinders University after finding out there weren't too many options for archaeological study, something he began to seriously consider as a vocation in his senior college years.

"I was planning on going to Melbourne University. It has a faculty, but they've only been doing it for, I'd say, six years now, whereas Flinders University's Bedford Park Campus has been offering the course for 21 years," Louca said.

"So, it was kind of a no-brainer to go towards the university that's been studying it for longer. "And being in South Australia, near the Flinders Ranges, lends itself to practical work in many areas."

And Louca is not on just any archaeology trajectory... he wants to be a marine archaeologist, something I point out could be seen as a little unusual for a young fella who grew up so far inland.

Louca explained that one of his high school subjects was biology.

"I did biology in Year 12 and loved it. Absolutely loved it," he says.

"That set me on a course to being a marine biologist, but now I know that I want to end up in the maritime archaeology field.

That branch of archaeology, he explains, "explores shells, sediments... there are so many different aspects to it".

He is also contemplating teaching later in life.

"I want to be able to teach younger kids," he says. "Not necessarily as a teacher, but like making videos on What this is? How it works? I really do think that's my goal.



Louca in the university student hub where he likes to study and also chill out.

"I want to be able to stick to maritime archaeology but be able to teach or make videos."

Louca has a talent for combining his interests, and these include men's fashion and the arts.

I point out that he seems to apply an artistic flair in everything he does.

He says: "One of our uni assignments was to make an artifact. I loved the idea."

Louca constructed a set of indigenous clay cooking bowls.

They weren't as fancy as some of the other students' assignment offerings, but he does like the connection with his indigenous heritage.

It is not the first time he has 'felt' something when connecting with that part of who he is.

"For example," he said, "When I was doing some traditional weaving, I wasn't the best at it, but when I was doing it, it felt like, I really don't know how to explain it, but when I was doing it and it just felt good."

Asked whether he might like combine aspects of indigenous and marine archaeology, Louca replied: "I'm sure I could find a job that's has indigenous archaeology and maritime archaeology in one. I have no doubt about it.



A proud Indigenous man Louca is standing in front of the Yungkurrinthi - Office of Indigenous Strategy & Engagement.



After a long week of studies Louca likes to go out clubbing in Adelaide with his friends.

CONTINUED PAGE 46

FROM PAGE 45



Louca enjoys walking around the university campus gardens which have a serene and relaxing ambience.

"But if I decide, which I may, to go straight to indigenous archaeology I know I can get a job there."

Here he revealed he would be following in his adoptive mother Rebecca's footsteps.

"My mother was an archaeologist before she became a teacher, and she mainly studied indigenous archaeology."

Louca says initially he was a little hesitant about his choice of course because he wasn't too sure how many jobs there were to be had once he graduated.

"At first, I thought they were really scarce... not too many opportunities, not too many doors to open. But no, I have since found out it is quite the opposite," he tells me.

"Actually, there is a lot of work, especially in the Darwin region and across into Western Australia."

That might mean getting involved with the mining industry I suggest.

"I don't know, but for an example, if you are talking about the indigenous culture, I guess mining companies have to be careful they don't go into the wrong places," Louca says.

"I did do some research on this issue. Say if there are mining companies who are going to do big excavations, create explosions... the whole lot, they actually get archaeologists out there to make sure it's not like on a burial site or other important areas or landmarks.

"So, you do need a professional to be able to say... this might be culturally significant to these people or those people."

Louca says he has settled into university life well these days, after a rocky start.

"Obviously when I first moved, I was scared. I moved there and it was like, "I'm in such a new area, I have no friends".

"But I ended up making a couple of friends on the first day and that kind of set my friend group up.

"We all live at the uni. I live in the residential hall, and you get your own room, but it's community bathrooms.

"Uni life is really social. You're never really left alone. You're always with people. It's awesome."

To support his new life in Adelaide, Louca has taken a part-time job at Myer. Not his first. Some readers may remember him because while he was still in Sunraysia he had a part-time gig with Ritchie's at Merbein.

He also has a personal trainer qualification gained while at Mildura Senior College.

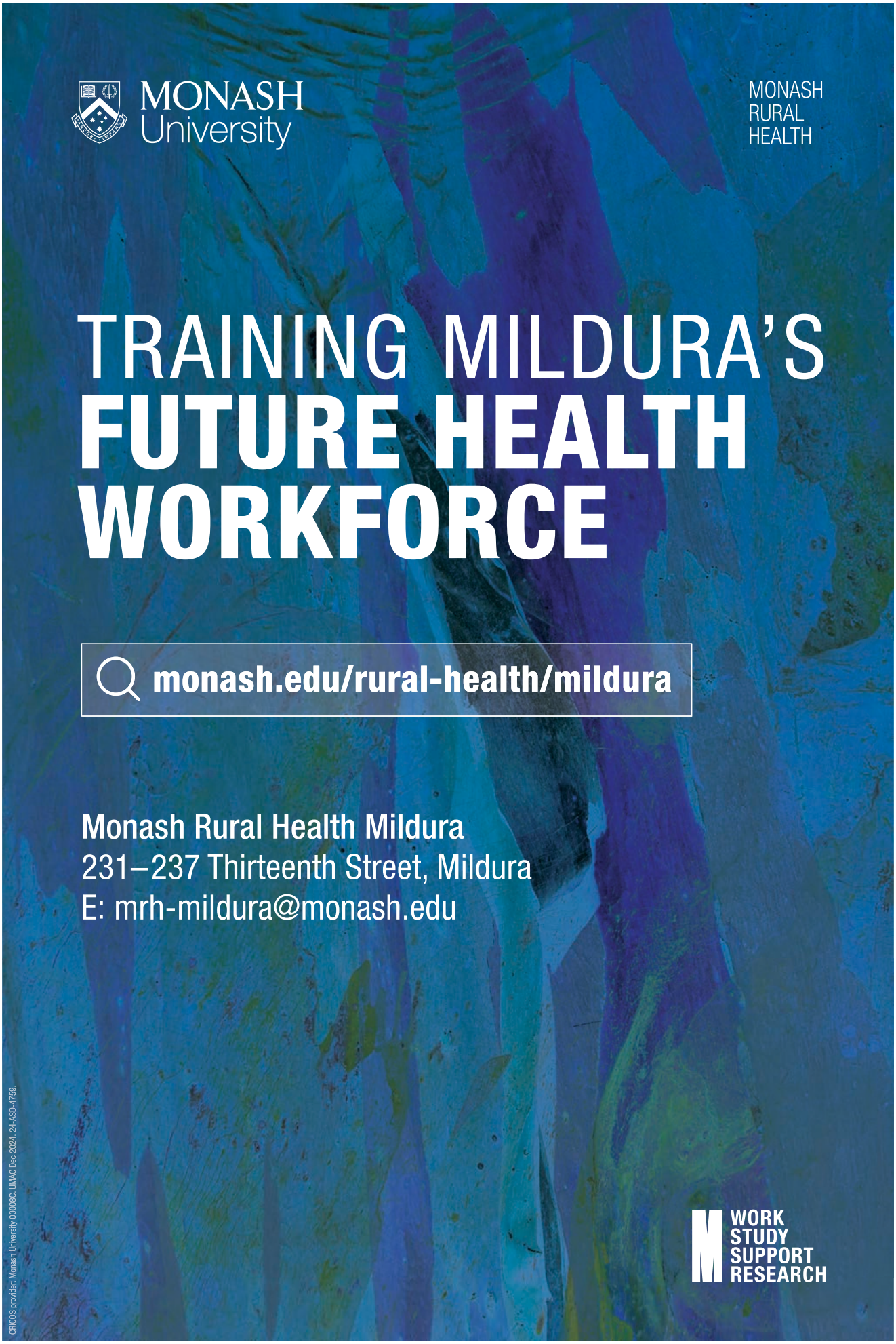
It is something to fall back on, he laughs, if archaeology doesn't work out.

Louca certainly has head screwed on and is making his way in life despite having what many would regard as a challenging start.

As the age-old adage goes: "The world is his oyster."

It will be interesting to see what Louca is doing in 10 years' time, but what does he think?

"I am open to wherever life takes me," he says.


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TRAINING DOCTORS WHERE THEY'RE NEEDED MOST: MILDURA BASE PUBLIC HOSPITAL SUPPORTS FIRST MONASH MILDURA GP ACADEMY STUDENTS

WORDS
STEPHANIE STORER

TWO healthcare professionals from Mildura Base Public Hospital are retraining as doctors through an innovative new medical program.

First announced in December 2025, the Monash Mildura General Practice Academy is a dedicated centre for general practice (GP) and rural generalist education and training. For the first time, this four-year graduate entry medical program is delivered entirely in Mildura. The inaugural 10 graduate entry medical students commenced this year at Monash Rural Health Mildura.

Pharmacist Rowan Moore is proud to call Mildura home. Having grown up here, he moved to Melbourne to study his pharmacy degree at Monash University's Parkville campus, before returning for his intern year at MBPH.

While working as a clinical pharmacist the opportunity to apply for the GP Academy emerged - and he was successful.

