

Rural Leaders

The Australian Rural Leadership Program aims to produce ethical and creative leaders who can meet the challenges of climate change, land and water management and sustainability. By Jane Milburn

“It was an amazing gift,” New South Wales beef producer Lucinda Corrigan says of the Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP) she completed 10 years ago. “In your adult life, it is rare to have the opportunity to examine your personal effectiveness, your motivation and what drives you.”

Lucinda says everything learned through ARLP helped guide her towards current national leadership roles including director of Meat & Livestock Australia and involvement with various cooperative research centres including as founding director of the Future Farm Industries CRC.

“The great gift was the personal leadership learning and thinking about behaviours in a considered way. Examining the way you do things, how you would like to improve and where you can work most effectively,” she says.

Lucinda was selected for the leadership program based on a track record of an agricultural science degree, eight years in the cashmere industry and building an award-winning Angus breeding enterprise near Albury with husband Bryan. She was sponsored in the part-time course by MLA and continues to enjoy reconnecting with peers from Course 5.

The ARLP network of 450 graduates across 16 years generates influential ongoing advocacy for the program because most applicants have heard stories about this special and unique learning opportunity from a contact already involved.

Despite being a ‘rural’ leadership program, it is not restricted to participants from the bush because there are many people in urban areas undertaking work that helps shape and develop rural Australia. In the case of former chief executive of the Australian Prawn Farmers’ Association, Martin Breen, he was third-time lucky securing a place in Course 10 after observing the positive changes in a seafood industry colleague going through the program.

Martin went on to work in Canberra with federal opposition agriculture spokesman Senator Kerry O’Brien and when Labor won the election in 2007 he became advisor to Federal Agriculture Minister Tony Burke.

These national roles gave Martin a first-hand insight into the workings of Federal Parliament and a broader appreciation of how to effectively influence the national policy debate. Martin says the program helped evolve a different approach in both his personal and professional life. “The enduring lesson for me was the importance of observation,” he says. “Rather than spending all of your time on the dance floor, it can be really helpful to get perspective from the balcony.”

After three years in Canberra, Martin recently returned home to Brisbane to take up a new position as senior advisor public affairs with mining giant Santos. As it transpires, one of Martin’s Course 10 colleagues is Craig Jones, principal advisor indigenous affairs with Santos – a newly committed investor in the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation currently sponsoring South Australian Che Cockatoo-Collins through the program.

Che impressed Course 16 colleagues recently with his ability – amongst other great qualities – to have a kip anywhere, anytime during the rigorous Kimberley trip which is the opening gambit of the six experiential learning sessions that comprise ARLP. In a past life, Che was a leading AFL utility player with Essendon and Port Adelaide teams but his ambition now is working to help Santos build its professional indigenous workforce.

He is one of 33 Course 16 fellows halfway through the intensive 60-day training over 16 months that includes 10 days in the wilderness, professional and personal training sessions in various regional and capital cities, a trip to India, and meeting people ranging from homeless children to federal parliamentarians.

These experiential learning activities are sponsored by scholarships from a broad range of organisations which support the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation. Chief executive Dr Lesley Fitzpatrick says sponsors invest in the foundation for various reasons. Some, such as Rural Press and Woolworths, provide open scholarships as a way of contributing something back to rural Australia while others, such as Dairy Australia, CBH Group, Elders and Westpac, provide scholarships for individuals from their industry or company to develop leadership, business capacity and network contacts in their sectors.

“This program really makes a difference for the individuals who complete it and for its broader impacts on rural Australia,” Lesley says. “A 2008 survey showed graduates gained confidence in assuming leadership roles, understanding their own response to situations, communicating, and handling media inquiries.”

Foundation patron Major General Michael Jeffery says that both challenge and opportunity await rural and remote Australia as we all learn to adapt to the importance of climate change on land and water management, and sustainability. “I see the foundation as pivotal in the selection and training of the next generation of rural leaders,” he says. “I know from personal observation in the Kimberley session that the benefit to each participant will be life-changing and of national significance.”

Course 17 of the Australian Rural Leadership Program will take place from 2010 with applicants selected in December 2009. Phone 02 6281 0680 www.rural-leaders.com.au.

** Jane Milburn won the Rural Press Open Scholarship sponsored by Rural Press Ltd. Jane is a rural journalist, vice-president of the Australian Council of Agricultural Journalists and immediate past president of the Rural Press Club of Queensland.*