



CareSouth EVERY DAY

Magazine Issue Six

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honoured**

**Restoration
against all odds**

**Helping survivors of
domestic violence**

in issue six

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This issue

is dedicated to Deniliquin foster carer Jody who passed away recently after a long illness. Jody and her husband Stan worked alongside CareSouth for many years, supporting and guiding children and young people in their care. This is a small tribute to the love Jody showed during this time, our thoughts are with Stan and their children.

Images used throughout this magazine are either stock images; images used with permission of parents; or images used with permission of the person/s featured. This magazine contains stories about domestic violence. If you or anyone you know needs support, you can contact Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service on 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732), Lifeline 131 114, or Beyond Blue 1300 224 636



Executive Officers' Welcome

Welcome to the 2021 edition of EVERYDAY, the CareSouth magazine. As we continue to feel the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, many of us have had the chance to reflect on what is most important to us, both at home and at work. Here at CareSouth our focus has been on making 2021 the year of collaboration, connection and where possible, community. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it's how much we have missed those face-to-face interactions with our clients, carers and the wider community.

As a frontline essential service organisation we have been able to navigate our staff, participants and carers through two lockdowns, the first nationwide and the second in our Wollongong and Shellharbour LGAs. We managed this by designing creative service delivery solutions – via online platforms such as Telehealth – to ensure children, young people, carers, and staff continued to receive the level of support they are accustomed to. Once those initial restrictions from the first lockdown eased, staff were excited to reconnect with the families and communities we support. Hearing the sound of children's laughter in the hallways across our offices again has been fantastic. Unfortunately, we have had to restrict those interactions at some sites once again and go back to online platforms. Many families outside of those lockdown areas have also continued to access our service delivery online as it works better for them. These creative delivery solutions have allowed us to offer services that fit everyone across our wide geographic footprint.

Supporting young people, giving them a voice and setting them on a path to independence via our Leaving Care initiatives is something we are extremely passionate about at CareSouth. This has never been more important than now as the Raise the Age debate continues to be discussed amongst our industry. Our Practice Improvement and Quality team, in collaboration with staff from across our programs, are working on a project to support young people leaving care, which will include instructional videos to help them prepare for independence. Carrying out everyday tasks such as ironing a shirt or making a cup of tea, along with more complex tasks like budget management will all be broken down into step-by-step functions to help build life skills and capacity for young people.

Supporting our carers, especially through these difficult times, is also a priority. We completed CareSouth's Carer Experience Project 18 months ago, interviewing carers and collating their extensive knowledge and experience in a bid to improve best-quality practice. The project has allowed us to better understand the needs of the families with whom we work, which has proved invaluable throughout this pandemic. It also presented an opportunity for a more connected and collaborative carer community. CareSouth continues to work towards making the carer journey exceptional, including creating two new positions at the end of 2020 to support our carer engagement and assessment caseworkers and Aunties & Uncles assessments across the organisation. The Carer Experience Project has also been submitted for a 2021 Good Design Award focussing on human-centred design.

In exciting news, our new Head Office and Community Hub in South Nowra is open, with staff moving into the new premises at Enterprise Avenue. Our new Head Office is a purpose-built facility which includes office space for up to 200 staff, meeting rooms, training facilities, our call centre, family contact rooms and a Community Hub. This building is a testament to how far CareSouth has come over its nearly 30 years of operation.

And finally, we have always recognised the importance of mental health and wellbeing, amongst those we support and our staff. After seeing first-hand the impact of COVID-19 on mental health, CareSouth partnered with Mat Lock at The Bay Games and implemented the 12-week Wellness Warriors program – an initiative that aligns with our values. Staff from across our seven offices created teams who each week completed a series of group challenges which focus on mind, body and spirit. As we say at CareSouth, we are great because our staff are great so maintaining a good level of mental health and happiness is important to all of us.

It is our hope that every one of you who are a part of our CareSouth community have found time to focus on your own wellness.

Tracy and Renee

CareSouth Executive Officers

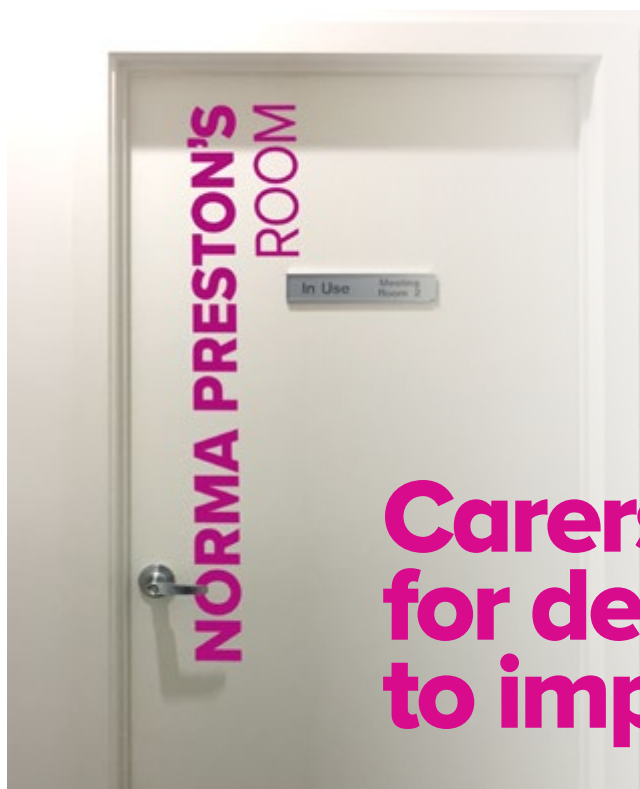
Nanny Nette's room creates plenty of smiles

Annette Holmes, known affectionately as Nanny Nette, provided a safe, loving home for more than 70 children – most of them babies – in the decade she was a foster carer for CareSouth. It was with much sadness that CareSouth staff, carers, and the children and young people whose lives she touched, farewelled her in May last year.

As a tribute to the much-loved foster carer, who lit up any room she walked into, CareSouth has refurbished and dedicated a suite of rooms set up for family time visits with children and their birth parents.

“Being a foster carer makes me feel useful,” said Nanny Nette when she featured in CareSouth’s Magazine in 2017. “I feel like I’m helping and contributing to improving their lives. It’s so satisfying. I wish I had started doing it 20 years earlier. But on the other hand, I also wish there was no need for it at all and the little people could be safe and happy in their birth families. Unfortunately that’s not always the reality.”

When asked if her heart broke every time a child moved on from short term care to a more permanent care arrangement, Nanny Nette was frank: “The short answer is yes. But we always say goodbye with a smile and talk about the happy times they had with us.”



Norma Preston was the first foster carer to transition over to CareSouth Deniliquin when the office opened its doors in 2013.

In honour of Norma’s dedicated service to improving the lives of vulnerable young people, the Deniliquin team, along with CareSouth Executive Officer Tracy Mayo, recently unveiled the Norma Preston room in the Deniliquin offices.

It was a fitting tribute to Norma and her husband Roy who have opened their hearts and home to 265 children during their quarter of a century as foster carers. Norma started her foster care journey after speaking with her

Carers honoured for dedication to improving lives



Nanny Nette remained a dedicated short-term foster carer, as well as a long-term carer for her grandchildren until she passed away. CareSouth held a special place in her heart, with her family requesting donations to the organisation in lieu of flowers after her sad passing.

"I actually feel that I'm part of a team at CareSouth," said Nanny Nette in 2017. "Of the three agencies I've worked with, CareSouth is by far the most supportive and the thing I love most is that the support is not just there for the children and the carers, it's there for the birth families as well."

In a fitting tribute to Nanny Nette, hundreds more children and young people's lives will be touched by the loving foster carer when they spend time with their families in our Berkeley family time rooms. And there will be plenty of smiles.

sister who was a foster carer at the time. Now Norma, her daughter and her granddaughter have all been foster carers throughout their life.

"My granddaughter is a carer at the moment," said Norma proudly. "She has a few children, including six of her own. She's a mini me."

Norma said that her initial motivation to start fostering was the realisation that so many children needed a safe and nurturing home and she was committed to making a difference. Both Norma and Roy had difficult upbringings and know how important unconditional love, consistency of care, routine and stability can be for traumatised children.

"We know how hard it can be for some parents, not to have enough money to feed their children, to look after them in the way they want to," said Norma. "If we can do that for them until they are ready to go home, we will do it. It's really important to have that empathy and understanding with



birth parents. We are here to work with them. We just do what we can to help. It has been such a worthwhile experience."

While receiving the honour, Norma joked that she had done all the hard yards while Roy just went to work. However, Norma and Roy have taken on a caring role for each other recently after both being diagnosed with cancer. They are now on the road to recovery, with Norma completing chemotherapy and radiation treatment earlier this year.

Despite their health issues the couple continued to care for two young children, along with their adopted children – aged 14 and 22.

Pru McManus - CareSouth Regional Manager, Western NSW - said Norma was always her first port of call when looking for a foster carer, particularly at short notice.

"Norma is passionate about supporting children to return to their family and gets great pleasure seeing them grow and flourish," said Pru.

Staff wellbeing is a priority at CareSouth. Teams at our Goulburn and Deniliquin offices have all set up a Social and Wellbeing Committee with the aim of promoting cohesiveness and wellness.

Deni netball stitch up the stuff of legends



CareSouth's Deniliquin crew are a tight-knit bunch who love a good laugh. Two years ago staff, as part of their Social and Wellbeing Committee initiatives, signed up for a mixed indoor netball comp with the proviso that "everyone has got to be able to do it – it has to be inclusive".

"Whether that means a quarter every season, or playing every game we wanted to make sure that everyone had the opportunity to get on the court, with the exception of Pru, Georgia and Tash who are self-appointed captain, coach and team manager," said Permanency Support Program caseworker Tenille.