"Since the opening of the Mildura General Practice Academy, a whole new and incredibly exciting chapter has opened up, and I'm still pinching myself that I have this opportunity to study medicine back in the community I grew up in," Rowan said.

"I'm very thankful to have such a supportive work environment in the hospital pharmacy, which has allowed me to continue working casually alongside my medical studies. My pathway into medicine has really been shaped by my love of healthcare, the experiences I've gained through pharmacy, and the fortunate timing of this amazing new program."

Alongside Rowan within the

The inaugural group of Monash Mildura General Practice academy students with Regan Tieste and Rowan Moore on the far right.



inaugural GP Academy cohort is registered nurse Regan Tieste. Originally from the Riverland in South Australia, he completed a Bachelor of Nursing degree and previously worked in the Riverland Mallee Coorong Health Network.

"I always thought about becoming a doctor, though my mum being a nurse made me appreciate the important role they play in healthcare," Regan said.

Regan had been working as a nurse at MBPH for about six months when he heard about the Monash Mildura GP Academy.

"Several colleagues encouraged me to apply and I knew it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. The first semester was definitely tough, but to see how much I've learned within such a short period is pretty amazing."

Next year, Rowan and Regan will start clinical placements alongside their studies, with rotations at MBPH.

According to Rowan, the program is ideal for local healthcare professionals interested in pursuing medicine.

"You have the opportunity to study medicine while remaining embedded in the Mildura community, close to family and the people you know, and you're supported by a really welcoming and experienced group of Monash staff, academics and clinicians. It's a fantastic way to build on the skills and experiences you already have while learning medicine in a regional setting, and to continue being involved in the Mildura community and everything it has to offer," he said.

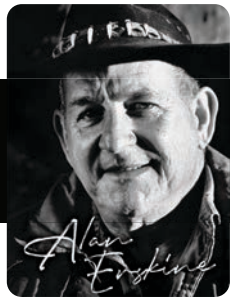
For Associate Professor Fiona Wright, Director of Monash Rural Health Mildura, offering an end-to-end medical program in Mildura has been years in the making.

"The Monash Mildura GP Academy provides an incredible opportunity to deliver much-needed healthcare to our community," she explained.

"For aspiring doctors to be able to complete all of their degree locally, and then continue their medical careers, here will bring meaningful, lasting benefits to our region. We are so grateful to Mildura Base Public Hospital and many other community partners for helping to bring our vision for a healthier Mildura to reality."

To learn more about the Monash Mildura GP Academy, visit monash.edu/medicine/mildura-gpa.

ANOTHER IN THE SERIES BY AWARD-WINNING FORMER MILDURA JOURNALIST AND NEWSPAPER EDITOR ALAN ERSKINE. HE IS RE-VISITING SOME OF HIS MORE COLOURFUL CAREER STORIES FOR *HEARTBEAT*.



A BOND OF LOVE, FAITH, AND AN UNSPOKEN PACT



Jeff Hulls.

WORDS
ALAN ERSKINE

LIKE any mother Lauris Hulls was looking forward to her daughter's wedding, although there were a hundred things to do and time was running out, fast.

Finally, there was just a month to go.

But then came a health crisis that no-one expected.

Lauris and her husband Jeff didn't realise at first that she'd had a stroke. Then, noticing her slurred speech, Jeff called for an ambulance.

Three hours later, in hospital, Lauris had partially lost the use of the left side of her body.

Jeff, an assistant pastor at a large Bendigo church for the past 18 years, contacted his church to get some time off. He never went back to work.

This is the story of a loving, vibrant, alert woman, trapped for years in a body that wouldn't respond to simple commands from the brain.

A woman of amazing strength, determination, and faith.

A woman who never gave up the fight.

It's the story of a husband's love, compassion, understanding, sacrifice and dedication to a partner.

A man who never gave up hope.

Their story was told in 2006 in book form. Jeff Hulls went from church leader to author and he travelled around Victoria to tell the story behind his self-funded publication 'So Beautiful'.

The book was a near sell-out, and there was a lot of interest from Sunraysia readers when my original story on Jeff and Lauris was published in the then very popular Mildura Weekly newspaper.

Twenty-five years down the track, and now in his 76th year, Jeff Hulls says he has been blessed that he and Lauris have a legacy that is being lived out by their children and grandchildren.

In his book, the former carpenter and farm

Jeff and Lauris' son Nathan with wife Kate and their boys Archer, Carter and Oliver.



merchandise salesman-turned church Pastor candidly told of his immense love for Lauris.

"She was a farmer's daughter," Jeff told me. "I pursued her and caught her."

The result was a 31-year marriage, and a busy, healthy and vibrant life that produced two children - Kellie and Nathan.

They were all unaware that the year 2001 was to change their lives forever.

Kellie had her wedding planned for June 23. The stroke came out of the blue on May 23.

It was a mystery to family, friends, doctors and the nurses that Lauris had worked with at Bendigo's Mirridong nursing home for almost two decades.

Lauris was in the acute stroke unit of a Melbourne hospital for 10 days. Severely paralysed, with little mobility and acute loss of balance, she vowed to attend her daughter's wedding.

Not only that, she vowed, but she would be strong enough to be able to stand by herself for the photographs.

Family, friends, nurses and rehabilitation staff worked overtime to make her dream a reality.

There wouldn't have been a dry eye in the house when a beaming, graceful and poised Lauris Hulls stood for a few minutes for a family wedding snapshot.

She improved from that moment on and eventually was sufficiently rehabilitated to return to the family home.

In time, Lauris swapped her wheelchair for a walking stick, and amazingly, regained the ability to once again drive the family car.

After two years, things were looking up.

The second stroke took everyone by surprise.

The seizure lasted 24 minutes. Lauris wasn't expected to survive. At St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne, only the neurosurgeon gave her any chance of survival. She was placed on full life-support.

After 10 days in a coma, it appeared highly unlikely that Lauris would live. Her breathing support was removed. Amazingly, she started breathing on her own.

Jeff never left her side. Kellie wrote daily. Jeff read the letters to Lauris, plus many verses and meditations he had composed himself.

He prayed that the woman who had given so much of herself to so many others would respond.

There was nothing anyone could do. Constant prayers, family visits, medical expertise - nothing worked. It appeared hopeless.

Finally, a hospital spokesperson had a heart-to-heart talk with Jeff. They had reached the point where all treatment should be withdrawn. It was probably time to let Lauris go.

As the family gathered at the hospital, ready for their final farewells, Lauris unexpectedly opened her eyes, looked directly at Jeff, and gave him a beaming smile.

She couldn't speak, but her eyes responded to every word directed to her.

She was out of her coma and determined to live.

Jeff met the specialist in the corridor.

Well, I don't think we need to discuss those matters after all," the specialist said.

Lauris was in rehab for a month, still without movement, but able to communicate with her eyes, and the wiggle of a finger. Her eyes were expressive. They showed many emotions - anger, fear, frustration.

Jeff knew there was an active mind inside that still body. Lauris reacted to every word. A blink was "Yes", a frown or grimace "No." And when she closed her eyes, it was "Go away".

In time, Lauris was able to return to Bendigo, but only to full-time care in a nursing home.

After almost two decades working at Mirridong, Lauris was back, only this time as a patient. Her work colleagues were on a mission to give her the best care available for the next few years.

Jeff was at her side every day, talking, reading, making plans. Family and friends called in on a regular basis.

Hairdressers joined doctors, ambulance staff, nurses, rehab therapists and family members as a huge support team.

They talked, sang, and played gospel music. Lauris made it clear from her facial expressions that she wanted to live.

When she learned that son Nathan had announced his intention to stand for Parliament, her paralysed face couldn't stop smiling.

And it was more than a special moment when Lauris learned that she was about to become a grandmother.

When you're paralysed, it's hard to laugh and cry at the same time. Somehow, Lauris managed.

Later, actually getting to hold grandson Riley, with the tiny tot hanging on to her wagging finger for dear life, brought more smiles, and tears of joy.

The family all knew that the big danger was pneumonia.

The simple act of Lauris swallowing successfully sometimes took hours. It was energy-sapping.



Lauris.

Often, Lauris was gagging, hiccuping and dry-retching at the same time. There was nothing Jeff could do, except be there to hold her hand.

A simple reassuring squeeze of the hand was returned. Just the look in her eyes told Jeff; "Thanks" or "I love you".

In mid-June, 2005, Lauris Hulls suffered another stroke and lapsed into unconsciousness. Jeff remained by her bedside.

Three days later, on June 19, Lauris opened her eyes, glanced at a televised game featuring her favourite football team, transferred all her attention to the devoted husband who had patiently and lovingly cared for her for so long, and passed away.

Overwhelmed, Jeff held her hand, weeping. The journey was over.

"She was so beautiful," he told me during our Mildura interview. "This book is our story. By her life, and her death, Lauris co-wrote it with me."

When I contacted Jeff recently with the idea of re-telling his story for Heartbeat, he again spoke of his great love of Lauris, his children and now their five grandchildren, and said Lauris would be immensely proud of them.

