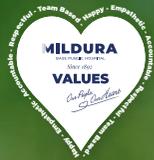


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## THE TRAGEDIES AND TRIUMPHS OF SOUTHERN SEAFARERS

'ESPERANZA' A FASCINATING NEW  
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BEN 'MINO' WELCH RAN 380KM FOR A CAUSE  
CLOSE TO HIS HEART RAISING A MASSIVE  
AMOUNT OF MONEY FOR HEADSPACE



EDITION

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JUNE 2025

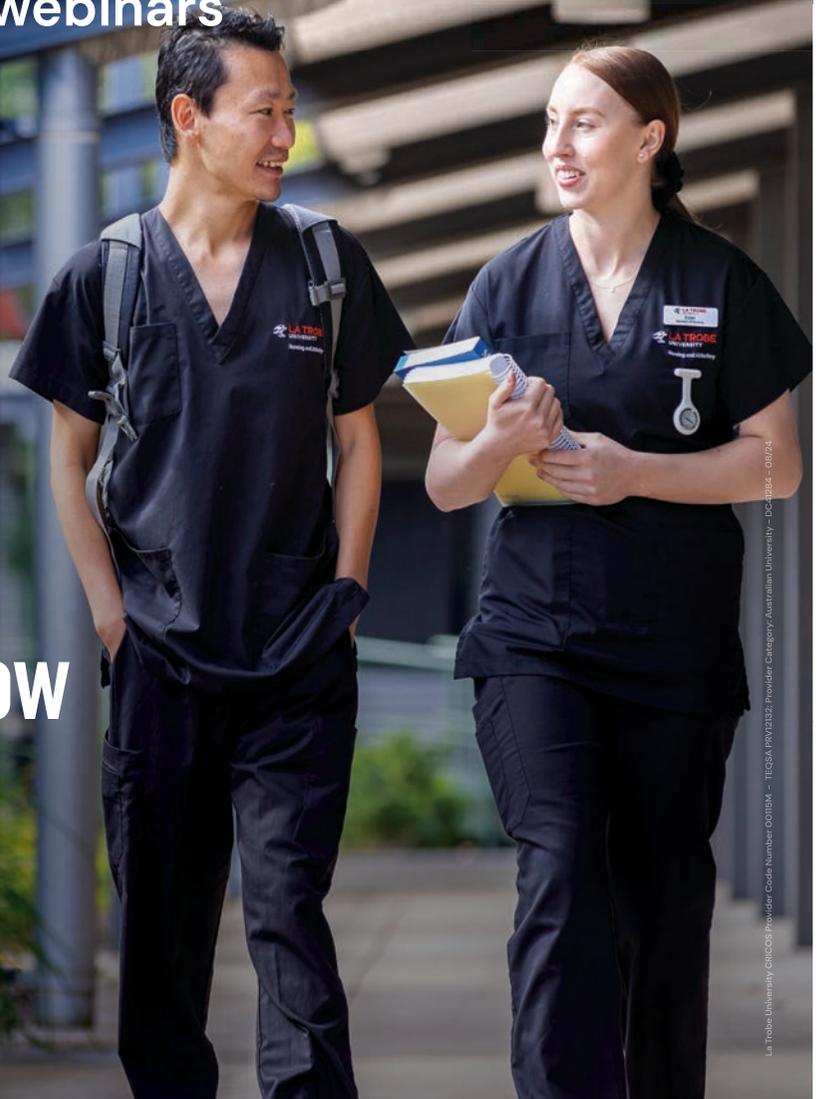


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# CONTENTS

MEET ROBINVALE DISTRICT HEALTH SERVICES CEO RO ENEVER.



## EDITORIAL

MBPH FOUNDATION THE RECIPIENT OF AN \$800,000 DONATION FOR NEW SCREENING VEHICLE.

6

VERNON KNIGHT IS THE GREAT GRANDSON OF CAPTAIN MCINTOSH WHOSE STORY IS AT THE HEART OF HIS BOOK 'ESPERANZA'.

15

444 MINO'S MURRAY MARATHON FOR MENTAL HEALTH RAISES \$550,000 FOR THREE HEADSPACE ORGANISATIONS.

20

MBPH PUBLIC CARDIOLOGY UNIT ON THE HORIZON.

28

KATRINA'S QUEST TO TURN HEARTBREAK INTO HOPE.

31

TACKLING CARDIOVASCULAR INEQUITY IN RURAL AUSTRALIA.

33

A MEETING WITH RO ENEVER CEO OF ROBINVALE DISTRICT HEALTH SERVICES.

38

A PICTORIAL GALLERY OF THE MBPH FOUNDATION GOLF DAY.

43

THE KC SOCIETY LUNCHEON RAISES \$150,000 FOR PUBLIC CARDIOLOGY UNIT.

48

PATIENT TRANSPORT VEHICLE SERVICE BEING DRIVEN BY SAFE PAIR OF HANDS

52

FROM MILDURA TO MEDICINE: TARSHA HAWLEY'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING A DOCTOR.

56

FOND FAREWELLS: THE BASE PAYS TRIBUTE TO RETIRING LONG-SERVING STAFF.

59

WHAT WOULD LIFE BE WITHOUT MUSIC? A TALE OF MUSICAL INSPIRATION.

63

HANNAH'S PATHWAY TO NURSING IS ONE OF AMBITION AND PERSEVERANCE.

68



JEAN GRAY'S STORY IS ONE OF INTRIGUE, DEDICATION TO COUNTRY AND HER CONNECTION WITH THE MILLEWA

THE EMBODIMENT OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHARACTER THAT HAS HELPED SHAPE OUR NATION.

73

THE 'GAHREEMAI' GUEST WAS RELOCATED FROM THE MILLEWA TO MILDURA IN 1939 AND ITS LOCATION IS NOW KNOWN.

81



MBPH PATIENT TRANSPORT VEHICLE OFFICER STEVEN MATULIC IS A 40-YEAR VETERAN EMPLOYEE.



MBPH NURSE HANNAH O'HALLORAN IS A SHINING EXAMPLE OF WHAT CAN BE ACHIEVED LOCALLY.

# HEARTBEAT

## EDITION 8, JUNE 2025



MILDURA  
BASE PUBLIC  
HOSPITAL  
FOUNDATION

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# FROM OUR FOUNDATION CHAIR

The beginning of this year has been incredibly busy for the Mildura Base Public Hospital Foundation but we wouldn't have it any other way. Our commitment to raising vital funds for the numerous projects underway remains at the forefront of everything we do. We are grateful for the ongoing support of our community and partners, as it is this collective effort that allows us to continue making such a significant impact.

One of the highlights so far was the recent K C Society lunch. This event was an outstanding success, with funds raised going towards the establishment of the new cardiac unit at Mildura Base Public Hospital, a much-needed service that will benefit so many in our community. We are incredibly grateful to everyone who contributed and attended, helping to make this event such a success.

Our golf day at Coomealla Golf Club also exceeded expectations, attracting a record number of participants. The support and enthusiasm for this event was fantastic, and we would like to extend a big thank you to all those who helped make it happen.

On another exciting note, our screening truck project is making fantastic progress. Currently being built in Shepparton, by Shepparton Body Builders, specialists in this area, we're looking forward to seeing it completed, hopefully by early 2026. This mobile service will be a game-changer for the community, and we are excited to launch it with a major community event once the construction is complete.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of traveling to Brisbane with members of the Foundation team, CEO Matthew Jukes from MBPH, and local businessman and Volvo dealer principal Brad Johnson. Our visit to Volvo Australia was a great success, as we discussed potential sponsorship opportunities with them. I would like to extend a special thank you to Brad for arranging the visit and introduction. The meeting was very positive, and I look forward to sharing more details in the near future.

Looking ahead, we have several exciting events on the calendar. In July we will host our highly anticipated race day at the Mildura Cup, where we'll be joined by special guest Wayne Hawkes, a name familiar to all horse racing enthusiasts. Later in the year our Foundation ball in November will once again be a highlight of the social calendar, promising to be a night to remember. Both events are wonderful opportunities to support our ongoing work, and we hope to see you there.

For more information on these upcoming events, or to learn more about the Foundation's work, please don't hesitate to visit our website at [www.mbphfoundation.org.au](http://www.mbphfoundation.org.au) or contact Jack Madafferi at [jmadafferi@mbphfoundation.org.au](mailto:jmadafferi@mbphfoundation.org.au).

Thank you once again for your continued support, and we look forward to achieving even more together in the months ahead.

Regards,  
Ross Lake OAM  
Chairman, MBPH Foundation





L-R GREEK COMMUNITY OF MILDURA AND DISTRICT SECRETARY HELEN KAMVISSIS, PRESIDENT HELEN BOUNIAS, TREASURER HELEN TAOUSAKIS, MBPH ACTING CEO MATTHEW JUKES AND MBPH BOARD DEPUTY CHAIR TARA WILLIAMS AT THE PRESENTATION OF A CHEQUE FOR \$800,000 TO THE MILDURA BASE PUBLIC HOSPITAL FOUNDATION FROM THE GREEK COMMUNITY OF MILDURA & DISTRICT ON FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28.

# ACT OF GENEROSITY THAT TOUCHED HEARTS ACROSS THE SUNRAYSIA COMMUNITY

*In February this year, the Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH) Foundation was honoured to be chosen as the beneficiary of an extraordinary donation of \$800,000 from the Greek Community of Mildura and District.*



THE FORMER GREEK COMMUNITY OF MILDURA AND DISTRICT HALL IN ELIZABETH AVENUE MILDURA.

**By John Dooley**

THE Greek Community of Mildura and District has left a remarkable legacy in Sunraysia, a legacy not only of hard work and cultural richness, but of extraordinary generosity.

Greek migration to Australia traces back to the mid-1800s, with waves of arrivals increasing significantly post-World War II. By the 1950s and '60s, many Greeks settled in rural regions like Mildura, contributing to local agriculture, horticulture, and small business. While official records highlight arrivals from the 1960s, photos confirm Greek-Australians were living in Mildura as early as the 1920s.

Over the decades, the community established itself as a cultural and social

cornerstone of the district. However, in 2023, facing a decline in numbers and participation, the Greek Community of Mildura and District made the emotional decision to sell their community hall and land on Elizabeth Avenue.

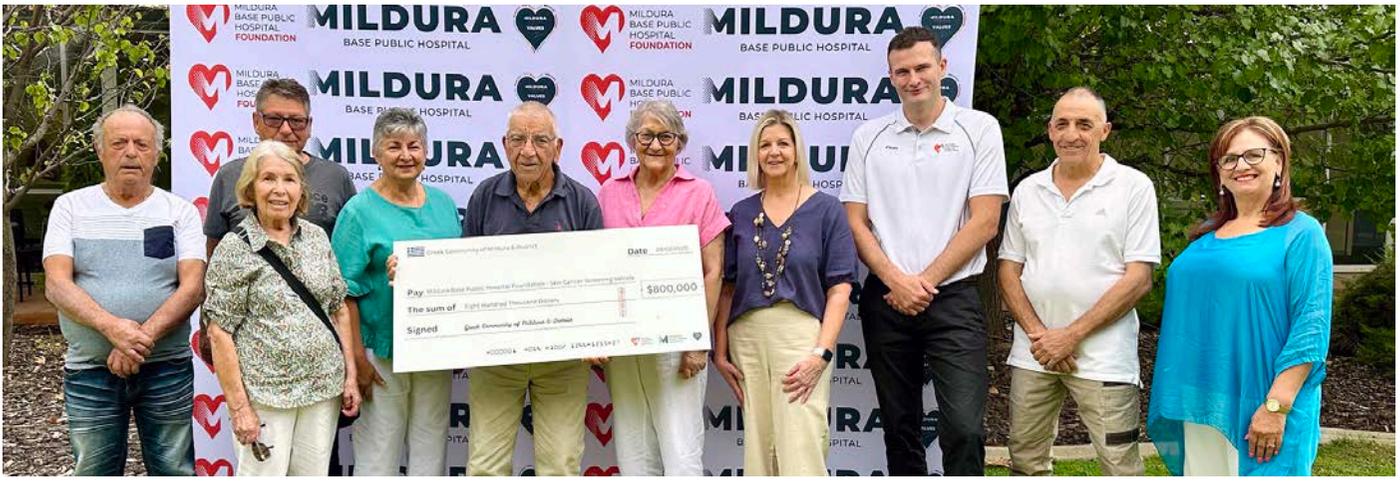
That decision has since blossomed into one of the most generous acts of philanthropy the region has ever seen.

Proceeds from the property sale were distributed to several local not-for-profit organisations and charities. The headline donation was an \$800,000 donation to the Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH) Foundation. Sunassist received \$500,000, while additional donations between \$50,000 and \$200,000 were gifted to Princes Court Community Care, Jacaranda Village Aged Care, Sunraysia Cancer Resources, and the Victorian

branch of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. On February 28, MBPH officially accepted the donation during a courtyard ceremony at the hospital. Members of the Greek community presented a symbolic 'novelty' cheque, marking the moment with both pride and purpose.

The funds will significantly expand MBPH's upcoming mobile screening vehicle project. Initially planned as a skin cancer screening unit, the boost in funding means the vehicle will now offer a broader range of vital services, including cardiovascular health checks and digital mammography.

MBPH Acting CEO Matthew Jukes called the donation "amazing" and "inspiring," noting that such support enables the hospital to deliver life-saving programs to the region.



ABOVE: MEMBERS OF THE GREEK COMMUNITY OF MILDURA AND DISTRICT ATTENDING THE CHEQUE PRESENTATION AT THE MBPH.



RIGHT: A PHOTOGRAPH OF GREEK AUSTRALIAN MIGRANTS TAKEN IN MILDURA ON THE 18TH OF JANUARY 1920.



THE PERIOD BETWEEN 1952 AND 1972 SAW THE GREATEST NUMBER OF GREEK IMMIGRANTS ARRIVING IN AUSTRALIA.

“This gift allows us to build something much more impactful than originally envisioned. It’s a game-changer,” Mr Jukes said.

MBPH Foundation Chair Ross Lake described the scale of generosity as “rarely seen,” acknowledging the Greek Community’s enduring legacy in Sunraysia.

Greek Community Treasurer Helen Taousakis reflected on the emotional journey leading to the sale of the hall.

“Over the years, our numbers dwindled. Many of the children who grew up attending our events have moved away. It came down to just a few of us keeping it going,” she said. “It was a bittersweet decision, but knowing we could give back in such a meaningful way made it worthwhile.”

While the official organisation will cease, Helen says the friendships will remain strong, with informal gatherings planned for coffee mornings, picnics, and lunches. Secretary Helen Kamvissis said the committee was thoughtful and deliberate in choosing where the funds would go.

“While there were many worthy causes, we were bound by regulations to distribute the funds to registered not-for-profits or charities,” she explained.

Both women paid tribute to the community’s founding members who, in the 1960s, helped build the hall from the ground up, often fundraising through catered events and volunteering their own labour for construction.

Each beneficiary plans to use their share of the funds to create lasting impact Sunassist will support its planned community centre,

including a new Meals on Wheels kitchen. Princes Court will use the funds for a planned extension; one of four new households will be named in honour of the Greek Community. Sunraysia Cancer Resources will continue supporting patients undergoing treatment. Jacaranda Village will invest in initiatives such as a kitchen garden, men’s shed, or dementia support resources and the Royal Flying Doctor Service will enhance access to rural health services across the Mallee. With every donation the Greek Community of Mildura and District has ensured their story continues. It’s a powerful reminder of how heritage, when combined with generosity, can shape the future.

As the MBPH Foundation so aptly put it: “the community salutes this remarkable gift and the people behind it”.

AT THE REQUEST OF THE GREEK COMMUNITY THE DONATED FUNDS ARE SPECIFICALLY BEING DIRECTED TOWARD THE MBPH FOUNDATION MOBILE SCREENING VEHICLE CURRENTLY UNDER CONSTRUCTION...



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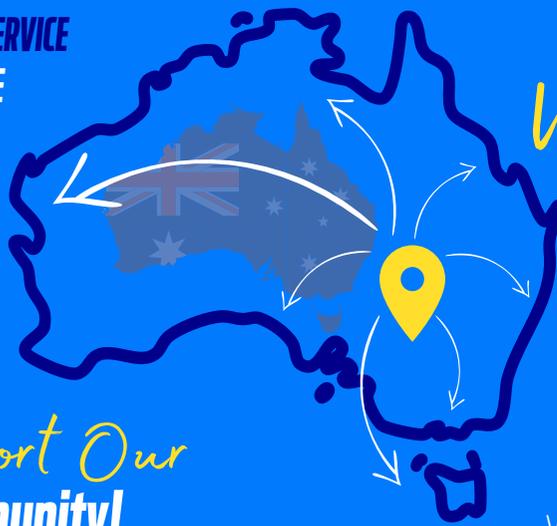
GREEK MIGRANTS ARRIVING IN AUSTRALIA. circa 1950s.

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*SuniTAFE celebrated another cohort of graduates on Wednesday, March 5, this year at the annual Mildura campus graduation and awards celebration.*

# SUNITAFE MILDURA CAMPUS CELEBRATES CLASS OF 2024

**By Samantha Leersen**

THE Class of 2024 commemorated the milestone of graduation alongside families, teachers, and employers at Mildura Arts Centre.

Across all campuses, more than 300 students graduated from 40 different study areas, with an additional 198 apprentices completing their education during the 2024 academic year.

The outstanding achievements of 15 students and staff were also recognised with formal awards, including Apprentice, Student, and Teacher of the Year.

Amongst the recipients this year was Board Excellence Award winner Hsin-Ting Chiang (Sandy), a hard-working Early Childhood Education and Care student who juggled her education with raising a young family.

Foundations Student of the Year was awarded to Indiana Stephen for her ongoing commitment to self-growth, exemplifying the positive impact of SuniTAFE's work education program.

SuniTAFE Chief Executive Officer, Brett Millington, was proud to present each student with their Certificate of Graduation on the night, acknowledging

the immense effort and dedication that goes into every student's educational journey.

"It is always a proud moment to bear witness to the graduates crossing the stage to collect their certificate," he said.

"It's a walk that is supported by hard work and the purpose of wanting to achieve something more, often a driver for their career and life.

"Each student has a story, and we all enjoy being a part of that, but particularly our teachers who have often been the mentor or guide for that journey."