The team, known as the Callum Murrys even extended an invitation to CareSouth Executive Officers (EOs) Tracy Mayo and Renee Knight when they were in town. It turns out the Deni crew had orchestrated a stitch up that has become legend amongst Western staff.

Pru casually mentioned to the EOs that the Callum Murrys had made the grand final, despite the team being knocked out of the competition the week before. Renee and Tracy pointed out they would be in Deniliquin for the finals and insisted on joining the team cheer squad on the sidelines.

"I know the stadium manager quite well so when I told him we needed to stage a fake grand final he put together a team for us to play against," laughed Tenille. "We played an hour before the real match was due to start. We wore our CareSouth head bands and we were determined not to lose."

Renee and Tracy were the Callum Murrys most vocal supporters, and in the last quarter were invited to play. Tracy jumped at the chance and donned a Wing Defence bib.

"She's very competitive," said Tenille.

The Callum Murrys won and a celebratory dinner at the pub followed. As they were leaving the stadium, however, the real grand final contestants began to arrive.

"We convinced them that these players were in the B-grade Grand Final," laughed Tenille. "We finally came clean over dinner and they took it so well. This comp the Callum Murrys have only lost one match. We have improved greatly and we're actually on track to make the real grand final. But how are we going to tell Tracy and Renee that?"

Tenille, who has been a part of the Deni team for the past two years, said she has never worked in an office where the staff "are so inclusive and have so much fun".

"I'm nearly a local, I've been here for 18 years," joked Tenille. "I've worked for a lot of big companies that have a lot of staff, but I've never worked anywhere like this. We have a really unique team who have such a lot of fun.

"It's such a joy to come to work every day. This can be quite

a stressful job at times and the stress does hit home.

Many of us have children and this is the kind of job where you sometimes take your work home with you. It's very important to have that outlet – whether it's a game of netball, a team lunch, or turning the lights off in the office and meditating for half an hour which we sometimes do.

"It makes it so much easier to know that we've all got each other's back. We are a very close-knit team and find ways to bond as much as we can. Around town CareSouth has a reputation as being a great place to work."

So much so that a recent job opening attracted almost 30 applicants. Tenille joked that a pre-requisite for new employees should be that they must play netball.



Goulburn hosts teal tea to raise awareness

Earlier this year Goulburn's Social and Wellbeing Committee – a staff team building initiative with a positive social impact – hosted a Teal Tea to raise awareness of Ovarian Cancer. The event is one of several planned by the Permanency Support Team over the next 12 months.

"We got the idea for a Social and Wellbeing Committee from Griffith," said Goulburn Permanency Support Program Manager Lena. "We wanted to run ours around community fundraising and in our first team meeting of the year we set an agenda to do this monthly.

"As a team we wanted to spend a bit more time around relationship building and having a positive social impact outside of what we do at work. Team members all had different ideas about what they wanted to support and our first event is raising money for Ovarian Cancer awareness month."

The Teal Tea was PIQ data and compliance leader Bernadette's idea and the cause is one that is close to her heart. The Goulburn team member and organiser of this month's fundraising event lost a beloved family member to ovarian cancer.

"My aunty passed away from ovarian cancer about four years ago," said Bernadette. "It's the most undetected cancer and not many women are aware of the symptoms. Most women don't find out until stage four because the symptoms are so vague. So whenever I can I advocate to raise awareness and money and share my aunty's story in the hope it can help someone else."

In the lead up to the fundraiser Bernadette spent hours baking shortbread biscuits and filling them with teal icing. She also made teal iced muffins. Other team members contributed with brownies and scones. Staff wore teal and donated a gold coin to join the morning tea.

ABORIGINAL EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY

CareSouth supports Aboriginal staff

CareSouth has over 600 staff and carers and supports hundreds of young people across our wide geographic footprint, many of whom are Aboriginal.

CareSouth has worked alongside many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, communities and organisations in its nearly 30-year history and we strongly believe that those with whom we work and those entrusted into our care deserve to be supported by staff with strong links to one of the oldest surviving cultures in the world.

It is for this reason that CareSouth has developed its Aboriginal Employment Strategy – a developmental framework to increase and support our growing number of Aboriginal staff. The strategy outlines workplace best practice in capacity building on the skills of our existing Aboriginal staff, as well as cultural awareness training for all CareSouth staff to support them when dealing with Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities.

The Aboriginal Employment Strategy provides clear directions on how to do this through four key areas: attraction and recruitment; workplace environment; career development and retention.

“CareSouth currently has 31 Aboriginal staff members,” said our Aboriginal Community Development Officer (ACDO) Rashelle. “Several of these roles are identified positions, which means that they must be filled by an Aboriginal person who has the specific skills in working with the Aboriginal Community or services. We want to continue to grow that number by making CareSouth an employer of choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The Aboriginal Employment Strategy ensures that we recruit and retain Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander staff who can best support children and young people to maintain their links to Culture, Kinship and Country.”

Strategies set out in the Aboriginal Employment Strategy to achieve this include cultural awareness training for all staff, supporting Aboriginal employees to access development opportunities for career progression and encourage networking, mentoring, support and retention of our Aboriginal employees.

“It is exciting to see CareSouth make this commitment, with the Aboriginal Employment Strategy, to improve our practice in recruiting, career development and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees,” said People and Culture advisor Mel. “The Aboriginal Employment Strategy informs how staff can best support our current and future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Working with Buwanha – CareSouth’s Aboriginal collective - has been invaluable in understanding how we can execute this essential employment strategy.”

Members of the Buwanha Aboriginal collective include Principal Officer Tracy Mayo, Aboriginal Community Development Officer Rashelle, Illawarra Permanency Support Program caseworker Hayley, Deniliquin PSP caseworker Jake, Griffith Senior PSP caseworker Nicole, Goulburn PSP team leader Mark, Wagga Wagga Senior PSP caseworker Margarette, Illawarra support worker Bobby, Wagga Wagga support worker Shane, Brighter Futures Team Leader Emma and Brighter Futures caseworker Greer. Buwanha meets monthly to discuss strategies to strengthen, review and monitor CareSouth’s practice with Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities and ways to effect organisational change to better reflect the needs and culture of First Nations Peoples.

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“We acknowledge that there is still much work to do in closing the very real and destructive gap that exists between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, in particular the over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Out-of-Home-Care,” said CareSouth Chair Christine Cook. “Creating this framework is a step towards closing this gap.”

The Aboriginal Employment Strategy includes employing an Aboriginal trainee and providing employment and study pathways over two years. This pilot program has been rolled out in our Berkeley office with our first trainee, Tyla, beginning her new role earlier this year.

“When I came across the Aboriginal traineeship with CareSouth I knew I had to jump on this amazing opportunity and run with it to kickstart my career in community services,” said Tyla. “Since starting at CareSouth I was welcomed with open arms by all my co-workers and have loved every moment. I am so grateful for the chance I have been given here.”

RESTORATION

Family together despite tyr

CareSouth's Batemans Bay Permanency Support Program (PSP) team spent more than a year facilitating two-year-old Grace's restoration to family. During this time the team navigated the reunion across state borders, natural disasters, and a global pandemic.

When Grace* came into care as a toddler she was placed in short-term foster care with a local carer while the team explored restoration options with her family. Batemans Bay caseworker Lucy was given the task of facilitating the restoration - Lucy's first with CareSouth. The little girl she was transitioning to her forever home had a very special place in the caseworker's heart, which made all of the setbacks the team faced that little bit more difficult.

Early on in the restoration process, after several months of working with Grace's parents, a Court Clinician Assessment sadly deemed that Grace's restoration to her natural parents was not a realistic possibility at the time. The search for Grace's forever family began, leading the Batemans Bay PSP team to Tasmania, the home of Grace's maternal grandparents.

"Grace's grandparents love for their granddaughter was undeniable," said Lucy. "When the opportunity to care for Grace arose, they jumped at the chance."

Gregg, a Batemans Bay PSP caseworker, travelled to Tasmania to meet Grace's grandparents and initiate the foster carer assessment process. A restoration plan was developed and put into action.

In the early stages of the restoration Lucy was involved in a car accident that put her out of action for several months. She returned to work, only to see catastrophic bushfires and floods disrupt the PSP team's carefully laid plans to connect Grace with her family.

"It was very important to support Grace and her grandparents to develop their attachment," said Lucy. So, despite bushfires ravaging the South Coast, followed by severe flooding, Grace's grandparents drove all the way from Tasmania to Batemans Bay and spent several days bonding with Grace in early 2020.

"It was really lovely to finally reconnect Grace with her grandparents, and it was a special visit for everyone involved," said Lucy. "The restoration plan was well on the way from this point onwards, and the Batemans Bay PSP team hoped to transition Grace to Tasmania in early 2020."

Things looked like they were finally getting back on track after the early setbacks, and Lucy and the PSP team were hopeful the family would soon be reunited in Tasmania.

"Then the world was hit by the global pandemic," said Lucy. "Isolation, social-distancing, CareSouth office closures, working from home, and interstate travel restrictions threw Grace's restoration to Tasmania into turmoil."

Batemans Bay was twice declared a hotspot over the coming months, making an early 2020 restoration impossible for Grace and her grandparents.

"Interstate travel restrictions were in place so all plans for a face-to-face transition were out the window," said Lucy. The family, who had been Skyping weekly since January, had to now rely on twice-weekly Skype sessions to build a secure attachment, instead of several planned trips to Batemans Bay.

"It's not always easy to get a two-year-old engaged in regular Skype conversations so everyone had to get creative," laughed Lucy. "Grace's grandparents used some really inventive tools to connect with Grace. Her grandparents bought her a special stuffed toy which would appear during each call, and they would get musical with ukuleles and guitars. They would also use balloons to help

anny of distance

keep the Skype sessions fun and exciting for Grace. It was so amazing to see that it really was possible for Grace to form such a strong attachment with her grandparents using video calls.”