"Before, during and after Lauris' illness, faith has been central to our lives," he said, "and with everyone living in Bendigo we get to catch up often, all being active and loving their local Assemblies of God Connect Church.

"The original story in the Mildura Weekly, along with writing my book, was all part of the therapeutic recovery."

In recent years, Jeff has busied himself developing a childhood hobby of antique sports card collecting, which he had revived in the many hours spent caring for Lauris until she passed away.

He recently sold, through Collingwood stalwart and media mogul Eddie Maguire, his entire Magpie sports card collection, and now enjoys finding and placing rare cards with serious collectors world-wide.

Like many of us in our twilight years, Jeff has survived a few health scares, and apart from sports cards, busies himself with some gold detecting, catching up with family and friends, and attending many church activities.



IT IS ONE OF THE HIDDEN GEMS OF THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH. ONLY A SELECT FEW KNOW OF ITS EXISTENCE, AND EVEN FEWER GET TO VISIT. MILDURA JOURNALIST, FORMER NEWSPAPER EDITOR AND SELF-CONFESSED 'BUSHIE' ALAN ERSKINE REVISITS A SPECIAL PLACE THAT IS SIMPLY REFERRED TO AS...

RON'S CAMP

IT'S not quite a shanty, just an old abandoned campsite by the side of a narrow, shallow creek off the mighty Murray River, downstream from the Old Customs House in South Australia.

The camp comprises a basic chimney, fenced in on two sides by rusting sheets of corrugated iron, a couple of old fridges, a solitary bed frame, basic cooking utensils, some fishing gear - and a freshly-watered but obviously long dead tree sapling in a wire tree bay.

But a closer look uncovers one of the more colorful and interesting folklore stories ever to emerge from the Australian bush.

It's the story of Ron's Camp, and people from all over Australia – even overseas – have visited, and continue to visit, to pay their respects to a simple Aussie bloke who loved camping, the bush way of life, and fishing.

Ronald Strathearn Gilbertson lived and worked in the South Australian capital Adelaide, and every now and then, sick of city life, he packed up a few necessities and drove the 300 kilometres to camp on the bank of Chowilla Creek, near Chowilla Sheep Station, bordering the Murray River near the SA-Victorian border.

Over the years Ron built up his special camp from things he brought with him, bits and pieces he picked up on the way, or what he found in his travels in this remote creek area.

He built a chimney from stones, fashioned a crude tin flue, a wood-fired stove, kerosene fridge, basic cooking utensils, an old wire-frame bed, bush esky – and a small space for storing his fishing gear, which he always left at the camp.

In 1980, on one of his trips, Ron planted a cedar tree. Not a native to the area because of its low rainfall, but with some TLC and regular watering, the tough little tree started to grow.

Ron's camp – and gear – was always there whenever he came back. Locals, station folk, friends and fellow fishermen would get into the habit of calling in to say G'day when Ron was in camp or leave a short note if he wasn't. Before they left, they always made sure they watered the cedar tree.

On June 11, 1987, Ron Gilbertson passed away. He was cremated, and his wife Vera brought his ashes back to sprinkle them around his beloved campsite, and his special tree.

She came back the next year to pay her respects, and found the camp still intact, with all Ron's gear still there – and amazingly, the cedar tree still thriving.

She watered the tree, wrote a note on a tissue (the only paper she had) and put it in a biscuit tin in one of the two old fridges at the camp.

It was for all the regulars and other visitors and read: "This is Ron's resting place – please water the tree."

It was another three years before Vera made it back to Chowilla, and she was amazed to find the camp intact, untouched by vandals, the tree still being watered, and more than 300 notes and letters to Ron in tins and jars in the fridges.

The story of Ron was published in February of '98 in a Renmark newspaper, someone cut it out and had it laminated and took it to Ron's camp to place in the fridge for the benefit of visitors who didn't know the full story.

Now there are hundreds more notes. Even business cards. They fill two jars, and four biscuit tins. They are written on pieces of old newspaper, tissues, notepaper and cardboard. There are notes scratched on the front and sides of the old fridges.

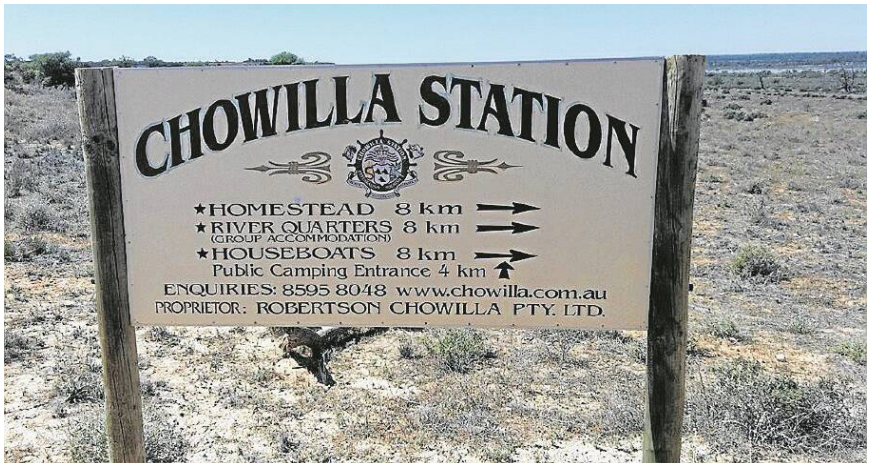
Nothing profound, just simple notes from people showing respect for a bushman and his camp.

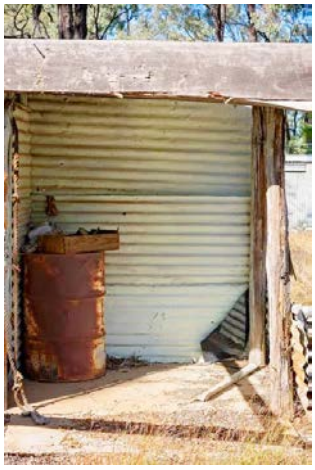
"Hi Ron. Called in to say G'day. Watered the tree." Peter and Shirl left a note, as did 'Belly' and Monika. That was in 1997.

'Tessa' was there a few years earlier, and Steve and Louie came in 1998. Pearl, Sam, Sheree and Bill all left a message. Someone left a biro in the fridge for people who didn't have a pen. There's a small basket, some dried-up flowers and the remains of a small cake. And even more messages.

One note that says: "This is a little piece of hallowed ground in God's great garden – a memorial to Ron."

Perhaps one of the most touching notes is one obviously written by a loving hand. It reads: "Ron Gilbertson was my father. This is a very special place. Thank you to everyone who has written, and especially those who watered the tree. Ashes scattered here – died 11.6.87. Husband of Vera, father to Craig."









The family would be happy to know that up to a few years ago, pre-COVID, the camp was still intact. The stump of the long-dead cedar tree is still being watered by visitors.

During my visit, I sat on Ron's old esky and studied the camp. The old horseshoe by the chimney, the now almost-disintegrated yabby net, dunny can, 44-gallon drum filled with bits and pieces, a bed post supporting one of the tin 'walls,' some pots and pans, a frying pan, the springy bed base and a ram's horn over the fireplace.

A short distance away, there's a plaque on a huge gum tree, telling of Ron's final resting place.

If you're ever up that way, below the Customs House on the Murray River, turn up Chowilla Creek for a few hundred metres and call in at Ron's Camp and pay your respects.

And by all means, leave a note.

Mine simply read: "G'day Ron. Called in to say hi. Watered the tree mate. – Erka."

Celebrating 50 YEARS of SRS!

Celebrating 50 years of caring, connection and community

Thank you Sunraysia!

Sunraysia Residential Services Inc. is proudly celebrating 50 years of supporting people and strengthening our community in 2026.

This milestone would not have been possible without the incredible people who have been part of our journey.

To our participants, clients, families, staff, volunteers, board members, supporters, community partners and friends, thank you for helping shape the organisation SRS is today.

For five decades, we've been privileged to support people living with disability and older members of our community to live with dignity, independence and choice.

Along the way, we've shared countless stories, milestones, friendships and memories. Now we'd love to hear yours.

Do you have a favourite photo, story, newspaper clipping or memory involving SRS?
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Scan the QR code to share your memories and explore the SRS story!



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Carmel Hare.

STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

WORDS
BROOKE SHELLY, GP PHARMACIST

One conversation. That's all it took.

In 1971, a young Philip Webster had every intention of becoming a metallurgical engineer. Then, over the family Christmas table, his grandmother and two nurse aunts asked what he was planning. Their advice was simple: "You should do something that involves people. You should do Medicine."

He listened.

Nearly half a century later, that conversation has impacted the lives of countless people across the Mildura region.

And recently, Philip was recognised with RWAV's Outstanding Contribution by a Rural GP or Rural Generalist Award.

At the same time, Dr Donald Hartley and Carmel Hare were recognised for their more than 35 years each of dedicated service to rural healthcare.

The awards celebrated three remarkable careers, but they also prompted a much bigger question.



Ontario Medical Clinic.

Who comes next?

