

CareSouth

EVERY DAY

Magazine Issue Five

Inside

Anderson
Ave

A Heart-
Warming
Restoration

Meet Buster our
Story Dog

ENTER



Executive Officers' Welcome

Welcome to the 2020 edition of the CareSouth magazine. It has been an unprecedented start to the year, first with devastating bushfires in many of the communities we provide support, followed by a global pandemic that sent us into isolation for months. Now more than ever we need to share stories that uplift us, inspire us and make us feel a part of our community. So, we hope you find that here, with a cup of tea in hand, while quarantining some time for yourself.

Firstly, we would like to introduce the new-look Executive Leadership team here at CareSouth. As you may know our Not-for-Profit has gone through some organisational changes over the past year and we now operate under a joint leadership structure with two Executive Officers, and that would be us – Tracy Mayo (Practice) and Renee Knight (Business). You may know us from our previous roles in the organisation as Chief Financial Officer (Renee) and Manager, Practice Improvement and Quality (Tracy). Both of us have spent the better part of a decade working with CareSouth to improve the lives of the families and communities we support. We are passionate advocates for best practice provision, and as such we are always looking for ways to better improve our service delivery.

If we have learned anything from this pandemic, it's the importance of building stronger relationships within our communities, listening to the needs of those we support, and finding creative solutions to meet those needs.

As Executive Officers who jointly lead CareSouth we are committed to ensuring our organisation provides the best possible customer experience for families so they can continue to focus on raising happy, healthy, independent young people.

This is something CareSouth has focused heavily on over the past 18 months through our Carer Experience Project where we interviewed hundreds of carers, collating their extensive knowledge and experience to better inform our day-to-day practice.

This research has not only allowed us to build better relationships with the families we work with, but to better understand their needs and the support they require. This proved invaluable at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic when we had to design creative service delivery solutions – such as virtual online platforms and Telehealth – to support our communities and continue to meet best practice guidelines.

in issue five

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As an essential service we were busier than ever during the lockdown, with some staff working directly with clients, carers and communities and others using online platforms to ensure everyone remained safe and supported. Our Permanency Support Program, Brighter Futures and Champions caseworkers continued their regular home visits and check-ins with families virtually, while our Clinical Services team used the Telehealth platform to support families. Getting creative with technology allowed us to all feel connected during this difficult time, with Illawarra carers involved in a trial for Group Reflective Practice run by our Clinical team saying that sense of connectedness was essential to well-being.

“... we are committed to ensuring our organisation provides the best possible customer experience for families ...”

We also recently rolled out a series of online training resources to ensure CareSouth maintains its reputation as a child-focused organisation with passionate staff and carers whose practices are trauma-informed.

The redesign of our Leadership Group culminated in the appointment of Tamara Lacelles-Smith, joining CareSouth as Regional Manager based in the Illawarra earlier this year, and Belinda Coleman taking on the position of Practice Improvement and Quality Manager, based in the Shoalhaven. Both Tamara and Belinda have a strong background in Child Protection and bring a wealth of frontline knowledge and understanding to their roles.

We were also very excited to take part in a virtual ceremony to mark the breaking of ground at the site of our new Head Office and Community Hub in South Nowra. The multi-million dollar project has been five years in the making and the ground-breaking ceremony signals a major step towards construction of the purpose-built facility, which will include office space, meeting rooms, training facilities, our call centre, family contact rooms and a Community Hub. The project was made possible by a \$1.5 million Federal Government Grant as part of the Regional Jobs and Investment Package and will create employment opportunities in the region.

And in another win for CareSouth we are pleased to announce that our founder and former CEO Jim McEwan was this year awarded an Order of Australia for significant service to youth, and to the community, as part of the Australia Day 2020 Honours List. It is a fitting tribute to a man who has devoted his life to improving the

lives of others. CareSouth is recognised as an industry leader thanks to the vision, values and solid foundations on which he built the business.

We hope you enjoy reading about more wins in this issue filled with inspiring stories of those who are part of our CareSouth community.

Stay connected, stay safe.

Tracy and Renee

CareSouth Executive Officers

CareSouth founder honoured

CareSouth founder Jim McEwan has devoted much of his life to helping young people. So it is a fitting tribute that he was awarded an Order of Australia (AM) for significant service to youth, and to the community, as part of the Australia Day 2020 Honours List.

Jim accepted the award on the condition it was not made public but agreed to share it with us because he felt it was more about CareSouth than himself as an individual.

CareSouth would like to congratulate Jim and acknowledge the incredible contribution he has made to creating positive futures for the vulnerable children, young people and families CareSouth supports.

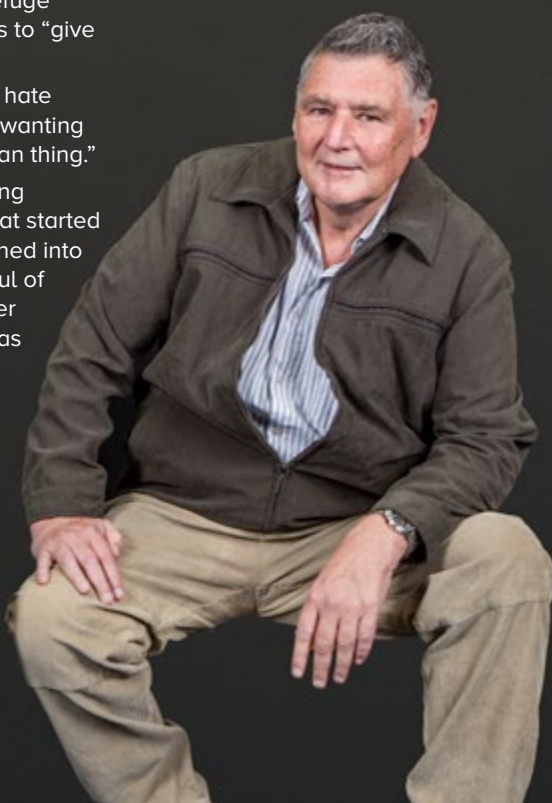
When Jim first set up our organisation (combining the Aunties & Uncles program

and the local Shoalhaven Youth Refuge almost 30 years ago) his vision was to “give every kid a terrific life”.

“Kids have so much potential and I hate seeing it wasted,” said Jim. “I think wanting to make a difference is a very human thing.”

Jim has done that in spades, building CareSouth from the ground up. What started as a vision to help “lost” kids morphed into a foster care program with a handful of staff and continued to expand under Jim’s leadership. CareSouth now has offices across NSW and employs more than 300 people.

Board Chairperson Christine Cook said the AM “is significant recognition by the Australian Government of the wonderful organisation that CareSouth has become and we all should feel very proud. It is the result of not only Jim’s vision and business acumen, but dedication and hard work by present and past staff, carers and directors.”



Meet our Executive Team



Tracy Mayo

With more than 30 years' experience working in the Community Services sector, nearly nine of those as a senior leader at CareSouth, Tracy Mayo is embracing her new role as Executive Officer (Practice) alongside colleague Renee Knight.

Tracy has worked in various roles in the Community Services sector, including disability services, Out-of-Home Care residential services, homelessness and therapeutic counselling services. During her time at CareSouth she has been the Regional Manager of the Southern, Western and ACT regions. Tracy also spearheaded a new role working as the Manager, Practice Improvement and Quality to ensure CareSouth's frontline workers are skilled in best

practice guidelines and training so they can better support families.

At the core of Tracy's practice is the child, ensuring they are given a voice and a say in their future. Listening and responding to the needs of those around her, whether it's children and young people, birth parents, carers or staff, is one of the reasons Tracy is so adept at building strong, long-term relationships.

Tracy recognises that the best option for children is for them to stay with or return to birth families. Where that is not safe there is a need to look at permanent options, such as guardianship or kinship placements with extended family or open adoption for non-Aboriginal children.

Tracy believes that it is in the best interests of a child to be connected to their family, whether it is their mother, their father or their grandmother so that children and young people have a wrap-around support network.