Finally, in August 2020, after countless setbacks, hours on the phone, multiple risk assessments, reams of paperwork, and months of nail biting for Grace’s grandparents, an exemption was finally granted for Grace’s restoration to go ahead. It was decided that Grace’s grandparents could travel to NSW, stay two nights at an airport hotel, then home-quarantine with Grace for 14 days once they returned to Tasmania.

It was a significant hurdle to overcome, and Lucy cautiously celebrated the win. However, the universe was not quite finished testing everyone’s infinite patience. Just days before Grace’s grandparents were due to fly to Sydney, Lucy received a call to say one of the interstate travel exemptions had been rejected.

“I was so worried it was going to affect our plans that I almost cried,” said Lucy. “I spent a few hours on the phone trying to figure it out with Grace’s grandparents, which we were thankfully able to.”

On the day the transition was due to go ahead, the universe had one more hurdle in store for Lucy and Grace as they travelled to Sydney to meet the toddler’s grandparents for the short two-day transition. The heavens opened and hundreds of millimetres of torrential rain fell, making it a treacherous trip. But thankfully, they made it to the airport hotel safely and the transition to Grace’s grandparents could not have gone more smoothly.

“As soon as Grace saw her grandparents she ran straight to them for a huge embrace,” said Lucy. “It was so beautiful to

Grace and her grandparents are so grateful to be together as a family...

see. Grace’s grandparents had brought along the special toy they used throughout their Skypes sessions for Grace. They were so nurturing and considerate of all of Grace’s needs.

“The whole Batemans Bay PSP team have a very soft spot for Grace, she has overcome so many odds herself – physically and emotionally – she has truly amazed everyone with her resilience, her spirit, and what she has achieved at a young age.”

The team was equally impressed with Grace’s grandparents, who approached all obstacles with a can-do attitude.

“Their commitment to Grace never wavered,” said Lucy. “The whole process was new for Grace’s grandparents and they had to learn all about the Foster Carer Assessments and Out-of-Home Care in a short period of time.”

But throughout it all they never lost sight of the light at the end of the tunnel – bringing Grace home.

“It doesn’t matter how many challenges you can face during the process or whatever comes your way; you can always find a way around it, like we did, distance is no obstacle,” said Grace’s grandparents.

Fast forward to June 2021, and Grace is thriving in Tasmania.

“She has settled into her new home and community beautifully,” said Lucy. “Grace and her grandparents are so grateful to be together as a family, and they truly make the most of every day together – they have such a wonderful energy. They treat every day as a new adventure, and are always exploring, laughing, sharing cuddles, playing games, and most of all having fun.

“Grace’s grandparents have decided to sell the family business, which means that Grace has their full devotion and time. They are very special grandparents, and they are undeniably committed to Grace, her needs, and embracing life with her. Grace has blossomed into a happy, caring, hilarious little girl who is full of personality. She absolutely adores her special Grandma and Poppy and Grandma and Poppy absolutely cherish Grace.”

*Name changed

FOSTER CARE

‘We are one big integrated family’

Nowra foster carers Tammi and Leena recently returned from a well-deserved holiday – their first in three years.

The couple, avid adventurers, have put their travels on hold, not just because of COVID-19 like the rest of the world, but in a bid to balance the complex needs of their two foster children.

Tammi and Leena began their foster care journey with CareSouth six years ago and it is fair to say it has been a rollercoaster ride; exhilarating yet scary. There have been extreme highs and deep lows, sharp jolts and sudden changes of direction but above all plenty of squeals of delight.

“Le and I have been together for almost 12 years,” said Tammi. “For as long as we’ve been together we’ve wanted to start a family and, in 2015, I saw a CareSouth ad for foster care and I said why don’t we do that – give a child a home who needs one. So we did, we stopped into CareSouth and six months later we had two children.

“I don’t think it was even six months,” laughed Leena.

For almost a year the couple cared for two siblings before they were restored to their birth parents. The children’s father, who was given full custody, was so impressed with the bond the carers had built with his children that he asked Leena and Tammi to stay in contact. The pair still see the children at least monthly.

Leena and Tammi began caring for a second sibling group – two young girls and an 11-week-old baby boy. The couple loved and supported the children for 10 months through some extremely challenging times before the Department of

Communities and Justice decided that the siblings needed to be separated for their own wellbeing.

“That was a bit tough,” said Leena.

“That was really tough,” agreed Tammi. “It was probably the lowest point of our foster care journey. Even though it wasn’t our decision to make, it was pretty rough to comprehend because there’s this social stigma that you don’t break up siblings. But every day was like World War III due to the impact of trauma. Life with the girls was just survival mode. Now each of the children are thriving. It’s so nice to see.”

The baby boy, Jack*, stayed with Tammi and Leena and the girls were placed with a maternal grandparent and a foster carer. They all have regular family time with each other and their birth mum.

“Our first family contact was about six weeks after the sibling separation and it was the first time that we saw the children play together,” said Tammi. “In 10 months we had never seen them play together.”

“We knew then that the right decision was made,” said Leena.

While it took some time and reflection, the couple successfully navigated their heartbreak over the sibling separation. And when Jack’s youngest sister was born three years ago Tammi and Leena did not hesitate when they were asked if they would care for Olivia*.

“She was in the NICU when we met her and we were asked if we would care for her,” said Tammi. “We said yes absolutely, but were told ‘hold up there’s more to it,’” said Tammi.

The ‘more to it’ was an extremely rare disorder called Rubinstein-Taybi syndrome which impacted on all aspects of Olivia’s development. She is intellectually delayed, physically

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For as long as we've been together we've wanted to start a family.

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delayed and, until recently, she was nil by mouth and peg fed, resulting in multiple hospital visits for the tight-knit family. The first was when Olivia was just six weeks old, suffering aspirated pneumonia. Monthly hospital visits followed before, at seven months old, Olivia became extremely ill and stopped breathing.

“We were on our way home from our Christmas contact with Mum,” said Tammi. “She went from being a little bit off, to us almost losing her.”

Olivia was home a few weeks later but was “still quite crook”. Just shy of Olivia’s first

birthday doctor’s inserted a feeding peg.

“Her first birthday she was tube free, it was amazing to see her face,” said Leena.

“The first twelve months of having her was really, really busy,” said Tammi.

An understatement given that the family juggled regular appointments with Olivia’s heart specialist, lung specialist, sleep specialist, speech, physio and OT, as well as the emergency hospital admissions for aspirated pneumonia. On top of this they had an active toddler, with his own complex needs, to care for.

“(Jack) has his own story,” said Leena. “When he came to us he had a severe flat head. We thought he was deaf, but it turns out he had desensitised himself from his environment.”

The couple also noticed a level of anxiety and took Jack to see a paediatrician and psychologist – both said he was “just your typical boy, he’ll grow out of it.” But the pair felt something else was at play and kept pushing for intervention.

He was eventually diagnosed with FASD and ADHD.

“Our caseworker was with us when we got the diagnosis and I cried with relief,” said Tammi. “Someone finally heard us, someone finally listened and it meant we could get him the intervention and support that he needed.”

Jack is now thriving at kindy, both academically and socially. After Jack’s diagnosis and Olivia’s surgery things were looking up for the family and hospital visits were few and far between. Until Christmas Eve, last year.

“Unfortunately, bub got really sick on Christmas Eve with

aspirated pneumonia again,” said Tammi.

“Just as the bushfires were starting,” added Leena.

In a bid to make the best of a difficult situation, Tammi and Leena organised Christmas lunch on the ward. But Jack came down with a bout of gastro and the family were unable to spend the day together.

Then COVID-19 hit and the family had to learn to balance two opposing needs - Olivia’s physical health and Jack’s mental health.

“On the one hand COVID worked in our favour, we had to go into lockdown to protect bub’s health because she is immuno-compromised, so we couldn’t take any chances. We basically shut our house down,” said Tammi.

“It worked well for bub, it’s the healthiest year she’s had so far,” said Leena. “She was able to get stronger. But (Jack) is so social and he needs to be busy all the time. He doesn’t even like school holidays, let alone a lockdown, so we had to organise lots of socially distanced playdates where we would draw a line through the middle of our driveway and have segregated picnics with friends.”

“We also set a lockdown goal to teach him to ride a bike, which we did, and he would go on socially distanced rides with the neighbours around our street,” said Tammi.

“We had to weigh up his mental health and bub’s physical health and it was, and still is, a really hard balance,” said Leena. “We tag team a lot, sometimes we can’t do everything together as a family as much as we want to, but we make it work.”

Making it work is a way of life for the couple, who have managed to successfully balance the needs of their own family and those of birth families.

“It has to be so hard for the birth family,” said Tammi. “So if you can work with them and make it less heartbreaking for them, by including them, then it’s the best outcome for the kids. We couldn’t imagine it any other way.

“The kids are fully aware that they have three mums. We organise frequent get-togethers with mum and the kids’ siblings, we share photos. When we have family contact mum will actually say: ‘our son is doing this, or our daughter is doing that.’ We have a beautiful relationship. The kids know they have three mums who love them very much.”

“We’re one big integrated family and we work together as a family,” said Leena. “I think we’re really lucky that they have welcomed us too. It’s a mutual respect. When we were asked to have (Olivia), mum actually hugged us and said thank you for taking my baby girl I wouldn’t want her to go anywhere else. If the children see us all getting on that’s so much better for them and their wellbeing. It’s not awkward, it’s natural. (Jack) has no comprehension he’s a foster kid. This is just his family.”

And family is everything for the couple who recently celebrated their long-awaited wedding, with a guest list that included 45 children. The couple performed a special sand ceremony just for the kids, where sand from separate vessels was poured into a unified vase.

