

ssue Three in this issue

Our People

- Retiring CEO to focus on her family 4
- Mentors make a difference 6

Our Wins

- Building a brighter, safer future for our families 8
- SafeCare goes back to basics 10

Our Programs

- We always say goodbye with a smile 12
- Permanency is key to creating a happy home 14
- Respite carers critical on path to stability 16
- Short-term carers share transitioning advice 18
- Passionate disabilities advocate finds her calling 20
- Champions get creative at Bundanon 22

Our Initiatives

- Homework Hub experience 'invaluable' for teachers 24
- Families flock to free Health Hub checks 26



his is my last CEO welcome before retiring from CareSouth next month. I have been at the helm of this wonderful organisation for the past seven years. I feel incredibly honoured and privileged to have been afforded this opportunity to work with you all – the staff, the carers, the young people, the families and the communities.

My impending retirement has led me to reflect on the highlights and challenges of my time as CEO. And while it is hard to narrow them down to just a few, the CareSouth Rebrand, 21st Gala Event, Re-Accreditation, Everyday Traineeship, Emerging Leaders Program, Ignite and Inspire Conference and winning the Shoalhaven Business of the Year award immediately come to mind. What a wonderful reflection of the incredible work undertaken by CareSouth staff, to be the first not-for profit to be recognised as a serious business player in the local community where we

Other highlights include building our valuable services and business streams to where they are today. Our geographic footprint now includes seven offices across the South Coast, Southern and Western NSW. The Western Region is one of our biggest growth areas, we now employ 30 staff and it is going from strength to strength. I'm incredibly proud of everyone who's been involved because we've really been able to support those communities.

The new Permanency Support Program (PSP) reforms are a positive step towards providing the stability for the children and young people we support. I am so thrilled that we finally got there and over time I'm hopeful we will iron out some of the issues. I certainly know from our staff that they are absolutely loving the work they are doing with families.

Receiving a \$1.5 million grant, as part of the Federal Government's Regional Jobs and Investment Packages, was a big win for CareSouth. The grant will support the construction of our new Head Office in South Nowra. The funding will be used to construct a new multi-purpose facility containing office space, meeting rooms, training facilities, our call centre, family contact and interactive play rooms and a Community Hub. The new space is going to be much more therapeutic and welcoming than our existing building and it will be so nice for our staff, visitors and everyone we support.

One of my first goals when I started at CareSouth was to get Out-of-Home Care accreditation over the line, and we did that successfully. But our most recent accreditation process earlier this year was a challenging time for us. It came after the Royal Commission inquiry, so the levels of scrutiny required by the Office of the Children's Guardian were much higher. We work in a space where you do need to raise the bar. But protecting and caring for children is and must remain the key driver of the work we do. Staff and carers across all our regions work tirelessly to meet those best practice standards and I am so proud of the work they do in balancing the paperwork with the fieldwork.

I feel honoured to have led this organisation to where it is today. It's not been without its challenges of course, but it is the highlights that have stayed with me and got me through the more difficult times. When you leave a role like this there's never a good time, there's never the right time. But I can't think of a better time. I feel so satisfied and that's a really nice feeling. How fortunate and lucky am I that I can end my career feeling like that, because not everyone gets that opportunity. I feel truly blessed that that's the case.



Deb grew up in the Southern Highlands and had an idyllic childhood on a rural property where her family sold farm equipment, trucks and tractors. As a teen Deb learned how to drive a semi-trailer and became an accomplished "paddock basher", honing her driving skills on the property. When she was 14 years old she started working in the family business on Saturday mornings and after school. And for a short time after finishing school, while she figured out her career options, it helped develop her savvy business acumen.

"The only thing I ever wanted to do is what I'm doing now," said Deb. "I wanted to go into the industry and work with people."

She applied for a job in youth services but was told she was too young and would identify too closely with the young teens she would work with.

"Now I reflect back and think they were absolutely right, I had no life experience," said Deb.

So with her father's encouragement, and against her mother's wishes, Deb bought a caravan, hitched it to her HQ Holden and set off around Australia with her best friend. It was the late 1970s and Deb was 18. It was rare for

women to travel on their own back then, let alone at such a young age. But Deb was well prepared. She could change a fanbelt with a stocking, replace a flat tyre and hustle the most accomplished pool players for extra petrol money.

"Yes I was a hustler," laughed Deb. "We won a pool comp in Coffs Harbour and we were the first women ever to join it. We had a snooker table at home so my girlfriend and I were great players. We played pool to help pay for our trip around Australia."

Life on the road stood her in good stead to take on future leadership roles throughout her career. Travelling taught her resilience and to think on her feet, including pulling a fully-laden caravan off the road with a chain after the HQ ran out of fuel.