Her ability to understand the broader community sector needs allows her to advocate and bridge the gap between sector demands and community needs, while supporting the CareSouth Leadership team to ensure the best possible outcomes for the individuals, families and communities CareSouth support.



Renee Knight

For more than a decade Renee Knight was responsible for managing CareSouth's finances as the company's Chief Financial Officer. After a recent stint working for the Aboriginal Medical Service Renee returned to CareSouth, this time at the helm of the organisation as Executive Officer (Business) alongside colleague Tracy Mayo.

Renee brings a wealth of knowledge and business acumen to her new role in leading CareSouth into the next decade of growth and opportunity.

Renee, along with CareSouth's Corporate Services team, has been instrumental in overseeing the development of the organisation's new multi-million dollar Head Office and Community Hub in Nowra.

The project has been the main focus of the Corporate Services team, whom Renee oversees, for the past five

years, so it was fitting that Renee presided over the official ground-breaking ceremony held last month.

While her job is essentially about numbers, Renee takes great pride in knowing the names of every young person in CareSouth's programs. This is testament to her kind, caring nature and her commitment to ensuring the best possible outcome for the families CareSouth supports. Like her co-leader Tracy, Renee is an advocate for giving a voice to young people in the Community Services sector.

She is also passionate about serving the Shoalhaven community, where she grew up and attended the local schools and University. Renee has sat on the committee of the Shoalhaven Business Chamber for the past four years and applied her skills and business acumen to her role as Treasurer for the past three years. She is also a member of Shoalhaven Women in Business, a subcommittee of the Business Chamber designed to inspire, develop and increase networks for women in business and leadership roles.

Renee has a Bachelor Degree in Accounting from the University of Wollongong. Her skills in Financial Operations, Leadership, Financial Management Experience, Managerial Finance, and Budgeting will allow her to lead the implementation and execution of CareSouth's long-term strategic business plans.

Meet some of our Board



Christine Cook

Christine Cook has been a member of the CareSouth Board since 2004 and was appointed as Board Chairperson late last year. After taking on the new position Christine mapped out a plan to visit CareSouth's rural offices in the New Year but bushfires put those plans on hold. She was able to visit Goulburn, Wagga Wagga, Deniliquin and Griffith in the week before travel lockdowns were put in place and the warm welcome she received was a highlight.

Christine was pleased to have the opportunity to meet our dedicated teams and gain an insight into the valuable services we provide across our footprint.

"CareSouth has faced many challenges over the past

months and the Board is very aware of the difficulties such challenges can bring," said Christine. "It is important to the Board that we stay in touch with staff and remain connected to the vital work of CareSouth.

"During this time of uncertainty as COVID-19 continues, the Board want to convey their wishes to you, your family and loved ones to stay safe and well during this unprecedented time. Our priority right now, is doing everything we can to ensure staff, carers and the people CareSouth support, remain healthy and safe."

Christine has been a secondary school teacher for over 30 years, spending 27 years at Bomaderry High. She has been the Producer of Bomaderry High School's Rock Eisteddfod productions since 1995, mentoring over 100 students during rehearsals. Christine is also a member of the Management Committee of the Nowra Show Society. She has a Diploma of Teaching and Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment. She is married with three children and two grandchildren.



Deb Tozer

Former CareSouth CEO Deb Tozer, who retired in 2018 to travel and spend more time with her family, has joined the organisation's Board of Directors. With a career spanning more than 30 years in the Community Services sector, seven of which were at the helm of CareSouth, Deb brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to her latest role.

Prior to working with CareSouth, Deb was employed by Anglicare Canberra and Goulburn for 16 years where she held the positions of Director of Services, Executive Manager and Acting CEO specialising in the delivery of Out-of-Home Care services. But it was during her early career as a youth worker that Deb began to understand the impact of trauma on children and young people. This knowledge informed her daily practice as a frontline worker and later as a leader. It showed her the importance of listening,

building relationships and empowering those we support. Deb has always been a strong advocate for building partnerships with other agencies to help those most vulnerable, and she will continue to work collaboratively with CareSouth's Leadership Group and external stakeholders in her new role on the Board.

During her years as CareSouth CEO Deb led the organisation through a time of great change in the Community Services sector. While it was one of her biggest career challenges, the outcome of these changes improved CareSouth's best practice standards and enabled Deb and her team to develop a research and evidence-based practice framework, with a focus on investment in early intervention and prevention services.

One of Deb's greatest achievements as CareSouth CEO includes expanding the organisation into our Southern and Western regions to provide services to communities of significant need. CareSouth was also named the Shoalhaven Business of the Year under Deb's stewardship, the first Not-for Profit to be recognised as a serious business player in the local community where it opened its doors more than 25 years ago.



From Little Things Big Things Grow

CareSouth has virtually launched its Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), cementing our active commitment to reconciling the past by creating an inclusive workforce and client base that recognises and meets the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

CareSouth's Buwanha Aboriginal Collective was the driving force behind the organisation's RAP and held a virtual launch, due to social distancing regulations surrounding COVID-19, during Reconciliation Action Week.

“CareSouth
can make a positive
change...”

The purpose of the Buwanha Aboriginal Collective is to strengthen, review and monitor our practice with Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities and effect organisational change to better reflect the needs and culture of First Nations Peoples.

The Buwanha Aboriginal Collective comprises of our Principal Officer Tracy Mayo, our Aboriginal Community Development Officer, Permanency Support Program caseworkers and a Brighter Futures Team Leader. The group have worked tirelessly over the past three years to develop CareSouth's second RAP. The document provides a culturally inclusive strategy, outlining the actions, targets, timeline and responsibility in delivering the best possible service for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, Elders and communities.

CareSouth's vision for reconciliation is to ensure that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, Elders and communities are listened to and strongly contribute to the decision-making to create a positive future.

Buwanha worked in collaboration with Reconciliation Australia to deliver the most robust plan possible to meet these needs.

One of the first actions of the RAP will be to engage employees and carers in cultural learning opportunities. This will increase our employees' and carers' understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and achievements.

The RAP is an important step in CareSouth's journey towards reconciliation and Buwanha's aim is to effect positive change and make a difference by embedding reconciliation through our core business, our people, programs and stakeholders.

Safe at work

CareSouth's People and Culture team (formerly Human Resources) were the proud winners of the 2019 SafeWork NSW Awards in the category of Excellence in Recovery at Work for Business. The awards recognise businesses and individuals that have made positive changes to workplace health and safety, as well as recovery and return to work.

CareSouth was recognised for its trauma-informed care model, which focuses on understanding

the management of client and worker behaviour after exposure to trauma. CareSouth won the accolade for Excellence in Recovery at Work for Business due to its promotion of proactive and early intervention processes, such as welfare checks and support to workers following exposure to violent incidents, its early communication with injured workers and access to counselling through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

"These prestigious awards promote

the highest standards of workplace health and safety and return to work outcomes in workplaces around NSW.

We are proud to have been recognised for the work we do to keep our staff and clients safe," said Executive Officer – Business, Renee Knight.



Life in lockdown

calls for creative thinking

CareSouth provides care and support to some of society's most vulnerable people. So when the nation went into lockdown in the final weeks of March, CareSouth's management quickly put plans in place to ensure the organisation continued to provide essential services, while keeping clients and staff safe.

"We just had to be a little more creative in the ways we support our families," said CareSouth Executive Officer (Practice) Tracy Mayo.

Teams who weren't working face-to-face with clients used online platforms to ensure everyone remained safe

and supported, with our Permanency Support Program, Brighter Futures and Champions caseworkers continuing their regular home visits and check-ins with families virtually. The need for foster carers has also increased during the pandemic so Carer Recruitment teams continued to conduct foster care assessments via Skype.

Clinical Services, which includes psychologists, a speech pathologist and occupational therapist, is one of many essential support services at CareSouth that had to change the way they practise. And Clinical teams from across our regions were quick to jump onboard with alternative practices that

ensured clients received the same level of therapeutic support they were getting pre-COVID-19.