“We wanted to do something special to include the children as well,” said Leena. “The celebrant and photographer had their hands full, with 45 children playing with sand.”

“Our poor celebrant,” laughed Tammi.

The newlyweds would not have it any other way. At the end of the day it is all about the kids.

*names have been changed

FOSTER CARE

Birth parents grateful to carer and caseworker

When Deniliquin caseworker Greta received a heart-warming letter from a birth parent earlier this year expressing his gratitude for “looking after my sons and making sure they see their family” she was understandably thrilled.

It is not often a caseworker, or foster carer, receives thanks for the difficult job they do in balancing the needs of a child and their birth families. The father’s letter was a heartfelt reminder of the grief and loss birth parents feel when their children are removed but also the healing that can occur when caseworkers, carers and birth parents build positive relationships together.

The father’s letter, which he agreed to let us share, said in part: “CareSouth I’d like to say thank you so much for taking care of my boys and finding them the best carer that suits them. Greta, to you I owe you the biggest thank you of all for making sure that their needs are kept in order and for being their caseworker. The boys are smiling just the way I want them to. If you can, don’t let my boys forget me. I love them so much and miss them. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart.”

Greta, who has worked in the Deni team for almost three years, takes great pride in her ability to build strong relationships with the families she works with, but this was the first time she had received such positive feedback.

“I was so touched that he had taken the time to write to us, he went out of his way to let me, the team and the carer know how grateful he was” said Greta. “I always make sure birth parents and families feel comfortable with me, but they have never before thanked me, it’s a rarity in this job. And because it was so unexpected it really filled my bucket.”

The birth father misses his boys terribly, so Greta frequently sends photos and letters and the boys’ foster carer makes sure the children have time with extended family.

“The carer has done a wonderful job in building a relationship with the boys’ family,” said Greta. “Even though she hasn’t met Dad she makes a point of sending gifts to both birth parents. For Father’s Day she put a photo of the boys on a mug with Dad written on it.

“When the children have family time she bakes bikkies with the boys and labels a box for Mum and Dad so the boys don’t eat them. She has done such a wonderful job and it makes such a difference to the family, who are so young and were so scared when their kids went into care.”

In the letter the boys’ father acknowledges how grateful he is to the carers, Greta and the Deniliquin team for “taking care of my sons”.

“

I was so touched that he had taken the time to write to us.

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“I know it's hard as you have a lot to look after but you have placed my sons with the most wonderful family,” he wrote. “It's hard to write to them because I cry every time I try and put tears all over the paper as I miss them so much. I love those three little boys so much, they will always be my little man, no matter how big they get.”

Deniliquin Manager Georgia said the letter touched the hearts of the entire Deni team. “In the letter (the birth father) expresses his appreciation for how Greta has helped care for his children and ensured they are placed in a great home,” said Georgia. “He also wrote a beautiful letter to the carers thanking them too and he goes on to thank CareSouth for all that we do. It's a really lovely letter, it can be a rarity in PSP to receive that type of appreciation and feedback from birth families.”

AUNTIES & UNCLES

‘I just wanted to help someone’

Leonie and Luke* have been linked through CareSouth’s Aunties & Uncles program for just over two years. In that time the pair have forged a strong connection, but it took some time and some groundwork.

Leonie became an Aunties & Uncles carer after volunteering in an orphanage in Nepal several years ago. The electrician and TAFE teacher found the volunteer work incredibly fulfilling and began looking at ways to give back at home.

“My experience in Nepal made me think of kids here who need help,” said Leonie. “That inspired me to join a volunteer program when I came back, so I started researching the options and decided on Aunties & Uncles.”

Leonie was matched with Luke, who was 12 at the time of the link. Luke has an older sister whom he adores but she lives interstate. Leonie became a sister figure for the youngster, and while it took some time for the pair to find their equilibrium, once some ground rules were established they quickly bonded.

“At first Luke didn’t really want to let me in,” said Leonie. “It was a bit like ‘this lady picks me up and we go places and hang out, but I don’t really want to talk to her,’” laughed Leonie. “Then it changed to ‘this lady will take me out all the time, I’ll just call her every second day when I’m bored and get her to take me places and do stuff.’”

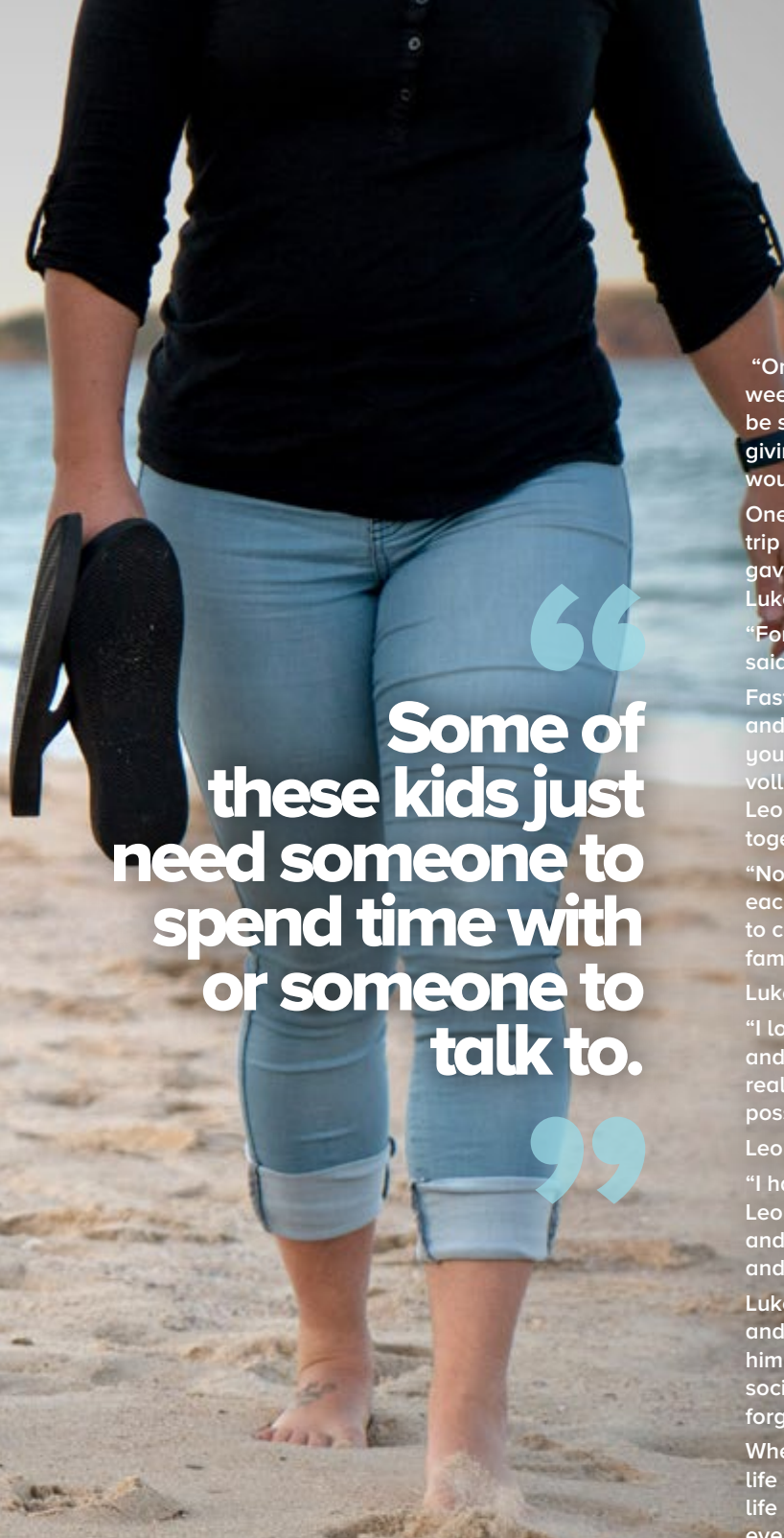
Leonie struggled to find the time in her busy schedule and found it quite overwhelming. However she was reluctant to say no to Luke, for fear of letting him down. But she soon realised that Luke needed to understand boundaries and have some routines and structure in place to help him prepare for his transition to high school the following year.

“Luke likes to be in control of what we are doing,” said Leonie. “At the beginning of our link Luke wanted to do everything his way. So I had to set boundaries and rules, without being a party pooper, so that he knew that he couldn’t have it all his way all of the time.

“At home he can stay up as late as he wants and watch whatever he wants. When we are at my house bedtime is 10pm and we have to both agree on what we watch because we’re watching it together. Sometimes he thinks I’m a party pooper but by setting boundaries early in our link Luke understood that he can’t always be in control and that relationships are a two-way street built on trust and compromise.”

Support from Aunties & Uncles coordinators and ongoing training helped Leonie recognise early on the challenges many young people in the program have faced and the long-lasting impact this can have on their lives. But with the right tools, support and matching, a successful Aunties & Uncles link can make a huge difference to both the lives of a child and a carer.

“When I started my link with Luke he was in primary school and since then he has transitioned to high school so I’ve seen huge changes in him,” said Leonie. “I like to think that I’ve had a positive impact. I’m probably a bit stricter than what he is used to. I set some fairly firm boundaries around manners, morals, homework and things like that.



“Some of these kids just need someone to spend time with or someone to talk to.”

“Now when he comes over for a sleepover he asks if he can bring his homework so I can help him. That would never have happened before, it would be me pushing him to do his homework. A few weeks ago he had a sleepover and spent Friday night writing a 400 word essay about someone who has faced adversity. Because I’m a teacher at TAFE he knows I’m more than happy to support him with that. Luke chose to write about his sister and it was very personal and very sad but I feel privileged he asked me to help him with it.”