"We were heading home because we had run out of money," said Deb. "We were on this stretch of highway when we ran out of fuel so we had to pull off the road. But the caravan jack-knifed across the highway so we had to unhook it and try and pull it off the road. We did it but by the end of it my hands were bleeding because I was at the front pulling this caravan with a chain."

It was the first of many adventures, and it reinforced Deb's passion for people, building relationships and hearing and sharing their stories.

"From a cultural perspective it was a fantastic experience because I absolutely did not know anything and realised how much I didn't know until I travelled around Australia and got to know other people's stories," said Deb. "I'll never forget my TAFE teacher instilling in us the importance and value of people and their individual experiences."

But she credits her mum for inspiring her to work in this sector.

"Mum's father passed away when she was young and there were 11 children. He was a rabbiter and there wasn't much money. My grandmother couldn't afford to look after all the children so they all lived with different relatives. Mum went to live with an aunt and uncle. And while Mum's life wasn't awful it wasn't a nurtured and cared-for life. She was primarily there to do chores.

"Mum's experiences made her the Mum that she was, she was such a strong advocate. There wasn't anything my Mum couldn't do."

It was Deb's mother who nurtured her passion for helping society's most vulnerable. This, coupled with her father's encouragement to take calculated risks, set her on her future career trajectory.

"I was never particularly career driven," said Deb. "I just wanted to do something that I loved and felt would make a difference. Even in primary school I was really attracted to people who didn't have the same advantages that I did. I didn't know it at the time but on reflection I look back and I can see that I had my Mum to thank for that understanding."

After returning home Deb was appointed to the HIV/AIDS task force, whilst also working in a youth refuge and a family refuge.

"I got into working with youth and the child protection sector and it was the only work I ever wanted to do," said Deb. "I absolutely loved that, from the very first day I met the young people. And they went on to be a significant part of my life."

> It was during her time as a youth worker that Deb had her "most profound learning" and really understood the impact of trauma on children and young people.

"I remember early in my career telling a young person I understood how he was feeling and his response was 'you would not have a clue'. He was right I really didn't understand what his experiences had been and how that must feel," said Deb.

It was a lesson that has stayed with Deb throughout her career and informed her practice ever since. It helped her understand the importance of listening, building relationships and, most importantly, empowering those we support by giving them a voice.

While it was her father who taught her to be business savvy — "he always encouraged me to go for gold. Why go for silver when

you can go for gold, he would say" - it was her mother who taught her the importance of having belief and hope.

"Belief and hope are probably the two greatest things that have influenced me in my life," said Deb. "Having people in your life who nurture you, who encourage you and who believe in you is so important."

"But now it is time for me to focus on my husband, my children and my grandchildren," said Deb. "I couldn't have done what I have done without their support. They have always been 100 per cent behind me. I couldn't be prouder of my kids they're fabulous parents.

"Now it is my time to be there for them. I want to be able to do for my children the things that my Mum did for me; picking up the grandkids from school, being there in school holidays to look after them, taking them water-skiing and teaching them to jet ski. And my wonderful husband is madly planning all our trips around school holidays."

And yes a trip around Australia is on the cards but the caravan will be "far more superior" to the one Deb travelled in back in the 70s. Just don't ask her for a game of pool if you cross her path. You will get hustled!





EMILY'S STORY

Positive role models are 'life-changing'

mily* is 22, a support worker for CareSouth, and has just bought her first house, which she is currently renovatina.

It is a remarkable feat for someone so young, but what makes it even more amazing is that Emily did it on her own, without any help from her family. Emily was raised by relatives and friends before going into foster care and later residential care. Her childhood was chaotic at best, terrifying at worst. She was born a "heroin baby" and her mum continued to use drugs, on and off, for the bulk of Emily's young life. Emily's dad, who had sole custody of her but was also a drug user, died when she was three. She lived with her step-mum, grandparents and a family friend for the next few years before she was restored to her mum's care.

"(Mum) got herself together a little bit when I was nearly five, but she was still selling drugs," said Emily, who read her file last year and found more than 40 risk-of-harm reports had been made to FACS during her childhood.

Emily was preparing to start kindergarten when she found her mum unconscious on the bathroom floor. She had overdosed. What followed was years of domestic violence and physical and emotional abuse before, at the age of 10, Emily's mum "dumped me at a friend's house because she didn't want me anymore". That friend became Emily's foster carer but when the placement broke down after 18 months Emily went into residential care.

It was a life-changing experience, because it was here that she met CareSouth CEO Debra Tozer. Deb was a manager at Southern Youth and Family Services, where Emily was

"Deb changed my life," said Emily. "She looked after me. Deb was like that caring mother of the service who you could always talk to. I remember her coming into work with her big fancy dresses and an even bigger smile. She was everyone's favourite.

"She was always going above and beyond for us when she didn't have to. She used to have a surf shop and I remember she brought in all these dresses for us. I still have that dress today, after eight or nine years."