Clinical Services continued to host their consults via Skype and used Telehealth practices once staff began working from home. A new consent form was developed, meaning people could choose for themselves whether they would like to do their normal sessions on video call, on the phone or wait until things went back to normal for face-to-face consults.

CareSouth Senior Clinician Christine said clinical consult sessions using Skype have been successfully running across all regions since late March.

“

I hope the carers feel it is a time for them to feel listened to and supported in a fun yet meaningful way.

”

“Excitingly, working from home has opened up new possibilities for the Clinical team,” said Christine. “Our Speech Pathologist Tegan is using a fun program called Theraplatform, to provide speech therapy to young people online. The most exciting part of how well this is working, is that now our speech pathologist in Berkeley has the ability to provide speech therapy to anyone in any region.”

Tegan agrees that the restrictions have provided clinicians with a silver lining.

“These times have encouraged us to think outside the box regarding how we deliver our services,” said Tegan. “In the past Telehealth has been viewed as a last resort for many health professionals or perceived as not being as effective as face-to-face appointments. We are now seeing that this isn’t always the case, and that Telehealth can be the preferred service delivery method for many families.

“I think we have been provided with the unique opportunity to develop our skills and knowledge in the area of Telehealth and that we are starting to realise the positive implications that this can have on our organisation. In particular, we now have the opportunity to offer services to our regional sites and areas that may have limited access to health services. It’s a really exciting position to be in.”

Christine said clinicians across the organisation have embraced the changes to service delivery.

“Our senior clinician in Nowra Clare has been able to provide occupational therapy assessments for NDIS plans via Telehealth during this time, which is also a big plus,” said Christine.

“Clare has developed some wonderful resources for families to use at home, including food-based items such as

brown sugar sand castles, rainbow spaghetti, peanut butter play-doh, pudding paint and lots of other fun activities which make great sensory learning tools. These sensory activities help strengthen the part of the brain that processes the external world into the internal one.”

In Wagga and Goulburn telephone contact seems to be the most popular option, with one carer reflecting that it feels like the clinician is ‘checking in rather than checking up on me’.

Christine said carers are also benefiting from the new online platforms too with a trial she is running in the Illawarra for group Reflective Practice for carers via Skype. She said the feedback she has received from the trial so far has been positive.

Carers have told the Carer Recruitment team that it is comforting “knowing that someone cares about what you’re thinking and doing. Usually calls are about the kid. This was about me. (It was) really nice. I felt good, lighter, afterwards”. Another carer said, “It brings back a sense of community that CareSouth used to have”.

Christine said it has been really valuable for everyone to recognise the importance of feeling connected.

“I hope the carers feel it is a time for them to feel listened to and supported in a fun yet meaningful way,” said Christine. “The carers have such great insights and are really enjoyable people to chat with. This period of social distancing has impacted everyone in different ways, even the most well-adjusted people are struggling at the moment. The longer it goes on the harder it will become, so staying connected becomes even more important. I think it’s really important all the time, it’s just taken a pandemic to make us prioritise looking after ourselves.

“Overall, it is business as usual for the Clinical team with a few new tools in our tool belt.”

Unfortunately the impact of COVID-19 saw many of CareSouth’s most popular community programs put on hold.

CareSouth’s Meet & Eat program (see our story on page 24) was temporarily suspended in March, with the annual St Patrick’s Irish feast the last meal served before the state went into lockdown.

But the need for healthy, nutritious meals in the Berkeley community grew as the health crisis took hold and

supermarket shelves were stripped of essentials.

“Those who suffered the most from hoarding behaviour, were the ones who could afford it the least,” said CareSouth Community Hub coordinator Natalie.

So what happens when those who come along to Meet & Eat to enjoy a delicious meal with friends in a safe, supportive environment are no longer able to do so because of social distancing legislation?

Never one to sit idly by during a crisis, Natalie used the small amount of funding afforded to Meet & Eat each month, to cook up a freezable feast in CareSouth’s Berkeley kitchen and distribute it to those most in need.

During the height of the health crisis Natalie filled 70 takeaway containers each week with homemade Spaghetti Bolgnese, curried sausages, rice, soups, and pasta dishes to feed the Berkeley community. She then



dropped off the meals at the Berkeley Op Shop, where they were frozen, and distributed to community members who needed a feed.

Word of Natalie’s generous food donations and her legendary curried sausages spread quickly. Now each time she drops off her meals Natalie is mobbed by grateful community members patiently waiting for her delicious delivery service, especially those sausages.



Supported Independent Living

Residents find forever homes full of heart

Build it and they will come. That was the philosophy behind Anderson Ave, a purpose-built facility that provides independent housing, with around-the-clock support, for residents supported by CareSouth under the NDIS.

For the past 20 years CareSouth has provided Supported Independent Living (SIL) support services to residents at Nan Bishop House and Tartarian House in the Shoalhaven. The Supported Independent Living model has been such a success that Sam, CareSouth's Supported Independent Living Operations Manager, was looking for an opportunity to expand the service. So when Sam learned Southern Cross Housing was building a new facility - Anderson Ave - which would allow residents to independently hold a lease on a property, she knew it was an opportunity that was too good to miss.

Sam, along with Shoalhaven Regional Manager Michael Mason, formed a successful partnership with Southern Cross Housing and Anderson Ave opened its doors in October last year. It is home to five residents, aged between 28 and 60, who rent accommodation from Southern Cross Housing while getting 24/7 support from CareSouth staff. The model aligns perfectly with CareSouth's vision to provide individualised support while building capacity towards independence.

"It is one of our core principles to provide independence where we can, and give residents control over their own lives," said Sam. "The way I see it, we work to support the residents in their own home. That's the way we have always operated; these houses are their forever homes. The 10 residents who live at Nan Bishop and Tartarian have been there for nearly

20 years. The same will be true for Anderson Ave."

Sam jokingly refers to the Anderson Ave project as 'my baby'. Given it took almost nine months to finish the build and get all the policies and processes in place before the five residents could move in, it was not unlike a pregnancy. Sam also spent many a sleepless night worrying about the logistics of setting up a cohesive community. Will the residents all get their first accommodation choice? (Amazingly they all did). Will they all get along with each other? Sam need not have worried.

While there is an occasional dispute over the TV remote and what to watch in the common areas, Sam says one of the most heart-warming aspects of Anderson Ave has been the strong bonds residents have formed with one another and staff.



“ Each of the residents bring their own creative talents to the table ”

“They just came together so well,” said Sam. “They’re a great bunch. Two of the residents had never lived in supported accommodation before, they had always lived at home with their family. It was a huge change for them but they have been amazing. One of those residents is Carmel, she’s 59 and has always lived with her Mum who is now in her 90s. It’s been so lovely to see her coming out of her shell.

“Carmel came from a generation where disabilities were seen as a limitation, so everything was done for her, but now she is doing all those things for herself and it’s been so wonderful to watch her build capacity and relationships.”

Capacity-building is one of the core principles of SIL accommodation. Each resident’s unit has a kitchenette and laundry area to maintain and build on independent living skills, as well as common areas to create cohesive relationships with other residents.

“The common areas of the house promote positive relationships with others,” said Sam. “It allows residents to learn teamwork skills, in a safe, family-like setting. Residents and staff members all work together preparing meals and choosing entertainment options. All the residents are highly creative and enjoy spending time together.”

It’s something they have been doing a lot of recently due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures. Sam laughs when she recalls how worried she was about “whether we got the mix of residents right”.

“At the time that was the most stressful thing in the world for me,” she said.

Little did she know 2020 would have much more stress in store, kicking off with devastating bushfires followed by a global pandemic. While Coronavirus has been a challenge, Sam and the staff who work

at Anderson Ave, including Senior Support Worker Kristine, have risen to the task. Sam and her staff set up extra one-on-one supports for residents, developed a clear communication plan for worried families, implemented a stringent hygiene and cleaning regimen (which will remain in place as a benchmark standard) and put a strategy in place for a positive infection (which hasn’t been required).