Collectively, Donald, Carmel and Philip have dedicated more than a century to caring for the people of our region. That's an extraordinary legacy, but it's about much more than the number of years they've served. Their careers have touched thousands of patients, supported countless families, mentored generations of healthcare professionals and helped build the healthcare system that Mildura relies on today.

Dr Donald Hartley arrived in Mildura in 1972 as a 25-year-old GP. Like many rural doctors of his generation, he practised far beyond what we now think of as general practice, providing obstetrics, surgery and anaesthetics alongside his work as a family doctor. He was instrumental in establishing Mildura Health Private Hospital and, more than 50 years later, continues to contribute to the organisation he helped create. Earlier this year, the hospital recognised that contribution by naming its operating theatre complex in his honour.

Carmel Hare's contribution has been just as profound. After 48 years at Ontario Medical Clinic, she recently retired, leaving behind a legacy that extends far beyond the patients she personally cared for. As Lead Practice Nurse, she mentored generations of nurses, supported countless clinicians and helped shape the culture of our practice. Her influence will continue to be felt every day through the people she taught and inspired.

Philip's story reminds us that healthcare careers often begin in the most unexpected ways. One family conversation changed the direction of his life, but his own passion now lies in helping shape the next generation. He has long believed that if we can encourage local students into healthcare careers and make it possible for them to train locally, they are far more likely to stay locally.

"We need them," he says simply.

I couldn't agree more.

As Donald, Carmel and Philip begin to slow down, retire or, in Philip's case, continue attempting retirement, we are reminded that remarkable careers don't replace themselves. We cannot simply assume there will always be another rural GP, another experienced nurse or another healthcare leader ready to step into their shoes.

The future doesn't arrive by accident

Fortunately, there is genuine reason for optimism. Across Sunraysia, we're seeing more GP registrars choosing to undertake their training locally



Dr Philip Webster.

than we have for many years. Practices such as Ontario Medical Clinic, Ontario Family Practice, Sunraysia Medical Centre and Deakin Medical Clinic have made a long-term commitment to training the next generation of rural GPs. At the time of writing, there are 11 doctors undertaking GP training across our community, with six based at Ontario Medical Clinic, two at Ontario Family Practice, three at Sunraysia Medical Centre and one at Deakin Medical Clinic.

That matters.

Research consistently shows that doctors who train in regional communities are far more likely to remain in regional practice. Every registrar who chooses Mildura represents an opportunity, not just to strengthen today's workforce, but to become part of our community for decades to come. After all, that's exactly how the careers of people like Donald Hartley and Philip Webster began.

Australia is also welcoming increasing numbers of doctors relocating from the United Kingdom, presenting regional communities like ours with another unique opportunity

Dr Donald Hartley.



to attract talented clinicians looking to build a new life. If we can combine those international recruits with local graduates and registrars who discover everything our region has to offer, we have a genuine opportunity to build the workforce our community will need for the next generation.

Recruitment is only part of the story

Healthcare professionals don't simply choose a workplace. They choose a community. They choose where they'll raise their families, where they'll volunteer, where they'll make lifelong friendships and where they'll build a future. If we want them to stay, we need to ensure they feel welcomed, supported and connected from the moment they arrive. That responsibility doesn't just belong to hospitals, health services and practices; it belongs to all of us.

That's why recognising people like Donald, Carmel and Philip matters so much. Their legacy isn't just measured in years of service or awards received. It's measured in the healthcare system they've helped build, the people they've mentored and the example they've set for those who follow.

Every generation stands on the shoulders of those who came before. If we continue investing in local training, welcoming new clinicians and supporting those who choose to build their careers here, the next generation will have the opportunity to stand on the shoulders of these giants.

The greatest tribute we can pay Donald, Carmel and Philip isn't simply thanking them for their extraordinary careers. It's ensuring they're not the last to dedicate their lives to ours.



A petite Felicity in front of a giant excavation machine.

15 KILOS, 300 TONNES AND THE WEIGHT YOU CAN'T SEE

WORDS
FELICITY EVANS

THE heaviest thing I've ever carried wasn't a 15-kilo backpack across the Kokoda Track. It wasn't one of the 300-tonne haul trucks I operated through some of Australia's most remote mines. And it wasn't the long hours, responsibility or expectations that came with every job I've held.

The heaviest thing I've ever carried was invisible. It was the belief that I had to carry everything on my own. People often ask me how I stay positive. I usually smile and tell them to focus on the good, keep moving forward and take life one step at a time.

Those answers are true. But they aren't the whole truth.

Growing up, life demanded that I mature quickly. My mum has lived with chronic health conditions for most of my life, and my brother has faced significant health challenges of his own. Our family moved so often that home felt more like an address than a sense of belonging. Looking back, I don't think I ever really had the chance to simply be a child.

By 14, I was working every weekend while still attending school. Work wasn't just something I did; it became part of who I was. It gave me purpose, independence and the belief that, if I worked hard enough, I could create a different future.

I didn't know what career I wanted. I just knew I wanted a life that looked different from the one I had grown up in. During high school, I was fortunate to receive the VET Student of the Year Award in consecutive years. When I attended the interview for the second award, I didn't think my grades or achievements had changed enough to justify receiving the recognition again. So instead of talking only about my studies, I spoke about walking the Kokoda Track.

That journey changed my life. I expected Kokoda to test my fitness. Instead, it tested my heart.

On the first day, I slipped down a steep incline and landed flat on my back with a 15-kilo backpack strapped to me. I remember lying between two rocks like an overturned turtle, completely unable to stand. Before long, we were wading through rushing rivers, soaking our boots before the trek had barely begun.

Several days later, I found myself walking alone between groups. Physically exhausted. Mentally drained. Emotionally overwhelmed. The backpack on my shoulders wasn't the only thing I was carrying.

Without saying a word, one of the local Papua New Guinean porters walked over, lifted my backpack and continued walking beside me.

He didn't ask what was wrong. He didn't expect anything in return. He simply saw someone carrying too much, and he helped. That moment has stayed with me ever since. Not because he carried my backpack, but because he showed me that strength isn't measured by how much we can carry alone.

Sometimes, strength is allowing someone else to walk beside us.

After finishing school, I completed a traineeship at an obstetrics and gynaecology clinic. Over the following years, I progressed from junior receptionist to managing the front desk, training new staff and discovering how much I enjoyed organisation, problem-solving and helping people.

Around 2019, I also began working casually at Mildura Workers.

It wasn't unusual for me to finish a full day at the clinic and head straight to the club for an evening shift. Some days stretched to 16 hours. I loved both roles, but eventually I realised the pace wasn't sustainable.

Still, one question was always in the back of my mind. What's next?

Years earlier, during my first driving lesson in a manual car, the instructor had laughed and said: "You could work in the mines." For some reason, that comment never left me.

Eventually, I decided to find out if he was right.

I resigned from a secure career to chase a dream many people thought was unrealistic. I had no mining experience, no industry connections and no guarantees. I cold-called companies, submitted application after application and refused to let rejection become my final answer.

Then, just as COVID began changing the world, two job offers arrived almost simultaneously. One was with a bank. The other was as an on-site cleaner at a local mine.

Most people expected me to choose the safer option. I chose the mine.

It wasn't glamorous, but I treated every shift as an opportunity. I watched experienced operators, asked questions, volunteered whenever I could and made it clear that I was prepared to earn my place.

Within months, I transitioned into operating heavy machinery and began a career that would take me across New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia.

During the next five years, I operated haul trucks capable of carrying around 300 tonnes of material in a single load. I worked alongside highly respected operators and supervisors and learned specialised techniques across several mine sites.

One of my proudest achievements was becoming the first haul truck operator to be loaded by a 55-cubic-metre bucket fitted to a Liebherr 9800 - one of the largest excavator buckets operating in Australia at the time.

Standing beside machinery of that size makes you realise how small you are. People often ask what it was like to operate something so enormous. The truth is that those trucks never felt like the heaviest thing I had carried.

Kokoda had already taught me that life's greatest weights aren't measured in kilos or tonnes. Mining gave me confidence, discipline and resilience. It taught me that I was capable of more than I had imagined.

But perhaps its greatest lesson



Felicity Evans in 'Barcode' at the Mildura Working Man's Club.



Felicity in the reception foyer of the Mildura Working Man's Club.

FROM THE MINES TO MILDURA

Felicity finds her home at The Workers



Felicity Evans in 'Barcode' at the Mildura Working Man's Club.



Felicity in the Working Man's Club bistro.





Felicty worked in the mines in Western Australia.

had nothing to do with machinery. Mining taught me the value of time.

Time with family. Time at home. Time spent being present for the birthdays, milestones and ordinary moments that continue while you are thousands of kilometres away.

Throughout it all my partner, Jake, remained beside me. He has been there since our school years, through FIFO life, career changes, uncertainty and every challenge in between. His support reminds me of the lesson I learned on Kokoda: even when the journey is ours to walk, we don't have to walk it alone.

Several years after leaving both the clinic and my casual role at Mildura Workers, I received a message asking whether I would consider returning to the club.

It felt like life had come full circle.

Mildura Workers had been part of my story long before it became my career. It was where I worked evening shifts after long days at the clinic, and it was where I celebrated my 18 birthday with my family.