# STUDENT AWARDS

Apprentice of the Year (First Year) | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Ty Roberts – Certificate III in Light Vehicle Mechanical Technology

Apprentice of the Year (Second Year) | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Madeline Rasmussen – Certificate III in Heavy Commercial Vehicle Mechanical Technology

Apprentice of the Year (Third Year) | Sponsored by SMGT  
Nathaniel Allford – Certificate III in Carpentry

International Student of the Year | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Jerie Medina – Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care

First Nations Student of the Year | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Peter Pitt – Certificate II in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Cultural Arts

Hospitality Student of the Year | Sponsored by The Grand Hotel Mildura  
Siew Boey Tan (May) - Certificate IV in Kitchen Management

VETDSS Student of the Year | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Gianna Gallace – Certificate III in Allied Health Assistance

Foundations Student of the Year | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Indiana Stephen – Certificate I in Work Education

VCE VM/ VPC Student of the Year | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Shelby Townsend – Victorian Certificate of Education Vocational Major

Trainee of the Year | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Saroj Khadka – Certificate III in Business

Student of the Year – Certificate III or IV (non-trade) | Sponsored by Mildura Rural City Council  
Emma Jolliffe – Certificate IV in Community Services

Student of the Year – Academic (Diploma/Advanced Diploma) | Sponsored by Skills and Jobs Centre  
Leonie Carter – Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care

Board Excellence Award | Sponsored by SuniTAFE Board  
Hsin-Ting Chiang (Sandy) - Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care

# SCHOLARSHIPS

La Trobe University Scholarship  
Makenzie Clarke – Certificate III in Allied Health Assistance

Tamrin Lenartowicz-Bates – Diploma of Community Services  
Molly Hall – Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care

# STAFF AWARDS

Teacher of the Year  
Catherine Benchmo – Business Studies

GeoffDea Values and Leadership Award  
Samantha Leersen – Communications Officer



The SuniTAFE Nursing department would like to wish every nurse a

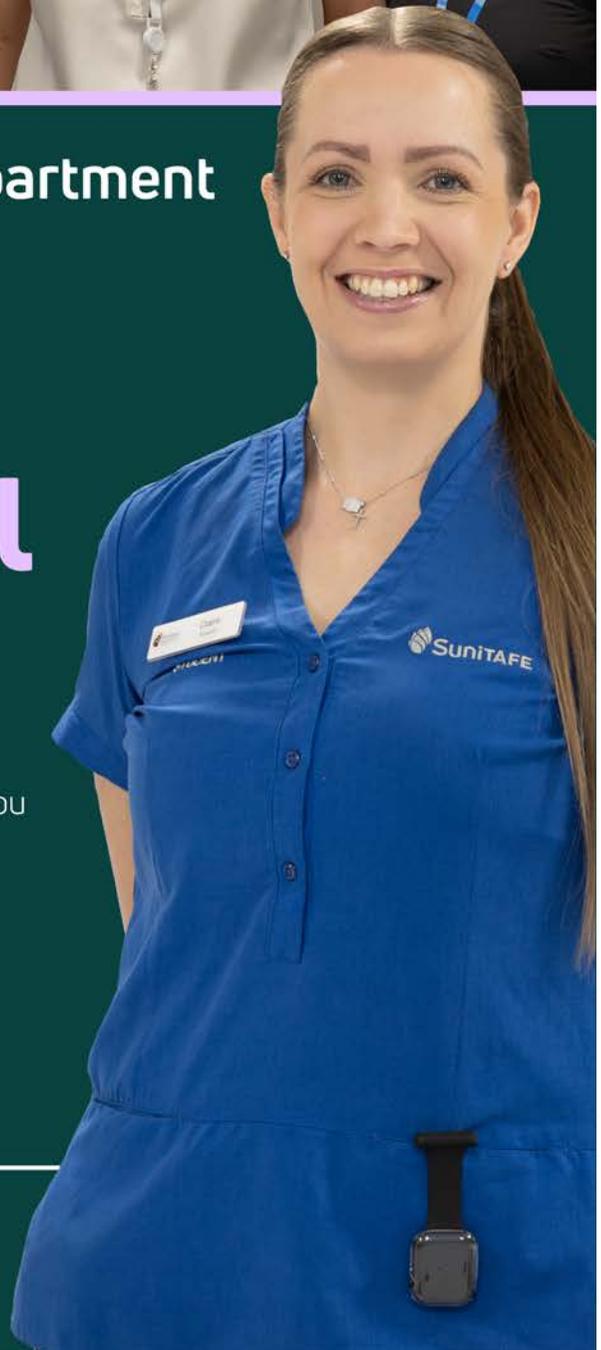
# Happy International Nurses Day.

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International Nurses Day is celebrated on 12 May every year to **recognise the important work that nurses do** and the impact this has on patients, their families, and **our community.**

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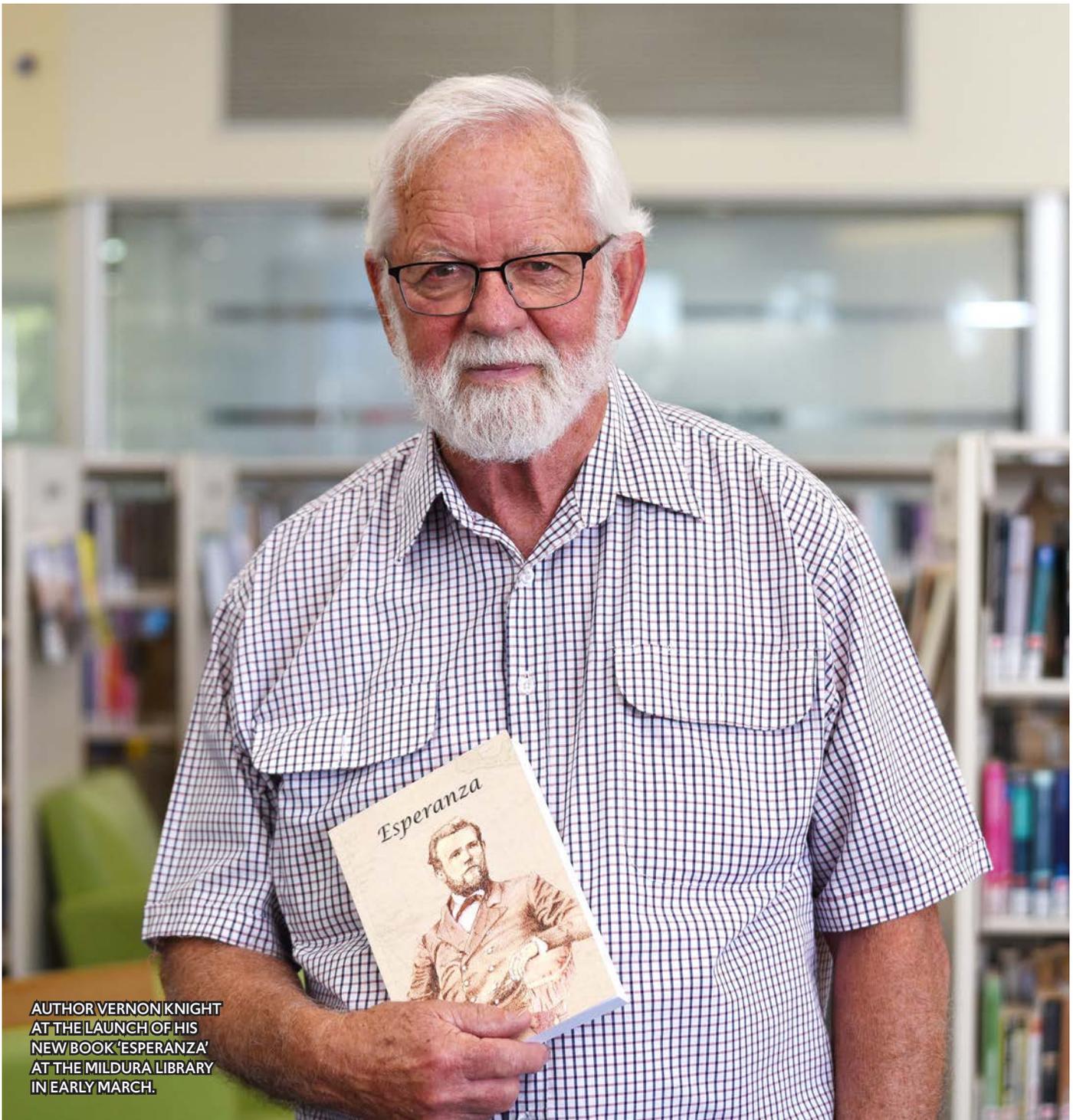
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AUTHOR VERNON KNIGHT  
AT THE LAUNCH OF HIS  
NEW BOOK 'ESPERANZA'  
AT THE MILDURA LIBRARY  
IN EARLY MARCH.

# ESPERANZA

## THE TRAGEDIES AND TRIUMPHS OF THE SOUTHERN SEAFARERS

---

*Esperanza, a fascinating new book launched earlier this year, details the deaths of Captains James Cook and James McIntosh, and the survival of Ernest Shackleton, William Bligh and Mary Bryant.*

By John Dooley

MILDURA writer Vernon Knight is the great grandson of Captain McIntosh whose story is at the heart of this well researched history. *Heartbeat* was privileged to attend the book's launch at the Mildura Library and after the event spoke with the author. Mr Knight said that prior to writing the book, he had begun his own lengthy research into the history of his great grandfather's "all-too-short life".

"I began by tracing his birth in Scotland, his migration to Australia, and his eventual voyage to Kolombangara in the Solomon Islands.

"I grew up knowing that my great grandfather died in 1880 when trading in the South Seas. He was either 26 or 27 and not long married. He left behind a six-month-old daughter that he probably never met. That daughter, Georgina, was my mother's mother.

"James McIntosh was born in Aberdeen in 1853 and was one of seven children. Like his father and at least one of his brothers, he was destined for a life at sea.

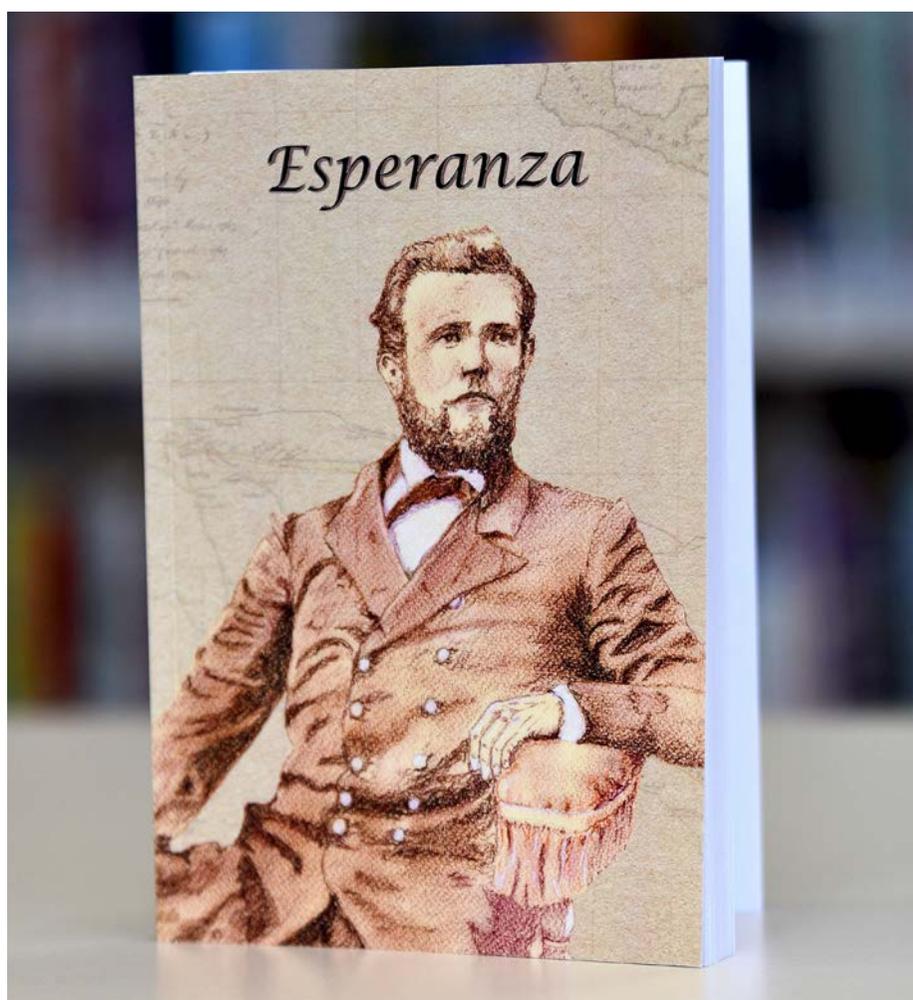
"After qualifying as a second mate, James was appointed to the crew of the 'Darling Downs' for its passage to Sydney. He subsequently gained his first mate certificate and worked on the steamship Australia, plying the Pacific between Sydney and San Francisco".

Vernon records that on the passage to Australia, James probably got to know a young lady whose family were relocating to New South Wales. "Margaret's father had been engaged to manage a blast furnace in Mittagong.

"Soon after settling in Sydney, loved blossomed and James and Margaret were married in 1879."

Not long after, James was appointed captain of the schooner, 'Esperanza'. *Esperanza* was built in 1875 by Alfred Dunn at Berry's Bay, near the present site of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. She measured a mere 43.6 feet long. According to another local author, Dick Johnstone *Esperanza* was less than half the length of the maxi yachts that race to Hobart each Boxing Day.

Dick notes that even in those early times, Dunn had a substantial enterprise building some 47 vessels in 32 years. "The schooner's carrying capacity was only 17 tons, so its size and minimal crew rendered it vulnerable to external attack.



ESPERANZA HAS BEEN WIDELY ACCLAIMED FOR ITS DETAILED RESEARCH AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE.

"We may now marvel", says Dick, "at the risks willingly accepted by the plucky mariners of that era."

#### THE SAD DEMISE OF THE CAPTAIN AND CREW OF THE ESPERANZA

According to Vernon: "James was in command when the *Esperanza* left Rubiana in the Solomons. It was May or June in 1880 and sadly it was a very short voyage that had no return ticket.

"It was one of many tragedies to beset mariners in the south Pacific and one of the early massacres carried out by a native tribe for no other reason than to collect skulls for their Taboo House.

"The story prompts us to reflect on the demise of Captain James Cook who was killed in Hawaii exactly 101 years prior.

"Cook was on his return from the Arctic, where he had been searching for a north-west passage.

"Having failed in his assignment, he retreated to the warmth of the Sandwich Islands, now known as the Hawaiian Islands, in circumstances not dissimilar to James McIntosh.

"To fully understand what happened required an investigation of the trading arrangements, the emergence of slave trading, the culture of revenge killing and cannibalism. My great grandfather and his crew were all killed."

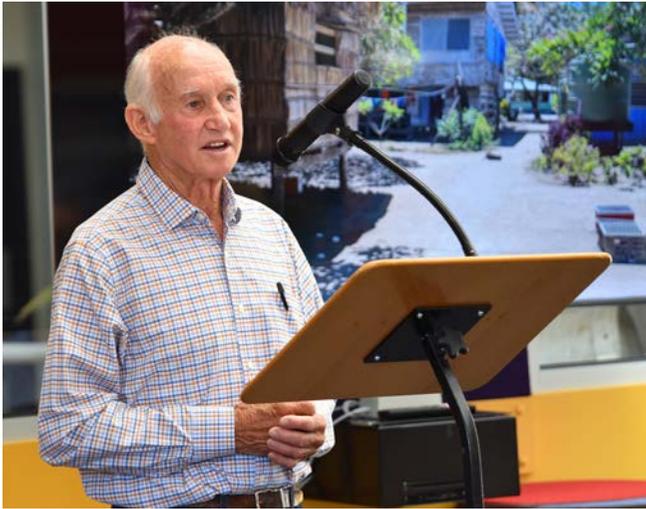
#### A VISIT TO THE SOLOMON ISLANDS UNCOVERS MORE

"My research soon convinced me that I would need to visit the place where he died and speak firsthand to those who knew the details of what had happened," Vernon said.

In 2024, Vernon, accompanied by his wife Chris and their good friend Brian Dodson, travelled to Solomon Islands. They found that the folklore surrounding the plunder of the 'Esperanza' remained vivid.

"While the tragedy happened more than one hundred and forty years ago, many locals were well acquainted with the event and a number could recall seeing the remains of the wreck," Vernon said.

'Esperanza' was launched by local author and historian Dick Johnstone, who also assisted in editing the text.



WELL KNOWN MILDURA IDENTITY, AUTHOR AND HISTORIAN DICK JOHNSTONE LAUNCHED ESPERANZA.



VERNON KNIGHT MEETING CHILDREN AT A MISSION SCHOOL ON KOLOMBANGARA ISLAND.



GHATERI VILLAGE. THE SITE OF THE MASSACRE.

In his speech, Mr Johnstone painted a picture of the era in which the story is set. Following are more excerpts from his speech.

“Today the world is a very small place. If necessary, we can travel to the opposite side of the globe in less than a day. More significantly, we can send and receive electronic messages in mere seconds.

“But for James McIntosh in the nineteenth century, the world was vast. As a mariner, he well understood that the security and success of shipping depended on the winds. What would be relatively short journeys today could sometimes take weeks.

“Predating the arrival of George Chaffey to Australia, the wireless and its derivatives were still to be invented. The advent of such communications would have been beyond the wildest imaginations of travellers in the southern Pacific at that time, so news travelled slowly.

“James’ island of destination within the Solomons had no governance or accountability of the kind we know today. “The values and disciplines that we now

cherish in a modern society are in stark contrast to those of the erstwhile Islanders. It was still very much a wild frontier.”

### TRACING ANCESTRY AND UNDERTAKING PAINSTAKING RESEARCH

“Many families have legends of mystique in their heritage. When those stories digress from regular orthodoxy, some of us remain content to live just for the present. Not everyone is troubled by not knowing,” Mr Johnstone continued.

“But others like Vernon feel compelled to discover the truth of their ancestry. After all, pairs of great grandparents together contribute one eighth of our DNA.

“Vernon’s passion has been unleashed because his uncle, the late Hubert Bailey had earlier left notes sparking the notion that perhaps, more of James’ story could be uncovered.

“So, for more than two years, Vernon has assumed the role of a research sleuth. He has found that manifests of shipping movements can sometimes still

be accessed. Key statistics on families still exist in long buried files in the public domain.

“In Australia, by 1880, print media had a spread and capability to report stories and events of the times. Much of this is preserved. Vernon has had the good fortune to discover a range of relevant research papers.

“More difficult to find are diaries and letters that yield descriptions, daily happenings, and personal feelings. Yet when these rare treasures are unearthed, they give a breathtaking entry into the reality of life at those times.

“You can feel James’ sentiments in his letter to his beloved wife. The schooling of his generation instilled a love of the written word and its power in sharing innermost thoughts.

“If you have read any old diaries, you will know how early explorers could use words to paint pictures and share the depths of emotion.

“In reading *Esperanza*, we get new and penetrating insights into the explorers Cook and Shackleton.



A SCHOONER AT A TRADING STATION IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS circa 1870s. PHOTO: CAPELL COLLECTION AT AUSTRALIA MUSEUM.

“Also shared are the stories of William Bligh and Mary Bryant who miraculously navigated the less than friendly routes to the East Indies.

“While their odysseys make compelling reading within the covers of this book, historians tend to overlook the perilous exploits of the peripheral pioneers of early commerce.