“So many practice and quality improvements have come out of COVID-19, as well as the bushfires with the emergency plans we developed, so that’s been a real silver lining,” said Sam.

Sam believes part of the reason everyone coped so well during both the fires and COVID-19 is due to the fact they genuinely like the company of each other and staff.

“Each of the residents bring their own creative talents to the table,” said Sam. “There’s a budding musician who loves singing and music lessons. His other passion is fishing and he’s a master on the BBQ so everyone is well-fed. But he doesn’t like relinquishing control of the remote.

“There’s also an amazingly competitive sportswoman who has an award named after her at her old school. She loves cooking and is an absolute whiz with a jigsaw puzzle.

“We have a very creative woman who enjoys sewing and building things, and another wonderful lady whose colouring in is magnificent. Having never been in a care situation outside of family she is really opening up and communicating with everyone. Another resident loves her computer and phone time but also really enjoys getting out to cafes and the movies so this time in lockdown has been very hard for her.

“While routines have changed slightly the residents have coped really well with these changes. We have maintained their connections to family and friends, including residents at Tartarian and Nan Bishop, through Skype and video calls. It’s become part of their daily routine, and routine and consistency are among the most important things we can give these residents.”

So is a forever home. In fact the ‘forever home’ model has been such a success that Sam and her team will open a new SIL residence in Sanctuary Point next month.



A room of her own helps young woman find hope

Jane* was 14 when she became homeless and started couchsurfing and living with friends or extended family. Her most recent living situation, at the age of 18, saw her crashing in her boyfriend's dining room after their relationship ended. But the household was dysfunctional and Jane was suffering mental and physical abuse from her boyfriend's mother and his siblings.

Jane finally worked up the courage to leave in March, after a Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS) caseworker began supporting the family.

Jane confided in Nicole, the SYFS caseworker, about the abuse and Nicole referred her to CareSouth's Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS).

It was a difficult decision for Jane to leave. She was fearful of the repercussions and did not know what her future would hold.

"It was scary at first because I didn't know how to leave a mentally abusive and physically abusive situation," said Jane.

But with Nicole's help she finally made what she now knows was one of the best decisions of her young life. "If I didn't leave when I did I would have been stuck (in lockdown) in an abusive household," said Jane. "I was already self-harming and my mental health would have deteriorated even more. Every abusive house I've been in, I've found a way to get out of it but the timing with this one was really spot-on. I'm in a good space now, I'm happy."

Jane's SYSS outreach support caseworker Kim couldn't agree more.

Kim has seen just how far Jane has come in the few short months she has been supported by SYSS.

"Jane has worked so hard to gain her independence during a really difficult time," said Kim. "The biggest thing for Jane was that she had no income so we supported her to apply for a Tax File Number, bank accounts and a Medicare card to be able to apply for a Youth Allowance payment. Many young people take all that documentation for granted. Jane didn't have all the paperwork she needed at hand. So it took a while to chase all that up. Then on the day we went to Centrelink it was at the peak of the COVID-19 unemployment crisis so people had been queueing for hours."

But Jane took it all in her stride and on March 30, a really important day for her, she received her very first payment on her path to independence. Jane is now studying for her Vocational Pathways course at TAFE and can't decide whether to become a tattooist or counsellor.

She has also learned how to cook, despite a few hiccups.

"CareSouth has helped me gain independence," said Jane. "I've learned how to cook, although I had an incident with accidentally setting off the smoke alarm once which was a bit scary. My favourite meals to cook are chicken drumsticks and I like to cook steak too. I'm really good at cleaning, I didn't need any help with that."

Now that Jane has a safe space to call her own she plans to get her licence and work towards stable housing. She currently lives in SYSS transitional housing and continues to be supported by Nicole and Kim.

"It's been a great collaboration between the three of us – Nicole, myself and Jane – to get her where she is today," said Kim.

And Jane could not be more grateful.

"Nicole gave me a voice and Kim listened," said Jane.

Jane celebrated her 19th birthday whilst staying at SYSS and being supported by Kim and Nicole. And for the first time in her young life Jane felt like she had a proper birthday party.

"I felt really special when they did that," said Jane. "I wasn't expecting it, it was a really nice surprise. It's better than sitting in your room crying. We had a BBQ and a cake with strawberries on top. They got me a face mask and some make up. It was just like celebrating with family. They feel like my family."

Kim is so proud of how far Jane has come in such a short time and marvels at her strength of character and resilience to all the really difficult things life has thrown at her. Jane is equally proud of gaining her independence and having a place to call her own.

"Yeah never give up on yourself," said Jane. "And never give up on hope. I gave up on hope until I met Nicole and Kim, but now I have it again. So be strong, be brave don't give up on life."

It's good advice from one so young who has lived through so much.

*Name has been changed

“I felt really special when they did that, I wasn't expecting it, it was a really nice surprise.”



Champions

Champion Carers a Light at the End of the Tunnel

At no time has the phrase “it takes a village to raise a child” been more relevant than in this COVID-19 lockdown space we find ourselves. Recent months have shown us just how much we rely on our extended family, our school community and those outside our home who transfer the knowledge and skills onto our young people to help them become the best possible version of themselves.

But what if there is no one in your village, no support network you can turn to for a helping hand at any time, let alone a few months in lockdown. Unfortunately that is the case for many families who don't have a wraparound support network outside of school and the home.

That is why the CareSouth Champions program makes such a difference in the lives of vulnerable children. Champions matches vulnerable families with volunteer carers and mentors who provide an additional layer of love and care through spending quality time with young people.

One such family, based on the South Coast, recently played a starring role in a short film highlighting the difference a helping hand can make in the lives of those who are most vulnerable. The film, commissioned by Community Industry Group – the peak body working for community services – and shot by Beyond Empathy Films, shows how creating connections builds better communities.

The family – Mum Belinda and her four children – were doing it tough, with little support and very few networks outside the home. Belinda was referred to CareSouth's Champions and says the program changed her family's life.

“It's just been that light at the end of the tunnel,” said Belinda. “We were

heading towards dark places and weren't sure where to go.”

Champions caseworker Maggie, who also appeared in the video, says volunteer carers are carefully matched with young people and provide “a space for the child to go (where) they're able to heal if they might have past traumas”.

“They're able to have a stable environment, because at home they could have several siblings and they might not get that opportunity to have one-on-one time with someone,” said Maggie.

After careful consideration of the carers' and the child's needs, former Champions caseworker Mark (who now works for CareSouth's Permanency Support Program in Batemans Bay) linked one of Belinda's boys, Cohen, with South Coast carers Jackie and Alan. It turned out to be a perfect match, not just for Cohen but for the whole family.

“I just wanted to give back to children, I haven't had any of my own,” said Jackie. “So Alan and I attended a couple of (Champions) meetings and we thought this is for us.”

While the initial link was for Cohen to spend time with Jackie and Alan the pair ended up taking the whole family under their wing. “We fell in love with the whole family,” said Jackie. “I got quite close to Belinda as well.”

The program is designed to not only support children and young people, but give parents a helping hand, a break, or sometimes even a shoulder to cry on.

“We go to Aunty Jackie's and Uncle Alan's to give Mum a break,” says Jacob.

“When Mum gets a bit upset sometimes Jackie and Alan come over and give

that support to Mum,” agrees Cohen.

Briley, the oldest of the siblings, saw how much fun Cohen was having during time spent with Jackie and Alan and was the catalyst for bringing the whole family into the fold.

“I was kinda jealous actually when Cohen was going, that's why I asked if I could come,” said Briley. “Probably one of the biggest opportunities in life is to have two really good caring, loving people just to have you for a weekend and care for you and love you.”

Cohen was happy to share his time with Alfalfa and Gangsta Granny, the nicknames he had given Jackie and Alan, which they are utterly delighted by.

And Belinda has seen a huge change in the family dynamic since Jackie and Alan came into their lives.

