



poised for success

WRITTEN BY KERRYNN SUTTON PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIDGETTE NICOL

As a talented soprano singer, ballet teacher, speech pathologist and local councillor, Fiona Gaske is making her mark in the small remote town of St George in southwest Queensland.

> FIONA GASKE WITH HER DAUGHTER
AND BALLET STUDENT, ELIZABETH



➤ **CURRENT PAGE** ST GEORGE OFFERS FREEDOM AND SPACE FOR FAMILIES – FIONA AND ANDREW GASKE WITH ELIZABETH AND JACK GASKE
➤ **OPPOSITE PAGE** FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THINGS GROW



Fiona Gaske's kitchen table is covered in piles of research papers and reports. With dinner over and the children now tucked up in bed, she is poring over documents in preparation for the week ahead. Fiona has put down roots in St George in southwest Queensland and through the many roles she plays in the community, including that of local councillor, she is determined to make a difference.

From an early age Fiona became interested in politics and the way that government policy shapes our lives. "When I went away to boarding school Mum would send me snippets of political commentary and policy from newspaper and journal articles," Fiona recalls. "She would highlight certain sections and we would engage in long distance debate from 'both sides'. Mum continues to send me highlighted reading to this day. My continued interest in grassroots policy was a key reason I ran for local council. I believe that local government is the level of government that is closest to people on the ground."

Growing up in Mackay, Queensland, Fiona regularly found herself immersed in the arts.

"I was a shy child and after failed attempts at other extra-curricular activities, it was music and dance that really brought me out of my shell," Fiona says. "I grew up in the back of a theatre. Mum was a speech and drama teacher and I was either performing, waiting for mum or doing my homework in the wings."

As an advocate for the arts, Fiona has worked tirelessly to put arts and culture in the spotlight. "I have a genuine belief, that culture feeds the soul," Fiona explains. "We cannot underestimate the value of the arts, particularly in rural and remote communities. It is closely linked to general health and well-being and is essential for healthy communities."

After leaving school Fiona commenced a business degree at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). At the time,

the Conservatorium of Music was on the same campus and a successful audition saw her change her enrolment. "I would hear the practice sessions and auditions and I just knew I wanted to sing," Fiona says. "I loved the technical classes and developed a special interest in vocal pedagogy." Fiona specialised in classical music and her talent as a soprano singer resulted in an invitation to study in Italy with a highly sought-after teacher. The diagnosis of Lupus was a heartbreaking set-back for Fiona and she again chartered a new path by studying speech pathology.

Fiona and her husband, Andrew, arrived in St George as newly weds more than 10 years ago. The couple now have two children, Jack, 8, and Elizabeth, 6, and it was after starting a family that Fiona became increasingly motivated to make a difference in the community. Fiona's first role was working at the local hospital as a speech pathologist. Her love of dance and music saw her open her own ballet school and, with a toddler underfoot, Maranoa Performing Arts was born. Starting out with just 12 enrolments, the school now boasts more than 65 dance students and offers a range of dance options including classical, modern lyrical, tap and adult lessons.

It was during a long hot dry spell in 2014 that Fiona dreamt up her first major community event, *Rain Dance*. Fiona invited experienced choreographer and ballet instructor, Lynette Denny AM, from Mackay, to join her in taking the arts to the bush. The duo travelled to the outlying towns of Bollon and Dirranbandi to conduct subsidised dance workshops. At the culmination, the students, including five boys, came together to perform at the *Rain Dance* concert, celebrating with a community supper afterwards.

"It was so dry and our communities were desperate for rain," Fiona recalls. "I wanted to do something to give back and creating a performance opportunity for our kids was one way I could contribute. It was a wonderful event, a distraction from

all that was going on around us, lifting spirits at a time when we really needed it most.”

In 2012, Fiona was elected as councillor with the Balonne Shire Council. “I felt that our region needed greater representation for young families and another female voice,” Fiona recalls. “Really when I look back now I wonder what possessed me. I was breastfeeding our youngest child at the time but somehow we made it work – Andrew has been incredibly supportive.”

Full of energy and rearing to make a difference as a councillor, Fiona found a lack of workplace flexibility, particularly for women juggling motherhood and a career, was a major stumbling block. “One of the first things I did in my role was to make a submission when the Local Government Act was reviewed in 2012,” Fiona says. “I felt confident I had the skills and ability to perform my role, however, if I had a sick child or if I was breastfeeding, there were very few alternatives for me to participate. At that stage teleconferencing was not considered to be an acceptable form of attendance at general meetings.” A boon for women was the amendment to this act allowing greater flexibility in meeting attendance.

Now in her second term after being re-elected as deputy mayor in 2016, Fiona has also become a key spokesperson on wider issues facing the community including the challenges around water buy-backs. “I was thrilled to be invited to do an interview with Fran Kelly on Radio National,” Fiona says. “I was unbelievably nervous. Our kitchen table was once again covered in stacks of documents in preparation. I really love the

research – it’s important to me that I put in the effort to ensure I understand even the most complex issues, so I can best represent our people.”

The portfolio of public health is an interest area for Fiona, aligning with her background in allied health. Fiona is now in her second term appointment with the South West Hospital and Health Board. “The biggest challenge out here is the tyranny of distance and keeping connectivity of our services across thousands of kilometres,” Fiona says. “I think we can do health better by focussing on connected and coordinated services, prevention and reducing duplication.”

With a young family, a ballet school and a plethora of council and community commitments Fiona acknowledges that some days are just about putting one foot in front of the other.

“There is no doubt that there are days when I wonder if I can juggle this many balls,” Fiona says. “I have learnt to reach out to others. I am blessed to have a strong support network around me and this keeps me going. Last year a friend recommended that I find a mentor - it has been a life-changing experience because of the perspective and clarity it provides.”

The future looks bright for the Balonne district with leaders such as Fiona stepping up to be involved in shaping the region’s direction. And though she is humble about her efforts, Fiona ends with this advice. “Hold strong on issues where not everyone will agree with what you are doing. Look within – I believe women have amazing inner-strength. Gather people around who help you to grow... and never give up.” 🍷

> ABOVE IMAGE RURAL BALLET SCHOOL IN ST GEORGE BOASTS OUTCOMES ON PAR WITH URBAN COUNTERPARTS, BELOW IMAGE FIONA GASKE WAS ELECTED AS DEPUTY MAYOR IN 2016



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