“A writer likes to think he knows his reading audience. Apart from the self-satisfaction of uncovering some of the mystery, the author bestows the story to his heirs. This history is theirs to own.

“Esperanza, however, is not only penned for Vernon’s and his family’s curiosity, but as a much broader account of exploration of the oceans and southern seas.

Among many affirmations received is that penned by Vernon’s long-time colleague, Professor Linda Briskman, Margaret Whitlam Chair of Social Work at Western Sydney University, who said:

“Thank you for the opportunity to read your wonderful book. It is brilliantly researched with the usual thoroughness that is the hallmark of everything you do. It is a rigorous weaving of self, family, points of history, using a mix of documentary research and on-site interviews and discussions. What strikes me is that you have the makings of doctoral research.”

To discover the hidden treasures contained in this wonderful book, it needs to be read! Esperanza is available from Collins Booksellers in the Langtree Mall, Mildura.



AUDIENCE MEMBERS AT THE BOOK LAUNCH LISTENED INTENTLY AS VERNON AND DICK SPOKE ABOUT THE BOOK’S CONTENT.



MILDURA HISTORIAN BOB WALTON WAS IN ATTENDANCE DECLARING ‘ESPERANZA’ AN IMPORTANT PIECE OF HISTORY.



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- August 2nd and 16th
- September 6th and 20th
- October 4th and 18th
- November 1st and 15th
- December 6th and 20th



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# BROTHERLY LOVE AND A FAMILY'S HEARTACHE INSPIRED BEN'S 444 MURRAY MARATHON

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*At 4.44am on Monday, March 3, 40-year-old Echuca builder Ben 'Mino' Welch, set-off from the front entrance of the Mildura Base Public Hospital to embark on the first-leg of a 380km marathon run to Echuca. Ben's mission was to raise funds and awareness for the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, headspace.*



AFTER ARRIVING IN MILDURA ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON BEN WAS JOINED BY MEMBERS OF THE HEADSPACE MILDURA TEAM FOR A GROUP PHOTO.



BEN WITH A 444 CUP CAKE MADE FOR THE WELCOMING AFTERNOON TEA AT HEADSPACE MILDURA.



BEN'S MOTHER JACKIE WELCH BEN WELCH HIS FATHER LEO WELCH WITH MBPH ACTING CEO MATTHEW JUKES AT HEADSPACE MILDURA.



BEN 'MINO' WELCH WITH MBPH ACTING CEO MATTHEW JUKES AT HEADSPACE MILDURA AHEAD OF HIS RUN TO ECHUCA.

**By John Dooley**

AFTER a gruelling, 4 days, 4 hours and 44 minutes, Ben Welch ran over the finishing line at Echuca on Friday, March 7, having raised an extraordinary \$550,000. That was more than \$100,000 above his target of \$444,444, with the funds subsequently being donated to three headspace centres in the Victorian Murray River region.

Mildura, Swan Hill and Echuca headspace, each received \$183,333.33, to further assist with the provision of youth mental health services.

"The money we have raised is obviously important, but a critical part of my motivation was and will continue to be, to help people understand the importance of kid's mental health and talk about how they're feeling and know how to ask for help when they're struggling with life," Ben said.

"If I can reach kids with my message and prevent them from doing what Zac did, then every single step in every single kilometre will have been worth it.

"I know the pain I've endured tackling this challenge was immense, but I assure you it was nothing like the pain my family and I have already experienced dealing with the grief of losing two brothers."

**HOW IT ALL BEGAN**

The background to this story is one that speaks of the unimaginable pain Ben, and his parents Leo and Jackie Welch, have endured.

Ben's focus was fuelled by the tragic loss of two brothers; his older brother Jai, who died in the Mildura hospital after a ski racing accident at Robinvale 10 years ago and his younger brother Zac, who committed suicide in 2022.

*Heartbeat* met with Ben, his parents and his 20-plus strong support team, in Mildura at a welcoming afternoon tea provided by headspace on the eve of his run.

We now wind the clock back to that day, as the full story of this amazing man's quest to spread awareness of youth mental health unfolds.

Ben arrived in Mildura on the afternoon of Sunday, March 2, in great spirits, looking forward to the nine marathon equivalent 380km run, he was about to undertake in 4 days, 4 hours and 44 minutes, along a stretch of the Murray River between Mildura and Echuca.

"I haven't had time to get nervous yet to be honest, but I am looking forward to it," Ben told *Heartbeat*.

"A lot of training has gone into it and I am ready to hit the road and get it all done."

The community in Ben's home town of Echuca and beyond, had really gotten behind his cause, with generosity forthcoming on a large scale. On the eve of the marathon, he had raised more than \$250,000 towards his target of \$444,444.

"The support has been amazing. We have had a significant following, not only on the socials, but also personal messages and all of the headspace organisations have really been helping me out. Haley in Swan Hill, Teresa here in Mildura and Meaghan in Echuca, who are right behind us," Ben said.

Ben's father Leo told *Heartbeat* that the 444 Murray Marathon for Mental Health had taken on a "life of its own".

"This 444 run has grown into a movement," he said.

"It's enormous around Echuca, Gunbower and even through to Swan Hill and here we are in Mildura on a Sunday and there is an enormous turnout of people wanting to support Ben.

"We have been really lucky to have some sponsorship along the way, including the Discovery Caravan parks providing accommodation for us in Mildura, Riverside Caravan Park in Robinvale has given us some accommodation and the park in Tooleybuc as well. The support has just come out of the woodwork.

"We have had fuel for the cars supplied by TASCOS and other sponsors have helped out. Having this support means that we haven't had to take money out of the funds raised, which is just amazing. Everything that is getting raised is going 100 per cent toward the cause."

Leo and his wife Jackie headed up the support group which made sure Ben was well looked after along the way, ensuring he was well nourished and hydrated.

The plan was for the support team to take it in turns running with Ben, giving him encouragement throughout the marathon.

"We are travelling 10kms ahead, cooking meals for the crew. Logistically it's a very big job and we are fortunate to have a fantastic team supporting Ben on his quest to raise awareness and funds for youth mental health," Leo said.

Ben's mother Jackie, herself a long-distance runner, said the support crew was amazing.

"We are so proud of the numbers of people who have given their time and joined this wonderful cause in support of Ben and



AT THE SITE OF BEN'S BROTHER JAI'S MEMORIAL ON THE MURRAY WHERE HE HAD HIS ACCIDENT.



A HUG FROM HIS MUM.



EARLY MORNING ON DAY 1 DESTINATION ROBINVALE.



THE LONELINESS OF THE THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER. 444 EVENT PHOTOGRAPHER: CINDY POWER.

his determination to complete this event, which coincides with the 10th anniversary of Jai's passing," Jackie said.

"I have prepped the food and he's on a very strict nutritional diet. Ben's on an hourly, nutrition diet and so he will be having food at specific times. Leo and I will go ahead and make sure everything's on track.

"I'm running the last day with him from Gunbower to Echuca and closer to home his wife and daughter will join him.

"I've done a few ultra-marathons and I did the Bali Marathon last August, which was a treat for my 60th birthday!"

Mildura Base Public Hospital Acting CEO, Matthew Jukes, also welcomed Ben, his family and their team of supporters at the headspace gathering, wishing them all the best for the epic marathon that lay ahead of them.

"Ben's an inspiration to be honest and the whole background to this story is a truly tragic one and for what Ben is about to embark upon, we wish him and his team all the best," Mr Jukes said.

"It's an amazing effort and with all the sponsors behind him, it just shows that this is going to go on to be a good cause.

"On behalf of headspace Mildura we are honoured to be one of the recipients of the donations that are going to come from this run. We hope to put that to good use and actually honour those tragic past events and the people who Ben is running for, and we couldn't be prouder of what Ben is about to achieve and we wish him all the best on his run."

MBPH Executive Director of Mental Health Services, David Kirby, was also glowing in his remarks about Ben.



ON THE STURT HIGHWAY HEADING TO ROBINVALE



DAY 2 LEAVING ROBINVALE BEN CONTEMPLATES THE LONG ROAD AHEAD



THERE WERE MANY TESTING MOMENTS ALONG THE WAY.



BEN'S PARENTS LEO AND JACKIE WELCH LED THE SUPPORT TEAM.



MATES HELPING MATES THAT'S WHAT THIS MARATHON WAS ALL ABOUT.



STRENGTH AND INSPIRATION FROM SUPPORTERS KEPT BEN GOING.

"I think what Ben is doing is absolutely incredible. The way in which he is dealing with his own life's circumstances and the grief that his family has experienced is quite remarkable," Mr Kirby said. "He's showing that there is help out there and quite often it's just about reaching out and asking for that help and that's the bravest step that people can make. "Ben and his great team of supporters who we have met here today, are putting that positive mental health message out there and that's wonderful."

Teresa Cavallo, Centre Manager of headspace Mildura said ahead of the run, that Ben was embarking on an incredible challenge. "Running 380 kilometres from Mildura to Echuca in 4 days, 4 hours, and 44 minutes in commemoration of his two brothers, as well as raising awareness and promoting early intervention for youth mental health, is an incredible undertaking," Ms Cavallo said. "As one of the beneficiaries of Ben's fund raising, I'd like to extend our heartfelt

thanks to Ben, his team and to the community who have stood behind Ben and donated generously to support his cause. "Each year, two-in-five young people experience a mental health difficulty and 75 per cent of mental health disorders emerge before a person turns 25. "Sadly, suicide is still the leading cause of death for young people in Australia, although we know early intervention can significantly reduce the impact and duration of mental health concerns.



THE TEAM ARE ARE UP AND ABOUT AND READY TO ROLL ON DAY 3 DEPARTING TOOLEYBUC.



AN EMOTIONAL JACKIE WELCH EMBRACES A SUPPORTER.



A POTENT MESSAGE WITH THE BLUE TREE IN THE BACKGROUND.



BEN IS JOINED BY SOME LOCALS AS HE RAN THROUGH THE TOOLEYBUC TOWNSHIP.



EARLY MORNING ESCORT FROM LOCAL POLICE AS BEN LEAVES THE LAKE CHARM AREA ON DAY 4.



PASSING THE BLUE TREE PAINTED IN MEMORY OF SOMEONE WHO HAS COMMITTED SUICIDE.

“headspace Mildura is an early intervention mental health service for young people aged 12 to 25, as well as for their family and friends.”

Ms Cavallo said the funds raised will go towards improving and increasing the services and programs headspace provide to young people in the Sunraysia area and broadening their reach. “We want to ensure our young community knows help is available for their mental health and wellbeing and that they feel comfortable reaching out for support when they need it,” she said.

### TRIUMPHAL ENDING TO AN EXTRAORDINARY MARATHON

Ben achieved his goal to finish the 380km marathon in the 4 days, 44 hours and 44 minutes arriving as scheduled in Echuca on the afternoon of Friday, March 7. He

was given a hero’s welcome by hundreds of people including school children, who turned out to see the man who had just completed an incredible feat.

Despite nursing a debilitating ankle injury after the run, Ben was riding a massive high, comprehending the enormity of his achievements and the positive impact he has had on so many individuals in the rural communities he connected with along the route.

“I know the pain I’ve endured tackling this challenge was immense, but I assure you it was nothing like the pain my family and I have already experienced dealing with the grief of losing two brothers,” Ben said.

On day two, when he knew everyone was thinking he wasn’t going to make it through the second 89km day, Ben said he thought about his brothers and how they would never get this opportunity

and about the many hours and hours of training he had invested in the lead up.

“I recited one of my favourite quotes in my mind: “I haven’t come this far to only come this far,” Ben said.

“Those last 30 kms on day two were the deepest I have ever had to dig in my life.

But my best mate Crozzy who had surprised me and flown in from Darwin that morning and a lifelong mentor in Brett Sands, ran right beside every step and both ticked off their own half marathons – it was bloody hot.

“They told me to run when I could and walk if I had too, and my wife Jayde and daughter Ollie who were on their bikes never left my back and never once said I should consider stopping.”

Ben’s message to self at this critical make or break moment was emphatically, “There is always more in the tank...we are all capable to so much more”.



BEN REACHES OUT TO AN EXCITED ROADSIDE SUPPORTER.



DEEP IN THOUGHT AFTER A LONG HARD DAY ON THE ROAD.



LOCAL SUPPORTERS TURN OUT IN DROVES.



AND BRING IT HOME HE DID!



DAY 5 AT GUNBOWER AND BEN'S MOTHER JACKIE RUNS THE LAST LEG WITH HIM.



A TRIUMPHANT AND EXHAUSTED MINO CROSSES THE FINISH LINE.

“You just need to find the way into your reserves. My way was the people around me – backing me in – never wavering or deviating from the goal,” he said.

Ben said he wanted to get people talking. Not just starting conversations, but finishing them. Well, he has certainly done that.

As was stated at the beginning of this article, Minos 444 Murray Marathon for Mental Health had set a fundraising target of \$444,444 – to everyone’s amazement and delight that actually materialised into \$550,000.

### HELP IS ON HAND

There are many ways headspace can support young people in their mental health and wellbeing and to help them navigate life’s challenges.

Young people can access the headspace

Mildura centre at 2/125 Pine Avenue, Mildura or phone: 5021 2400

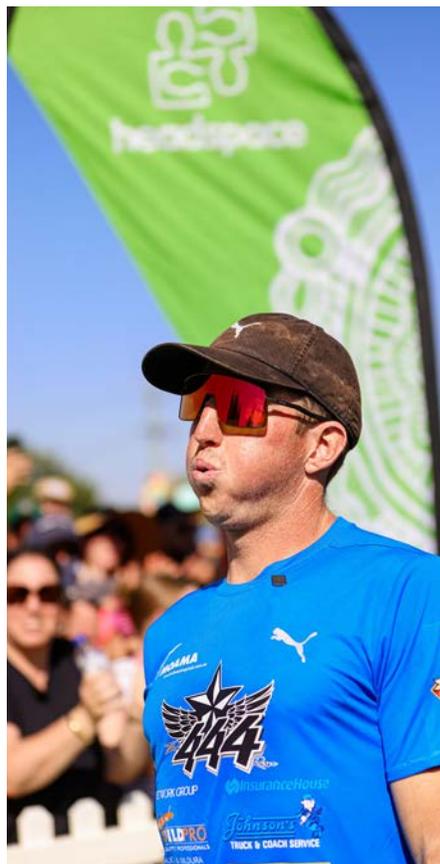
Through the headspace National Service, young people can access mental health online support at: [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au).

In an emergency, please contact 000. Alternatively, crisis support services are available including: Lifeline: 13 11 14 - Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467 and Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800.

*Heartbeat acknowledges the special contribution from event publicist Suzie Shearer, who provided media releases for the ‘444 Run – Mino’s Murray Marathon for Mental Health’ some content of which, has been included in the preparation of this article. Our thanks is also extended to event photographer Cindy Power, who captured the wonderful images of the marathon.*



TWO LITTLE SUPPORTERS WITH BIG HEARTS WERE THERE TO SEE BEN CROSS THE FINISH LINE.



BREATHING A SIGH OF RELIEF THE JOB IS DONE!



IN THE CLOSING STAGES SHCOOL CHILDREN JOINED IN THE RUN.



BEN PRESENTED THREE CHEQUES TO THE MANAGERS OF HEADSPACE CENTRES IN ECHUCA, MILDURA AND SWAN HILL AT A POST RUN CELEBRATION EVENT FUNDED BY THE MOAMA BOWLING CLUB ON THE FRIDAY EVENING. .



Held from May 5 -11 this year, Heart Week is Australia's national heart health awareness week.

The awareness campaign provides an opportunity for all Australians to start a conversation about heart health with their loved ones and take positive steps to reduce their heart disease risk.

Heartbeat magazine is aiming to further support this awareness campaign by publishing several articles that go to the heart of this vitally important subject.



## PUBLIC CARDIAC UNIT WILL BE A LIFE-SAVER

*Mildura and the surrounding Sunraysia region have long faced the challenges of distance and accessibility when it comes to specialist medical services. While a private cardiac service has been a welcome addition to the local healthcare landscape, the need for a publicly-funded cardiac unit at Mildura Base Public Hospital has never been more critical. Establishing such a unit would not only save lives but also ensure timely access to care for all residents, regardless of income or location.*

**By Heath Kendall**

HEART disease remains one of the leading causes of death in Australia, and regional communities are disproportionately affected. In Mildura, the rising rates of cardiac-related illness are compounded by an aging population and long distances to major metropolitan hospitals. Currently, many patients must travel to Melbourne or Adelaide for diagnosis and treatment, delays that can be dangerous, even fatal, when dealing with cardiac emergencies.

A public cardiac unit at Mildura Base Public Hospital would allow for earlier diagnosis, faster treatment, and better long-term management of heart conditions close to home. It would significantly reduce the burden on families who now face the

emotional and financial strain of long-distance healthcare.

While the private cardiac service in Mildura provides essential care, it isn't accessible to all members of the community. For many patients, especially those without private health insurance or the means to pay out-of-pocket costs, private care is simply not an option. A public cardiac unit ensures that no one is left behind when it comes to life-saving cardiac treatment.

This is a matter of health equity. Everyone in the community should have access to the same standard of care, regardless of their financial situation. Public healthcare is the backbone of rural and regional health services, and a public cardiac unit would ensure that the Mildura region receives

the quality and accessibility of care that is standard in larger cities.

The establishment of a public cardiac unit would not compete with the existing private service, it would complement it. Together, the public and private sectors can create a more robust, flexible, and efficient cardiac care system in the region.

The case for a public cardiac unit at Mildura Base Public Hospital is clear. It addresses a pressing health need, ensures fairness in access to care, complements existing private services, and strengthens the region's healthcare capacity for the future. Most importantly, it gives the people of Mildura and surrounding areas the chance to receive life-saving care when and where they need it most.



MBPH Director of Medical and Community Services and Clinical Director of Medicine Dr Bernhard Kuepper with Cardiac Liaison Clinical Nurse Consultant and Nurse Practitioner Candidate Emma Bath.

# BERNHARD SETS HIS HEART ON CARDIAC UNIT BECOMING A REALITY

**By John Dooley**

THE leading proponent and architect of the project that will see the establishment of a public cardiac unit at Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH) is Director of Medical and Community Services and Clinical Director of Medicine, Dr Bernhard Kuepper.

The highly credentialled Dr Kuepper is also a specialist physician in general medicine and cardiology, and an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at Monash University.

Dr Kuepper is being assisted in his mission to establish the MBPH public cardiac unit, by Cardiac Liaison Clinical Nurse Consultant and Nurse Practitioner candidate, Emma Bath.

*Heartbeat* spoke to Dr Kuepper and Ms Bath recently to gain an insight into their plans for the cardiac unit.

“When I came to Mildura and commenced in my role at MBPH, I observed that there were obstacles for certain groups in the

population to access a cardiac service,” Dr Kuepper said.

“Given my background as a cardiologist, I then started to think about certain strategies that would help to mitigate these problems.