It was Emily's determination and resilience that drove her to work with vulnerable people so she could "make a difference". She approached Deb at 18 and asked for a job as a youth worker. Deb suggested disability support.

"But I wouldn't have a bar of it. I understood what the kids in resi were going through because I had walked in their shoes," said Emily.

"It was really difficult growing up in the resi home. You'd have different dynamics with workers and different dynamics with the young people living in the house. It was like a domino effect, if one kid escalated you all escalated. And I think that's the issue with resi homes, you are so easily influenced and you don't have that guidance to set you in the right direction sometimes.

"We miss out on a lot of things because we haven't had those life skills. Things like cooking, cleaning, hanging out your washing the right way, my mum never cared about those things. She never did those things so no one showed me how. So to have those positive role models like Deb is life-changing."

Knowing that Deb believed in her and had her back, helped Emily "face her demons" and begin the counselling process that has allowed her to become the best version of herself.

"To be honest it took me a while to face my demons. But I did it because I had the attitude: 'that's your choice, only you can make it better'. I could see that because I had people like Deb supporting me. If you don't have that consistent support you start from scratch each time.

"Deb made everyone feel safe," said Emily. "Safety is a really big thing for kids in care and it's not easy to get and it's really easy to lose.





areSouth's Brighter Futures team are passionate advocates for early intervention to keep families together. So when CareSouth won the tender to be a pilot site for SafeCare - a ground-breaking US-based family preservation program — it was no surprise that our Brighter Futures caseworkers completed their training to deliver the program in record time.

SafeCare, developed more than a decade ago at Georgia State University and now rolled out across six countries, is an evidence-based training program for parents with children aged 0 to 5 years old, who are at risk of or have been identified as experiencing neglect and abuse.

CareSouth was one of a handful of Brighter
Futures providers chosen by the NSW Department
of Family and Community Services to implement
SafeCare. Brighter Futures program manager Alex
Muir had no doubt the program would be a great fit for her dedicated team

"SafeCare aligns closely with the work already were very happy to be a part of this exciting

"We were one of the first agencies to achieve certification of providers and that is a credit to the caseworkers here at CareSouth and the passion they have for the SafeCare Program," said Alex.

So far nine staff from the Brighter Futures team e completed their certification in SafeCare and two have received accreditation to become

"From the very beginning CareSouth have had such a positive outlook on delivering this program," said US-based facilitator Lacell Joseph, from Georgia State University's (GSU) National SafeCare Training and Research Facility.

This is a model that you can use to reinforce the good things that families are doing.

Lacelle and her GSU colleague Akilah Thomas visited CareSouth's Berkeley site earlier this year to meet the Brighter Futures team who had so successfully put the SafeCare theory into practice. The pair were suitably impressed.

"CareSouth didn't let barriers that other organisations had reported impact their implementation. They made a choice to make it work," said Lacelle. "And it really has worked," added Akilah.

"I've heard nothing but great things about this group," said Akilah. "And now I've got to hear their positive stories and successes first-hand."

Cara Chapman, who is now accredited as a SafeCare coach, said caseworkers have had the privilege of watching families become more confident in their own skill set.

"I really enjoyed delivering the program one-onone in the family home. The home is a safe space for them to be and when you are able to develop that supportive relationship there's more scope for change," said Cara.

"This is a model that you can use to reinforce the good things that families are doing," said Jayne, a trained SafeCare provider. "You are frequently reminding them that they are doing a good job."

The Brighter Futures SafeCare providers have been working closely with 13 families across the Illawarra, five of whom are Aboriginal and one family from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background. After working through the modules with the families, caseworkers have seen immediate results.

"The program, run weekly for 50-90 minutes over 18 weeks, really works for families and the results have been extremely positive," said Alex.

"Delivering modules in this way fits the needs of the families we work with. After working through the modules families have more positive interactions with their children and a better knowledge of health outcomes for children and strategies to manage their children's health. We have also seen increased safety in the home and a reduction in risk factors that could potentially cause harm to children.

"We believe SafeCare should be a services-asusual program. It gives a bigger range of families access to a program that is proven to work."

*Earlier this year Four Corners aired a documentary about the SafeCare program -Parenting 101. It featured CareSouth's Brighter Futures Caseworker Brittanii Carr delivering SafeCare to a young mother. Watch Parenting 101 to see how a helping hand can make a world of difference.









nnette, or Nanny Nette as she is affectionately known, shed a quiet tear as she placed the latest picture on her wall of love. The wall, a photo gallery that runs the length of her hallway, is a tribute to the 73 children she has welcomed into her home, and heart, as a short-term foster carer for the past 23 years.

The photo captures the most recent cherished moment on Nanny Nette's foster care journey - a first birthday celebration she shared with a child she has loved and nurtured since birth.

The baby came to Nanny Nette straight from the hospital. The seasoned carer, with the help of the two family members she has raised for the past nine years and calls her grandchildren, spent countless sleepless nights soothing, feeding and nurturing the newborn.