Leonie has also helped to broaden Luke’s view of the world, given him opportunities to experience things he might not have otherwise, and encouraged him to step out of his comfort zone and try new things.

“One of our things would be having dinner together every week and Luke would get to pick what we ate, and it would be something different that he had never had before. It’s giving him exposure to different things that he normally wouldn’t have had an opportunity to do.”

One of the highlights of the link for Leonie and Luke was a trip to Jamberoo Recreation Park. A friend won a pass and gave it to Leonie so she could share an experience with Luke that many of us take for granted.

“For Luke he thought it was the best day ever, he loved it,” said Leonie.

Fast forward two and a half years since the pair first met and Luke has grown into a mature, polite but cheeky young man. He has found a solid friendship group, plays volleyball at school and engages in after school activities. Leonie now feels like the focus is on spending quality time together rather than quantity.

“Now he tells me everything,” said Leonie. “We don’t see each other as much but he will call me when he wants to chat and he tells me everything about school and his family. We are part of each other’s lives now.”

Luke agrees.

“I love being able to connect to other kids (in the program) and I really enjoy Leonie’s company,” said Luke. “She is a really great person to me, she tries to help me in any way possible and I appreciate her.”

Leonie’s relationship with Luke also extends to his family.

“I have a very good relationship with Luke’s family,” said Leonie. “Every time I pick Luke up or drop him off I go inside and have a chat to his family. They send me birthday cards and give me Christmas presents.”

Luke’s Dad can also see the positive impacts the program and his son’s link with Leonie has had saying: “It’s helped him by bringing him out of his shell, enabling him to socialise better with other people and to also help him forget about things that can upset him.”

When asked how Aunties & Uncles has changed Leonie’s life she said: “I have an extra person who’s part of my life now. All of my friends and family know about Luke, everyone regularly asks me about him and they all check in to see how he is going. It’s almost like I have a child they will check up on when they talk to me. It has definitely changed my life for the better.

“I would recommend the Aunties & Uncles program to anyone who is thinking about volunteering,” said Leonie. “Even if you think you don’t have enough to offer, you definitely do because it doesn’t have to be big things.

“Some of these kids just need someone to spend time with or someone to talk to. It doesn’t have to be a huge outlay of time or money, you don’t have to buy them things or take them places, just giving them a little bit of time is enough. I joined Aunties & Uncles because I just wanted to help someone and I feel like I am doing that.”

*name changed

Milly on her way to achieving her dreams

Like all 28-year-olds Milly has big dreams for herself and her family; four-year-old son John and partner James. High on her list of goals is a holiday, getting her licence, buying a car and eventually a wedding.

“There are a few things that I want to do but I can’t really afford them all right now,” said Milly.

That is about to change, with Milly starting her first job at McDonalds recently. Milly admits to being very nervous before her maiden shift.

“But I’m not nervous anymore things went well,” she said. So well in fact she was asked to work an impromptu shift while at the restaurant having lunch with Danny, one of her support workers.



It is an exciting milestone for Milly and the many CareSouth support workers, past and present, who have shared her journey to independence over the past 12 years.

Milly came to CareSouth in 2008, when she was just 16 years old, and lived in a supported living home in the Shoalhaven. She transitioned to independent living and is supported by CareSouth's Community Support team as she continues to develop her social skills, confidence and independent living skills.

Four years ago Milly settled into a steady relationship and had a baby boy. This proved to be the biggest learning opportunity for her. Milly credits parenting with giving her the confidence to speak up, try new things and face her fears.

"It's tough, especially with a baby but I'm making plans for our future," said Milly.

So many people have helped Milly on her journey towards independence, then motherhood and now employment and CareSouth staff could not be prouder of her achievements.

"Milly has made a lot of progress over a long period of time and so many people have been a part of that journey," said Tim, one of her support workers. "She is blossoming."

"Into a young lady," laughed Milly.

"I was going to say into an adult, you've started adulting," quipped Tim.

The pair, who have been working together for the past two years, have an easy rapport. They both love a laugh and a joke, but also know when it is time to be serious.

Around a year ago Tim and Danny helped Milly develop an employment pathway, working with Milly to increase her confidence, social networks and community connections.

“

Just by chatting to the girls at Macca's she's broadened her network and got a job

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"We would take Milly out to Macca's and talk about getting a job and she started chatting to the staff who worked there," said Tim. "All that time she was building her confidence and social connections as well. Then one day they mentioned they needed new staff and Milly had to step up and out of her comfort zone. That comes with confidence and Milly did it."

"I used to not have confidence," said Milly.

"There's been some ups and downs this year, especially with day care," explained Tim. "But Milly has gone into Mumma Bear mode and spoken up and her confidence has soared."

Now Milly is taking on her next big challenge.

She knows it's not going to be easy, but she's proved she can do it.

"Just by chatting to the girls at Macca's she's broadened her network and got a job," said Tim. "She's taken the first step and is on her way."

"It only takes small steps to make big changes," said Craig, Shoalhaven's Community Support Team Leader. "Every CareSouth support worker over the past 12 years who has worked with Milly has contributed with little steps forward to build Milly's confidence and life skills required to make this life changing step forward."

"While Milly freely admits that she is still a work in progress (like all of us) her latest achievement speaks volumes about how far Milly has come. This is a great success for Milly and shows that persistent, positive support can have a dramatic impact on someone's life."

Milly has started saving for a holiday to Yamba, or maybe a cruise.

"I've never been on a cruise in my life," said Milly.

"I'll come along as your support worker," joked Tim.

There is likely to be a long line of CareSouth staff willing to carry Milly's bags, given the mutual respect developed over more than a decade of support.



SHOALHAVEN YOUTH SUPPORT SERVICE

Adulting 101 helps young people find independence

Annabelle * was 14 when she first became homeless. Through no fault of her own, Annabelle's family broke down and she became caught in the middle of a three-year custody battle between her parents. The situation deteriorated and Annabelle was forced to leave home in Year 8.

Annabelle had nowhere to turn. There were no youth homelessness services on the South Coast for young people under the age of 16, her relationship with her father was irreparable and living with her extended family wasn't an option.

"I didn't have any other family to support me. It was just me on my own at the age of 14. It was pretty scary," said Annabelle.

Fortunately, a trusted teacher at Annabelle's high school took her in and gave her a place to stay for a few months

until her Mum was well enough for Annabelle to return home.

"But things went awry pretty quickly due to Mum's drug and alcohol use and her mental health issues," said Annabelle.

For the next year the teenager bounced around from house to house, couch surfing at friends' places and living with her older sister and her partner before, at 15, being placed with a foster family. But none of these arrangements gave Annabelle what she craved – a room of her own.

By this stage Annabelle had hit rock bottom. She had no ongoing support network, there was a lack of homelessness services available to young people under the age of 16 and foster care placements are difficult to find and maintain for older teens. Annabelle's mental health deteriorated and her only option was to return home. But once again things fell apart.

“

It will be a new kind of independence for me and I'm excited about the future.

”

By the time she was 16 Annabelle was back living with her High School teacher's family. They had three young boys and life was busy, but Annabelle found the stability, structure and routine that she craved. She was aware of the sacrifices the family made for her to stay with them and says she will be eternally grateful. It also meant she could finish school.

“Those boys are like my brothers,” she said. “And my teacher, and school in general, was a very big support for me. I never wanted to go in those early years but in Year 10, 11 and 12 it was my only support network. It stopped being a place for learning and became more of a haven, a safe space.”

Finishing school, despite the extraordinarily difficult circumstances Annabelle faced, proved to be a saving grace and gave Annabelle access to her dream job once she graduated.

“I moved to Sydney and did sound and lighting and roadwork with bands for quite a few months after school,” said Annabelle, her face lighting up as she recalled one of the happiest times in her life. “But then my accommodation fell through.”

Without any family to help out with Sydney's exorbitant living costs, Annabelle once again found herself homeless and was forced to move back to the South Coast.

By now Annabelle was 18 and eligible to access CareSouth's Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS), a program which she believes saved her life. Annabelle was referred to the program by staff at Ulladulla's Youth Centre and in November last year spent several months living at SYSS before moving into CareSouth transitional housing.

She found work at Nowra Entertainment Centre doing some sound and lighting gigs (unfortunately that ended with COVID-19 restrictions). And most importantly, after five years of uncertainty and bouncing around more than 10 houses, Annabelle finally had a home of her own.

“I'm not sure where I would be if I hadn't come here (to SYSS),” said Annabelle quietly, reflecting on a time in her life where she was lost, lonely and felt utter despair.

“Five years ago my mental health was at its worst and it was difficult to believe it would get any better. I couldn't see a way out. I was 14 and all alone.

“Now things aren't perfect, but they are much better than what they were because I reached out and asked for help. I struggled with that a lot, asking for help, but if I didn't reach out who knows where I might be.

“With support from SYSS caseworkers I was able to get back on my feet. I grabbed any opportunity that came my way, even if I didn't want to do it, I forced myself to. Once you take those first steps lots of opportunities come your way. One of the difficult things about mental health is you don't want to do anything, or ask for any help but my advice would be just make yourself do it, say yes to everything.”

One of the initiatives Annabelle said yes to was the SYSS Driver Mentoring program. 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 in Nowra to gain the required log-book hours needed for a provisional licence.

“Without family support young people have no opportunity to achieve the 120 hours driving experience needed for their licence,” said SYSS team leader Tony.

“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.”

For Annabelle the Driver Mentoring program has put her on the road to independence.

“I didn't have parents to drive me around,” said Annabelle. “And public transport on the South Coast is really bad. Getting my licence and a car means I can study and work, it will open up so many doors.”

Annabelle is well on her way to gaining her required hours to get her licence, thanks to the generosity of volunteer driving mentors. She has also taken part in a unique program developed by SYSS and funded by the Department of Communities and Justice called Adulting 101.