“It appeared that working towards a publicly available cardiology service in the hospital, was probably one of the ways forward and it would serve to complement the private providers in Mildura.

“With the help of Emma Bath, who has been working in the field of cardiology in the hospital for quite a while and led the Cardiovascular Ambassador Project through Safer Care Victoria servicing patients across all cardiac conditions, we started looking into whether we could create our own little heart failure service to improve one aspect of the treatment. That led to the opening of the MBPH Heart Failure Clinic.”

That was in May last year and since then Dr

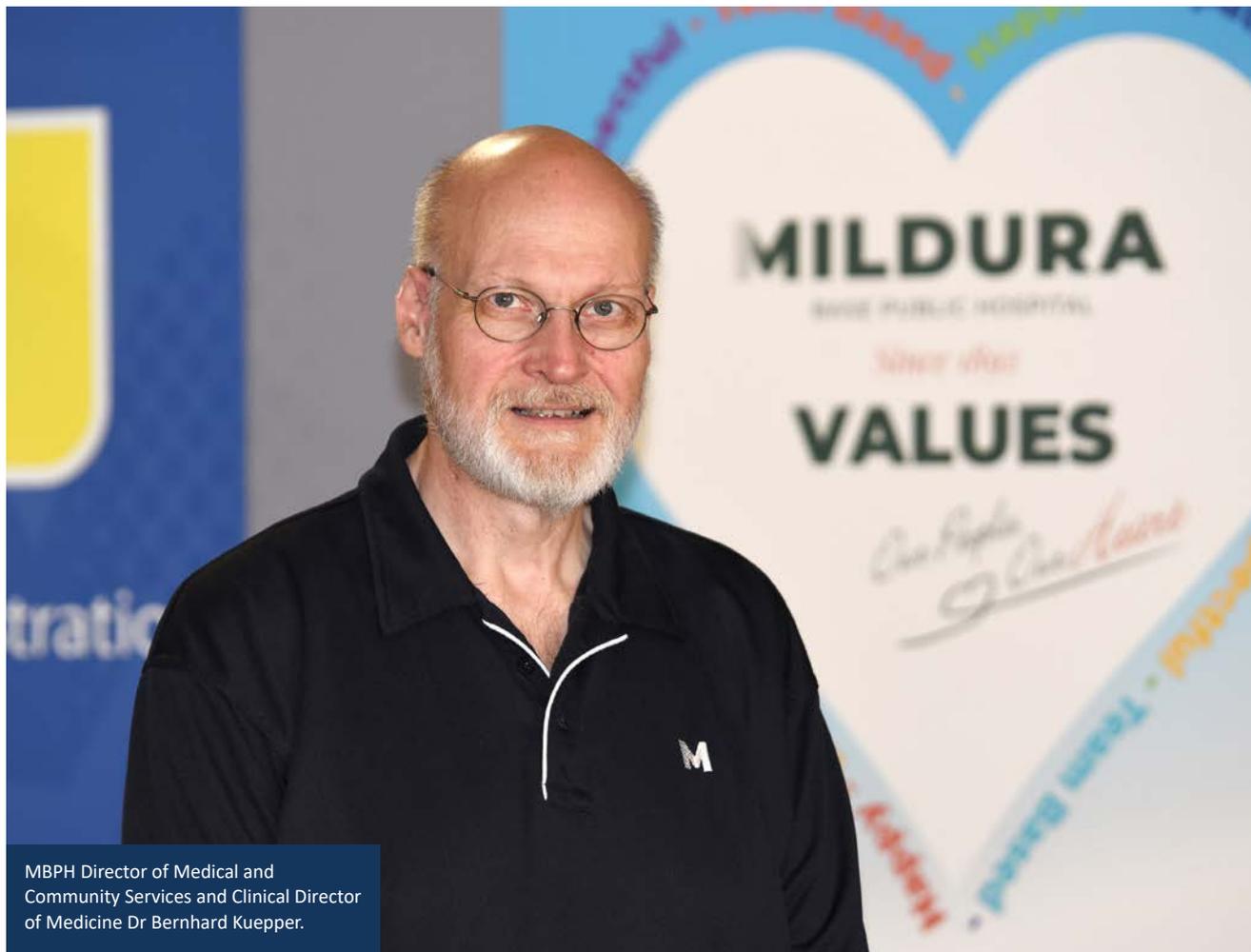
Kuepper has drafted a more comprehensive plan for a non-interventional cardiac service, which was presented to the MBPH board.

“I was pleased to see that it was positively received by the hospital board,” Dr Kuepper said.

“The plan has also been approved by the Department of Health. We are now in the first stages of the implementation of the service, and the hope is that by the next fiscal-year we will be able to offer more and more public cardiology services at MBPH.”

Ms Bath said when the Heart Failure Outpatient Clinic established, it was limited to receiving patients who were admitted to an MBPH inpatient service at the hospital.

“We are planning to move beyond this limited scope of patients and to this end we will be interviewing to fill the role of a second cardiac nurse. This will enable us to expand this service,” she said.



MBPH Director of Medical and Community Services and Clinical Director of Medicine Dr Bernhard Kuepper.

"I have also been doing some outreach heart failure visits where I try and provide exactly the same service as Bernhard and I deliver in the Specialist Clinic.

"The difference being that we are taking it to patient's homes who may have limited mobility due to their health conditions or are vulnerable people who can't get to the hospital themselves.

"I envisage that when we have the public cardiology unit, the two services will sit quite closely together.

"Initially, we will start with inpatient referrals and see how our capacity goes and, as the service builds, we will be able to take public referrals from local GPs for example."

From Ms Bath's perspective, the cardiology service is something that the community needs and deserves.

"I think our community deserves access to this sort of vitally important care," she said.

"And as Bernhard mentioned, it will complement our private providers who often tell us that they are under-the-pump and at capacity. For people to be able to gain timely access to a cardiac service,

there is no doubt that will be a good thing and change outcomes for patients.

"From an organisational and professional point of view, for me to have worked with Bernhard has meant I have been able to upskill to a much higher level, something that wouldn't have been possible without working shoulder-to-shoulder with an expert in his field.

"I think it's very exciting that we will have a service established that we can really upskill our existing staff, because we know that historically we have struggled to attract people to come and stay in Mildura. Often, we have registrars who love being in Mildura but we don't have enough to retain them.

"But, if we have this specialist service here, we will certainly be able to upskill staff, retain more specialist staff and that leads us to be able to scale the service up in the future."

Born and raised in Germany, Dr Kuepper completed his medical degree at Heinrich-Heine-University in Duesseldorf. He then went to work at Augusta-Krankenhaus Hospital in Duesseldorf, which had an angiography and cardiology suite.

"After about five years, I decided that my

future may be in general practice and so I switched to a surgical hospital and worked as a senior doctor in surgery for a year. I also spent time in the GP clinic to advance my training," Dr Kuepper said.

"Then an opportunity came for me to return to Augusta-Krankenhaus. The cardiologist said to me that they needed me back and hoped I was available. He also gave me an undertaking that I could finish my internal medical specialist course and guaranteed I could finish cardiology."

Dr Kuepper's career in medicine and cardiology continued over the years, with many senior appointments, of which there are too many to detail.

Then, amazingly in 2015, he came to Australia, initially to Queensland and then to Alice Springs in 2017, where he established the public cardiology service and became the first head of cardiology at the Alice Springs Hospital.

And then, an enticing opportunity to come to Mildura presented itself in early 2013.

This would materialise into Dr Kuepper being appointed Director of Medical and Community Services and Clinical Director of Medicine at MBPH.



La Trobe University Associate Dean Prof. Grant Drummond, Heart Health Advocate, Katrina Umback, President Australian Cardiovascular Alliance Prof. Gemma Figtree and event chair, GP pharmacist, Brooke Shelly.

## TURNING HEARTBREAK INTO HOPE: BE PART OF THE CHANGE FOR HEART DISEASE PREVENTION

**By Rebecca Crossling**

IN 2019, Mildura's Katrina Umback faced the sudden and devastating loss of her husband, Scott, who succumbed to a heart attack while awaiting an emergency flight to Melbourne. He was just 42-years-old.

"I was completely blindsided. I had no idea he could just have a heart attack and die," Katrina recalls. "It's been a defining moment in my life."

Katrina remembers meeting La Trobe Associate Professor Simon Egerton and Dr. Saimon M. Silva at a focus group organised by La Trobe University in Mildura in 2023. When asked about the biggest health challenges in her community, she immediately responded, "Naturally, I said heart disease. I spoke about the inequities we face just to access a heart health check."

Heart disease prevention is a critical issue in Mildura, where it is the leading cause of preventable death, even surpassing cancer. The lack of a catheterisation (cath) lab for specialised cardiac procedures, makes Mildura an ideal location for research and intervention in heart disease prevention. The focus group emerged from a project initiated

at a Research Think Tank conducted by La Trobe researchers in Mildura in early 2023. The goal of this event was to collaboratively design research projects aimed at addressing local challenges. This groundwork has now led to La Trobe researchers, in collaboration with regional partners, being awarded more than \$900,000 to co-design a kit for rural Australians to check their heart health at home.

This initiative is led by Associate Professor Simon Egerton from La Trobe's School of Computing, Engineering, and Mathematical Science, and Associate Professor Carina Chan from the School of Psychology and Public Health. The team has worked with Mildura consumers and clinicians to develop the Heart Health Check Kit, addressing the healthcare challenges faced by rural communities. This funding was secured through a 2024 Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) Survivorship Care and Collaborative Research Prioritisation grant.

"Rural communities face significant barriers to the standard model of care, including lengthy waits, long distances to travel, and high out-of-pocket expenses," Associate Professor Egerton said.

"The kits we have created can solve this, allowing people to check their heart health at home and receive results via phone or mail—leading to earlier primary care intervention, risk factor reduction, and lower rates of heart disease."

Katrina has been advocating for a cath lab in the region for some years and helping locals understand their risk of heart disease. She is now part of the research team.

She was named the 2025 Mildura Rural City Council Citizen of the Year in recognition of her efforts to raise awareness about heart disease risks, calling the study a game-changer.

"I am excited to put my energy into supporting this local research project. What I'm really proud of is that it will be conducted in the Mallee, in partnership with the community and people like me, a heart disease widow," she said.

"If successful and implemented nationwide, this project will help contribute to ending heart disease being the leading cause of death in our region, and across Australia."



When an unimaginable tragedy struck Katrina Umback and her two young boys in 2019 it would take her on a journey to advance heart health care.



Katrina's husband Scott who died from a sudden heart attack aged 42.



Katrina's advocacy extends beyond this local project. She was invited to be part of an event at La Trobe University's Bundoora Campus in late 2024, which introduced the work of CAD Frontiers. CAD Frontiers, a collaboration between La Trobe University, the University of Sydney, the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute, and Monash University, is on a quest for zero heart attacks. The CAD Frontiers team leads cutting-edge coronary artery disease research and clinical practice, uniting a global team of clinicians, researchers, healthcare, and industry leaders to drive innovation in discovery science, clinical trials, and commercial translation, with the goal of preventing heart attacks before they happen.

"CAD Frontiers are an Australian-led, international research team who, in layman's terms, want to create a blood test to tell you if you do or don't have coronary artery disease and if the test indicates you do, you'll be able to access treatment that will put your CAD in 'remission,'" Katrina said.

"Once I left that event, I was on a mission to get the team to Mildura, as I knew their

research would be transformative for rural and regional Australians."

They accepted Katrina's invitation and an evening event was held on Wednesday, April 9, this year, at La Trobe's Mildura campus, chaired by Mildura GP Pharmacist and 2024 Australian Credentialed Pharmacist of the Year, Brooke Shelly - a La Trobe pharmacy alum and Adjunct Senior Lecturer.

Katrina was joined on the panel by Professor Grant Drummond, Co-Director of the Centre for Cardiovascular Biology and Disease Research (CCBDR) at La Trobe, and Professor Gemma Figtree, a member of the CAD Frontiers leadership team and Chief Scientific Officer, and Professor of Medicine at the University of Sydney.

The event attracted around 100 community members who were highly engaged, asking many questions and making pledges on the night to support local initiatives such as a community health dashboard and advocating for funding a local clinical research trials coordinator.

"While I haven't given up on getting a cath lab to Mildura, I think most people

understand how laborious and political it is trying to establish such a facility," Katrina said.

"So, for me right now, it makes sense to get involved with research that is focused on heart disease prevention."

Sandy Connor, La Trobe University's Mildura Head of Campus, said La Trobe researchers seek to address major challenges facing local and regional communities.

"La Trobe is committed to driving research that has positive impacts for health and wellbeing across our regional footprint," Sandy said.

"This local project was a direct result of La Trobe's work here on the ground in Mildura. We help facilitate strategic partnerships for our researchers and I'm particularly proud that this project secured the MRFF funding.

"We're inviting community members from Mildura and surrounding areas to co-design key aspects of the project. Your input will ensure that the final Heart Health Check Kit and delivery modes are as accessible and user-friendly as possible. Please register to get involved via this link <https://brnw.ch/21wRZPF> or scan the QR code above."



La Trobe University Associate Dean Prof. Grant Drummond, President Australian Cardiovascular Alliance Prof. Gemma Figtree, Heart Health Advocate, Katrina Umback and event chair Brooke Shelly.

# THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US: TACKLING CARDIOVASCULAR INEQUITY IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

**As told by Brooke Shelly - GP Pharmacist**

I’VE spent a lot of time thinking about distance.

The distance between rural and urban, between need and provision. The distance between diagnosis and access. Between symptoms and solutions. Between professional advice and patient reality.

Sometimes, the gap is physical, measurable in kilometres and dusty roads. Other times, it’s hidden in the absence of local services, in the patchy phone signal, in the six-week waitlist, in the shrug of “We don’t have that here.”

And sometimes, that distance becomes permanent.

Because there’s no ‘further away’ than losing someone you love.

The sudden death of Mildura resident, Katrina Umback’s husband, Scott, from a preventable cardiac event in 2019, came in the absence of a cath lab. The help came too late. The distance cost him his life.

This tragic event would become the catalyst

for Katrina’s strong advocacy for a cath lab to be built in Mildura.

Katrina and her boys live with that reality every day and she’s made it her mission to make sure fewer families ever have to.

**A REGIONAL HEALTH REALITY**

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the leading cause of death in Australia. But not all deaths are treated equally.

If you live in a city, you’re more likely to be screened early, more likely to access a GP, and far more likely to get to a cath lab in time if you need one. If you live in the bush? You wait longer. You travel further. And sometimes, you simply don’t make it.

- Melbourne: 51.1 CVD deaths per 100,000
- Victorian average: 60.2
- National average: 63.8
- Mildura: 72 per 100,000

It’s not a Victorian problem. It’s not a statewide trend.

It’s an us problem. A Mildura problem.

A rural justice problem.

And for too long, we’ve been told it’s “just how it is.”

That we’re “too far away.”

That the fix is too expensive. The resources too limited. The distance too great.

Well, I put it to you — too far away from where?

This isn’t just about health. This is about spatial justice.

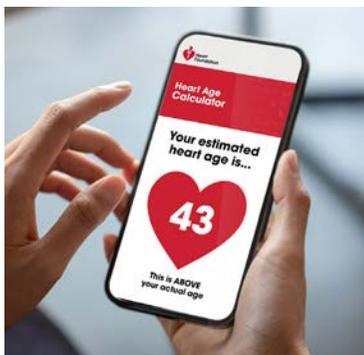
Rural communities like ours are constantly asked to do more with less. To be self-sufficient. To make do. To accept “cost-neutral” solutions and rationed care as though we’re lucky to get anything at all.

And yet—we feed this country. We fuel it. We sustain it.

We grow its food—citrus, grapes, almonds, olives.

We power its economy through agriculture, tourism, and transport.

We welcome visitors to our river, our festivals, our landscapes.



The Heart Age Calculator. It only takes 3 minutes to understand your risk of heart attack or stroke..



Heartbeat of Football founder Andy Paschalidis with Katrina Umback.



Shane Warne Legacy's Country President Novartis Aus/NZ Matt Zeller, Shane Warne Legacy's Brooke Warne with Heart Health Advocate, Katrina Umback

We contribute to the national economy in ways that are invisible to policymakers, but vital to the lives of every Australian.

And we do it all while travelling further, waiting longer, and living shorter lives.

We've normalised this. We call it a challenge. A disparity. A workforce issue.

Let's call it what it is: a rural health failure. If these stats belonged to the cities, the government wouldn't call it a challenge. They'd call it a national emergency.

### AN OPPORTUNITY TO FLIP THE MODEL

We know at-home prevention works.

When Australians are sent a free bowel cancer screening kit at age 50, nearly 1 in 2 complete it.

But when it comes to Heart Health Checks through their GP? Only about 1 in 100 eligible adults ever get one done.

It's not because people care less about their hearts.

It's because one makes it easy—and the other makes it hard.

That's why Katrina's work spans both sides of the solution. She's helping to engage local GP clinics to ensure they're actively promoting Heart Health Checks—supporting a system where people can access prevention through their doctor. But she also knows that access isn't equal, and

wait times are real. Still, it's better to book in now—whatever the wait—than to not know your heart health risk at all.

Of course, not everyone will get in. Not everyone will follow up. That's where innovation matters.

An At-Home Heart Health Screening Kit could change that.

Bringing prevention into people's homes. Taking distance, appointments, and complexity out of the equation—and hopefully saving lives.

This isn't a theoretical fix. It's \$900,000 of federal MRFF funding to trial a real solution: an at-home cardiovascular screening kit, built in the Mallee, for the Mallee. A tool designed to meet people where they are—and finally take access out of the equation.

And it's not being built behind closed doors. It's being co-designed with the community - our community - with people like Katrina Umback, who know all too well what's at stake when prevention fails.

### KATRINA UMBACK: FROM GRIEF TO ACTION

What began as a deeply personal tragedy has become a public movement for change.

Katrina's advocating for a cardiac cath lab in Mildura as an urgent need remains. But

as time passed, she recognized, that while system-level reform takes years and often decades, lives were being lost now. So, she shifted her focus from, treatment to prevention.

In 2024, she partnered with the Shane Warne Legacy to bring free heart health checks to Mildura—an initiative that saw incredible local engagement. And in 2025, she helped bring 'Heartbeat of Football' to the region over the Easter weekend, offering free heart screening at community sporting events. The not-for-profit organisation, founded by sports broadcaster Andy Paschalidis, has a simple mission: zero heart-related deaths at football grounds in Australia. By raising awareness, conducting screening, and promoting defibrillator access, they're proving that grassroots action can save lives.

But Katrina knows these events, as powerful as they are, aren't enough. One-off moments can't fix long-term access issues. That's why she's now a core community partner in the MRFF-funded screening kit project—bringing her lived experience, passion, and practical insight to the co-design process.

This isn't abstract for her. It's personal. And her leadership is helping shape a solution that could change the future of rural heart health.