That night my Nan insisted I order a Fluffy Duck, one of her favourite cocktails from years gone by. The bartender had to Google the recipe because hardly anyone ordered them anymore. I wasn't particularly fond of the drink, but seeing the excitement on Nan's face made it a memory I will always treasure.

That moment captures what Mildura Workers means to me.

It isn't simply a building, a business or a place to work. It is a place where people gather for the moments that become part of their stories. Returning home wasn't about walking away from mining.

It was about walking towards the life I wanted and towards a place where I could use everything my experiences had taught me. For years, success had meant proving how far I could go. Eventually, it meant recognising what I wanted to come home to.

Today, I work closely with the CEO and Operations Manager at Mildura Workers across marketing, functions, operations, compliance, strategic projects and much more. The role draws on everything my previous careers have taught me, but its most meaningful part is supporting the people who make the club what it is.

Most people see a community club. I see around 80 people working together to create something none of us could create alone. I see the receptionist greeting members by name. The chef plating hundreds of meals on a busy Friday night. The cleaner arriving before sunrise. The duty manager quietly solving problems before anyone else notices.

Each person has their own story, responsibilities and invisible burdens. Yet every day, they come together to create a place where others can celebrate birthdays, farewell loved ones, reconnect with friends, support local sport, raise money for charities and simply feel that they belong.

No single person creates that. It takes all of us.

People still ask me how I stay positive. It isn't because life has always been easy. It's because life has shown me what kindness can do.

A Papua New Guinean porter once saw a 16-year-old girl from Mildura struggling beneath the weight of her backpack. Without asking questions or expecting recognition, he lifted it from her shoulders and walked beside her. He probably has no idea how deeply that moment changed me.

More than a decade later, I see the same kind of quiet kindness at Mildura Workers. In people who show up for one another, often without recognition and sometimes without realising the difference they make.

That lesson continues to shape how I work, how I lead and how I treat the people around me.

We may never know everything another person is carrying. But we can choose not to let them carry it alone.





Felicity and her trekking friends after walking the Kokoda Track.

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BUILDING THE FUTURE HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE

WORDS
SAMANTHA LEERSEN

AT the beginning of 2026, fifteen new students commenced their Diploma of Nursing (HLT54121) at SuniTAFE's Mildura campus, making them one of the largest commencing cohorts in recent years.

Each nurse-in-training brings to the classroom a unique life story and motivation that has led them towards this career path. However, one thing the group has in common is their hopes to make a real difference in the healthcare industry.

Due to the Free TAFE program, studying locally to become a nurse has never been a more accessible aspiration. The benefits of tuition-free study are felt widely across this new cohort of nursing students who are now working towards achieving their dreams.

Having just completed the end of their first phase of study, the group is finding their stride, learning vital skills, and preparing to provide high-quality care for their local communities.

Meet our nurses-in-training:

Angelina

Angelina's time at SuniTAFE is the first step in a longer educational journey that will help her achieve a lifelong dream of becoming a nurse.

"I've always wanted to be a nurse ever since I was little because my auntie, who has been my biggest role model since I was little, was a nurse for a very long time," she said.



Angelina.

"But I was homeschooled all my life and didn't have an ATAR, so completing my diploma at SuniTAFE seemed like the perfect pathway from the qualification in allied health assistance that I completed last year.

"After my diploma, I want to go to university to do my bachelor's degree and then I want to go further than that again and hopefully complete a master's degree."

While Angelina is not yet sure of the exact role she wants to obtain in healthcare, she's enjoying this time to practice her skills and figure out what she enjoys.

"I love the classroom experience," she said.



Stacey.

"I like how the room is set up like a hospital experience and that we have so much equipment that we can practice with. It's very engaging.

"All my teachers have been really amazing and really helpful too, and they explain things well, and they'll explain things in a different way if they need to just to make sure you understand."

Stacey

Stacey has more than a decade of work experience looking after others but being inspired by other nurses in her life has helped steer her towards this next step of her career.

"I've always wanted to be a nurse since I was a little girl," Stacey said.



Kaitlyn.



Jasmyne.



Dawn.

"I worked in the disability sector for 11 years in group homes caring for those with intellectual disabilities, then moved from there into mental health in the non-clinical setting where I did psychosocial recovery work, and now here I am.

"I really love oncology, palliative care, and wounds, so I'm hoping my career will take me towards one of those.

"My mum had terminal brain cancer, and she passed last year. Just watching the care that she got from the oncology team was quite inspiring and then the care she got in palliative as well, which was beautiful."

Following her dream and enrolling in the Diploma of Nursing was daunting at first, but being guided by SuniTAFE's nursing educators has helped Stacey find her place and thrive.

"My SuniTAFE teachers have been amazing," she said.

"They're so full of knowledge, easy to talk to, and so approachable, which is lovely because sometimes it can be intimidating especially as a mature age student returning to study.

"They just want to help you succeed!"

Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn's interactions with the healthcare system began when she was quite young, meaning that she's experienced firsthand the positive impact that nurses can have on their patients.

"I picked a career in nursing because I was diagnosed at nine-years-old with Type 1 Diabetes and I really appreciated the care I received while at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne," she said.

"I learned from that and over the years I've picked up those skills in having compassion and empathy towards other people and I really just want to give back."

Kaitlyn's career journey since leaving secondary school is a great reminder that there's more than one pathway to achieve a dream, and sometimes it takes more than one attempt.

"I finished Year 12 and started a qualification in nursing the year after, but withdrew from the course pretty soon after I started," Kaitlyn said.

"I was fresh out of school and it felt really stressful and I think I just wasn't ready. But I feel like I'm older now and more mature, I've had the experience of working in a few different jobs, and I'm ready to work towards my career again.

"My favourite thing about the course so far is that I'm almost finished phase one when I didn't make it this far during the last time I was here!"

Jasmyne

Nursing has been a long-held dream for Jasmyne, and now that her children are a bit older, studying locally has helped her to turn this dream into a reality.

"I've been a stay-at-home mum for many years, my oldest is 12 now," Jasmyne explained.

"I've wanted to get into nursing for a while, but it just never lined up with schooling and kids, but this year it finally did so it's my time to shine.

"I've really been enjoying my course so far, especially all of the hands-on tasks. Checking vital signs, performing CPR and checking blood pressure. It's great to now have these skills."

CONTINUED PAGE 74

Now that Jasmyne has started her career journey into healthcare, she is looking towards the future and the many different specialties she can lead into after completing her SuniTAFE qualification.

"I want to be a midwife eventually," she said.

"I have five children, and for one of my children I had to have a cesarean. My midwife was my support person who got me through everything, and it really inspired me.

"As I continue in my course that may change, but for now I'm pretty excited to go down that path."

Dawn

Dawn's journey into nursing hasn't been a linear path, but now that she's here, she's excited to learn.

"I've worked in retail; I've been a stay-at-home mum; I ran a shop in Walpeup, and then I started working at Mallee Track Health and Community Services in aged care," Dawn said.

"I chose to pursue a course in nursing because it's a great stepping stone to get to where I want to be - a palliative care nurse.

"I lost my mother last year and just seeing her go through that and knowing that there's more that can be done for people within palliative care just concreted for me what I want to do."

So far, Dawn's favourite part of her course has been the opportunity to practice the practical skills required for roles in nursing.

"The hands-on learning is what I enjoy most," she said.

"In particular, I've enjoyed using stethoscopes and checking blood pressure. These things help me in my job at Mallee Track Health and Community Services and means that I'm putting all my practice here into work there."

Ella

Early in her career, Ella switched the university lecture halls for hands-on TAFE labs, and she couldn't be happier in her decision.

"After Year 12, I started out by going to university to be a teacher, and while I was studying, I got a job in support work," Ella said.



Ella.



Ireana.

"Working in that role led me to my decision to leave university because I realised I really loved looking after people.

"Nursing is such a great choice because it opens up a lot of pathways. You can try out different fields and experience different skills and environments. It opens so many doors."

This isn't the first time that Ella has completed a course with SuniTAFE, as she continues to be drawn to a supported, hands-on learning environment.

"I love SuniTAFE," she said.

"A few years ago, I completed qualifications in community services and allied health, and I really do love it here.

"Yes, there is a lot of work to do but it's structured, you know exactly what you're going to have to do before you do it and because you're in class with your teacher, if you need help with anything they're always available. I love it!"

Ireana

After spending most of her life caring for others, Ireana decided to make a career out of it, leading her to enrol in the Diploma of Nursing at SuniTAFE.

"I've always helped care for family around me," she said.

"I helped care for my dad and my grandparents and I've always just loved helping others."

Ireana is a Mildura local and recent secondary school graduate, and she's grateful for the opportunity to study so close to home.

"After I finished Year 12, I took a year off last year to care more intensely for someone within my family," she said.

"Then, as those caring responsibilities ended, it helped me to decide I want to be a nurse.

"Studying in Mildura means I don't have to travel; I don't have to pay for accommodation; I can live at home, and it's pretty much at no extra cost to me."