He is now a happy, healthy toddler with a gummy grin who loves nothing more than a cuddle and a bedtime story.

"My 11-year-old grandson struggles to sit still but he would sit quietly and read to the baby every night," Nanny Nette recalled fondly. "And my granddaughter is so good with the little ones. She's 13 and thinks she's too big for cuddles with me, but she'll happily sit for hours cuddling the babies."

Nanny Nette and her grandchildren were there for the baby bou's first smile, first word and first step. When she was given the news that he had found a "forever home" and would be adopted, she was overjoyed. But she had one simple request; to celebrate his first birthday before the transition to his adoptive parents was finalised.

"It was important to celebrate his time with us and share that really important milestone with him," she said. "We threw a party and invited his extended family. It was such a lovely day."



The 64-year-old is frequently asked if her heart breaks every time a child moves to a permanent home.

"The short answer is yes," said Nanny Nette. "But we always say goodbye with a smile and talk about the happy times they have had with us. One of the things I love most about adoption is that we have relationships with all four of the families of the children we've cared for who have been adopted. We go to birthday parties and still see the children and their families, even if it's only a few times a year."

Annette and her grandchildren recently visited the baby boy and his new forever family for the first time since his transition.

"My granddaughter was worried he would forget us," said Annette. "But he didn't. And I don't believe any of the babies ever forget that they had a place where they were loved and treasured. And I remember each of them, they all hold a special place in my heart."

Annette says becoming a foster carer was the best decision she's ever made.

"It's the most rewarding thing you could ever do," she said. "Even though it's really hard saying goodbye and it breaks my heart, I know that they've been loved and you need to focus on the difference you've made in their lives and the difference you will make in the life of the next child who comes into your home. There are so many little people out there who need to be loved, hugged and nurtured."

She has called for anyone in the community considering foster care to take the leap of faith. It can be a life-changing experience, not only for the child but also the carer.

"I love being with CareSouth because it is an organisation that cares not just about the children, but the birth families and the carer families," said Annette.

"I could never have children so my husband and I looked into fostering but he was too old. When he died I thought that was the end of that. I didn't know then that single people, older couples and same sex couples could foster. I wish I wasn't needed, but it's the best thing I've ever done.

"People say to me you're wonderful for doing this but it's really a very selfish thing to do because of all the cuddles and hugs you get. I love to be hugged and I love to give hugs. I'm a hug therapist," she laughed.

"For some kids affection might be associated with abuse, so when they feel safe enough to accept a hug – and I always ask permission – then that's a wonderful thing. You can never give a child enough hugs."

It's so important that more people are willing to give children a stable, loving home.

As the Government's Permanency Support Program rolls out with the aim to give every child a loving home for life, shortterm carers like Nanny Nette are more vital than ever.

"When I started doing foster care, there was a great need for short-term and emergency carers and so I made the conscious decision to do that," said Nanny Nette.

"Short-term care is a really good way for new carers to decide if they want to do long-term care, guardianship or adopt a child. It's so important that more people are willing to give children a stable, loving home. I've had some children who've had nine placements before they come to me and it just breaks your heart. But when they find a forever home it's so rewarding."

Our Programs

PERMANENCY SUPPORT & RESTORATION

Permanency is key to creating a happy home

ngela is a self-confessed nurturer. She loves nothing more than bringing families together, whether it's her own or the young people in foster care she has supported over the past five years. Angela's gift is her ability to build relationships and bring everyone to the table, without judgement, to deliver the best outcomes for the children in her care.

"You can never replace a child's mum but you have to carry that role. You have to find the balance," said Angela.

When Angela and her husband first became CareSouth foster carers, it was for a short-term placement with two young children under five. The goal was to return the children home once their mum had the supports in place that she needed.

"A foster carer's role is not only to support the kids but also the birth parents," said Angela. "So I started building a respectful relationship with their mum. The children were actually pretty impressed, they found it really reassuring that their foster mum was talking to their real mum. I would have phone conversations with her after she had visited the kids so we could work together for the best outcomes."

The government's Permanency Support Program, introduced in October last year, relies on carers like Angela who are willing to build a solid support network for vulnerable children while they are in foster care so caseworkers can determine the best pathway towards a stable, secure home. This may be through short-term care while working towards restoration with birth families, long-term foster care, guardianship or adoption.

"I have always been a strong advocate for children; that is my main role as a foster carer. But when you are moving towards restoration you have to work collaboratively with families. A lot of the time parents will ask 'what do you do in this situation'? I write down all the things I do and strategies I use with the kids. But I always write this is a guide, do what's right for you. At the end of the day everyone just wants to be listened to without any judgement, or opinion."

Angela has worked with children and families across many aspects of permanency support, including restoration, short-term care and long-term foster care. The family is now working towards adopting two teen siblings and the process has brought everyone closer, according to Angela.