Ontario Medical Clinic's Dr Ryan Sheridan, Desri Whiteley, Damon Ryan, Deanna Smith, Caitlyn Neilson, Dr Brad Murray, Monica Cook, Brooke Shelly, Kellyann Wilton and Dr Philip Webster.

Being named 2025 Mildura Rural City Council Citizen of the Year was an acknowledgement of not just for what she's done, but for what she continues to do. Katrina helping us reframe rural health not as a deficit to be managed, but as a frontier for innovation and leadership.

### THIS PROJECT NEEDS YOU

The MRFF Heart Health Screening Kit is now entering its co-design phase—and your voice matters.

Whether you're a patient, a carer, a nurse, a GP, a pharmacist or someone with a story to share, you can help shape how this kit looks, feels, and functions. Your insight will make it safer, more relevant, and more effective.

If you've ever thought, "Why wasn't it picked up sooner?"—this is your chance to be part of the answer.

To get involved, email [hearthealthcheck@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:hearthealthcheck@latrobe.edu.au) or register your interest at: <https://tinyurl.com/y55pj9r3> or scan the QR code.



### SAY YES TO RESEARCH. SAY YES TO PREVENTION.

As detailed in La Trobe University's story in this issue of Heartbeat, Katrina has also helped bring CAD Frontiers, a national research consortium, to Mildura.

The project is on a mission to detect and treat "invisible" coronary artery disease (CAD)—with the goal of preventing heart attacks before they happen.

Their work focuses on discovering and translating new blood biomarkers that can identify silent CAD across the community, and developing new drugs that target an individual's susceptibility to CAD and halt disease progression.

It's cutting-edge research, and they're actively working with local GP clinics to offer trial participation.

If your clinic offers you the opportunity to get involved—say yes.

Research shows that people who participate in trials often have better outcomes.

Not always because of the intervention, but because of what the process sparks: conversations, awareness, connection.

Sometimes, just showing up is the first step toward better health.

### A FUTURE CLOSER TO HOME

Katrina Umback has shown us what it means to turn grief into momentum. To take tragedy and shape it into systemic change. But she shouldn't have to do it alone.

The burden of action shouldn't fall only on those who've lived the cost of inaction. It belongs to all of us.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about distance.

The distance between rural and urban. Between help arriving—and help arriving too late.

The distance between a community surviving—and a community thriving.

The distance between rural and urban should never be the distance between life and death.

It's time to close that gap—for good.



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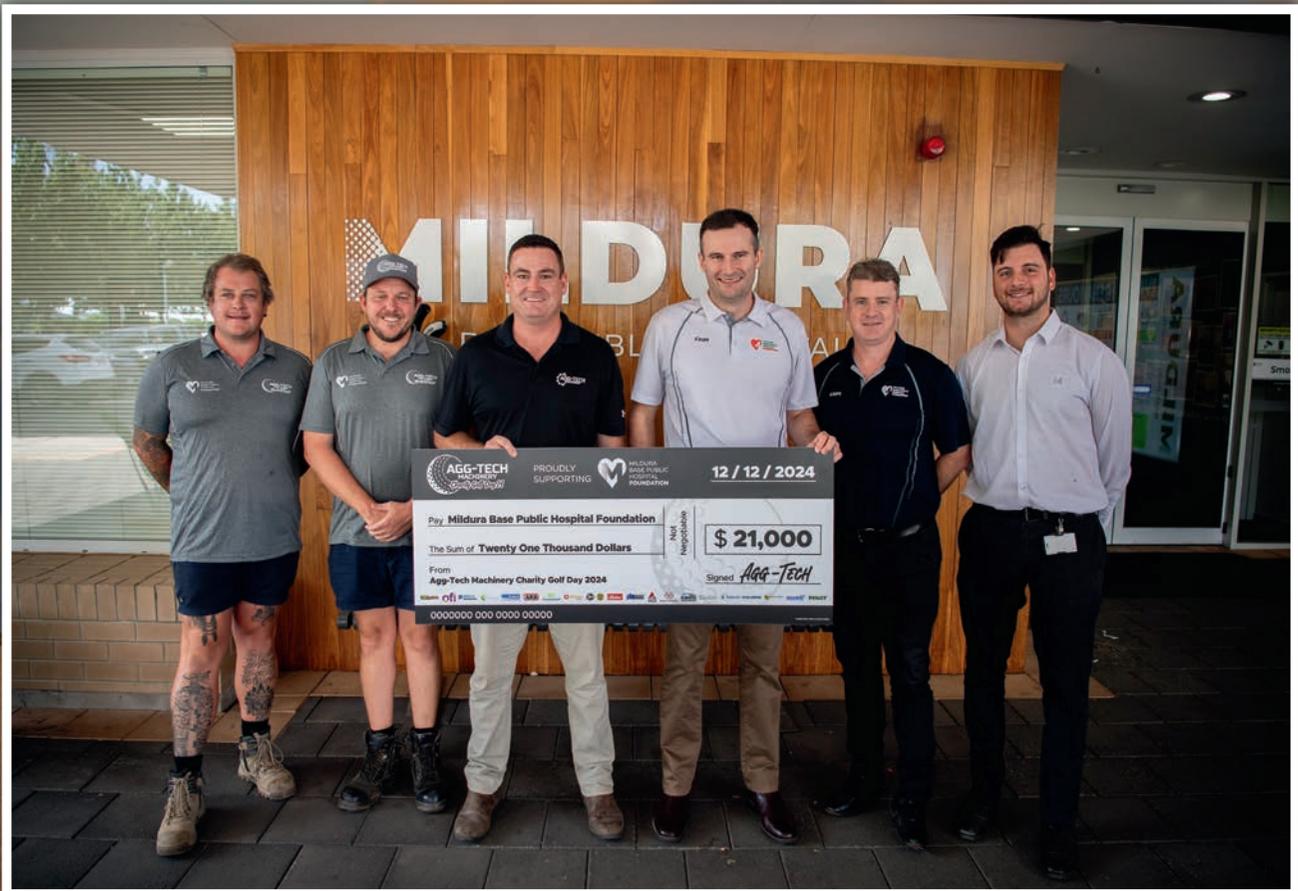
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# CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY IS THIS LEADER'S FOCUS

*A health professional with a wealth of experience gained in many different settings, Robinvale District Health Services CEO Ro Enever has finally found her perfect role.*

**By John Dooley**

FOR Ro Enever the pathway to her becoming Robinvale District Health Services' (RDHS) Chief Executive Officer has been paved with myriad Victorian health sector senior roles over many years. Ro grew up in South Australia's Barossa Valley and started her career as a nurse in Bendigo. *Heartbeat* recently sat down with Ro

to talk about her working life and the intentions she has for RDHS.

"When I was a little girl, I always thought I was going to be an archaeologist. I didn't think I was going to be a CEO of anything," she said.

"But, I guess I had a fairly traditional pathway through to a CEO role. I started nursing in Bendigo and from there I moved to work at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, then I came back to Bendigo to live.

"I worked in the operating suite of a private hospital for quite a number of years and had GPs that would come in and do surgical assists in theatre. One of those GPs was moving to a large practice with eight others, and he approached me to be their clinic nurse. I accepted, and stayed in that role for a number of years. "It was a multi-purpose, health centric clinic that included a dental practice, physiotherapist, podiatrist and a gym.

“While I was there we expanded the services to cater for what we called industrial clients, and I ran immunisation and health programs for them. That was a great learning experience.”

Ro said as a result of that, someone who had been working at one of those services had gone out on his own as an occupational health and safety consultant and he reached out to her.

“He asked me if would I like to spend some time just ‘shadowing’ him for interest’s sake? I said: ‘No worries. That would be interesting’.

“Ultimately, he offered me a position with his business and I went and worked with him for a number of years. We serviced areas in central Victoria and parts of the Mallee, right up to Mildura.”

That job was the catalyst for Ro doing postgraduate study in health and safety hazard management.

She said that her career opportunities just seemed to open up to her wherever she was.

“I think I have been fairly fortunate because I seem to have always been tapped on the shoulder for jobs. So, my career path just took me where it took me,” she said. “As long as I was growing and being extended professionally, I was happy to take opportunities as they presented.”

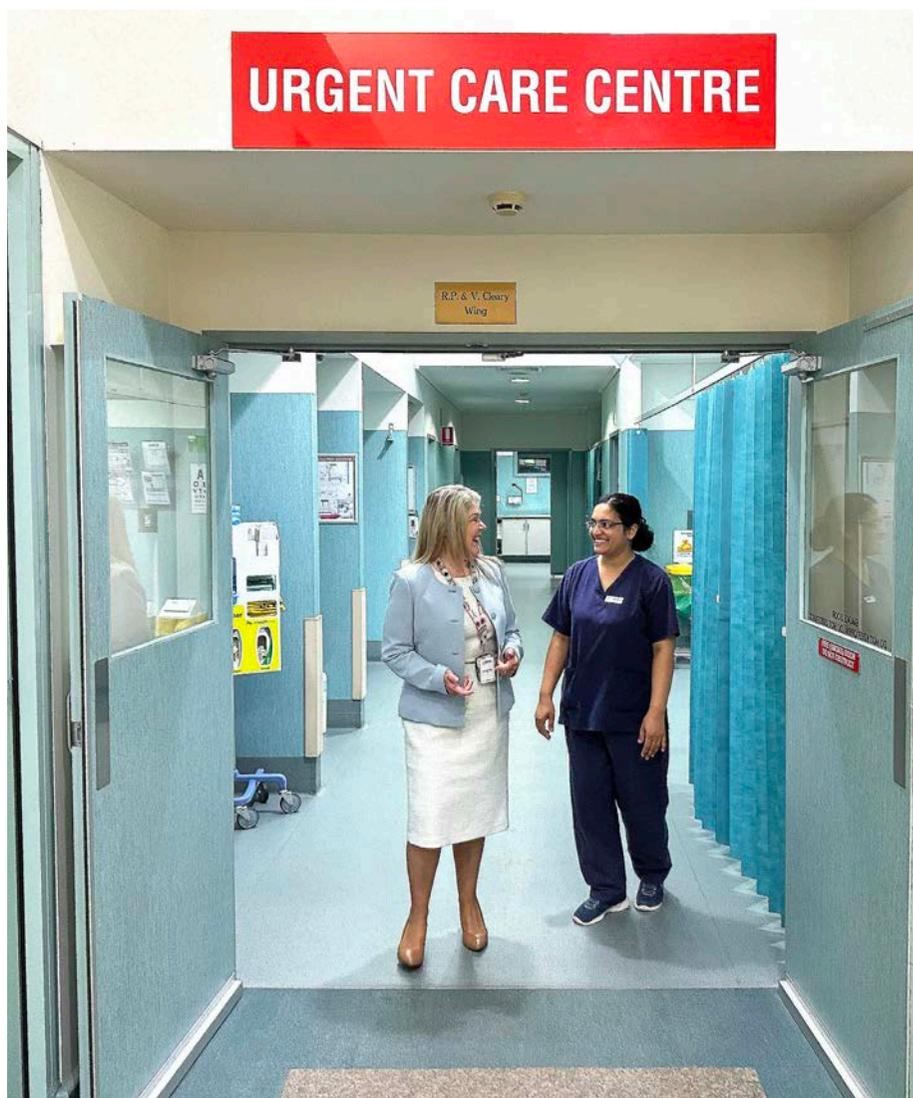
“While I was completing my post graduate studies, I was contacted by St John of God Hospital in Bendigo and offered the position of OH&S Manager.

“I spent a number of years there and ultimately ended up being the Acting National OH&S Manager for St John of God Healthcare, while they recruited to fill that role permanently. This was an interesting role which included all St John of God Healthcare hospitals, pathologies and outreach services in Australia, New Zealand and Timor Leste.

“About 15 months later, after flying backwards and forwards to Perth — where St John of God Healthcare’s head office was — and going to Melbourne frequently, I needed a change. I had a young child, and it was taking its toll. And so, they actively recruited to the national role.”

Ro then started on her trajectory toward hospital management while still with St John of God, taking on the role of Acting Director of Corporate Business.

“Following that tenure, my next move took me to Bendigo Health, working in a public-private partnership,” she said.



CEO RO ENEVER WITH ASSOCIATE NURSE UNIT MANAGER SHEENA VARGHESE DURING A VISIT TO THE URGENT CARE CENTRE.

“I was working for Spotless and ended up staying with them for a number of years. I was the Cleaning, Environmental, Waste, Portering and Logistics Manager.

“I had around 400 staff with a large CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) cohort. My time at Bendigo Health was predominantly during COVID.

“Being a large streaming hospital, this was where small rural hospitals who, in the worst-case scenario, couldn’t cope, sent their patients.

“No one quite knew what COVID was going to look like. And so, the planning involved considered all scenarios.

“If for example, instead of having 40 cleaners every day we would have only two turn up! So, what gets cleaned? How is that cleaned?

“Or, we only get two porters turning up instead of 60. How do we manage that? How do we support the clinical services?

“While that was an interesting time, I missed being part of the clinical mix so I left Bendigo Health to take up a director’s role

at Goulburn Valley Health, in Shepparton.

“In this role I had a large portfolio including amongst other streams, food services, cleaning and fleet management of 179 vehicles. I was also responsible for overseeing the accommodation for visiting doctors, student doctors and student nurses.

“After a further few years, I moved to Swan Hill to take up the role of Executive Director of Corporate Business with Swan Hill District Health.”

But, Ro’s family was still in Bendigo and she was getting further and further away from them.

“I took the job in Swan Hill because of a new Emergency Department build and that was going to be part of my portfolio,” she said.

“I was also responsible for all of the corporate services, which included maintenance, catering, cleaning and a range of other services.

“The first stages of ED were built and it ended up being a \$72million project in two stages.



ROBINVALE DISTRICT HEALTH SERVICES MAIN ADMINISTRATION ENTRANCE.

“That role involved a lot of collaborative work with the Executive Director of Nursing and IT, Purchasing and Procurement and Nurse Unit Manager of ED. It was really fabulous team work.”

Ro would then successfully apply for the role of CEO at Robinvale District Health Services, which she commenced in April, 2024.

“By that point in my career, I had witnessed some things over a period of time where I thought I could have done that better. Done it with better regard and better respect for people,” she explained.

“I then asked myself ‘How can I have that influence?’ A lot of culture flows from the top down, and I really wanted to make a difference.

“I hope that my staff would feel that I’ve helped to make a difference here, although this was a lovely hospital to come to anyway.”

Ro said that the timeline she had set herself to take on a CEO role at some time had exceeded all her expectations.

“I’d set myself a five-year plan on making it into a CEO role and I arrived here in about four years,” she said. “I’ve been very lucky. My family have been incredibly supportive and the journey I’ve been on has always been one where I have been able to learn from incredible people.”

### RDHS AT THE HEART OF THE ROBINVALE COMMUNITY

Established in 1957, RDHS has grown into a vibrant, community health service that today has 174 staff employed across a variety of clinical and non-clinical roles on a part-time, casual or full-time basis - the latter three allowing for a good, work-life balance.

Robinvale is where RDHS is headquartered but it also has facilities at Manangatang. These are an aged care service and urgent care service with acute beds.

In Robinvale the urgent care service has 14 acute beds for which it provides excellent amenities, and 14 beds for their aged care residents across three campuses — Robinvale, Manangatang and Riverside.

The aged care residents are much loved part of the hospital’s community.

RDHS prides itself on the support it provides its community. Primary health services include X-ray, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, podiatry, speech therapy, dietitians, renal dialysis and an antenatal clinic.

RDHS also provides palliative care, visiting nurses service, telehealth and immunisations.

Early Learning, play groups, after school

care and vacation programs are some of the other services provided to the community by RDHS.

RDHS also provides consulting rooms for the Royal Flying Doctors to run its five-day-a-week GP Clinic service out of in Robinvale.

The organisation prides itself on having a strong focus on cultural safety and they employ an Aboriginal Liaison Officer, who assists the organisation connect with First Nations people. It also provides a strong voice on the Reconciliation Action Plan Committee.

RDHS nursing staff are very well qualified. They are known as, RIPRN staff (Rural and Isolated Practice Registered Nurses) and have extra skills because they work in what is considered a remote location.

While they work closely with local GPs, RDHS has a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week, virtual service that allows for admissions from the community.

RDHS utilise a service called VVED, which is a Victorian doctor service that enables them to call an emergency physician who can assess the patient and interact with nursing staff. This virtual consultation may then result in the patient being admitted to an acute bed and if needed, to then be transferred to Mildura or a metropolitan hospital in Adelaide or Melbourne.



DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES VICKI SHAWCROSS AND ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE OFFICER NICOLE LIPAROTA IN CHARGE OF THE BBQ AT THE RDHS DAYS OF JOY 2024.

In October last year, Robinvale District Health Services joined Mallee Track Health & Community Service in using the virtual care model to facilitate the admission of patients back into their hospital.

Working in partnership with Mildura Base Public Hospital, Robinvale followed Mallee Track as the second hospital in the region to adopt this model, which allows them to provide patient care closer to home.

Speaking at the time, Ro described the virtual care as a “great enhancement for the hospital and the wider Robinvale community”.

“We are delighted the service has commenced and we are looking forward to having it as another pathway for us to enable our patients to receive their care closer to home, while still having specialist oversight,” she said.

“Patient outcomes are positively impacted when they are able to access care closer to home. This is a real game-changer for patients and represents a significant step towards enhancing health-care accessibility across the region.”

*Heartbeat* asked Ro about some of her achievements so far and what goals she has for the future?

“Strong focuses for me have been to build the services that the community needs,



LOCAL FIRST NATIONS DANCERS AT NAIDOC WEEK CELEBRATIONS 2024. PHOTOS CONNIE CHIRCHIGLIA RDHS.

and a part of that was getting radiology services back here and they resumed recently. That was a big-tick for our hospital,” she said.

“We were really pleased to be able to do that, and it was good to work in collaboration with Mallee Track in Ouyen. Together we were able to provide enough work to make it attractive for a radiologist service and radiographer to work with us.

“Another item on my agenda is to get a community advisory committee up and running so that we can hear directly from the community and what is it that they need?”

“Overall, my focus is really about understanding. Continuing to understand the community and continuing to have that community voice influencing our growth.”

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# GOLF DAY HELPS DRIVE THE FOUNDATION FURTHER

**By Heath Kendall**

A SOLD-OUT crowd hit the fairways at this year's Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH) Foundation Golf Day, held at the stunning Coomealla Golf Club.

More than 130 players took part in the popular annual fund-raiser, which supports the MBPH Foundation and its vital projects, including the much-anticipated mobile screening truck, currently under construction.

Adding to the excitement of the day was former Carlton premiership star Anthony Koutoufides, who entertained the crowd with stories from his AFL playing days and plenty of friendly banter.

The event's success was made possible through the generosity of local businesses and key sponsors. The Coomealla Golf Club once again offered the course free of charge, playing a significant role in the fund-raiser's continued success.