“The kids are more connected, they get on better, they're just having fun, they're just living life,” said Belinda. “They're happy being together. (Jackie and Alan) mean the world. They absolutely changed all of our lives in such a positive way.”

The feeling is mutual, with Jackie pointing out that Belinda and her children have added so much value to her and Alan's life also.

“Alan and I have learned a lot from this as well. It's probably made our bond stronger,” said Jackie.

Cohen sums up nicely the important role Jackie and Alan play in the family's life.

“It's precious,” he said. “It's rare in the world to have such good carers and a good, loving Mum and a beautiful sister and my two brothers. I'm really lucky to have such a good Aunty and Uncle like Alfalfa and Gangsta Granny.”

Evaluation Shows Champions Program is Priceless

The Champions program, formerly known as Aunties & Uncles, is a foundational program for our organisation and has been assisting families, children and young people in the Shoalhaven for almost 30 years, expanding to include the Illawarra and Ulladulla regions in the past decade.

The model was designed to link disadvantaged children with volunteer mentors in the community, with the aim of developing long-term positive relationships for children and ongoing support networks for vulnerable families.

“Champions staff work closely with vulnerable young people, their families and potential carers when they link a child with a volunteer,” said Champions Team Leader Michelle. “It is really important to find the correct match, for the young people, their family and for carers. And when a match works it is amazing to see the joy it brings to everyone involved.”

Despite anecdotal evidence from Champions caseworkers, young people, their families and volunteer carers about the success of early intervention and the difference it makes in their lives, the program had not been evaluated through its evolution – including its expansion and changed funding structures – until recently.

Dr Kylie Evans-Locke, CareSouth’s Research and Practice Manager, undertook a robust program evaluation involving 19 children, young people, their families, carers and caseworkers.

She used surveys, interviews and a body mapping exercise to determine if the Champions program improved social connections, time spent outdoors, physical activity levels and positive impacts on children and young people.

“Anecdotal evidence from caseworkers suggested the Champions program created positive relationships with volunteer carers and this corresponded with improvements in well-being, resilience and the self-confidence levels of linked young people,” said Dr Evans-Locke.

“Caseworker documentation also noted that youth mentoring services may have the indirect effect of reducing birth family risk factors. This anecdotal evidence is important in light of the NSW Government focusing on preventative action for young people and families. But we needed measurable data to evaluate the impact of the program, alongside the anecdotal evidence.”

So Dr Evans-Locke began collecting evidence and collating data through surveys, interviews and body mapping (a life-size artwork created by tracing around the body and filling it with words and symbols that are meaningful to the individual). Dr Evans-Locke found evidence, through surveys, interviews and the young people’s drawings that “the linkages between volunteer carers and children and young people have increased life opportunities and experiences, along with developing the social connections of families”.

“During the body mapping, all children and young people who took part reported special activities such as dog walking, beach visits, going to the movies and mowing the lawn as outcomes they have experienced by being part of Champions,” said Dr Evans-Locke.



“Outcomes from this evaluation have shown the development of solid connections, based on trust and frequent interactions are essential in creating lasting relationships between carers and children and young people. And insights from young people indicate that linkages have a positive influence on wider issues of routines, physical activity and self-confidence.”

The Champions program provides ‘the village of volunteer carers’ that many vulnerable families don’t have access to. And Dr Evans-Locke’s evaluation showed that linking a young person with a volunteer mentor not only improves a child’s connection to community, physical activity levels and time spent outdoors but also extends the social connections and community networks for families experiencing challenges in their everyday lives.

“Initial evidence presented in this evaluation shows children and young people believe the program promotes more positive interactions with parents and family, in addition to reported improvements in well-being,” said Dr Evans-Locke.

CareSouth’s Champions program is partially funded by the Department of Communities and Justice and, based on the program’s ongoing success, was recently awarded a further five-year funding allocation.

This research by Dr Evans-Locke and her CareSouth colleague Dr Ching-I Hsu has been published in a peer reviewed journal, ‘Evaluation Journal of Australasia’.



PSP Restoration

Family reconnected through restoration

Charlotte* loves nothing more than pottering around the veggie garden in her rural backyard with her Mum looking on and giving gardening advice. The scenario, while mundanely normal, is not something Charlotte takes for granted. Charlotte was seven when she was taken into care, along with her two brothers. Now a decade later she had finally returned home to her family. And she could not be happier.

Asked how she felt the day she came home Charlotte simply says: "probably one of the best feelings I will ever have".

She can recall it in vivid detail. "We had a welcome home bonfire with my family and the neighbours. We ate takeaway. Nothing can beat that feeling, it is one of the happiest days of my life," said Charlotte. "And when I saw my room, I just got this warm, bubbly feeling in my gut like you're meant to be there."

At 17 Charlotte 'voted with her feet' after finding her voice and expressing a strong desire to return home to her mum, said CareSouth caseworker Amy*. Not long after Charlotte returned home, her 15-year-old brother followed in her footsteps. After a decade apart Charlotte's family was reunited.

The child protection landscape has changed significantly since Charlotte and her siblings Harry* and Dean* (now an adult working full-time and living independently) entered statutory Out-of-Home Care. Under the government's Permanency Support Program (PSP) legislation, introduced two years ago, these long-term care orders are no

longer imposed by the court and cases are regularly reviewed, with a view to restoration, guardianship or adoption.

"I believe these children could have been restored to Mum years ago," said Amy. "But children who were under the care of the Minister until the age of 18 didn't have their situation looked at again. Now things are different under the lens of PSP, and restoration is a priority where possible.

"In this case the kids have voted with their feet and left their (foster care) placements at separate times and both returned home to Mum, and it looks like all court orders will be rescinded."

It took a complete breakdown at school mid-last year before Charlotte was able to find her voice and tell her school counsellor, and later her caseworker, how lost and unloved she felt in 'the system'. After receiving the necessary support from her caseworker Charlotte went into a short-term care arrangement while CareSouth explored the possibility of Charlotte returning home. Charlotte's caseworker soon realised that restoration was the best possible solution.



"Mum is in a completely different situation as opposed to where she was when her children went into care in 2010. Back then she was in a domestic violence relationship with the children's father," said Amy.

"Now she is in a long-term stable relationship, has two young children with her current partner and those children are not subject to any protection orders, they are loved and they are safe. And once Mum was out of the DV relationship with the father she thrived."

When Michelle's* children were removed in 2010, family contact was supervised by a support worker and limited to four times a year, during school holidays.

"It almost broke me," Michelle recalls, holding back her tears. "But now I have my family back. It's a happy ending story with a lot of crap bits in the middle. It's all fallen into place like a normal family should be and should've been."

"No words can explain the relief," says Michelle when asked how she felt when she was told the court orders would be rescinded, meaning there would be no child protection orders for her family.

"I'm just so happy to have my children home. We all are. My youngest one even gave up his bedroom. The kids were meant to be here and they are home now."

Harry was reluctant to talk about his journey but said he was "very happy to be home".

Charlotte is now in Year 11 at school and she is happy and settled. She has a part-time job in a café and her confidence in herself and her place in the world has skyrocketed since returning home.

"I'm so glad I finally found my voice and spoke up about how unhappy I was," she said. "It is essential for young people like me, in the foster care system, to know they will be listened to. It is not wrong to speak up, it is something we need to do because it made me realise people really cared. I wasn't alone and no longer felt like I had no one."

"Now that I'm home, I'm safe and I'm happy. My next step is to help other people like me realise that they have a voice, that their caseworker is their advocate. Being in foster care is not something to be ashamed of, it's not our fault. We are only kids, we shouldn't blame ourselves."

Charlotte said she will always be grateful to her caseworker for listening to her concerns and supporting her decision to return to Mum. And Amy is equally grateful that she was able to play a part in reuniting a family.

"I will have one final home visit with the family, to tie up loose ends and say goodbye, but basically we are at the point where these teenagers are home," said Amy.