"I think it's so important to have that security in a placement, because when they're 18 they're scared, they think they're going and that's it," said Angela. "So as soon as we knew adoption was on the table we gave the girls the option, we gave them all the reading material and gave them the choice of whether they wanted to be adopted or guardianship. We also asked our kids their opinions and noone said no.

"We got the girls a journal and we wrote down why we wanted to adopt them. We got all our family to write down the reasons why we wanted these children in our care forever and to be part of our family.

"I've told the girls it doesn't matter how you got here, it doesn't matter if you aren't in our DNA you are part of us. As soon as you walked into this house you got a bit of our heart. Then they wrote back and I can't even read it without crying. It brought us so much closer."

It's conversations like these, whether written or verbal, that Angela believes is key to her family's success as foster carers. Angela loves nothing more than "having a chat with her girls" while walking the family's dog, it creates a sense of connectedness, allows her children to have a voice and be heard and is a great form of self-care (Angela also goes on daily runs to clear her mind).

"Open communication is so important in this role," said Angela. "We've always worked collaboratively with families to keep them updated about whatever is happening with their children. You have to make an effort and be thoughtful, so we always give birth parents a present from their child on special occasions. It's all about mutual respect for everyone involved, but while making sure there are really clear boundaries."

Angela and her family have not only opened their homes, but also their hearts to all the children they have cared for, whether their stays have been short or long-term.

"We have handprints of all the kids when they came into foster care and all of the kids when they left foster care. They all have a place in our hearts," said Angela.



Our Programs

PERMANENCY SUPPORT & RESPITE CARE

Respite carers critical on path to stabilitu

hen Deniliquin carers Barbara and Bill* were asked by CareSouth to take a young boy and girl into their home for emergency respite care they agreed without hesitation.

It was supposed to be a two night stay but the short-term respite lasted nine months. In that time, the couple were instrumental in reshaping the lives of the two foster children in their care — a young girl and boy who struggled to reach their milestones due to significant delays and medical issues.

While the respite carers put loving structures and routines in place for the children, Western Region caseworkers determined the best way forward to provide permanent, stable care.

Pru McManus, the manager of CareSouth's Western Programs, said it was important to find a home where the pair, who are not siblings, could stay together "because the young boy is as protective of the little girl as a big brother would be, they have walked their journey of foster care together, and they are each other's constant".

It was decided that long-term foster care was the best option for the children but this was no easy feat according to Pru, as the number of children entering the child protection system is increasing while the number of carers is in decline.

Latest statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) annual child protection report found 47,915 children were in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) nationally, with more than half in NSW. More than 60 children enter care across NSW every week because they cannot live safely at home and around 660 foster carers each year are needed to meet this demand.

The government's Permanency Support Program was introduced in October last year to address this gap. The program will improve safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for children and young people who are currently in care or at risk of coming into care. Pru said the move towards permanency makes emergency or short-term carers even more critical while decisions are made about a child or young person's future.

"We need short-term and respite foster carers like Bill and Barbara who can provide a loving home while the best permanency pathway – restoration, guardianship, adoption or long-term foster care - can be found so children and young people have safe homes where they can thrive," said Pru.

"The role of short-term respite carers like Bill and Barbara is so important. One of the best things we have seen with this placement is that the carers have given both children the time and intensive care that they needed to thrive. They are just brilliant.

"The change in these kids over that time has just been amazing. We have had so many people come to us and tell us how far these children have come. It is time-intensive work but this family have gathered all the information and strategies they could to help these children who have been through so much."

Barbara said the family's home has always been "an open house, full of kids and family, so it made sense for us to welcome these two little ones into our home".





PERMANENCY SUPPORT **& SHORT-TERM CARE**

Colleen and Stephen have opened their hearts and home to 20 babies and toddlers over the past decade as short-term foster carers. The couple, who are based in the ACT and became CareSouth carers two years ago after working with FACS and other nongovernment organisations, have helped transition children in their care back to their birth families, into long-term foster care, guardianship or adoption.

Colleen has offered her heartfelt suggestions, based on her family's own experience, to help new or future foster carers navigate the journey ahead of them. It is timely advice, as the need for short-term carers is increasing while critical decisions are made about a child's path to stability under the government's new Permanency Support Program. Here is Colleen and Stephen's story.

Short-term carers share transitioning

Be true to your thoughts of why you want to foster, and be generous with the love and care you are about to give to these special babies and children. They come with nothing but possibly some disability, health problems or emotional baggage. You are there to help them start a new loving life with you or to transition them back to their families. Most of them won't be able to speak for themselves so it is up to you to speak up for them.

ur advice to prospective foster carers would

My husband and I have been doing short-term care for the past 10 years for newborn babies and children up to 2%years old. A lot of the children we have cared for have been disabled, born prematurely or withdrawing from drugs. We don't turn away from any babies that need special care. We love them all dearly and want to give them the best start in life. You have to remember that they never ask to be put in this situation and it is not their fault.

