

Sandra Ireson goes online to champion community causes in a region still reeling from drought.



Community driver

SANDRA IRESON USES SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER MODERN TECHNOLOGIES TO FOSTER GROWTH AND SEND POSITIVE MESSAGES ABOUT LIFE IN THE BUSH.

STORY **KERRYNN SUTTOR** PHOTO **SARAH HOUSTON**

SANDRA IRESON is a woman on a mission. She's on the phone, the internet and out on the bike mustering cattle, all in a day's work. Despite the hardships that have plagued the western Riverina region of New South Wales, the community is fighting back. And Sandra is one community leader who is making her mark.

To Sandra, every cloud has a silver lining and when there were no clouds and drought loomed, she just found another way to do things, taking others with her. She and her husband Matthew, together with their three children, Lochie, 14, Ellie, 12, and nine-year-old Pip, own and manage "Belmont", a predominantly beef cattle operation near Booligal, 80 kilometres north of Hay. They also run sheep for the prime-lamb and wool market and are supported by irrigation from the lower Lachlan River. Matthew's family has been farming in the district for five generations.

While Sandra dismisses her achievements as nothing special, her list of past and present community involvement is long. She has been treasurer of the Hay Nursing Mothers' Group, president of the Hay Mobile Children's Service and has helped out with Booligal's P&C, community hall, tennis club and Catholic church. Sandra has also pitched in to help the Hay Isolated Children's Parents' Association (where she is currently vice-president) and the town's pony club, preschool and Junior Rugby League Club.

Sandra was involved in the re-opening of Booligal Public School when it closed in 2000. Five years before that, she'd joined forces with her husband to start the region's signature event, the Booligal Sheep Races, which has now raised more than \$100,000 for the local community. She's also involved with The Long Paddock touring route, supports the Shear Outback museum in Hay and is working with Hay Shire in Tourism and Economic Development.

"My wife made the move from the Snowy Mountains to the plains at Booligal 17 years ago when we got married," Matthew says. "She first joined the Hay Cutters Rugby Club as treasurer when as I was playing rugby and coaching. Sandra was the first and only woman on the committee. When she stepped down from her position, many other women followed her lead and joined the committee because of Sandra's encouragement."

Many years of drought and related water issues has seen the population in Hay and Booligal dwindle. "For me, one of the hardest things (apart from sending the kids to boarding school) has been when friends have had to move away because of the drought," Sandra says. "I remember counting the tally one day and I worked out that 12 friends had left the district ... you

really feel that in a small community."

However, locals have banded together to come up with ways to counteract the declining population. The Long Paddock, a historic touring route encompassing five New South Wales shires from Moama to Wilcannia, is a key project. Along this journey is Shear Outback, an interpretive centre devoted to the culture, stories, passion and language of Australian shearing. Events such as the Booligal Sheep Races have also helped put the region on the map.

Sandra has become the district's self-taught social-media expert, using Twitter to increase visitation, promote rural living and lobby on key community issues. "I first started tweeting when our river stopped and we were fighting for water," Sandra says. "But I also think we need to use social media to spread positive messages about the benefits of living in the bush."

Sandra champions the internet as a learning tool for people in rural and remote areas and regularly participates in webinars (online seminars) held by the National Rural Women's Coalition. "It is truly amazing that we can connect and learn without having to leave home," she says.

Being internet-savvy is not only a great way for rural and regional groups to promote themselves – it also saves money, Sandra says. The Long Paddock website has been upgraded so it can easily be viewed on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. Statistics show that 20 percent of the website's visitors use smartphones to view the site. On average, its digital brochure is downloaded 150 times a month, compared to one or two requests for a physical brochure, saving the group thousands of dollars in printing and distribution.

But Sandra isn't shy about using more traditional media to promote her region. In 2010 Grant Denyer from Channel 7's *Sunrise* breakfast show came to Booligal to promote the sheep races. In 2012, when Channel 7 returned to the district, Sandra tweeted about the visit and the *Sunrise* crew re-tweeted, their comment reaching thousands of people.

With two of her children at boarding school, Sandra has embarked on a new project that aims to link secondary school students in Sydney with farming and rural communities, exposing them to farming practices and the associated tourism industry. It doesn't seem like Sandra will be slowing down anytime soon.