"And when you see them together they are a loving, tight-knit family with the usual sibling banter, silliness and teasing. Just a normal, everyday family. And Mum is doing what mums do, providing a safe, loving home for all four kids, making sure they go to school, linking them in with the necessary support services, and giving them all the love and care they need and deserve."

"The kids look so beautiful, healthy and happy and I am so pleased this unexpected but amazing restoration happened on my watch. I am really proud of both children who were comfortable enough to use their voice, contact me and say 'we just want to go home to Mum'."

*Names have been changed

“The kids look so beautiful, healthy and happy and I am so pleased this unexpected but amazing restoration happened on my watch.”



Carer helps keep families

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Bernadette has been a CareSouth foster carer for more than a decade. Based in Thurgoona, just outside of Albury, she has provided a loving home for dozens of children and young people in our southern region.

One of the things that makes Bernadette such an exceptional carer is her ability to recognise the importance of keeping families connected. She does this by maintaining strong familial attachment throughout the time a child is under her wing.

"At the end of the day I believe kids should be with their family if it is safe for them," said Bernadette. "I became a foster carer to help these little people, to give them somewhere safe while whatever is going on in the background gets sorted out."


Bernadette knows that her role as a short-term, emergency and respite foster carer is transient and, as emotionally difficult as this can sometimes be, the goal is to return children and young people to their families wherever possible.

"It makes me feel grateful I can do that for kids," said Bernadette. "For them to be in this situation in the first place, it's not the child's fault. And many parents have had their own trauma history, so I really feel for them."

Bernadette, and her extended family, form strong attachments to the young people in her care and saying goodbye is always hard. But she knows the best place for them is with their family, if possible. While children remain in Bernadette's home she does everything in her power to maintain and facilitate birth family bonding and attachment, moving heaven and earth to ensure children and young people have regular face-to-face and phone contact with their birth families.

"If a child is of an age where they can understand what is happening in their lives, it is very important that they know that your relationship with their birth parents is a positive one," said Bernadette.

"I do always try to build a very nice bond with the birth parents I get to meet or talk to. Some you don't always get to meet. But I think the ones you do meet, most of the time they feel the same way. They appreciate that you are taking care of their child, until they are able to take over where possible."



The hope is that this holistic approach to foster care will mean better, more positive outcomes for children, young people, birth parents and carers.

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Recently Bernadette helped one birth parent, who was working towards restoration of her child, get back on her feet by providing “bits and pieces, and a few knick-knacks to make her house more of a home”.

“By doing this I knew in my heart she had everything she needed in the home so all she had to do was provide lots of love and hugs once her children were home,” said Bernadette. “At the end of the day our primary responsibility is to look after children, but we need to look after birth parents as well.”

CareSouth also recognises the importance of looking after our foster carers, who are often the glue that hold fractured families together while they heal and rehabilitate.

Last year CareSouth launched its Carer Experience Project, as part of the organisation’s commitment to providing the best quality care and service to our clients and carers like Bernadette. The project captures the wealth of knowledge and experiences of carers from across our regions, through targeted interviews and consultation meetings.

The information collected from carers who have been interviewed will be used to increase carer satisfaction and retention across CareSouth’s wide geographic footprint. The Carer Experience Project will also identify opportunities to innovate our service delivery to carers and the children they support.

In the first phase of this project CareSouth focused on short-term, emergency and respite carers, as their role has changed in both complexity and compliance over recent years with the introduction of the government’s Permanency Support Program (PSP).

Introduced in October 2018, PSP improves safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for children and young people who are currently in care or at risk of coming into care. Under PSP foster carers 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.

Future phases will look at other aspects of care so we can get an overall view of what being a foster carer with CareSouth looks like.

The hope is that this holistic approach to foster care will mean better, more positive outcomes for children, young people, birth parents and carers.





SafeCare a Huge Success

When CareSouth's Brighter Futures team won the tender to launch SafeCare – an innovative, early intervention parenting program – no one could have predicted just how successful it would be.

CareSouth was one of a handful of providers chosen by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice three years ago to implement SafeCare, 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.

Since rolling out the program, CareSouth became the first official accredited SafeCare agency in the state last year. CareSouth currently has 11 SafeCare providers who are working with 27 families across the Illawarra, and an internal SafeCare trainer and four internal SafeCare coaches.

On top of those already impressive accolades a family working with SafeCare provider Emma V was the 100th in NSW to graduate from the program.

"The family overcame quite a few hurdles to complete the SafeCare program," said Emma. "They were actually homeless twice but Mum was really dedicated and motivated to finish and they were very consistent with appointments.

"Even though she had so much other stuff going on, she had to look for housing, she always made SafeCare appointments a priority."

Of the 100 families who have graduated from SafeCare statewide, 27 have worked with CareSouth.

The ground-breaking US-based family preservation program teaches at-risk families practical parenting skills to enhance safety, stability and security. Skilled SafeCare providers have to complete an intensive four-day course before visiting families and providing module-based instructions, modelling, role-play rehearsal, constructive feedback and clear goals to help enhance parenting skills. Once certified, each SafeCare provider also completes a monthly check-in to ensure that they are continuing to meet the fidelity of the program. Providers are then able to become SafeCare coaches and trainers.

Emma R, a Brighter Futures Team Leader, is one of only a select few who have reached Trainer status in NSW. Emma was also one of the fastest ever SafeCare providers to achieve accreditation and has worked her way through the ranks to become an internal SafeCare trainer for CareSouth.

When SafeCare's US-based facilitators Lacell Joseph and Akilah Thomas, from Georgia State University's National SafeCare Training and Research Facility, visited CareSouth shortly after the program began three years ago they were amazed with the work being carried out at CareSouth.

The Americans were particularly impressed with how quickly CareSouth's Brighter Futures staff completed the training modules to become certified providers.



Access for Families



“Emma got certified so quickly,” said Lacell.

“We were just blown away. CareSouth didn’t let barriers that other organisations had reported impact their implementation. They made a choice to make it work. CareSouth was the very first agency to have all of their SafeCare providers certified before anyone else.”

“And it really has worked,” added Akilah.

Emma said CareSouth is getting closer to meeting and exceeding the organisation’s 2020 target of 50% of eligible families completing the program, which runs weekly for 50-90 minutes delivering 6 sessions in each of the 3 modules over an 18-week period.

“Families have become more confident in their own skill set,” said Emma. “They have more positive interactions with their

children, as well as a better knowledge of health outcomes 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.”

One family who has benefited from the program is Wollongong mum Amy, 27, and her daughter, who is almost two years old. Amy recently completed the SafeCare program and said it has helped her care for her daughter “in the best possible way”.

“It’s helped me and I’m thankful that I’ve done it. I think that every parent, even couples should do it, because it’s really good.”

SafeCare also helped Amy build on her parenting skills as she works towards regaining care of her two older children, who are in her parents’ care under a DCJ intervention order.

Brighter Futures Program Manager Alex hopes SafeCare will continue to be a ‘services-as-usual’ program when the three-year pilot program ends.

“The program really works for families and the results have been extremely positive,” said Alex. “After working through the modules families have more positive interactions with their children and a better knowledge of health outcomes 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. Delivering modules in this way fits the needs of the families we work with.”

Therapy dogs

Furry friends provide comfort and cuddles

At a time when the community is being encouraged to stay at home, many are turning to their furry pals for comfort. Four-legged friends make excellent colleagues, are great listeners, always provide unconditional love, and are great givers of slobbery hugs, even in the midst of social distancing bans.

That is why two of our hardest-working employees during this time in isolation have been Buster our Story Dog, who is based in the Illawarra, and Rosie our Therapy Dog from our Wagga Wagga office.

Each week, up until home schooling began, Buster would join students in CareSouth's Homework Hub to listen to them read a book with his handler Natalie.

CareSouth Homework Hub coordinator Danielle said in the 12 months that Buster has been sharing stories with students their literacy skills and enjoyment of reading has increased.