Short-term care can be hard at times but that is one of the reasons caseworkers are there for carers. We are never afraid to ask them for help when we need it. The most important thing is open and honest communication.

As short-term carers we have gone through times where it has not been easy, on us or the little ones that are leaving our care. Our babies have nothing but the best love and care whilst living with us. They either leave us after the appropriate forever family has been found or when they return to their own family.

This is when the hard part really starts, as you have to be prepared to transition the child to a new family or back to their birth family. It is important for us when a child is transitioning that the new family come to our home as often as possible to get to know the child and vice versa. We open up our home because the most important part of a transition is to make sure that the baby and new family feel comfortable with one another.

The transition may take six to eight weeks but you know when it is time to let go, you're with the child 24/7 and you instinctively know if they are ready or not. During the transition time we make sure the family comes to play with the child regularly and assists with feeding for the first few weeks. After this they need to come and learn the child's routine such as meal times, whether that be solids or bottles, bath time and putting the baby to bed. We like to make sure that during this time we have a photo of the new family, or the birth family they are returning to, and we show the baby this picture each day.





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Now people have choice and control over the services they receive.

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aving worked at CareSouth for 15 years, with a wealth of experience across Disabilities and Outof-Home Care (OOHC), Rhonda Miller has seen a lot of changes in the sector, most significantly the shift away from institutionalised care in the 1980s and more recently, the roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). For Rhonda, who grew up wanting to be a nurse, there is no doubt that she found her calling in the Disabilities sector. "I do love to work with families. You meet some incredible people. I think that's what I was meant to do," she says.

There have been some sad stories but they're far outweighed by the inspiring moments Rhonda feels fortunate to have been a part of throughout her career. Rhonda frequently reaches for the tissues as she shares the highs and lows of working in a sector that presents many challenges but where the rewards are life-changing. She recalls supporting a 12-year-old boy with significant disabilities while working for Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC).

"The family were struggling and couldn't afford a wheelchair-accessible van. And you couldn't get funding for that," said Rhonda. "They never did anything together as a family because of the transport issues. Through fundraising, I got them enough money for a van and the modifications they needed. The day they showed me, they said: 'you did this for us'. It was a happy moment. That was maybe 20 years ago but it has stayed with me."

Rhonda also recalls a four-year-old girl who learned to walk in the institution in which she trained. It was before the Richmond Report in the 1980s saw the end of institutionalised care in favour of loved ones being supported in their own homes with their families.

"Sometimes parents came to visit and sometimes they didn't," said Rhonda. "But I'll never forget the look of joy on the mother's face when she saw her little girl walk down the long corridor towards her. It had quite an impact on me at that early stage of my career because it made me realise that those developmental milestones are such a huge moment for parents, whether their children are in an institution or out in the community."

The Disabilities sector is constantly evolving to meet the complex needs of some of society's most vulnerable people and it is not only Rhonda's passion for those she supports, but her ability to adapt to change which has allowed her to make such a difference to the lives of struggling families.

For the bulk of her career at CareSouth, Rhonda managed the Family Choices program which supported the families of children with a disability by providing respite care through trained volunteer carers.

"To see a carer have a child with such a significant disability - I'm talking can't walk, can't talk, has to be tube-fed, the love, care, acceptance and resilience of these carers is just incredible. I can think of one family in particular whose little girl had the perfect carer. Even when the child was

hospitalised in Sydney, the carer would travel up and relieve the mother, sit next to the young girl's bed to give mum a break. That wasn't part of Family Choices, she did that because she was committed to the little girl. That helped that family enormously."

The Family Choices program no longer exists under the NDIS which was rolled out in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven in July 2017. From the beginning, Rhonda was in no doubt the NDIS had the potential to be fantastic for some people, but she was sceptical about its ability to meet the needs of all in the way it was promised, especially the complex cases she sees every day.

"Some of the people I had been working with prior to NDIS had funding for one-on-one support over a number of years and it worked extremely well for them because of their disability," said Rhonda. "And now we're fighting to get the funding to continue that. A group has lots of advantages for people, to develop their social skills and have a network of friends, it's really good. But some people need one-on-one. They could rethink that. I was hoping the NDIS would be fantastic for the people I work with and families out in the community. And it is really good for some people because it's about choice and control.

"There were people with physical disabilities like quadriplegia who, prior to the NDIS were not able to choose who bathes them, what time they go to bed. Their care was dictated by the services. Now people have choice and control over the services they receive. They are getting support they've never had and they're doing really well."

One of the most positive aspects of the NDIS, according to Rhonda, is being able to connect someone with a service quickly and know they will provide continuity and quality support. But she believes there needs to be more support co-ordination for people who are struggling to navigate the system.