While this new group of nursing students still has more than a year of training to go before they're fully qualified enrolled nurses, on graduation they'll join a proud legacy of SuniTAFE nursing graduates working locally in vital roles.

Partnership Opportunities

There are a number of levels of involvement you may wish to consider in establishing a partnership with the MBPH Foundation.

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A LIFE WELL LIVED



MERBEIN'S LEN GARDNER IS THE PERSONIFICATION OF THE PHRASE AND HAS PACKED QUITE A BIT INTO AN INTERESTING LIFE THAT INCLUDES MANY DECADES DRIVING TRUCKS AND MAKING MUSIC ALONG WITH BEING A HUSBAND, FATHER AND GRANDFATHER. MORE RECENTLY HE HAS BEEN A TRUCK DRIVING TEACHER, MOTORCYCLIST, AND KEEN CAMPER.

WORDS
GRANT MAYNARD

A LIFE well lived. A simple phrase too often reserved only for those who have passed.

However, we are happy to report that the phrase can also apply to those still amongst us – like Merbein's Len Gardner - the personification of 'a life well lived'.

Heartbeat can thankfully report that the 78-year-old remains very much alive and enjoying life to the fullest. While it is true he has slowed down a bit and he acknowledges bits of him are not working as they once did, the ever-optimistic Len continues to make the most of every day.

He was born at the old Mildura Base Hospital and lived his formative years with his family in a home on what is universally referred to as the Merbein Common, and not far from the old racetrack that once existed there.

He was schooled at the then Merbein State School before leaving at age 14, and the district later at 17.

"I think the local police were happy to see the back of me," he says while wryly admitting that by today's standards, the mischief he used to get up to with his mates was tame indeed.

On leaving school Len took up a pastry cook's apprenticeship with Merbein's Wallace's Bakery.

The bakery was, at the time, a big concern Len told *Heartbeat*, "employing about 40 people".

"I only lasted a couple of years, and by that time – it was 1964 -- Dad had a bought a house in the Melbourne suburb of Carnegie because he reckoned there wasn't much here for us," Len recalls.

After trying his hand at various jobs following the family's move to the 'big smoke', Len eventually started driving trucks at age 18. It was to be a pivotal moment in his life as you shall see, but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

"Before I got into diving trucks, I spent a couple of months working in a bakehouse in Melbourne, but I soon got sick of it and moved to Rainbow in country Victoria where I worked on a sheep and wheat farm for a while," he said.

It was while there that Len got his driving licence.

"Even though I was only 17, I told the coppers that I was 18," he says smiling.

"I got my car and motorbike licence before I returned to Melbourne, and by that stage I had turned 18, but my licence indicated I was 19!"

Len explained that, at that time, a driver had to have held their driver's licence for 12 months before they could go for a truck licence.

But because of the discrepancy regarding his real age and his 'licence age', Len really got his truck licence at 18.

He then went to work for Mayne Nickless in Footscray Road, Melbourne.

"They were big general carriers then, before they branched out into armoured cars," Len explained.

"I told a mate of mine that I had a 'semi' licence, and he said: 'Go out to Mayne and Nickless in the morning at seven and you'll get a start... and make sure you take your working gear'.

At the time the company had about 40 drivers but there were invariably a few who didn't turn up for work, according to Len.

"So, I got there bright and early and the bloke in charge who was allocating the day's work said to me: 'Do you want a job? – Joe's not here'.

"I said 'Yes', and he handed me some paperwork and said, 'Get into truck number 21 and go down to 18 South Wharf'.

"I said to my mate, 'Where's South Wharf?' he said: 'Follow me, it's not far away', and that's how I started to get my jobs."

"Times were good then, and I gained a lot of experience," Len recalls.

It was experience that was to stand him in good stead.

At the same time, he was driving trucks, Len was also attending Allan's Music School, learning to play guitar and he spent much of the free time he had doing the rounds of Melbourne's thriving live music scene to see many of "the great bands" that were performing at the time.

St Kilda's Esplanade Hotel was a favourite venue.

"We used to go down there on a Sunday in the 1960s singing protest songs," Len recalls with obvious fondness.

"They were the best days. The 'hippy movement' was in full swing... there were 'love-ins' on every corner and there wasn't any pressure. They were great, easy going times. They were peaceful days filled with music."

Len kept on driving trucks while he kept on practising guitar. Keen to get more involved in music he joined the 'The Country Wranglers' in the mid-1970s as the lead singer and guitarist.



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"They were one of the premier bands around Noble Park. They used to work all of the pubs and they put me on as a singer," he recalls.

"I didn't think I was a singer, but I didn't have much choice. I thought, well this is going to benefit me later on if I can sing and play the guitar.

"My music teacher had always said to me: 'If you're going to play the guitar, you start singing, because if you can sing and play the guitar, you'll get in anywhere'.

"I found it relatively easy because I knew a lot of songs from the old days and if you listen to a song enough times you can get it down pat."

The Wranglers were a five-piece band that played mostly country music.

"We had a steel guitar player, a lead guitarist, a drummer and a bass player, while I was playing rhythm guitar and singing," Len recalled.

"This went on for a few years, but when the 1980s arrived I decided I wanted to branch away a little bit because I was a huge fan of Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson – all the country music giants of that era and the majority of them considered icons of what had become known as Outlaw Country.

"At the same time, I had all this rock 'n' roll in my head, and so I formed a band called 'Canyon' and that took a little while to get off the ground.

"There was me on rhythm guitar and singing, a guy called Robbie Pugh on drums – an excellent drummer; Phil Pond on bass guitar and a great muso named Dave Martin on lead guitar.

"They were all Waylon Jennings fans, so it worked out well."

Reminiscing about those days, Len recalls there were music festivals being held every month somewhere.

"Hastings had a festival, so did Wandong, and the Country Music Club from Dandenong used to put on a turn at the Dandenong showgrounds, and 1500 people would turn up," he said.

"That was when everybody went out – it's different today.

"We also did the pubs and clubs. There always seemed to be somewhere to play."

Canyon had been together for eight or nine years before one of the key members "pulled the pin" and the group disbanded.

"This was busy time for me. I was driving trucks during the week and playing in the band three or four nights a week," he said.

"I made a lot of money out of music – it was a great time."

During this hectic period, Len also managed to fit in a marriage and two children.

"I was married at 21, and my wife and I had two boys by the time I was 25," he said.

"The eldest boy now lives in Brisbane, and the younger one is in Pakenham and they both have three kids.

So, a grandfather too?

"Yep. It's great having grandchildren, and some of them are showing an interest in the guitar."

Sadly, Len's wife passed away 25 years ago and not surprisingly left quite a hole in this life.

In the 1990s, Len's musical career continued to flourish. His next transition coming when he was approached by Bernie O'Brien, lead guitarist for the band 'Saltbush'.

"It was a band that had done some good things and had a profile. Bernie said the band was looking for a singer," Len said. "They'd just finished recording an album – they'd done a few – and so I thought this could be a good opportunity.

"The guys in the band were a bit older than me, and Bernie was a veteran performer from the 'Rondells', which was Bobby and Laurie's backing band – and all well-known in the 1960s.

"Paul Pile was the bass player, and he came out of band called 'Hot Dog' which also featured the late Ross Hannaford, and which was the pre-cursor to 'Daddy Cool'.

"Our other member was Harold Frith. He came out of Johnny Chester and the Thunderbirds – a band formed in 1961."

Len ended up joining Saltbush, but it didn't prove to be the winning move he had envisioned.

"It wasn't a happy band. Too many egos -- and one guy in particular – but I learned a lot," he says.

"They drank a tonne of grog and had the occasional 'joint'. That was all new to me and fortunately neither really grabbed me.

"We had some good gigs – two which stand out were in Queensland with Johnny Chester and 'Ol' 55'.

"I only stayed with Saltbush for a couple of years. In hindsight I probably should have stayed with Canyon because we could have written and recorded some great stuff and done well out of it."



But as time ticked on, Len could see the music industry was changing, and that venues were struggling to afford to engage bands.

This, coupled with advances in technology, saw the one-man band starting to emerge on the entertainment scene.

It was at this point Len decided to try his luck out on his own.

"One day I thought 'I might go out on my own for a while'. I had all my own gear, and I could play the guitar and sing. So, I threw in the trucking job and went on the road playing music," he said.

"I contacted a guy I knew in Wangaratta, who had a management agency, and he said there was plenty of work up that way. Next thing you know I was booked Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday night at the Bogong Hotel, at the base of Mount Beauty, in the snow season.

"Friday nights I was at the Mulwala Water Ski Club; Sunday afternoons at the Mulwala RSL and I'd get home to Dandenong on Monday with about $1200 in my pocket.

"In those days, average wages were about $500 or $600 a week, so it was good money.

"That lasted for a few years – but you did have to chase it, and it became a little bit lonely being on the road all the time and living out of the back of a van."

Len was now homesick for the country he grew up in and moved back to Sunraysia and Merbein in particular.

He has since reunited with some of the mates he went to school with, while also explaining that his older brother is buried at Merbein. It is a comfort to know that he is close to a sibling that he would have liked to have gotten to know better.