Mildura Houseboats donated the main prize, a luxury five-night stay aboard one of their premium houseboats, while Drummond Golf contributed with high-quality golf gear and equipment.

Acting MBPH CEO Matthew Jukes praised the community's strong turnout and ongoing support.

"It was absolutely fantastic to see so many people come together for such a great cause," Mr. Jukes said.

"The Foundation does incredible work in our region, and events like this are a perfect example of how the community can support better health outcomes in a fun and engaging way."

"We're incredibly grateful to the sponsors, volunteers, and players who made the day a success. Their contributions go a long way in helping us achieve our mission of delivering world-class healthcare locally."

Next year's Golf Day is already on the calendar for March, with organisers anticipating another great turnout.

Those interested in sponsoring or contributing to next year's event can get in touch with Jack Madafferi at MBPH via [jmadafferi@mbph.org.au](mailto:jmadafferi@mbph.org.au).

# MBPH FOUNDATION GOLF DAY



# MBPH FOUNDATION GOLF DAY



# MBPH FOUNDATION GOLF DAY





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GUESTS WERE TREATED TO THE BEST ON OFFER FROM 27 DEAKIN AND 400 GRADI.



MBPH'S KATRINA ALLEN, DR BERNHARD KUEPPER AND EMMA BATH WITH FOUNDATION CHAIR ROSS LAKE AND HEART HEALTH ADVOCATE KATRINA UMBACK.

# KC SOCIETY LUNCHEON RAISES MORE THAN \$150,000 FOR CARDIAC UNIT

**By Heath Kendall**

GLORIOUS weather and an unforgettable culinary experience set the stage for the third annual KC Society Lunch, hosted along the picturesque Deakin Avenue footpath.

Held in memory of the late Mr Kevin Chambers, a pioneering figure in local medicine, this year's event brought together community members and supporters to raise funds for the establishment of a new cardiac unit at Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH).

Guests were treated to an array of gourmet offerings created by two of Mildura's finest dining establishments, 400 Gradi and 27 Deakin, while showcasing local hospitality at its best.

Among those in attendance were Mr Chambers' children — Jas, Jen, and Scott who travelled from Sydney to honour their father's legacy and reconnect with many of his former colleagues and friends.

The event's success was made possible through the incredible support of local sponsors and donors, with more than \$150,000 raised toward the new cardiac unit.

Acting CEO of MBPH, Matthew Jukes, expressed his gratitude to everyone who helped make the event a success.

"We are very thankful for the community's generosity. The funds raised today bring us significantly closer to establishing a cardiac unit that will provide lifesaving care for so many in our region," Mr Jukes said.

"Kevin Chambers was a visionary in local healthcare, and it's only fitting that this event, in his honour, is helping to drive forward another critical chapter in our hospital's services," he added.

Mr Jukes also highlighted the broader impact of the initiative.

"This cardiac unit isn't just about medical equipment, it's about access," he said.

"We're talking about providing essential treatment to people who might otherwise go without.

"That's why the establishment of this unit is so important."

Those wishing to support the continued development of the cardiac unit can visit the MBPH Foundation website at [www.mbphfoundation.org.au](http://www.mbphfoundation.org.au).



MILDURA RURAL CITY COUNCIL MAYOR HELEN HEALY WITH MBPH FOUNDATION CHAIR ROSS LAKE.

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HEART HEALTH ADVOCATE KATRINA UMBACK WAS THE LUNCHEON'S GUEST SPEAKER.





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MBPH PATIENT TRANSPORT VEHICLE DRIVER STEVEN MATULIC WAITS ON LOCATION FOR A PATIENT WHO WILL BE TAKEN BACK TO THE BASE.

# PATIENT TRANSFERS IN SAFE HANDS WITH STEVE BEHIND THE WHEEL

*In February this year long-serving Mildura Base Public Hospital employee Steven Matulic clocked-up 40 years of service. He has served in many roles over the years and today is the hospital's Patient Transport Officer.*

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THE PATIENT TRANSPORT VEHICLE AT THE HOSPITAL ENTRANCE.



THE PATIENT TRANSPORT VEHICLE DEPARTING THE HOSPITAL.



THE PATIENT TRANSPORT VEHICLE WAS FUNDED BY THE FOUNDATION.

**By John Dooley**

THE Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH) Patient Transfer Vehicle, commenced operations in November last year and since has carried out more than 350 patient transfers. A project that was funded by the hospital's Foundation, it is proving to be an invaluable service for the community.

Steven Matulic was tasked with operating the service as its principal driver and it has proven to be the perfect new role for him – something that will be explored further in this article.

*Heartbeat* met up with Steven recently to chat about his long 40-year tenure with the Base.

"I was 18 when I started my working life at the Mildura Base Hospital and I still remember the date. It was the 28th of February, 1985," Steven recalled.

"It was my first job out of school and initially I was employed as a courier,

which I did for one or two years and then I joined the Portering Service.

*Heartbeat* asked Steven what led him to take a job at the Base.

"I used to play soccer and my coach worked at the hospital in management in the cleaning and patient assistance services area and he said: 'Have you got a job?' and I said 'No, but I'm looking'.

"He then asked me to come and see him on the following Monday morning, which I did and I started immediately.

"I have a lot of great memories from those days at the Base. In this business you see some good things and some bad things happen, but mostly good."

As a porter, Steven's duties saw him working across all the clinical areas in the hospital.

"In that role I would take patients to and from X-ray, theatre and other wards for their procedures," he said.

"I would also respond to 'Code Greys' and any other code alerts that occurred

in the hospital. I would also deal with duties relating to the mortuary." (A Code Grey in a hospital context refers to an emergency alert indicating a danger or threat to patients and staff, often related to behavioural emergencies).

Fifteen years later, in the year 2000, Steven, along with the other Mildura Base Hospital staff, made the move to the new hospital, where he would continue to carry out his designated role.

Twenty years later, the Base Hospital was returned to public administration, becoming the Mildura Base Public Hospital and Steve was still onboard for the long-haul.

"After 40 years I'm still here! It's a great place to work," he said.

"I am part of a cohort of staff who have been here for 40 years or more. It's a bit of an exclusive club really!"

*Heartbeat* asked Steven about his role as Patient Transport Officer and the service the vehicle was providing.



STEVEN MATULIC (FRONT ROW LEFT) COMMENCED HIS CAREER AT MILDURA BASE HOSPITAL IN FEBRUARY 1985. PHOTO circa late 1990's.

“It’s a fantastic job. I am enjoying the different learning experience. The grey matter is still learning,” he said with a chuckle.

“People we talk to think it’s a great service for the hospital to be able to provide. The ambos also say it has taken the load of some of the work they would otherwise be needed to undertake.

“Monday to Friday from 8.30 am to 5pm, the Patient Transport Vehicle carries out trips throughout the region, including cross border pick-ups and deliveries, transporting low-acuity patients.”

Steven said he and the other drivers in his team are always accompanied by a nurse during patient transfers.

“For example, if a patient is being taken to have some treatment outside the Base, we stay with the patient while they receive their treatment or until they arrive at their drop-off destination. We are responsible for the patient handover in the case of a hospital-to-hospital transfer,” he explained.

“We have done trips to Robinvale, Ouyen, Wentworth and as far afield as Broken Hill.



AN MBPH PATIENT ABOUT TO BE TRANSPORTED TO AN APPOINTMENT AT A MILDURA MEDICAL FACILITY.

“We take patients to a variety of destinations for a range of requirements as per the booking.

“Many patients comment on the vehicle and they’ll take a look at the van and say: ‘Is this the new one? I’ve never been in this one before’.

“The level of care we provide is high and it’s something the patients appreciate and something I am proud of.”

Steven Matulic gives the impression that he isn’t going anywhere soon and so the MBPH Patient Transport Vehicle looks to have a safe pair of hands on the wheel for some years to come.

By any measure, he is living testimony to the fact that the Mildura Base Public Hospital is a workplace that values its employees and provides an environment where people can thrive in their chosen career.



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FINAL YEAR MEDICAL  
STUDENT TARSHA HAWLEY.

# FROM MILDURA TO MEDICINE: TARSHA HAWLEY'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING A DOCTOR

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TARSHA Hawley grew up in Mildura, attending Irymple Primary School and Irymple Secondary College before completing Years 11 and 12 at Mildura Senior College.

For as long as Tarsha can remember she wanted to be a doctor.

In Year 10 Tarsha did work experience in Mildura Base Public Hospital's (MBPH) Emergency Department (ED).

This year, in her final year as a medical student, Tarsha is again working at MBPH in the same department.

"I have come full circle. I always dreamed of becoming a doctor, and that only solidified when I had the opportunity as a young high school student to experience first-hand the work of an ED. Now, I'm back, as a final year student doctor," she said.

After an undergraduate degree in biomedicine at Monash University in Melbourne, Tarsha started Monash's graduate medical program, joining the Rural End-To-End Cohort.

This program is specifically designed for students to complete their clinical years of study in rural and regional Victoria.

For Tarsha, enrolling in the Monash end-

to-end program was a "no brainer". "I've always known I wanted to practice in Mildura, so studying and working regionally made perfect sense," she said.

The first year of her medical degree was spent at the Monash Rural Health campus in Gippsland, before she returned to Mildura in her fourth year where she completed her GP placement, working in three different general practice clinics.

"It was an amazing experience, I had great mentors and tremendous support from the university," she said.

In her final year of her degree, Tarsha is spending 2025 trialling a number of specialties – oncology, ED, general medicine, general surgery, and aged care.

She will also conduct research as part of her final year, with her project focusing on a local Mildura sports injury clinic that treats acute sporting injuries either on the field or in the clinic, sending only the most serious injuries to the MBPH ED.

"It is a fantastic service for the local community. It helps alleviate some of the pressure from the existing healthcare system in Mildura," she said.

General Practice is one of Tarsha's areas

of interest: "Through my degree and placements, I've had the chance to work in GP clinics and see just how crucial General Practice is to address the health needs of the local community. I want to contribute to that," she said.

"Even when working in other towns and in Melbourne, it has always been clear to me that I will eventually return home to work as a doctor."

Associate Professor Fiona Wright, Deputy Head of School of Monash Rural Health (MRH) and based at Mildura, said that MRH is increasingly trying to find clinical placements for medical students in their hometowns, when possible, "because it's clear that the more time a student spends studying rurally, the more likely they will be to practice rurally upon graduation."

There is a Monash Information Evening taking place in Mildura on 30 July 2025 – for any students or family of potential students who want to find out more about studying medicine, nursing or allied health at Monash Rural Health.

Use the following link for more information:

<https://www.monash.edu/discover/events/events-calendar>

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# FOND FAREWELLS

*The first half of this year at Mildura Base Public Hospital has seen a number of long-serving staff choosing to call time on their careers and enjoy a well-earned retirement. Heartbeat pays tribute to those wonderfully dedicated staff members, many whose working lives have spanned more than forty years.*

## KERRY LEAVES A LASTING LEGACY

**By John Dooley**

WHEN a veteran Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH) nurse made the decision to retire in March this year, it was a case of mixed emotions when the day to say goodbye actually arrived. After a stellar career spanning 47 years, veteran Registered Nurse Kerry Jackson was hanging up her scrubs and stepping into a well-earned retirement. Trained at School 91 at the Northern District School of Nursing and Mildura Base Hospital, Kerry has spent her entire career caring for the people of Mildura and surrounding communities.

She has not only provided compassionate care to palliative, rehabilitation, and sub-acute patients, but has also trained and mentored hundreds of students and nurses along the way. Her impact on the profession, and those she has worked with, is immeasurable.

Kerry worked her last shift on Ward 4 at MBPH, on Saturday, March 8, ending a career characterised by decades of dedication to nursing.

Kerry was given a warm farewell by her colleagues at the hospital on the previous Thursday, which Heartbeat attended.

Kerry, who doesn't look her age, confided to *Heartbeat* that she had passed the traditional retirement age of 65, but had reluctantly decided it was time to retire,

because her body was telling her to.

"It's a bitter-sweet moment really, but I'm ready to embark on the next chapter of my life," she said.

"I've spent a long time on my feet during my working career and it does take a toll on your knees and hips and so reluctantly it's time to ease up and have a rest.

"I will have a bit of a break and take it easy and I look forward to spending some time with the grandkids, but there are also lots of things to do around the house and garden.

"I have plans do some travelling with my sister. I've done Europe with her and so we are going to start doing some of Australia, now that she isn't working as well.



KERRY JACKSON IS JOINED BY HER MANY FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES AT MBPH FOR HER FAREWELL. INSET: KERRY IS PRESENTED WITH A BOUQUET OF FLOWERS BY MBPH ACTING WARD 4 NURSE UNIT MANAGER NATALIE KNUDSEN.

"I've got family in Perth and friends in Brisbane. So we've got quite a few places we can go."

Kerry's foray into nursing began back in the late 1970s, when she commenced training at the Mildura Base Hospital.

"I've just 'clicked' over 47 years in nursing," Kerry said.

"It's been a wonderful career right from the start at the 'old base', through to setting up Ward 4 when we moved down here to the new hospital and I was heavily involved in that 25 years ago.

"I started my nursing career in 1978 and eventually I became NUM (Nurse Unit Manager) of female surgical – Ward 2, at the old hospital and then the rehab unit was attached to that ward. With the move to the new hospital I then assumed the NUM role of the Rehab Unit for nine years." MBPH Executive Director Clinical Operations & Chief Nursing & Midwifery Officer, Katrina Allen, spoke glowingly of Kerry's contribution.

"Kerry's excellent career has seen her in nursing for nearly 50 years. She trained at the Mildura Base Hospital in Thirteenth Street, commencing in 1978, where she was a resident in the nurses' home next door to the base," Katrina said.

"Kerry I have to congratulate you on having reached the point where you are comfortable with letting it go because I think we are all so strongly attached to what we do.

"It's just a massive celebration to have had such a long career in something that you have loved and you have made such a big difference in so many people's lives."

MBPH Acting Ward 4 Nurse Unit Manager, Natalie Knudsen, paid tribute to Kerry's work in Ward 4.

"Thank you for your dedication to Ward 4 and your role mentoring other staff," she said.

"You have shared so much knowledge with the other nursing staff who you have worked alongside, which has been so appreciated. We are going to miss you."

Kerry spoke about her role mentoring new staff at MBPH over many years.

"I have seen a lot a lot of these kids come through over the years and even most of the nurses who have progressed into management roles. I grew up and developed with and worked on the floor with them all," she said.

"I have enjoyed all of the education that I

do and the orientation of new staff which I have been involved in."

Kerry said she felt privileged to have worked in Ward 4 at the Base.

"I have a rehab certificate and also a palliative care certificate so I was involved in both areas in Ward 4," she said.

"The palliative care is the most rewarding and we are with the patient and their families to end of life, ensuring it is as comfortable as it can be."

*Heartbeat* asked Kerry what she would miss most about working at MBPH.

"I am going to miss the people here — the wonderful staff on the ward and the patients we care for," she said.

"I will miss the friendships made on the ward and there is still a lot of those that continue today.

"We've got a group, who we call 'ex-Ward 4' which includes other staff who have already retired and I meet with those people.

"There are half-a-dozen of us who meet two or three times in the year, and we catch up for coffee or drinks and dinner.

"It's always a lot of fun and now I'll be able to attend a few more of those gatherings which will be lovely."

## MORE FOND FAREWELLS...

At the end of March, MBPH also farewelled two other long-serving nursing staff members had also chalked-up more than four decades each on the wards.

Tracey Tonkin, who was the Nurse Unit Manager (NUM) in Ward 4, was recognised for her dedication, leadership and all-round wonderful contribution to MBPH.

Tracey's career spanned 45 years and she commenced her nursing training at the Good Shepherd Nursing Home at Abbotsford in Melbourne, when she was 17. Eventually, she came to work at the old base hospital in Mildura and then continued her nursing at MBPH in Ward 4 for almost 25 more years.

Katrina Allen paid tribute to Tracey's contribution to the hospital.

"It's not every day that you get to farewell a staff member who has dedicated 45 years to the nursing vocation," Katrina said. "Letting go, and making the decision to say goodbye, I imagine, is a very difficult one.

"Thank you Tracey for all that you have done at MBPH. Your legacy will live on."

Speaking at her send-off, Tracey said that while she was looking forward to resting up for a bit, she was going to miss her workplace and her colleagues.

"I just think how fortunate I have been to have worked at the Base. I look around this room see so many people who I have interacted with over the years," she said.

"They have helped make my role so much easier. Every day I would come to work with the intention of learning something new. I learnt from patients. I learnt from the leadership group, from staff and I learnt how to manage people.

"It's been unbelievably rewarding. I'm proud of what I did and hopefully I have left some sort of mark here.

That's an understatement Tracey!

On the same day, Robyn Cavendish left MBPH after almost 48 years as a Registered Nurse. Like so many other veteran nurses at MBPH, Robyn commenced her training at the Mildura Base Hospital and worked there for many years, a large part of which, was in Men's Surgical — Ward 7.

Throughout her career, Robyn has embodied the dedication, compassion and professionalism that is so highly valued at MBPH. In recent years, despite facing some personal health challenges, she remained



MBPH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CLINICAL OPERATIONS, KATRINA ALLEN AND ACTING CEO MATTHEW JUKES FAREWELL REGISTERED NURSE ROBYN CAVENDISH WHO WAS RETIRING AFTER 47 YEARS OF SERVICE.



MBPH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CLINICAL OPERATIONS, KATRINA ALLEN WITH RETIRING WARD 4 NURSE UNIT MANAGER TRACEY TONKIN.



DARYL HILL WITH THEATRE WORKPLACE COLLEAGUE SUE RONEY AT HIS FAREWELL.

determined to return to work and continue her nursing, which she did.

As Robyn embarked on her well-deserved retirement, she was looking forward to spending time travelling and relaxing at the beach in Torquay.

"It has been an incredible journey, which sadly has come to an end," she said.

"I will miss the people I work with greatly — they are all friends."

MBPH Acting CEO, Matthew Jukes', comments perfectly encapsulated Robyn's contribution.

"All of us at MBPH are incredibly grateful for Robyn's dedication and wish her a healthy, happy, and restful retirement. Her service is an example of the lifelong impact one individual can have on the lives of others," he said.

And finally, perhaps one of the most colourful farewells was that of MBPH night cleaner Daryl Hill. Daryl retired at the end of March after 43 years of service, having worked as the night cleaner in the theatre department for 18 years at the 'old base' hospital and an additional 25 years at MBPH, always ensuring the theatre was spotless.

Katrina Allen spoke of Daryl's long career with MBPH and the dedication he had shown to his job over many decades.

"Congratulations Daryl on a career spanning 43 years and I know just how hard the decision to retire has been for you leaving your 'theatre family'. Well done and thank you from all of us here at MBPH."

"Thank you for the past 25 years on night shift in this lovely place," an emotional Daryl said in reply.