SYSS staff, in collaboration with Southern Cross Housing, Headspace, Legal Aid and Mission Australia Transition to Work, recently hosted a series of educational workshops for young people aged between 16 and 24 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, to support them on their path to stable housing, education, skilled employment and financial independence.

Despite the restraints imposed by COVID-19, SYSS staff were able to hold workshops – focusing on mental health, access to housing, employment obligations and entitlements, financial literacy, and education and training opportunities – for up to 20 young people over several weeks.

Feedback from those who participated in the program was positive, with young people saying the knowledge they gained from the workshops has helped them on their path to independence.

“There was lot of information to help us plan for our future,” said Annabelle. “One of the things we learned was that getting access to housing is a really long process, one of the most difficult processes. But the workshops helped us understand what we need to do.

“Soon I'll have my own house, I have enough saved up to buy my first car, I'll have started studying again and I'll 110 per cent have my licence. It will be a new kind of independence for me and I'm excited about the future.”

*names have been changed

Carer catch ups provide welcome support

Balance. Whether it's used in the context of work/life, nutrition, being active, down time or screen time, balance is something we all strive for every day. None more so than foster carers. Being a foster carer is the ultimate balancing act; carers constantly weigh up the needs of a child, their birth family, casework guidelines, their own family and finally themselves. To say foster carers are selfless is an understatement. Carers play a key role in keeping everyone - especially a child - on an even keel so things sail along smoothly.

But navigating these sometimes bumpy waters is impossible to do alone. It requires a dedicated crew with a wide-ranging skill set who are available around the clock, in all conditions. And that is where CareSouth's carer support services come into play.

At the frontline of these services is the caseworker and carer recruitment teams, who work tirelessly to ensure carers have as many tools as possible at the ready to help them on their foster care journey, including clinical support, 24/7 on call support through our call centre and a connected and collaborative carer community.

"At the beginning of 2020 the Illawarra carer recruitment team asked ourselves the question: what can we do to better support carers, outside of our normal casework, where the carers are the focus of our concern?" said Illawarra carer recruitment caseworker David.

It was a question borne out of CareSouth's Carer Experience Project, a two-year research project designed to harness the extensive knowledge and experience held by our carers so we could better support them.

"We came up with a plan for a regular Illawarra Carer Reflective Practice group – run by our Senior Clinician, Christine - which would give staff a chance to talk directly to carers, about carers," said David. "In casework you care for the carer but you're always talking about the child. We wanted to create a space where we could focus on the carer.

"Our clinician Christine facilitates the chats and carers talk about whatever is on their mind. It works because it's informal and carers get the opportunity to just reflect on being a carer. The feedback we got from these sessions is that carers really like it, they really like making connections with other carers, they enjoy each other's company and they all have different carer experiences they could share. Some carers have even established connections outside of that group."

The aim of the Carer Reflective Practice sessions - to create a more connected and collaborative carer community – proved invaluable at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic when many face-to-face support services were replaced by virtual support.

"When COVID-19 came along we were unable to do any face-to-face support, so we set up an online Carer Reflective Practice support group, which became so important because it kept people connected in a really difficult time," said David.

CareSouth's clinical team of psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, mental health nurses and behaviour support specialists were one of the first teams to provide online support services during COVID-19, quickly banding together to research and deliver new systems using Skype, TeleHealth and Theraplatform.

"It has changed the way we work forever," said Head of Clinical Services Christine. "Clinicians across the organisation have embraced the changes to service delivery. And carers and young people are better able to access and receive the care required, either virtually or face-to-face to allow them to be the best possible versions of themselves." Carer feedback about the ongoing support and connection has been positive.

As well as direct carer support CareSouth provides 24/7 on call support for our carers, staff and communities, with our CareSouth Call Centre – CareSouth Connect – and After Hours team, working together to provide around the clock support to carers, birth families, young people and staff to help those who make up our CareSouth community across NSW.

CareSouth's wide range of carer support services are created based on the needs identified by foster carers to

help them on their journey as they "hold these children and their story in one hand, while moving them through life with the other," as one carer so eloquently put it.

Southern Region Carer Engagement and Support Team leader Karen said the Illawarra-based Carer Reflective Practice group was an individualised local approach, designed as a pilot, which worked well for Illawarra carers.

"There are similar carer support groups in other areas across CareSouth," said Karen. "Some sites are running face-to-face carer support groups again like Deni, which has been highly successful, and Nowra's support group has started up again just recently with more to come soon. Carers can ask their caseworkers what is happening locally if they are interested in joining a carer support group."

Also keep an eye out for the monthly edition of CareSouth's carer newsletter which is emailed to all CareSouth carers. We would love to share your insights and stories through our many and varied communication platforms.

One wonderful Illawarra carer, Bec, shared her thoughts with us during the peak of the pandemic in 2020. This is her story:

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**As a carer with CareSouth
I can see how COVID-19 has
impacted families.**

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"COVID-19 has seen no shortage of challenges or stress. Being in lockdown with a high school kid, a primary school kid, two toddlers, two pets, one husband, work to do and the great toilet paper epidemic of 2020, I wondered how long it would be before my eyes started to twitch!

As a carer with CareSouth I can see how COVID-19 has impacted families, children and carers. All of a sudden, as a carer I had to juggle work life, home life, COVID restrictions, family Skype visits and on top of that - dare I say it - home schooling! Despite these challenging times, with the support of CareSouth, I feel that carers have united in new ways, through technology to help each other through times of isolation and to stay connected. CareSouth is going above and beyond to support their carers whilst, I'm sure, experiencing a multitude of new unique challenges themselves. I have been able to stay connected and updated via the newly created "Illawarra CareSouth Carers" Facebook page and have been able to share information with other carers myself.

While I struggled to create a new routine at home (we all know how important this is for kids!) and tried to balance building volcanoes with work meetings, CareSouth came

up with some initiatives for Illawarra carers which I've been excited to take part in. One of these initiatives is "Carer Reflective Practice", online sessions enabling small groups of local carers to connect with a Senior Clinician. This has provided more focused support for myself as a carer, which I feel is much needed.

While looking different to the norm, regular check-ins have been continued via technology. This has been important to combat the feelings of isolation and ensure that as a carer, I felt continued support, especially while home-schooling children, managing visitations and all the extra things that come with being a carer - even if while trying to have these conversations the children were sitting under the desk and standing behind the computer signing "hungry" in sign language! For some reason I thought teaching a sign a day would be a great skill to learn during lockdown! On a brighter note, the caseworker couldn't see the pile of folded laundry on the floor, or the fact I was still wearing pyjama pants at three o'clock in the afternoon.

It's the little things that count and my family was very excited to receive a pack of goodies during lockdown that included a family board game and art and craft activities for the kids. It felt great that CareSouth was still thinking of carers and making us a priority during such crazy times! I was reminded of a quote that says, "We don't grow when things are easy, we grow when we face challenges". I believe as a carer with CareSouth, we are rising to the challenge and growing and learning, even if it's just in Year 9 maths! I am excited to see how things are evolving for carers and will continue to take advantage of new opportunities to connect. And while COVID-19 has brought its challenges, I'm hopeful that our learnings can continue to provide long term benefits for carers, families and the kids in our care."

HEALTH HUBS

Free Health Checks for Young People in Deni

For the past five years CareSouth has been running free Health Hubs for the Illawarra, and more recently Shoalhaven and Goulburn communities. There is such a high need for the service, which includes free dental, optical and hearing checks, as well as speech and occupational therapy assessments, that sessions are always booked out and many families are put on a waitlist.

This year, for the first time, families in Deniliquin were able to access the free Health Hub service with a grant from the Kofi Foundation – a family-run, private philanthropic fund which quietly helps not-for-profit organisations in rural and remote areas – and the IMB Foundation.

The generous donations from the Kofi Foundation and IMB Foundation allowed CareSouth to take the Health Hub model on the road to our most remote families – a long-term goal of CareSouth's Community Engagement Coordinator Natalie.

Natalie designed the Health Hub model after recognising the difficulties many families with several children, particularly those in rural and remote areas, face in juggling multiple appointments for health checks.

"The Health Hubs make it easier for families to access all the services they need in the one spot," said Natalie.

"It is even harder to access health appointments for multiple children in remote communities where families might have to travel hundreds of kilometres," said Natalie. "A one-stop shop Health Hub, will mean that those in remote areas have access to all their health needs in one place, in one day."

CareSouth's Deniliquin foster carers know how difficult it can be to juggle multiple appointments in remote locations. Stan and his late partner Jody, whom this magazine issue is dedicated to after she passed away recently, have covered

every aspect of care, from restoration to long and short-term care, respite and emergency care for more than 50 young people.

"If I had one piece of advice to a new carer it's this: as soon as a child comes into your care go to the GP, dentist and optometrist and cross those off the list early," said Stan. "This way you have a baseline so if you notice any changes in their health you can address it straight away."

"It really pays to be proactive," said Stan. "Taking care of health checks early on will make sure kids get all they need to thrive."

Natalie offered hearing, occupational therapy and speech assessments in the Deniliquin Health Hub with 40 screenings held on the day. Screenings were paid for using \$3400 from the Kofi Foundation grant, in partnership with the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal and \$2000 from the IMB Foundation.

"We are so grateful to both Foundations who have allowed us to roll out the Health Hub model to those most in need in our communities," said Natalie. "Since the Health Hubs started, every session has been booked out. So there is obviously a need out there, and in some cases the treatment children have received has been life changing."

It can also be life changing for carers, as Stan found out on the day.

He received a hearing test which discovered he had some early-stage hearing loss, which can now be addressed.

CARESOUTH CONNECT & AFTER HOURS SERVICE

Phone Support available around the clock

CareSouth Connect (CC), the organisation's centralised call centre, and our After-Hours service (AHS), has been operating for several years now and has become an integral part of our core business.