"He died at 18, the result of a workplace accident at Mildara Winery in 1953," Len told *Heartbeat*.

"I was only a youngster at the time, but I remember him and regret that we didn't get to spend more time together."















CONTINUED PAGE 82

When he first retuned to Sunraysia Len didn't do any live gigs for a couple of years because he was too busy working on his new home and the surrounding yard. There's a lot of his landscaping handiwork to be admired during a visit.

While he was doing that, he secured a job with JADS (Driver Training) in Mildura as a truck driving instructor. It was an extension of the work he had done as a truck driving assessor with Vicroads in Melbourne for about four years before moving back here.

Len loved the job and it proved all those years of driving experience were useful both in the city and on his return to Sunraysia.

He acknowledges that it was a heavy heart that in recent years he gave up driver training and even more recently playing music in the public domain after returning to the stage once his garden was in order. Len became a popular and welcome fixture at local markets and clubs as well as private events.

Giving up both driver training and playing music were hard decisions, "but the years catch up with everyone eventually" he admitted ruefully.

But don't think for a moment he has taken to his lounge chair to sit out whatever years he has left.

He recently purchased a Harley Davidson motorcycle and is also known to head bush to go camping for a few days with his faithful Blue Heeler.

About the motorcycle. Len explained he has owned quite a few bikes over the years, from what are now considered historic BSA's to classic Kawasakis.

He loves the autonomy of getting out on the road and often rides the loop from Merbein out through Dareton and back into Mildura before heading home.

He also loves the peace and quiet of camping with his dog.

Both provide time to reflect on an interesting and busy life well lived.



Sun City Streaming's Ari Sahani was filming a story about len and couldn't resist taking his harley for a spin!



SMILES, SKILLS AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES

WORDS
REBECCA CROSSLING

FOR La Trobe University dentistry student Sarah Chapman clinical placement at Sunraysia Community Health Service (SCHS) has brought her studies and rural upbringing together.

"I chose La Trobe Rural Health School because it gave me the opportunity to study in a rural setting while still being relatively close to my hometown of Mildura," Sarah said.

"Another major factor in my decision was the Aspire Program, which allowed me to receive a conditional offer into the Bachelor of Dental Science (Honours) before completing Year 12, giving me confidence and reassurance about my university pathway."

Growing up in a rural community gave Sarah an early appreciation of the importance of accessible healthcare. She was fortunate to complete her first two five-month rotations of fourth year in Mildura, allowing her to live at home while undertaking clinical training at SCHS and contributing to the community where she was raised.

"What I've enjoyed most about the course is the hands-on learning from the very beginning," Sarah said.



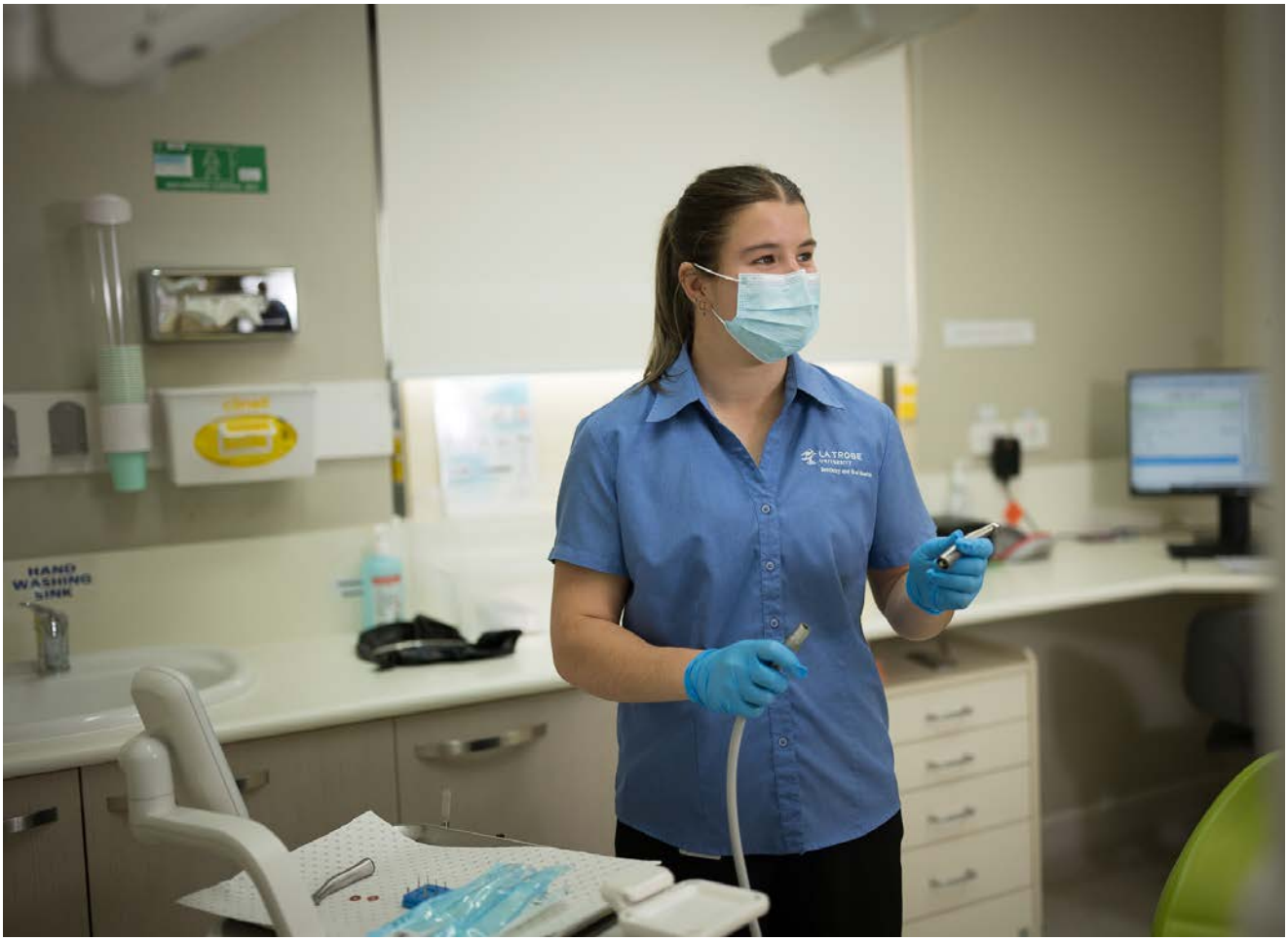
"As a practical learner, having clinical experience from week one really suited the way I learn. It reinforced my confidence that I had chosen the right career while giving me plenty of time to develop my clinical and practical skills."

Sarah also values the balance between guidance and independence provided by clinical educators.

"They create a really encouraging learning environment, providing guidance when needed while also giving us the independence to build confidence, develop our clinical decision-making and grow as future practitioners," she said.

During placement, Sarah works alongside her peers and alternates between the roles of clinician and dental assistant. She said the experience had strengthened her understanding of the teamwork and communication required to provide high-quality patient care.

Sarah Chapman.



"Having a peer alongside you provides great support, while also helping us understand and appreciate the important role every member of the dental team plays," she said.

Working with patients from a wide range of backgrounds has reinforced Sarah's passion for dentistry and her desire to continue working in rural communities after graduation.

For fifth-year student Dona, the Mildura placement is the latest in a series of regional experiences shaping the way she approaches patient care.

"I've been lucky to do my public dental placements across Bendigo, Melton, Wonthaggi and now Mildura, working with regional communities," Dona said.

Across these placements, Dona has seen how deeply dental anxiety can affect patients, often shaped by past trauma or difficult experiences.

"The biggest thing these placements have taught me is how much dental anxiety people carry," she said. "It's made me really want to help patients work through that fear of the dentist at their own pace."

Dona is also gaining a greater understanding of the barriers faced by people living in regional and remote communities.

"Some travel hours just to reach a dentist, and that lack of access shows in their oral health," she said.

When the first stage of SCHS's Thirteenth Street site was completed in 2010, it included the development of the organisation's revised dental facility. This marked the beginning of a longstanding partnership between SCHS and La Trobe University to support dental education in our region.