"It's been a very hard decision to make because I love the people here. I'm alright from the neck down and my head says that I want to be at work, but my body says no — it's your time."

Daryl was apparently legendary for the 'Blues' music he used to like to listen to as he did his cleaning rounds and staff always knew when he was coming in their direction, because they would hear his whistle.

"I was happy in my workplace," Daryl said. Hence the expression 'whistle while you work'!

Thanks Daryl, MBPH salutes you. Enjoy your retirement!



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- **Eating Disorders Victoria:** 1300 550 236 and the **Butterfly Foundation:** 1800 33 4673 - supporting people with eating disorders and body image issues



FORMER RED CLIFFS BOY  
RICK STEPHENS IS NOW  
A MUSICIAN LIVING IN  
GERMANY.

# WHAT WOULD LIFE BE WITHOUT MUSIC? A TALE OF MUSICAL INSPIRATION

*In today's modern world, where everything that we say can be critiqued by our friends and by social media, we mere mortals don't always like to say what we really feel. Instead, we are often inclined to look to music to help us through what we don't understand*

---



RICK LEADS 'THE SHADES OF TROOPERS CREEK' BAND AT 60 YEARS OF WIMMERA ROCK IN HORSHAM. PHOTO THE WEEKLY ADVERTISER.

**By Phil Kettle**

I RECKON a life without music would be one of stunted emotions.

It would, I contend take from a musician, for example, an avenue to explicitly convey what they feel.

And for the rest of us, music can allow us to feel our emotions in a way that we might normally find hard to articulate.

That brings me to Rick Stephens. Born in 1951, and formerly from Red Cliffs, he has become a musical icon in Germany. The country where he has lived for the past 27 years.

But he spent his formative years growing up on a fruit block with his parents Stanley and Greta, and siblings Peta, Michael, Philip and Sue.

Rick was like most young men growing up in the 1960s and '70s, spending his years playing football or any other sport that involved kicking, hitting or throwing a ball of some description.

Little did most people know then, that there was another side to Rick and something more than sport. That was his passion for music.

Rick himself didn't know at the time that music would end up being more than just a simple fun thing to do. That it would end up not just being his passion, but his life work.

He started his working life on the family fruit block. After four years he moved to

Ballina on the North Coast of NSW. There he worked for eight months amongst the sugar cane before returning to Red Cliffs.

On his return, his passion for music was starting to lead him into another direction. Playing and singing in different bands, it led him to be offered an opportunity to be involved with music full time.

"I was offered a job managing a music shop in Horsham," he recalls. Shortly after taking the job, the business came up for sale.

"After some consideration, I purchased the business and Horsham became my home for the next 20 years," he said.

"I was married, and it was where my first child was born. I was also playing in local bands."

Owning a music shop enabled Rick to turn his love of music, not only into a successful business, but the time to learn to play multiply instruments.

"If you want to sell a musical instrument, being able to play a tune on that instrument will certainly help sales," he said.

"Apart from playing the guitar, I managed to teach myself how to play a tune on nearly every musical instrument that I sold!"

Life for Rick was busy. Not only was he managing his music business and running a music school, he was also doing what he loved the most - playing and singing in

various bands locally, as well as at venues in regional Victoria and as far away as Adelaide.

"We played a variety of music. We were what a lot of people would call a bush band. It was so much fun!

"But, as happens to a lot of people, my life changed. I divorced and sold my business. I guess, on reflection, after that and for a period of time I was lost. I lacked direction. Fortunately, I met an amazing lady. A lady from Germany who gave me a sense of purpose and direction."

Fast forward to 1997. Rick moved with the soon to be mother of his second and third children to the small town of Memmingen (43,000 population) 117km from Munich, Germany, and the place he still calls home.

For some, moving to another country would seem like a daunting task, but for Rick it was an adventure to be embraced.

"Of course there was the language barrier. But, with the help of my wife I was soon able to overcome that.

"I surprised myself at how little time it took for me to master the German language.

"And then I formed a band, which included a German who could play the didgeridoo. I'd like to think that we were the one and only 'Australian Bush Band' in Germany."

Rick and his band started playing in schools and fairs, where Australian produce was sold.



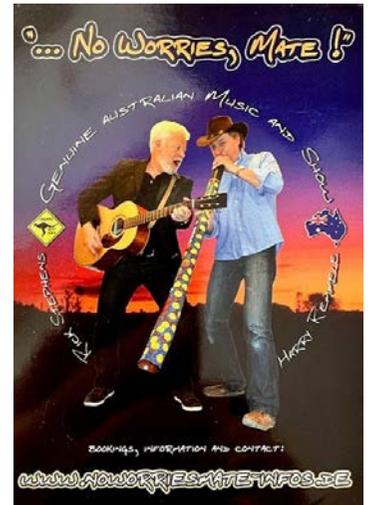
RICK PLAYS AT SCHOOLS IN GERMANY BRINGING HIS LOVE OF AUSTRALIA TO THE STAGE.



RICK PLAYING AT THE FIRST WIMMERA REUNION CONCERT FOR OLD BANDS FROM THE 60S, 70S AND 80S HELD AT HORSHAM IN 2010.



BARBARA MULLER-POLLACK (L) WITH RICK STEPHENS AND FELLOW MUSICIANS HAVING A 'CLASSICAL JAM'.



PROMOTIONAL POSTER FOR RICK'S 'NO WORRIES MATE' CONCERTS.

"I also started doing folk music evenings, where groups and individuals are invited to go on stage to perform 'open mic' sessions. This has proved to be hugely successful!

"I'm guessing most Australians probably don't realise how popular not only Australians are in Germany, but how popular anything to do with Australia is.

"Ask most Germans if they were able where to choose where they would like to visit, and the vast majority, without hesitation, will say Australia. "Australian bands and musicians like Men at Work, Midnight Oil and John Farnham have all been massive in Germany. More popular than a lot of the big American bands.

"As well, it would seem that not only are the Germans enjoying our music, the interest in Australia is such that in schools, as part of their curriculum, studies include Australian history."

But, as life sometimes has a habit of doing, it can turn things upside down. For Rick the year was 2003 with the totally unexpected death of his wife.

"The love of my life," he says.

Rick was left with two young children to care for and love.

But, with the help of his music, the dark days that had engulfed his life led him to a ray of sunshine many years later when he met Barbara, who shares his love and passion for music.

With his children now adults Rick, and Barbara, who plays the double bass spend their time travelling and playing music.

And he says, and when Barbara sings you would swear you were listening to Marlena Dietrich!

Whilst some might think that living in Germany for the past 27 years, Rick may have lost contact with Australia.

But that is not the case. And never has been. He returns every year to visit family and to play his music with his Aussie mates.

"When you love what you do (and I love what I do) then no matter what life throws at you, you always will find a reason to wake each day and count your many blessings.

"And I have many to count.

"I still call Australia home and always will."

On a return trip to Australia in February 2020, Rick was back in Horsham to 'relive the fantastic days' he and other band members had experienced with their group 'Shades of Troopers Creek'.

"It was right the band would play at Maydale Pavilion at the Horsham Showgrounds in February because it was there that we played the many bush dances the band hosted during the 1980s.

"It hadn't changed a bit. It was fantastic.

"We were just excited with the 60 Years of Wimmera Rock, putting on another bush dance.

"There were so many people there, with many of the musicians that had performed there before announcing they would return to play at the festival. It was a blast from the past. It was fantastic."

On his return visits to Australia, Rick always visits Mildura, to catch up with family and great friends like Brian and Jan Erskine, who have visited Rick in Germany. Rick, who has never forgotten that Australia is home, is another great product of Sunraysia and someone that we can all be proud of.

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# HANNAH'S PATHWAY TO NURSING IS ONE OF AMBITION AND PERSEVERANCE

*In late March this year, Victorian Minister for Skills & TAFE Gayle Tierney visited Mildura Base Public Hospital Ward 2, where she had the opportunity to meet with SuniTAFE nursing graduate Hannah O'Halloran. As you will learn, Hannah is one of many students who have benefitted from 'FREE TAFE' across a number of vocations including nursing.*

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L-R MBPH DIRECTOR CLINICAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT TIM DE BOO, MBPH BOARD CHAIR FRANK PISCIONERI, MBPH ACTING CEO MATTHEW JUKES, VICTORIAN MINISTER FOR SKILLS & TAFE GAYLE TIERNEY, SUNITAFE CEO BRETT MILLINGTON WITH MBPH ENROLLED NURSE HANNAH O'HALLORAN DURING THE MINISTER'S VISIT TO WARD 2 IN LATE MARCH.

**By John Dooley**

WHEN Hannah O'Halloran moved from Echuca to Mildura with her young children many years ago she was harbouring a burning ambition to become a nurse. Some years on she was able to commence her Diploma of Nursing at SuniTAFE in Mildura and the world would begin to open up for her. In 2023, Hannah completed her two-year Nursing Diploma at SuniTAFE, benefiting from the FREE TAFE course and a scholarship provided by the campus. She spoke to *Heartbeat* on the day Minister Tierney visited Mildura Base Public Hospital (MBPH). "I completed my two-year Diploma of Nursing studies at SuniTAFE and then came to work at the Base for my grad-year. Now I am working as an enrolled nurse on Ward 2 male medical surgical and I am currently undertaking my Bachelor of Nursing at La Trobe's Mildura Campus," Hannah said. "I've been in Mildura for eight years and

I'm originally from Echuca. Nursing is something that I have always wanted to do. "I used to go to work with my friend's mum and she was a nurse and I was always inspired by that. Because I had children when I was young, I had to keep putting it off. "Eventually, I felt the time was right and in 2021 I decided to do my nursing." Minister Tierney met with Hannah on the ward and she recounted her journey to becoming a nurse. Ms Tierney was particularly impressed to learn how Hannah had managed to undertake her studies while being a mother to three children, such was her determination to become a nurse. "Wow that is really is really amazing," Minister Tierney said. "What was your motivation to continue your studies after gaining your diploma?" "SuniTAFE was amazing and provided me with that opportunity. The diploma was a free TAFE course, which made all the difference," Hannah explained.

"Without that assistance, I wouldn't have been able to undertake the course and so I had the motivation to continue my studies. "The other contributing factor was that when I came to work here in Ward 2 after my grad-year, I just felt so supported by the NUM (Nurse Unit Manager) and the best co-workers who were alongside me on the ward. "It's just a great learning environment as well and I feel that the more you learn, the more rewarding your nursing career will be." The Minister emphasised the significance of the partnership between SuniTAFE and MBPH, which has created valuable pathways for local people to gain vocational skills and secure long-term employment, particularly in nursing roles at MBPH. "It's all about local people gaining skills and training at their local TAFE and then being employed in not just local jobs, but long-term careers," Ms. Tierney said. MBPH Director Clinical Learning and



MINISTER TIERNEY SPEAKING WITH WARD 2 STAFF, ENROLLED NURSE HANNAH O'HALLORAN, DIRECTOR INPATIENT SERVICES DAWN GOBO AND WARD 2 NUM, KATRINA GATES.

Development Tim De Boo explained to Minister Tierney that Hannah was one of the MBPH's first intakes for the Enrolled Nurse Transition to Practice Program.

"Hannah has really taken this program onboard and she is a values-aligned person, as is our organisation, and she has continued her studies. And, as you know, she is now doing her Bachelor of Nursing at La Trobe," Mr De Boo said.

"Given, Hannah studied while bringing up young children, including a teenager, we think she is a super star!"

Mr De Boo made the point to Ms Tierney that Hannah's experience is testament to the fact that "we can all work together across our organisations to achieve fantastic outcomes".

"This program really meets our needs.

We currently have about 20 or so Enrolled Nurses who are progressing through to their Bachelor courses at the moment," he said.

#### RECOGNITION OF MBPH NURSES

On May 12, this year, International Nurses Day was celebrated across the world, an event that is of special significance on the Mildura Base Public Hospital calendar. Acting CEO, Matthew Jukes said the occasion provided the perfect opportunity to recognise and celebrate the incredible contribution nurses make to our healthcare system, particularly in caring for the communities across our region.

"Nurses provide not only essential clinical care but also bring a level of compassion,

empathy, and commitment to the workplace," Mr Jukes said.

"Their ability to care for others in often challenging and high-pressure situations, is what makes nursing such a unique and respected profession.

"We all know that nursing is not an easy job. It takes a remarkable kind of person, someone resilient, empathetic, and highly skilled, to perform the role at the standard required to ensure patients consistently receive the best possible care.

"I am extremely proud of the outstanding team of nurses we have here at MBPH".

Hannah O'Halloran is one of those nurses Mr Jukes referred to and she is without a doubt, a shining light for others who may consider nursing as a career here in Mildura to follow.

# 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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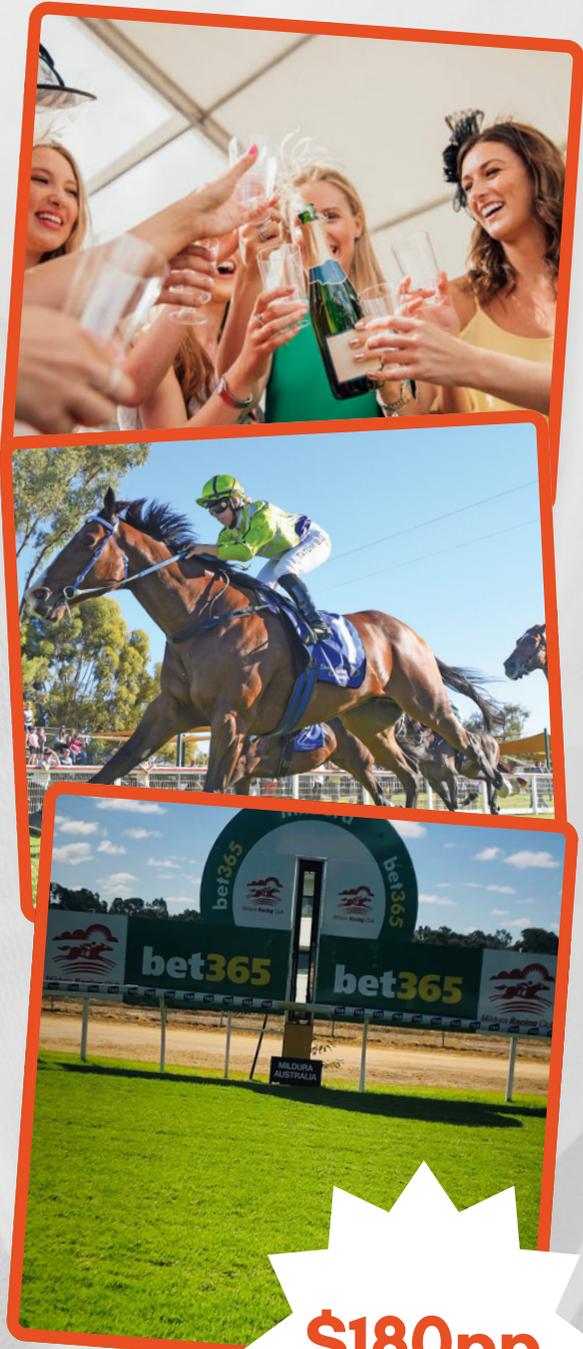
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**\*Money raised from this event will go towards the Screening Vehicle project**



# A TALE OF SERVICE AND DEDICATION TO COUNTRY

*Each year Anzac Day commemorates and honours the sacrifice of the brave men and women who have served in our armed forces in theatres of war overseas. It is an occasion that evokes memories of many individual wartime tales worthy of telling. The following story is one such example that was recounted in an October 2022 edition of Mildura Weekly. It has been contemporised for republication in Heartbeat.*

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THIS PHOTO OF JEAN GRAY WAS TAKEN ON THE EVE OF HER 100TH BIRTHDAY IN OCTOBER 2022.

**By John Dooley**

WHEN you speak to Jean Gray her story has all of the intrigue of a spy thriller. But in large part, she has led a quiet, ordinary life in our region, working hard on the family farm at Morkalla and bringing up four boys with her husband Reg.

On the eve of her 100th birthday, I was privileged to sit down with her to learn a little more about her life, which she described as “fortunate”.

Mabel ‘Jean’ McDonald, was born at Hopetoun on October 8, 1922 and was one of seven children and the four eldest, including herself, would all see service during and after WWII.

“The eldest was my sister who was a nurse and joined the Occupational Forces that went to Japan after the war. She was there for five years and during that married an Australian airman,” Mrs Gray said.

“I had a brother who was conscripted along with other young men his age from the Millewa and he joined the air force.

“I had another three siblings who were younger and then there was my mother and father.”

Mrs Gray reflected on years gone by when she and Reg were living on the farm in the Millewa.

“We’ve been through hard times – droughts and all that business,” she said.

“On the land there’s always doubt, but we got through alright.

“I think today, there is too much borrowing and money is too easy to get.

“We only bought what we could afford in those days.”

Many years later after her husband passed away, Mrs Gray would leave Millewa and move into Mildura, leaving son Geoffrey to continue running the farm.

“When my husband Reg became ill we had time to discuss the future,” Mrs Gray recalled.

“He wanted us to keep the farm in the family and that’s what I did.

“When Reg passed away I made sure that my son Geoffrey was a partner in the farm business.

“After a few years, Geoffrey decided he wanted to buy the property which he did.

“I gifted some of the land to him, but because of the other three boys, I had to consider them as well and so the rest he bought.

“After 40 years running the Morkalla property, Geoffrey sold the farm.

“Before he put the place on the market, he came to me to ask how I would feel about him selling it.

“I said to him that when he bought the land it was his and he could do what he wanted to do with it.

“I was quite happy. He had worked hard and earned it.”

We’ll hear some more about the early days in the Millewa later in this article, but there is an intriguing chapter in Mrs Gray’s life that, up until the mid-1990s, she wasn’t able to speak about to anyone.

Mrs Gray served with Australian Special Wireless Group (ASWG) in the Australian Army during World War II, having joined the services in Victoria, in 1942.



PLATOON 3 SECTION 6 COMPANY 1 4TH TRAINING BATTALION DARLEY.

The top-secret section, originally known as the Australian Special Wireless Section, was moved to Bonegilla in Victoria and on May 18, 1942, it was renamed as the Australian Special Wireless Group with a 'war establishment' of almost 1,000 personnel. Most of the new personnel, including Mrs Gray, were recruited from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia.

In time, the ASWG would be relocated to Brisbane, where it remains today.

The function of the ASWG was to intercept enemy wireless transmissions and monitor Allied wireless traffic.

The operating site at Kalinga, in Brisbane, was in a tent, surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Some other sites operated in huts and sometimes in trucks.

The operators were usually not aware of the contents of the messages they were receiving or sending. They were trained in Morse Code and Japanese operating methods by the experienced personnel who had just returned from the Middle East.

They were assisted by some expert

British operators who had escaped out of Singapore. One of the well-known instructors was Regimental Sergeant Major Bill Stevenson. He was affectionately known as 'The Scot'.