"Quite often we get a phone call from someone in the community asking for help with their plan and they are usually quite distressed," said Rhonda. "I will ask them if they have support co-ordination in their plan and often they will say no. It can be really difficult for families, especially if it's their first plan, or an 80-year-old who doesn't know how to use a computer but has a 60-year-old son on an NDIS plan. It's all computerised. I've heard some pretty sad stories from people who don't know what to do and they're not using the money.

"However I know there are lots of people out there who are very happy. I also know there's a lot of work that still needs to be done and we are doing everything we can at CareSouth to provide the level of support these families are entitled to."



CHAMPIONS

Champions get creative

or the past four years CareSouth Champions from the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Ulladulla have discovered their inner artist at the historic Bundanon, on the banks of the picturesque Shoalhaven River.

Each year more than 20 Champions students, their parents, staff and carers attend school holiday art workshops at Arthur Boyd's famous bush retreat.

"It's a unique activity we do each year," said Champions caseworker Michelle Barham, who is based at CareSouth's Nowra office.

"It's an art activity in such beautiful, serene surroundings and everyone – the carers, kids, their mums who came along and the staff – are in awe of the tranquil, almost meditative surroundings."





"The kids in our program are usually high energy and find it quite hard to focus. But they go into this peaceful zone when they are surrounded by nature. That is why it is such an amazing program and we've kept doing it over the years because it makes such a difference.

"And it's a nice break for everyone. It's a little recharge for all of us, but especially for the kids. Their lives can be quite hectic and there's a lot going on. When they are at

Mary – a former carer in what was then known as CareSouth's Aunties & Uncles program – is well aware of the need for vulnerable young people to switch off from the pressures that life can throw their way. And she has seen how much students benefit from being surrounded by nature.

"Getting together and sharing these experiences is so important for these kids," said Mary, a passionate advocate for nature-based education, particularly for students who struggle to focus.

"It gives them a safe space, a creative space with room to move within the environment and they get lots of positive feedback for their work. So many kids these days don't have the security and confidence of being in nature. Nature-based education programs, like those at Bundanon, gives students an opportunity to get into a more right brain frame of mind and away from IT.

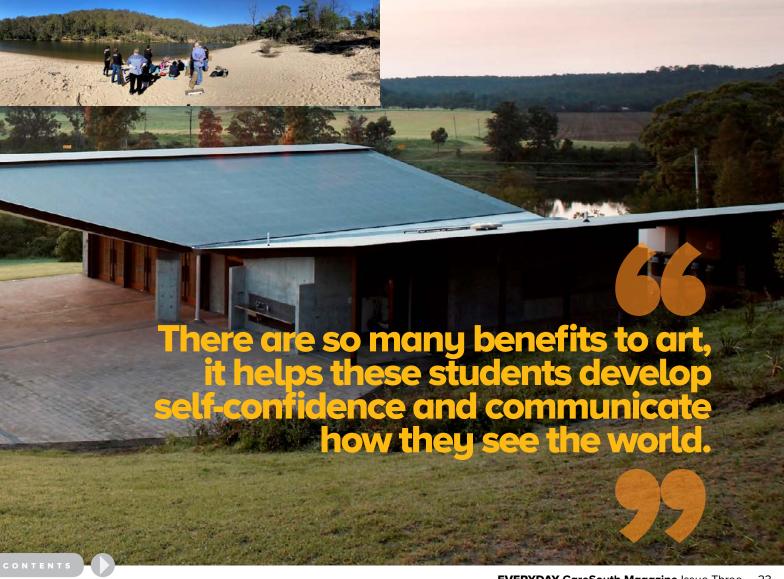
"There are so many benefits to art, it helps these students develop self-confidence and communicate how they see the world. The structured workshop gives them some boundaries but helps them find their own way. There's no fixed right or wrong with art and that's great for self-esteem.

"When a person leaves here happy and wants to show their artwork to a parent, carer or their family that's success I think."

at Bundanon

Bundanon they can just stop and focus."

When Bundanon's education Manager Mary Preece was asked by Michelle to run the Champions holiday workshops four years ago she embraced the opportunity. It was such a success the workshops are now an annual school holiday event.



Homework Hub experience are South's Homework Hub has been supporting students academically and invaluable?

supporting students academically and socially in our Berkeley Community
Hub for more than three years. In a bid to further improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students, not only at CareSouth but also across the wider community, the Homework Hub co-ordinator, Danielle Woolage, has developed a partnership with the University of Wollongong's Faculty of Education.

The partnership, with UOW's professional experience program and Master of Teaching students, is an opportunity for future teachers to gain an understanding of the impact trauma has on a child's capacity to learn.

The collaboration allows teachers to build supportive, mentoring relationships with Homework Hub students while learning about Trauma Informed Practice.

"It is mutually beneficial because it not only improves a child's social and academic confidence, it helps educators learn strategies to meet the social and academic needs of vulnerable students both in the Hub and in their future classrooms," said Danielle.