As the organisation has grown so too has the importance of having a centralised point of contact. With seven offices and multiple houses operating across NSW, caring for hundreds of carers, clients and staff, CC and AHS are the first voice people hear when they ring our 1300 554 260 number. The team can be likened to the body's central nervous system, in charge of absorbing, decoding and disseminating critical information far and wide to ensure a smooth operating system.

"That centralised service means that calls do not get missed and we provide that first point of contact and consistent customer service, whether by email, phone or face-to-face. We get to know the staff and our clients and can provide them with support or connect them with the right people"

During business hours, all calls are directed to a central service so the team of specialised staff are able to best answer enquiries and link people to the required service. Since going live in 2017 the Call Centre has averaged 80 calls per day with 96% of calls answered within 15 seconds. In addition to taking all calls for the organisation, the team now also process all internal and external referrals for clinical and NDIS services including scheduling appointments and providing administration support for

these programs. The team also play an important role in providing information and following up on our carer enquiries.

The After-Hours team receive all calls, as their namesake implies, after 5pm, weekends and public holidays and cover the concessional week over the Christmas break. The team are located at the Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS) in Moss St, Nowra. Not only do the AHS team effectively ensure carers and staff are able to speak to someone 24/7 but they also caretake the young people during these hours who reside at SYSS. The AHS team are not only the first point of contact for enquiries, they are also the first to respond in a crisis.

As of March this year, all incidents across the organisation are now logged over the phone via the 1300 number.

"When an incident occurs staff, carers and clients call CareSouth Connect or After Hours who complete the incident report form while on the call with the parties involved," said Customer Service Manager Jane. "This ensures all incidents are reported, recorded and processed in a timely manner and eases the administration of the frontline staff."

For information about any of our programs please contact CareSouth Connect and after 5pm CareSouth's After Hours service continues to be on call to support staff, carers and the community. Both services can be accessed via 1300 554 260.


ESCAPE BAGS

Survivor Helps Others Through Darkest of Times

Stacy, a UK national, had just turned 30 when two years ago she found herself bloodied and bruised on a cruise ship when her violent ex-partner viciously assaulted her the night before the boat was due to disembark in Sydney.

The people in the cabin next door heard the assault and alerted the ship's security. Stacy had been in the abusive relationship for three years, but this was the first time reporting the abuse had been taken out of her hands.





"I was always too frightened to report it," said Stacy. "Back home over those three years I had a tracker on my car and software on my mobile phone. So any kind of bank transaction, text message, phone call that I made was monitored. He would lock me in the house every day. I couldn't speak to my family or friends about it because I would be punished as a result because he was monitoring everything I was saying."

That is the crux of coercive control where victims of domestic violence are isolated from those closest to them and made to feel helpless and hopeless. They often feel there is no way out. But Stacy found one and now her goal is to make it easier for others in the same position to have an escape plan. Stacy is the founder of Australian Charity Escabags, distributing hand-sewn 'Escape Bags' that are filled with necessities that a victim of abuse and his/her children may need when initially escaping a dangerous or abusive situation.

After Stacy was attacked on the cruise ship, she had no belongings. The perpetrator had changed the pin to the safe where her passport and bank card were stored.

"All I had were the clothes I was standing in," said Stacy. But first Stacy, alone in a foreign country, had to find a safe harbour. "Fortunately, I'd met a really amazing Australian family on the cruise and security had notified them the next morning and told them what had happened to me," said Stacy. "When we were due to disembark they knocked on my door and were horrified when they saw what I looked like. They said to me 'this is the first day of your new life and you're coming home with us'. So I did."

For the next week – the duration of her Australia holiday – Stacy stayed with the woman she has dubbed Maussie (My Aussie Mum) and her family. That single act of kindness changed Stacy's life, in fact it probably saved it.

"I really don't know where I found the courage to leave, but I think I realised that this was my last chance to get away from this person," said Stacy. "I went back to their home for the remaining week of my holiday and then had to return to the UK."

Back in the UK Stacy moved into a women's shelter, where she spent the next four months living in fear, barely leaving her room. Depression set in and Stacy had moments where she considered returning to live with the perpetrator because sometimes it felt like "it's better the devil you know".

But frequent phone calls from her Australian rescuer helped Stacy stay strong and recognise she deserved so much better. "One day she called and I was really upset. My ex had sent me a video of the location of the safe house I was staying in. Maussie just said to me 'come home Bub'."

So, in August 2019 Stacy sold everything she owned on eBay and bought a one-way ticket to Australia.

In the short time she has lived in Australia she has carved out a new life. She has started a charity, has a loving new partner and an adoring 11-year-old stepson, who with Stacy's gentle guidance, is now the 'Deputy CEO' of Escabags and is learning the story behind the business in an age-appropriate way.

Five months after moving to Australia, Stacy – who was living with Maussie – began having panic attacks and nightmares. She was constantly terrified and anxious; concerned the perpetrator had followed her to

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It's a practical solution for people escaping violence just to get them through those first few days.

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Australia. Stacy was diagnosed with PTSD and in a bid to manage her anxiety Maussie suggested a hobby.

While in the UK women's shelter Stacy had attended a sewing class and made a cotton tote bag. It currently hangs on the wall of her Escabags office to remind her how far she has come. She began making tote bags in earnest, it was a form of therapy. "I really didn't know what I was going to use them for, I thought my Nan might be able to give them to her church pals in the UK."

Then Hannah Clark and her three children were murdered in Brisbane in an horrific incident of domestic violence. It broke Stacy's heart and spurred her into action. Stacy stayed up all night and completed a basic website. The following day Escabags was born.

The simple business plan was to start off small. Stacy and a team of dedicated friends would send out a handful of escape bags filled with toiletries for both men and women fleeing violence, donated by kind-hearted supporters. There is also a parent/child pack that includes a children's storybook, teddy bear, nappies, a soother and cuddly blanket.

"It's a practical solution for people escaping violence just to get them through those first few days," said Stacy. "There has to be a grab-and-go, fast solution so people don't have to return home to the perpetrator. When the perpetrator knows they no longer have control over that person, that's when we see loss of life."

What started as a humble project over a year ago has snowballed into a business with a board of directors and volunteers across the country making escape bags for businesses and individuals across Australia. "We now have over 200 stockists and we just sent out our 1000th escape bag," said Stacy. It's such a double-edged sword. On the one hand it makes me so sad, that's 1000 victims who have gone through the horror of what I did and I know how that feels. But on the other hand that's the 1000th life that we've potentially saved or changed."

"I'm a great believer in that you can't change a person's circumstances but you can change their mindset. The products we put in escape bags are nice products that can help restore a person's sense of self-worth when they have constantly been told they are worthless."

Stacy puts a hand-written note addressed to the survivor in each bag, "That's something that is so personal to me, you feel so lonely when you are in that situation and I try and do what Maussie did for me," she said. "If I can be that positive voice in someone's head in their time of need, that is so important. One small act of kindness changed my life."

If you or anyone you know needs support, you can contact Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service on 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732), Lifeline 131 114, or Beyond Blue 1300 224 636

SIMPLE CYCLES

Simple Cycles roll out a whole lot of joy



Thanks to a generous donation of Trek bikes from Illawarra bike shop Simple Cycles, 21 young people from across CareSouth's wide geographic footprint have a set of new wheels. Simple Cycles recently donated the bikes to children and young people in our foster care programs in the Illawarra, Nowra, Batemans Bay and Western region. The bikes, in near-new condition, added a little extra joy to the lives of young people, in what has been a tough 12 months due to COVID-19.

And the positive impact the bikes have had on their confidence and independence has been huge.

"Who would have thought such a small thing could make such a massive difference to someone's life," said Illawarra Permanency Support caseworker Kathleen, one of many staff who jumped at the chance to deliver a Trek mountain bike to a 10-year-old boy she supports.

"It has not only lifted his confidence but it has given him a new level of independence," said Kathleen. "He can now ride to his friend's house for a sleepover, whereas before he was very clingy towards his carer and would just stay at home and play computer games.

"Now he rides around the lake on the bike track with his mates and it has made a huge difference to his activity levels."

The youngster received his bike just before Christmas and it couldn't have come at a better time for his carer.

"It took a huge amount of pressure off the carer," said Kathleen. "His trampoline broke just before Christmas and he really wanted a new tramp, a bike or an Xbox. The carer could only choose one of those things, so receiving the donated bike took some of the financial burden off her.

"The carer is so grateful for the donation. And the young person was so excited to show his birth mum his bike during their Christmas visit and all the things he could do on it. I

just think it's such a great opportunity for these kids. I never thought a bike would lift someone's confidence so much."

Simple Cycles 'Trade Up Program' gives owners of Trek bikes the option of trading in their used bike and applying the trade-in value towards the purchase of a new one. The bikes which are traded in are then serviced, cleaned up and donated to not-for profit organisations or charities who have kids in need.

The 'Trade Up program' means Simple Cycles makes no profit on children's bikes but the cause is close to the heart of owners David, Suzanne and Peter McGuinn, who love nothing more than knowing they have helped bring a smile to a young person's face. The Trade Up Program was Peter's idea.

The couple's birth son was five when the family began to consider becoming foster carers. "He's walked that journey with us," said Suzanne. "And as a co-owner it was his initiative to run the program and offer bikes to not-for-profits who will benefit."

Peter, now 30, grew up with an adopted sibling and two other children who are under guardianship orders. The family have an intricate understanding of foster care and all that it entails – Suzanne was once the Barnardos mother-of-the-year runner up and David had an executive role with the Australian Foster Care Association.

So, when a customer visited Simple Cycles and it came up in conversation that his wife worked for CareSouth, Suzanne knew exactly who she was going to contact to take delivery of some of the Trade Up bikes on offer.