"We are extremely passionate about literacy at CareSouth," said Danielle. "And we have seen students gain confidence in their literacy skills each time they read with Buster. He is a very attentive listener, he is not judgemental and he loves a scratch or a pat, which is also therapeutic for the kids, with research showing patting a pet lowers a child's heart rate and anxiety levels.

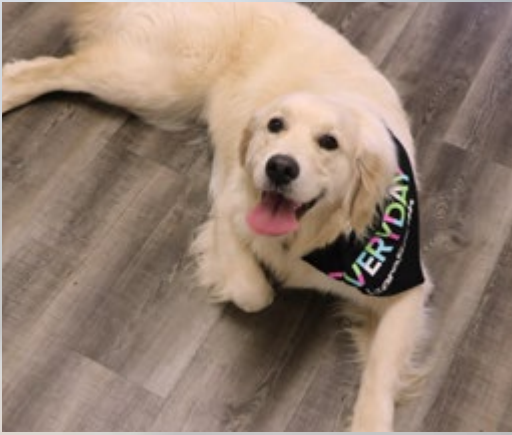
"Now more than ever it is so important to help children and young people in our programs manage any anxiety they may be experiencing and keep them connected to the things they love during periods of upheaval.

"During the lockdown carers were under additional pressure to home school young people. So in a bid to support carers and young people during this difficult time CareSouth continued to run the Homework Hub via a virtual platform. And Buster was definitely the star."

While the Homework Hub's online learning is not quite as structured as face-to-face mentoring, the young people who have joined the Virtual Homework Hub have enjoyed quizzes, scavenger hunts and Story Time with Buster. Many students like to get their own dogs and sit them on their lap while listening to Nat read with Buster. CareSouth has also been sharing weekly Story Time videos with Buster on our Facebook page so everyone can enjoy reading with furry friends.

Rosie, an accredited Therapy Dog who has graduated from the Lead the Way Institute and met the standard for Visiting Therapy Dog and Handler, has also been doing some wonderful work in the Western region with vulnerable children and young people.

Rosie and her handler, Western Senior Clinician Tracey, completed the intensive six day Visiting Therapy Dog and Handler course last year and Rosie began working with Tracey in Assisted Animal Therapy.



During training Rosie was a standout in the 'Inappropriate Handling' category, meaning she remains calm in overwhelming situations with lots of people, rough patting or a restraining hug - all scenarios she has found herself in with excited children as she helps Tracey heal some of the trauma experienced by children and young people in our Western regions.

One thing we have all learned from our period of isolation is the importance of enjoying the simple things, like cuddles with our pets. So CareSouth is encouraging



young people from all of our regions to sit with their pets, or a stuffed toy if they don't own a pet, and share some quality time enjoying their therapeutic company and reading a book with them. You can also tune in with them to listen to Story Time with Buster on CareSouth's Facebook page.

“
...we have seen students
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”



Meet & Eat

Kids are itching to get back in the kitchen

On the first Thursday of each month CareSouth's Community Hub turns into a communal restaurant, complete with its own in-house culinary team.

The chefs often take diners on a world tour with themed meals including a Mexican Fiesta, a Chinese New Year celebration dinner, and a traditional three course Christmas feast complete with glazed ham.

The before-service buzz is no different to any commercial kitchen. Knives are sharpened, fry pans are fired up, food is chopped and prepped, the banter is good natured and the production line mirrors that of a restaurant pass. But you won't find any Gordon Ramsay types barking orders and dropping inappropriate words. This is because the cooks are still in high school.

The budding chefs from Illawarra Sports High (ISH) - Year 12 students Harry and Jordon - are studying their Certificate 2 in hospitality, and both have gained early entry into prestigious Sydney cooking school Kenvale College of Hospitality, Cookery and Events. Despite their

busy schedule the students - with support from their Food Technology and Hospitality teachers - volunteer at Meet & Eat each month to create, prepare, cook and serve a themed meal for up to 70 members of the Berkeley community.

With Meet & Eat numbers increasing, CareSouth Hub Development Officer Natalie set up the successful partnership with ISH three years ago. It was an opportunity

to not only give students hands-on experience, cooking for and serving such a large group of people in a short space of time, but also allowed Meet & Eat to cater for a growing crowd.

"Many of those who come along to Meet & Eat sometimes struggle to make ends meet, especially during these tough times," said Natalie. "So a hot meal with plenty of leftovers to take away is always embraced by members of the community."

ISH Food Technology and Hospitality teacher Jane Jarman said partnerships like Meet & Eat are essential for students to broaden their skill set as well as their community participation in



a safe, supportive environment.

“Our students have learned so many new skills, and not just cooking skills but life skills,” said Jane. “Programs like this are crucial for them to get hands-on experience. It’s a soft entry into the world of commercial cooking for students. It’s also really humbling and confronting for them to see how difficult life can be for other people, humbling because they realise how lucky they are.”

It is a sentiment that the students share.

“Working here and giving back is so important because CareSouth does so much to help the community,” said Harry, the Year 12 captain at Illawarra Sports High.

Jordan agrees: “It makes us feel good inside that we are able to do that. Meet & Eat gives us something to look forward to, there’s more to life than just worrying about yourself. Having the ability to do that makes you feel fulfilled inside and when the people we cook for see us out in the community they always say hi to us.”

So it was fitting when Jordan won the Illawarra and South East region Hospitality Student of the Year 2020 at the recent VET in Schools Awards. Harry was also highly commended in the same category.

“This award means a lot to me, I’ve always love the hospitality industry,” said Jordan who works at Illawarra Sport High’s Café ISH, along with three part-time jobs in the hospitality industry, while also studying for his HSC and volunteering at CareSouth.



And it is not just the ISH students who give up their time to volunteer for Meet & Eat. Louise Mahon, one of the Food Technology and Hospitality teachers who helps students with the food preparation said other staff members frequently help out.

“One of our head teachers Pete Davies donates produce from his farm for the students to use,” said Louise. “It’s such a great program and the benefits are twofold. It builds confidence in their food prep skills as well being part of a wider community. The confidence they get from talking to the community is invaluable. It raises awareness of being inclusive.”

Food Technology and Hospitality teacher Carrin Di Milia, who got the CareSouth/ISH partnership off the ground with Natalie, laughs as she fondly recalls the meals prepared by the first cohort of students three years ago.

“The kitchen was a bit chaotic with the first group of students who went through the program, but now it is a well-oiled machine,” she said.

The Meet and Eat program continues to provide monthly take-away meals until health guidelines around COVID-19 change and Natalie is happy to report that once the senior ISH students returned to school after lockdown they headed straight back into the kitchen.

“The ISH students used all the fresh produce from their school garden to make huge vats of vegetable soup, which they then donated to CareSouth to distribute to the Berkeley community,” said Natalie.

“It’s such a kind, thoughtful gesture. And it just goes to show how dedicated and passionate these students are, not just to cooking, but to helping their community.”



Driver/Mentoring Program

Defence Forces Step Up to Provide a Help

When you are homeless, getting your licence is not a priority, a roof over your head and a warm bed is. So when Wade*, then 18, was forced to leave his Wollongong house due to significant risk factors, he fled to the Shoalhaven to find work and a place to call home. Wade got a job as a sales assistant in the retail sector but his weekly wage was not enough to secure a private rental property.

When Wade reached out to Southern Youth and Family Services for help, his caseworker referred him to CareSouth's Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS). SYSS supports over 170 young people a year from the Shoalhaven LGA who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Of these young people 34% identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, more than 65% have a diagnosed mental health issue and 70% left home to escape family violence, child abuse or family breakdown. The majority of SYSS clients come from the child protection system.

Wade spent almost 12 months in the SYSS program, first in the eight-week residential program where he was offered crisis accommodation and casework support, followed by almost a year in the SYSS transitional property where he received outreach support.

Wade rode his pushbike to and from work each day and eventually saved enough money to move into alternative accommodation. But the commute to work was even longer. During his time at SYSS Wade had the opportunity to join the Shoalhaven Driver/Mentoring Program, a partnership with HMAS Albatross and a Shoalhaven Driving School.