Salim Layoun was in his final year of a Master of Teaching degree at the University of Wollongong when he began volunteering in the CareSouth Homework Hub. It was an experience he found "invaluable".

"CareSouth's Homework Hub allowed me to build connections and professional relationships with children who are often neglected in the classroom," said Salim. "Working with these vulnerable children has opened my eyes and provided me with insights into where the education system is sometimes strained – the children who are often overlooked or left behind."

He not only learned how to provide effective classroom support to students at CareSouth, but was able to transfer this knowledge to classrooms across the community in his current role as a casual Primary School teacher. "I gained hands-on experience and was able to refine and consolidate my teaching skills with a large group of students with differing needs," said Salim. "Working with these vulnerable children has taught me that a child's background and experiences do not define or represent who they are. All children are unique and possess different skills, abilities and talents.

"CareSouth's Homework Hub makes sure these children are supported, whether it's dancing, mathematics, reading, astronomy, visual arts, rapping, or social communication skills."

Salim is studying for his masters in Teaching English as a Second Language while working as a casual teacher. He has also taken on a long-term mentoring role with a CareSouth Homework Hub student after the pair bonded during his time as a volunteer.

"The Homework Hub provided me with invaluable insights into the needs of a wide range of children," said Salim. "I was able to support not only their academic needs but also their social and emotional well-being. Specifically, I was able to provide these vulnerable children with a positive role model that they could trust. Through these experiences, I developed strategies that I could use within the classroom to ensure no child gets left behind.

"The Homework Hub is an opportunity to make a positive change within the community. Everyone is friendly, supportive and willing to assist at any time and there is a real sense of community and enjoyment – both for volunteers and importantly the students. The best part is seeing these children leave each afternoon learning a thing or two with a smile!"





Our Initiatives

Families flock to free Community Health Hub checks



2015-2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics report found more than a quarter of people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage delayed or avoided visiting a dentist due to the cost.

We know that accessing health care can be cost-prohibitive for many families in CareSouth's programs and the communities in which we work. In a bid to help families overcome this economic hurdle, CareSouth's Community Hub Development Officer Natalie Nicastri created and sourced funding for a one-stop Health Hub to provide free dental clinics, eye tests and hearing screening to 60 children and young people.

Natalie works closely with local dentists, optometrists and audiologists who provide the free health-checks, while the service is funded by community partners like the IMB Community Foundation, Make Healthy Normal and Ability

Since the Health Hubs started two years ago more than 200 children and young people have attended the free health

checks and the feedback from families and young people has been overwhelmingly positive.

"One of the big success stories was an eight-year-old from our Permanency Support Program who has previously refused to walk through the dentist's door and was terrified of any testing," said Natalie. "Because the young girl felt safe and supported by her caseworker, who came along to the Health Hub, she agreed to have her hearing and sight tested. She even allowed the dentist to clean her teeth and was very proud of herself. She loved her new pink toothbrush!"





Natalie has also facilitated a partnership with Go4Fun, a healthy lifestyle program for kids aged 7-13 which focuses on improving eating habits, fitness and confidence.

"At our recent Health Hubs Go4Fun staff played games with the children and conducted healthy weight checks while they waited for their appointment," said Natalie. "This was a great help as it kept the kids entertained and having fun while they waited for their turn. Staff from Ability Links also pitched in to help out with the Health Hub."

All children and young people are offered fruit and water bottles during the Health Hub and are educated about the importance of making healthy food choices.

"A healthy community is a happy community," said Natalie whose vision for the Hub aligns with that of retiring CareSouth CEO Debra Tozer.

Deb wanted the space to belong not just to our staff and clients but also to the community. Natalie has helped bring that dream to fruition by providing services that bring the community together, while ensuring their health and well-being needs are met.



Teens learn to look out for their mates

eeping young people safe and building resilience is integral to the work we do at CareSouth. One of the many ways we do this is through education and training.

In a bid to educate young people around socialising safely, CareSouth partnered with the Australian Red Cross to run its Save-a-Mate Program in Berkeley's Community Hub. The course promotes the health and well-being of young people, aged 14-19, through education, support and empowerment on youth health issues, particularly those related to alcohol, drug use and mental health.

A group of 10 young people from across CareSouth's programs participated in the training session and many of them invited a mate to join them. The group learned about supporting their peers, minimising harm, recognising harmful behaviours and how to ask for help and have tough conversations.

"Many of the young people were initially hesitant to participate in the program that was held in the school holidays," said CareSouth caseworker Sandy O'Halloran. "But they quickly changed their minds when they realised the training would be followed by pizza and a movie in the Community Hub.

"All the young people displayed manners and maturity throughout the night. They made me proud with their openness and willingness to participate in the program. There were fun games and open conversations with the young people discussing what programs we could run for them next time."

All participants received certificates for completing the course.



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