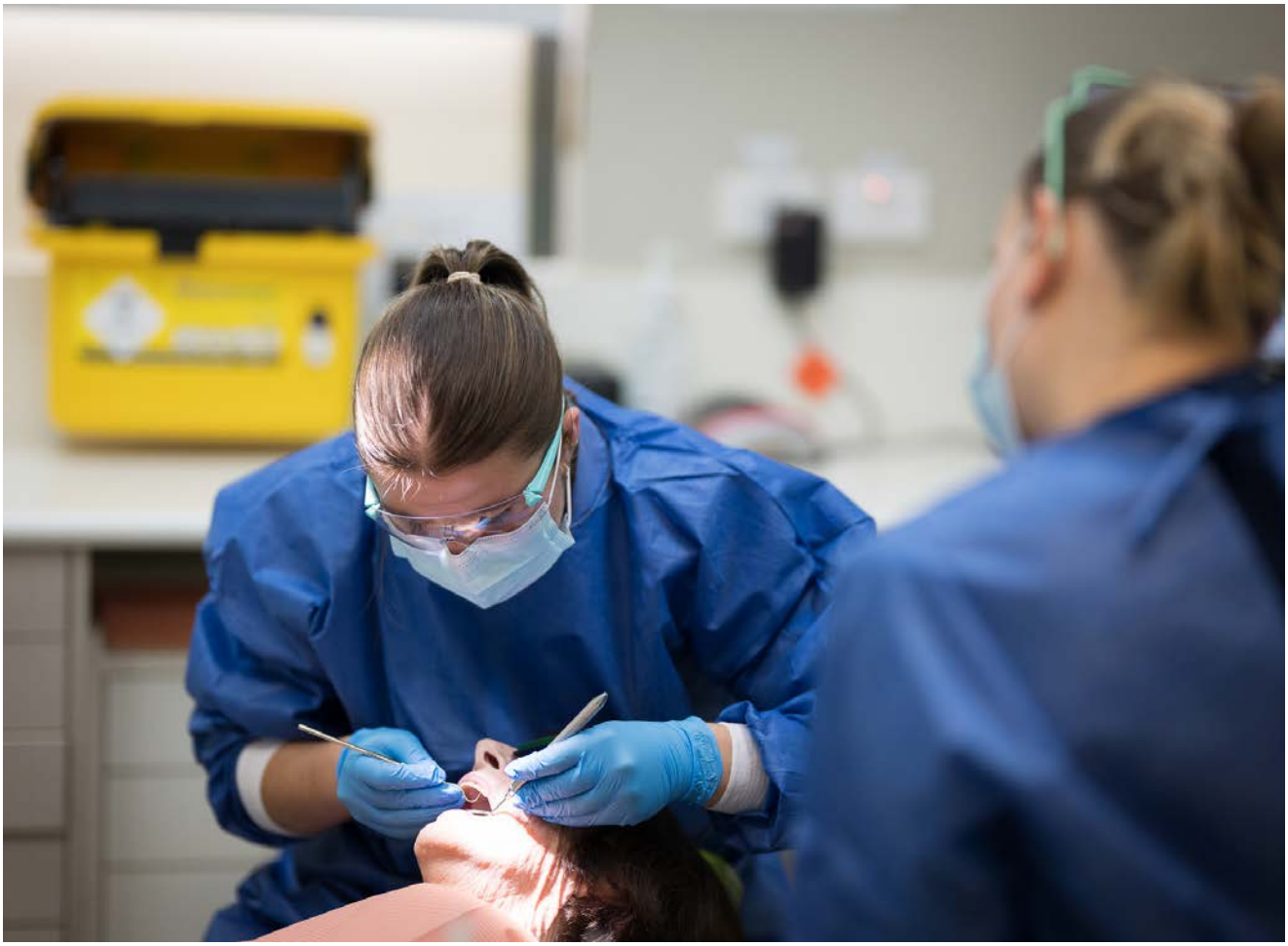
Through this partnership, SCHS has hosted fourth and fifth year La Trobe dental students, providing valuable experience in a busy public dental setting while contributing to local oral healthcare. This would not have been possible without the strong support and collaboration of SCHS, Dental Health Services Victoria and La Trobe University.

For SCHS Dental Team Leader Nola Fonua the partnership benefits students, patients and the wider community.

"Hosting La Trobe students not only gives them valuable hands-on clinical experience, but also increases our capacity to provide oral healthcare to the community," Nola said.

"Several former students have come back as graduate dentists and joined our team."

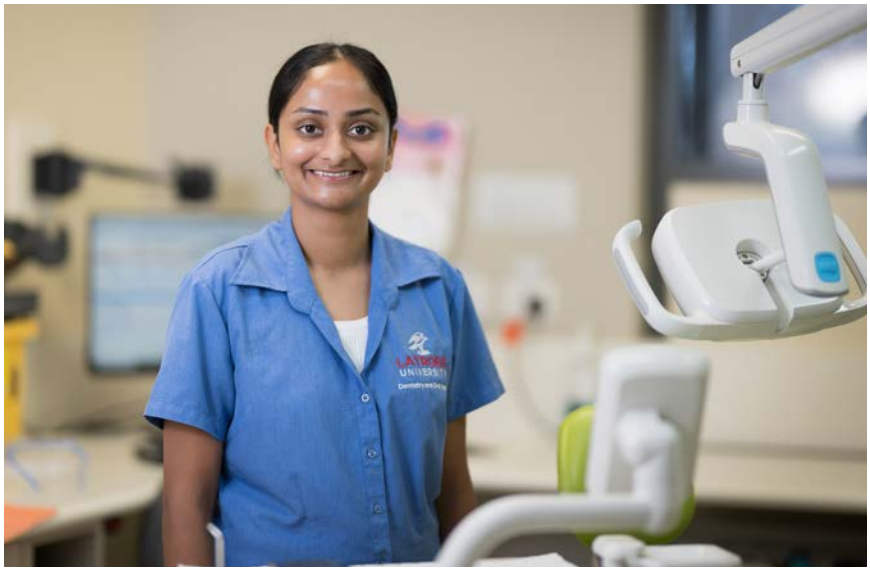
That workforce pipeline begins in Bendigo, home to the largest site of La Trobe's Rural Health School. Students benefit from La Trobe's newly developed $21million Rural Dentistry and Oral Health Clinical School, which opened in 2025. The facility is one of the largest pre-clinical simulation centres in the Southern Hemisphere for dental and oral health education and features 82 simulation workstations, 16 dental chairs, advanced radiology and digital denture-making equipment.



Dr Sandy Connor, Head of Campus for La Trobe University in Mildura says La Trobe's dentistry offerings are designed to meet regional workforce needs.

"In 2025, almost 70 per cent of La Trobe's dentistry cohort came from regional postcodes, following nearly 80 per cent in 2024. Research indicates that students from rural backgrounds are more likely to return to practice in rural areas. The new facility in Bendigo means La Trobe can increase its capacity to admit 150 dentistry and oral health students each year. We see the benefits of that across regional Victoria when we invest in high-quality facilities that enable students to train regionally and go on to work in the communities where they are needed," Dr Connor said.

The Bendigo facility forms part of La Trobe's broader $170million investment in health teaching, research and infrastructure across its Victorian campuses. In Mildura, this commitment includes the $4.97million Dr Deb Neal Wing, opened in 2024 to support nursing education. In Shepparton, the nearly $20 million campus redevelopment which included doubled the clinical nursing facilities, while in Albury-Wodonga, a $4.9million clinical simulation suite doubled the campus's simulation capacity from eight to 16 beds.



Dona Wijayasinghe.

"Our investment across Victoria reflects La Trobe's commitment to strengthening regional communities through education, training and research. It also recognises that the best workforce solutions are developed in partnership with local health services and the communities they serve," Dr Connor said.



BLAKE IS A SPEEDWAY SUPERSTAR AT THE AGE OF TWELVE!



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT FOR THIS SPEEDWAY PRODIGY IS GOING TO BE EXCITING TO WATCH. HEARTBEAT HAD THE PLEASURE BEING INVITED TO HIS OFFICIAL WELCOME HOME.



THE Mildura Motorcycle Club's Olympic Park Speedway has been the training ground for many international speedway legends who have gone overseas and become world champions. Phil and Jason Crump, Leigh Adams, Jason Lyons, Jason Hawkes, Kevin Doolan, Travis McGowan, Chris Ferguson, Nathan Hedley, Cameron Woodward, Cory Gathercole and Tom Hedley, Justin Sedgmen, and many others - the list is a mile long.

And now Sunraysia's speedway superstar - 12-year-old Blake Schlein, has made his debut on the world stage, recently winning the 'Fim SGP4 World Championship' in Malilla, Sweden, after a dramatic gold medal run-off saw Danish rival Simon Jul Vindum defeated and our Blake taking home the gold medal.

Congratulations Blake - you have done us proud!

Heartbeat wishes you and your racing team every best wish for a brilliant future career on the international speedway circuit.



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ONE AGENCY MILDURA



Looking Ahead

Growth for us has always been about people. Every new face strengthens our ability to deliver the local knowledge, genuine care and professional service our clients deserve, whether they're buying, selling, renting or simply wondering what their home might be worth in today's market.



Please join us in welcoming **Courtney** and **Fred** to One Agency Mildura. If you see them out and about in Sunraysia, say hello. They'd love to meet you.

Welcome, Courtney

Courtney Hinitt joins us as Executive Assistant to Tom Dawe in the Sales team. With a strong background in customer service and administration, she was the perfect fit for the role. Add her vivacious personality and strong work ethic, and she has settled into the team beautifully. Clients and colleagues alike are already benefiting from her warmth and organisation.



Welcome, Fred

Fred Mouvet has also joined the Sales team, bringing a wealth of experience from his years as a business owner/manager and his time being known as a retail appliance king. He has transferred those skills seamlessly into real estate and has hit the ground running, connecting with the people of Sunraysia and becoming a valued part of the One Agency Mildura family.

Growing Together