The program gives young people access to CareSouth's pool cars, a free professional driving lesson, and ongoing lessons with a mentor from HMAS Albatross to gain the required log book hours needed for a provisional licence.

The program began several years ago when CareSouth staff identified that paying for driving instruction is a major barrier to independence for homeless young people and those in residential or foster care.

"Without family support young people have no opportunity to achieve the 120 hours driving experience needed for their licence," said SYSS Team Leader Kim.

"To help young people at risk get their licence CareSouth developed a partnership with HMAS Albatross, where Defence staff become mentors for young people so they get the required driving experience and recorded log book hours to gain their provisional licence."

Wade began his driving hours with Chief Petty Officer Aircrewman Greg Doran, who generously donated his time to mentor Wade for several months so he could complete his required log book hours.

"I got my L's when I was 19," said Wade. "But then you have to do 120 hours of driving, that's 100 in the day and 20 at night, as well as city hours, highway hours and country hours. It's tough to cover all those bases, especially when you don't have access to a car. It took a while to finally get all those hours but I got there with Greg's help."

Chief Petty Officer Doran is modest when asked how he helped Wade as part of CareSouth's Driver/Mentoring program.

“
**Without family support
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”

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“I just sat in the left hand seat and provided some mentorship,” laughed Greg. “But in all seriousness I feel very fortunate to be making a difference for someone who probably otherwise wouldn’t have the opportunity to get their licence.”

“As you know on the South Coast in particular, for young people who don’t have access to family getting around is hard if you can’t drive. The options are extremely limited, unless you’re a triathlete and happy to ride your bike everywhere. The more young people we can help get their licence, the more we can get them out and mobile so they can start chasing work.”

“It’s so important for young men and women to have good strong role models in the community and it’s quite confronting for people who haven’t been able to trust society to open up and talk about things. But eventually that’s the point that we got to and I was able to build (Wade’s) confidence not only around his driving but his

life in general. (Wade) has come a long way, he progressed quite well from a guy who was really nervous to someone who has the confidence to gain their independence.”

Wade is now saving to buy a car, plans to get his provisional licence once the COVID-19 crisis is over and is grateful he had the chance to gain the required log book hours with Greg through CareSouth’s Driver/Mentoring program.

“It’s pretty hard to get around Nowra without a car, there’s not a lot of public transport and it’s a big area,” said Wade. “I’m very grateful I could do the Driver/Mentoring program. Greg was a great teacher, he made me feel comfortable while driving and that’s really important because it can be a bit stressful. Getting a licence these days isn’t as easy as it used to be, there’s a lot more hours you have to do, a lot more traffic and there’s a lot more distractions.”

Along with giving up their time as volunteer driver mentors HMAS Albatross staff also host regular fundraisers for CareSouth. The fundraising partnership began when Shoalhaven Regional Manager Michael Mason and Shoalhaven Permanency Support Program Manager Chris Stubbs hosted a presentation with 723 Squadron members, focusing on the difference positive role models and mentors can make in boosting the confidence and well-being of at-risk young people. The 723 Squadron were quick to jump on board and help out and have raised an impressive amount of money which is used in our programs for vulnerable young people.

“The squadron have always had a nominated charity and were looking for a local organisation to support,” said Michael. “When they heard what we do they selected CareSouth. They have monthly barbeques and auction a VIP parking spot at the base to raise money for our support programs. They also host Bunnings barbeques and have raised thousands of dollars to help homeless youth in Shoalhaven’s SYSS program and at-risk youth in our Champions program, as well as volunteering for our community events like NAIDOC.”

Another long-time supporter of CareSouth is the Navy personnel posted to RAAF Base Wagga, who last month raised \$1500 for vulnerable young people in CareSouth’s Western region. This is an impressive fundraising effort, given it was during the height of the Coronavirus pandemic where people were tightening their purse strings, rather than opening their wallets. The Wagga Naval Base donation will be used for our children and young people at Christmas time.

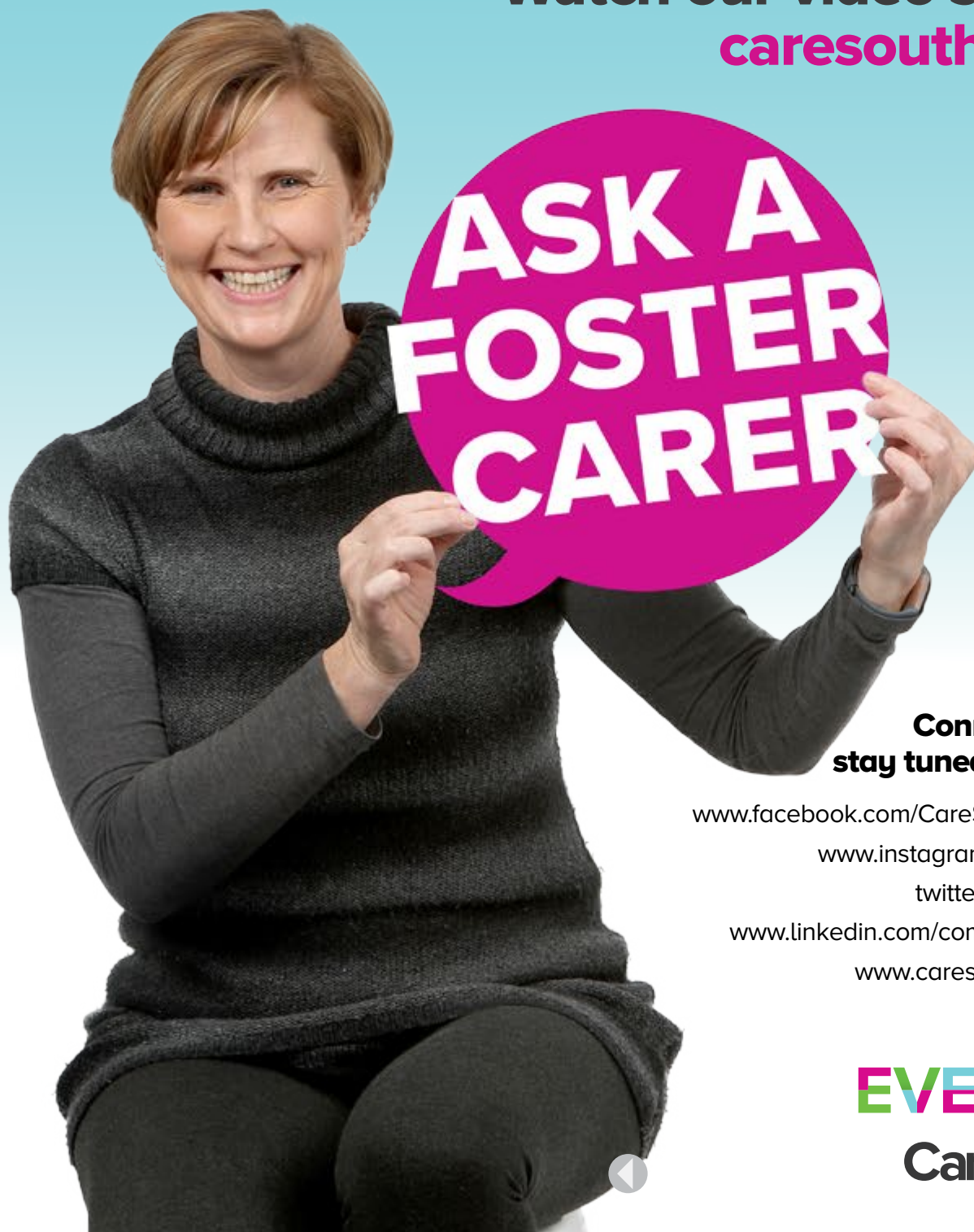
CareSouth would like to thank both HMAS Albatross and the Navy personnel at RAAF Base Wagga for their continued support. We appreciate our community partnerships with such wonderful teams so much.

*not his real name



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