It was a very secret group. One batch of recruits for ASWG was told: "Not only do you not exist; you never will have existed. You will remain for always unknown and unacknowledged. There will be no awards, no glory. There will be no medals for this unit."

Mrs Gray was amongst those recruits who were sworn to maintain complete secrecy for 50 years after the war ended.

"It was interesting alright. I didn't know what I had let myself in for," Mrs Gray said. "We swore an oath to maintain that silence for 50 years. To never reveal what we did or knew.

"After that time expired in 1995, I received a letter from the British Government's Bletchley Park, which was written by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown. That is where all of the code breaking during WWII had its origins.

"The Australian Special Wireless Group only took the messages. We searched on the frequencies and we picked up Japanese messages being sent in areas up in the islands north of Australia, but we didn't decode them.

"We never ever knew how they came to break the Japanese codes until it was published in a book more than 50 years later."

Mrs Gray said the Australian forces pushed back from Balikpapan, which was a seaport city in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. It was during that operation that the Australians found a steel trunk in a mud hole.

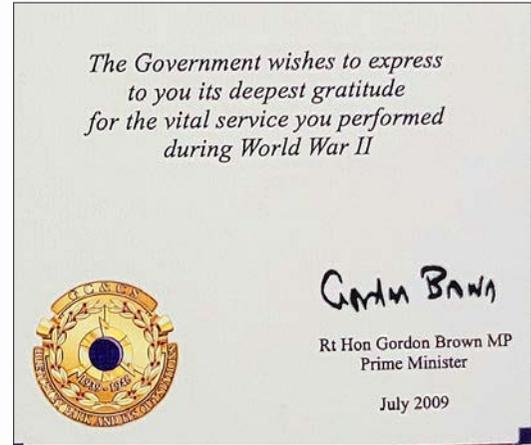
"They opened the trunk and to their astonishment the contents contained Japanese code breaking information. And that's how they broke the code," Mrs Gray explained.

"I was discharged and returned home to Mildura in May, 1945 and the war in the Pacific ended in August. That was the end of my spying days!"

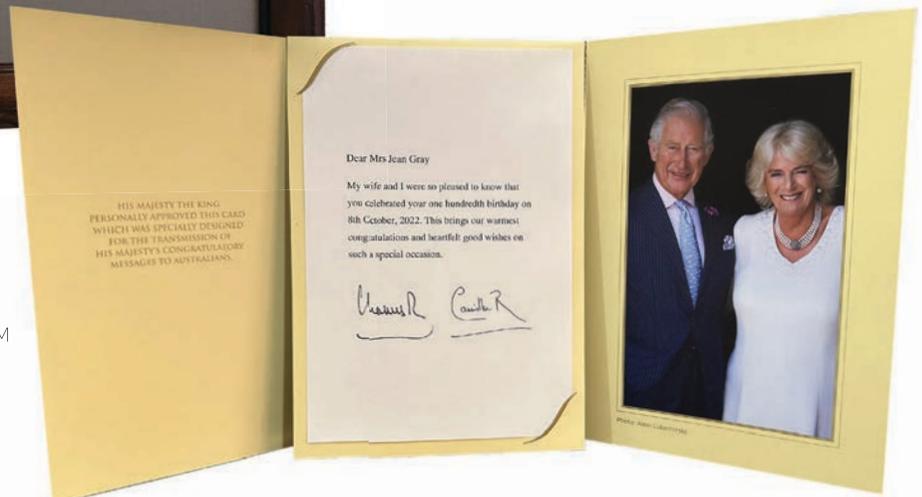
Mrs Gray then returned to the Millewa to marry and start a family.



THIS FRAMED HISTORY OF JEAN GRAY'S WAR SERVICE INCLUDES A LETTER FROM THEN UK PRIMEMINSTER GORDON BROWN IN 2009.



THE ROYAL RECOGNITION OF JEAN GRAY ATTAINING THE AGE OF 100 YEARS WAS SENT FROM BUCKINGHAM PALACE BY THEIR MAJESTIES KING CHARLES III AND QUEEN CAMILLA.



"I came home and married the 'local bloke', " she said.

"I had met Reg before I went into the army. He had been rejected by the army because he had a chronic injury incurred shearing sheep. He was really too young at the age of 16 and it had ruined his back and so he was deemed unfit to serve in the army.

"But he had six brothers who went to war and thankfully they all came home.

"We lived on the family property at Morkalla and we had wheat and sheep. By then they were bigger properties and we had 8000 acres. And my second son ended up running that farm and he only sold it two years ago. "My husband had lung cancer — never smoked in his life. It was probably the chemicals used on the farm that caused it — weed killers and things like that.

"He passed away in 1982 aged 63, and after that I retired in Mildura in 1984."

When Mrs Gray was born the world was still

recovering from the devastation of World War I and would face the Great Depression. Almost a decade later, another world war would break out. By then she was an adult.

"My mother and father were share-farming in that area. They actually originated from down around Minyip," Mrs Gray said.

"Mum's parents were property managers on a farm there. Dad was working on a property nearby and that's how they met.

"They moved further north and were share-farming around Woomelang and I was born at Hopetoun. I'm not sure how that happened!"

"In 1925, my dad obtained property at Meringur North. It was a 'raw' farm just timber, a shovel and an axe were about all they were given.

"In the year prior to us moving there, dad and my uncle built a galvanised iron dwelling with three rooms.

"I went to the Meringur North School and

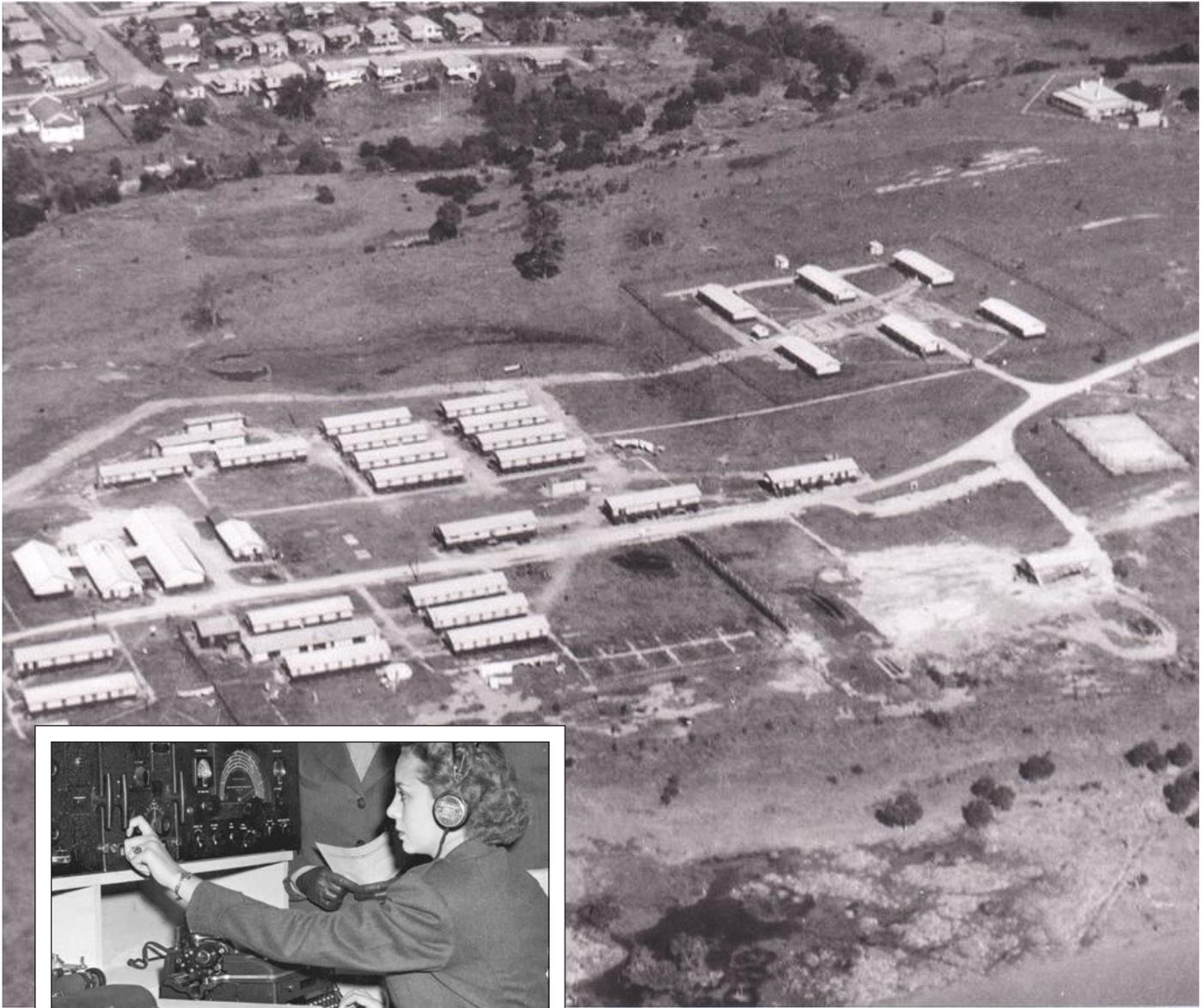
there were about 10 of us in various grades. The sole teacher was my aunt and the parents of the children had banded together to build the school, which was made out of galvanised iron as well and very hot in the summer.

"It was air conditioned with windows open as well as a door back and front like a barn!" Mrs Gray explained that by the time the family were able to clear the land, fence it and have sheep grazing, it was almost war time.

"Unfortunately, the acreage wasn't large enough to make a viable living from and so, in 1943, dad surrendered the land and bought the grocer's shop at Werriemull," she said.

"At the end of 1942, I helped dad take the last crop of wheat off. I drove an old Fordson tractor and dad sat on the header with hand signals giving me instructions.

"You can imagine the excitement. I had



ASWG KALINGA BRISBANE. PHOTO PROVIDED TO WWW.OZATWAR.COM  
BY RUSSELL MILLER AND DAVID SPETHMAN.  
INSET: A WW2 CODE INTERCEPT OPERATOR (not Jean Gray).

never driven a tractor before! My older brother had been conscripted and so he couldn't help on the farm and so I was the next in line."

At the age of 20, Mrs Gray joined the Army. "I did my rookies at Darley base near Bacchus Marsh and from there I went to the Ivanhoe Grammar School for six weeks, where I learned the British Morse code and we had to attain a certain speed at that," Mrs Gray said.

"From there we were transferred to a 'secret' location which was Bonegilla, near Albury–Wodonga. And that's where I learned the 'Kana' code\*.

\*The Wabun Code, sometimes called Kana code, is a variant of the Morse code used to transmit Japanese text. It converts kana characters (hiragana and katakana) into signal sequences.

"We had a secret area in the Bonegilla camp right in the far north-west corner.

"After six weeks there, we were shipped up to the Brisbane suburb of Kalinga where our camp was, and I spent more than 12 months there.

"And from my observation, as the groups were coming through and doing that course, if you had previous experience and knowledge of the British Morse code before joining the Army, you could learn the Kana code faster. You picked it up quicker and you could write it down faster."

After her time in Brisbane, Mrs Gray was relocated back to Melbourne.

"I was redeployed to the Chief Signal Office in Queens Road in the city and I worked in the Planning and Intelligence Section there," she said.

"Originally I had been down to Melbourne and joined the Army, but they sent me home because my tonsils were inflamed and needed to be removed.

"I came home and had my tonsils removed

and while I was recovering, that's when I helped dad harvest the wheat.

"I then went back to Melbourne and served until the end of the war with the Special Wireless Group."

Back home and after its establishment, Mrs Gray would be a long-serving member of the Mildura Women's Veterans Association. She has lived a long life, one which has included witnessing a Great Depression, a World War and the passing of the Queen. She has seen the best and worst of humanity on display.

Mrs Gray was asked what she makes of today's world and some of the challenges that we face now and in the years ahead.

"I hate to think what's ahead of us," she said.

"There is a lot of risk and doubt – a lack of certainty – I just don't know.

"Every day there is something different happening here and around the world.



75TH ANNIVERSARY  
END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
AUSTRALIA REMEMBERS 2020

*A grateful nation expresses  
its sincere thanks to*

**Mabel Gray**

*For your service and contribution to the  
war effort and to the freedom of nations*

His Excellency General  
the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd)  
Governor-General of the  
Commonwealth of Australia

The Honourable Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister of Australia



159

"I have had a fortunate life and have a lovely family who have all done well."

At the time of the publication of the original article Mrs Gray was expecting to receive a congratulatory letter from King Charles III, something she thought she would receive from his mother Queen Elizabeth II.

Her Majesty's passing on September 8, 2022 changed that.

The letter from Buckingham Palace marking her 100th birthday milestone did arrive, a photo of which is included in this article.

Mrs Gray turns 103 in October, this year.

THE CERTIFICATE JEAN RECEIVED FROM THE GOVERNMENT ON THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF WW2 IN RECOGNITION OF HER SERVICE.



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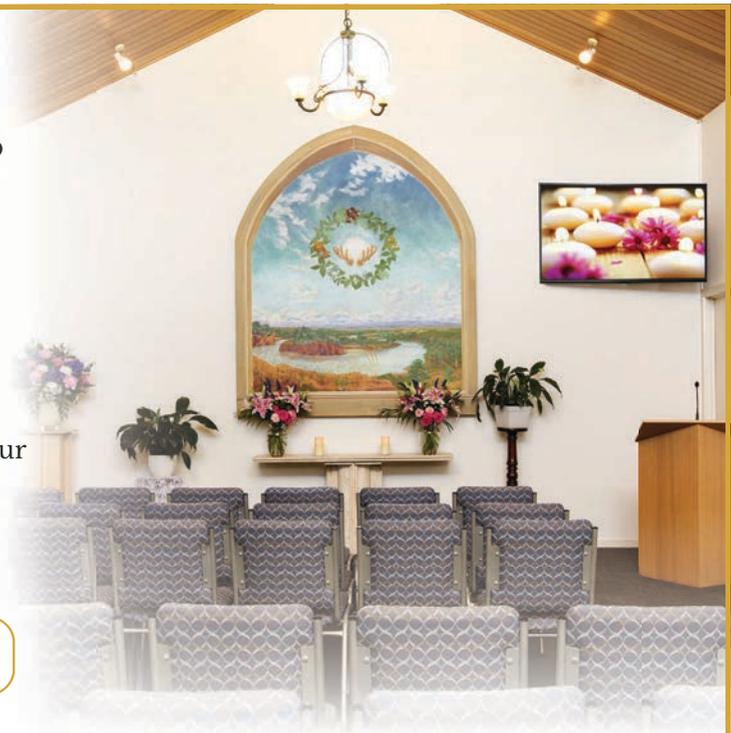
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# GOING DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE OF HISTORY

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*Studying history can be like connecting the dots and going down a rabbit hole all at the same time!  
That's how it appears here at Heartbeat.*

**By Grant Maynard**

REGULAR readers of our magazine will know that in several previous editions we have highlighted our quest to track down the whereabouts of the former Werrimull Bush Nursing Hospital building.

That mystery now seems to have been solved. In our Summer 2025 edition, we updated our ongoing story with former Millewa resident Jim Douglas, who claimed he had found the building in Robinvale!

Jim, who was born at the hospital in 1928, had previously told us that he recalled the hospital building being transported to Robinvale to become the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission offices in the town.

At the time that was helpful, but no one seemed to know if the building existed in Robinvale to this day and, if it did, where it could be found?

Ever curious, Jim was determined to find the old hospital and following a trip to Robinvale with his daughter in recent months he reckons he has firmly established the former hospital's whereabouts.

The building is now situated on Bromley Road – Murray Valley Highway, he says, a short distance from the Robinvale Masonic Lodge. Over the years it is now thought to have been occupied by a range of different occupants, most recently a home.

We were certainly happy to see the mystery solved, but it seems we may have solved another related one too!

In our initial story about the hospital, and where it had gotten to after it closed in 1947, Margaret Turvey, widow of Sunraysia photography doyen Don Turvey, told Heartbeat that she recalls her husband pointing out the hostel accommodation building on the corner of 7th Street and Pine Avenue, opposite the Seven Pines Motel, as the former Werrimull Bush Nursing Hospital. That, as the saying goes, got the ball rolling and prompted Jim Douglas to get in touch to tell us Don was mistaken. Jim was sure the building Don pointed out was not the hospital and it appears he was right. That's because more information has now come to light, revealing that the corner property is indeed home to a building that was shifted there, but it is not the old Werrimull hospital. Heartbeat can reveal that while researching the mystery of the Werrimull Bush Nursing Hospital, it came across information that the 7th Street and Pine Avenue building was a former farming homestead shifted to



THE WERRIMULL BUSH NURSING HOSPITAL WAS RELOCATED TO ROBINVALE AFTER IT WAS SOLD IN 1952.



THE 'OLD HOUSE' ON THE CORNER OF 7TH STREET AND PINE AVENUE HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED AS THE GAHREEMAI GUEST HOUSE. REF. MILLEWA HISTORY PHOTOS FACEBOOK.



THE GAHREEMAI GUEST HOUSE WAS RELOCATED TO MILDURA IN 1939.

Mildura from Karawinna in 1939 to become the 'Gahreemai' Guest House.

The photo we have published was originally posted on the Millewa Historical Photos Facebook page which indicates the building is 'Gahreemai'.

The information Heartbeat uncovered also contends 'Gahreemai' is an Aboriginal word

appropriately approximating to 'camping ground' or 'resting place'.

Stay tuned as this story could well have another chapter.

If anyone would like to shine further light on this story please contact:

John Dooley.

Email: [jdooley@mbph.org.au](mailto:jdooley@mbph.org.au).

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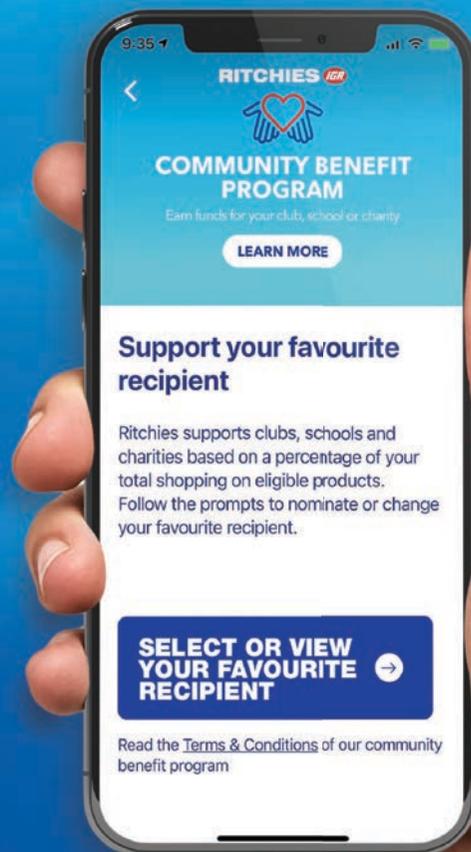
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