"To give a child some piece of joy makes it so worthwhile," said Suzanne.

CareSouth is extremely grateful for the generous donation from Simple Cycles. For more information about the Trade Up program visit www.simplecycles.com.au

GRIFFITH BACKPACKS

Eleanor's birthday wish is to help others

When six-year-old Eleanor celebrated her birthday her wish list did not include the usual toys. Instead, she asked her extended family for 20 backpacks in a range of colours and styles. She was gifted 36 of them and requested to go shopping. Eleanor went on a spending spree with her birthday money – but not a single purchase was for her. She bought pyjamas, cuddly toys, toothbrushes and toothpaste to fill each backpack.

Eleanor and her Mum lovingly packed and labelled each bag and hand delivered them to CareSouth's Griffith Permanency Support Program. The backpacks are for children coming in to CareSouth's foster care program and Eleanor wanted to make sure each young person had a toy to cuddle, a new pair of pyjamas and a toothbrush.

Each year for her birthday, instead of requesting gifts for herself, Eleanor chooses a charity to donate to, and with her Mum's help finds out what is most needed and asks family members to contribute instead of buying presents.

When asked how she came up with such a wonderful idea Eleanor said: "My Mum explained (CareSouth) help other kids, the kids they might feel upset, so I bought them bags and a teddy.

"We have a family friend who is a foster carer so Eleanor and I did some research to see what kids might need when they first come into care," said her proud mum Zoe. "She chose the backpack idea and decided what to fill them with."

Asked why she chooses to donate instead of receiving presents Eleanor said matter-of-factly: "I have everything I need here."

In previous years Eleanor has asked for grocery vouchers for her birthday so she could donate them to Ronald McDonald house. This time around CareSouth were the lucky recipients of Eleanor's generosity.

"Eleanor is very giving, sometimes I have to stop her from giving all she owns to her cousins," laughed Zoe. "She also doesn't really like toys and is hard to buy for. So we came up with the idea to donate to a charity each birthday."

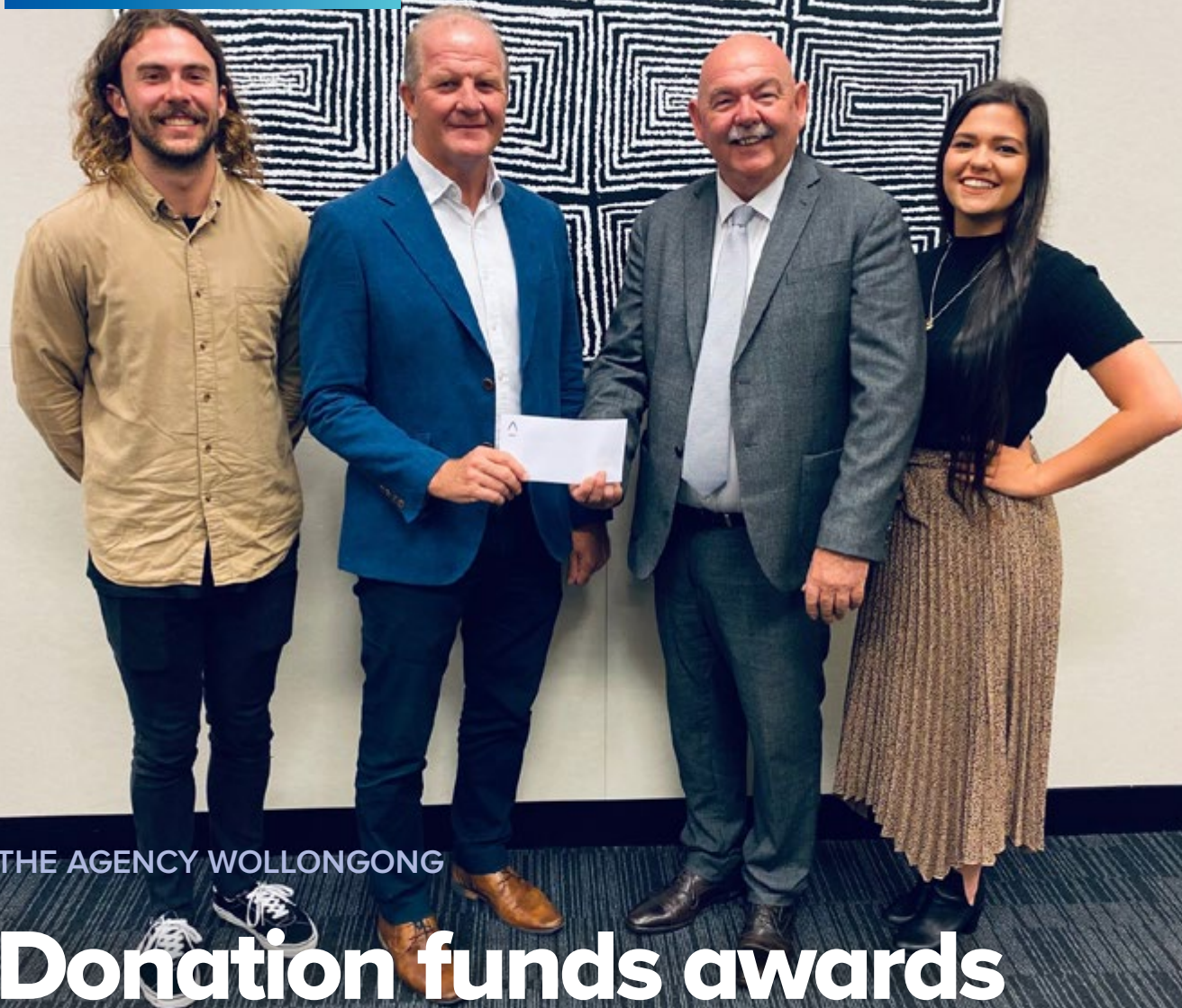
CareSouth's Griffith Foster Care Team Leader Brenda was honoured to receive Eleanor's generous donation.

"Eleanor is just amazing," said Brenda. "Having these bags has already proven to be a great resource. We used Eleanor's bag for two separate sibling groups who came to us as an emergency placement. The four little ones were all under the age of four and came to us late in the day with no personal belongings.

"As you can imagine it is a very emotional time for both the parents and children when they come into care and there is no time for packing bags in most cases. Thanks to Eleanor's generosity we were able to give each child a little bag with a cuddly comfort toy, pyjamas, undies, toothbrush and toothpaste just to get them through their first night with their new carers."

Thank you Eleanor for your selfless contribution to making a difference in the lives of vulnerable children and young people.





THE AGENCY WOLLONGONG

Donation funds awards night for young people

Each year CareSouth's Illawarra Permanency Support Program (PSP) team host an awards night to recognise the hard work and achievements of the 80 children and young people they support.

The team have held an awards ceremony and dinner for children and young people and their carers for the past six years to acknowledge and celebrate the successes achieved over the previous 12 months.

Traditionally staff have held fundraisers – pie drives, sausage sizzles and bake sales – to raise money for the event and to purchase gifts for the children and young people. This year due to COVID-19 restrictions fundraisers were not possible and a sit-down dinner was off the table.

Fortunately thanks to a generous donation from The Agency Wollongong, CareSouth was still able to celebrate the achievements of the children and young people they support.

"The Agency Wollongong kindly donated \$2500 so the team were able to provide gift vouchers to all of the young people

in our program," said Illawarra PSP caseworker Kathleen.

"At CareSouth we work with a diverse mix of children and young people in care. On a daily basis we see them making progress in their lives, working hard in school, taking part and excelling in their chosen activities and contributing to their community.

"We feel it is important to recognise the achievements and the successes of the children and young people we work with and this would not have been possible this year without the support of our community partners like The Agency Wollongong."

As well as individual awards and a gift voucher, each child and young person also received a letter from Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who expressed his delight for the "tremendous work" CareSouth's children and young people have achieved.

"Whether it's been at home or at school, in sport or in the community, everything you've done has helped to make a difference," wrote the Prime Minister.

RAY WHITE GOULBURN

A Little Ray of Giving

lights up kids' Christmas

A conversation at footy training four years ago between a CareSouth foster carer and Ray White Goulburn's Jess Grashorn and Justin Gay, has resulted in a long-running partnership helping young people in our southern region.

Each year for the past four years, The Little Ray of Giving campaign has provided Christmas gifts to more than 50 children and young people in Goulburn's Permanency Support Program (PSP).

As soon as the Christmas decorations go up and the carols start playing dozens of businesses and individuals from across the Southern Tablelands dig deep and show their generosity of spirit by donating gifts for young people in Goulburn's foster care program.

Jess works closely with CareSouth's Community Engagement coordinator to ensure each child and young person receives an age-appropriate, practical gift.

"All of Goulburn has got behind it," said Jess. "We have developed a really beautiful relationship with CareSouth and our community supports this because it is helping local kids. We work closely with the CareSouth team, who know the kids best, so we can buy gifts for the right age and gender. We want young people to get gifts that they want and need."



Last Christmas Ray White staff collected, wrapped and tagged almost 100 gifts. The presents were placed under the Ray White Christmas tree for collection by CareSouth Goulburn caseworkers to give to more than 50 children and young people.

"It's a really lovely experience for everyone involved and the kids are always so grateful," said Jess.

"The kids loved it," said Goulburn caseworker Darren. "And the carers were really grateful. We can't thank Ray White enough for their support over the years."



CARE

with

fostercare



At CareSouth we are everyday people with big hearts.

We support vulnerable local families in Deniliquin to create a better future. Have you ever considered fostering a child or young person? If you are responsible, warm-hearted and patient, you can make a positive difference for a short time or a lifetime. Our team is ready to answer all your questions on **1300 554 260**. Join the CareSouth family and show how much you care.

CareSouth
EVERYDAY

caresouth.org.au