



CareSouth

EVERY DAY

Magazine

Issue Eight

Inside

**Aunties & Uncles Day
recognises selfless
volunteers**

**CareDogs support
wellbeing**

**Family is everything for
Griffith foster carers**

Acknowledgement of Country

CareSouth acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands on which we live and work. We recognise their strong and ongoing connection to land, waterways, and sea and their contribution to society as one of the oldest living cultures in the world.

We recognise and value the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, carers, children, young people and communities on our path to reconciliation which we walk together. We are privileged to work with and alongside our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, community, and families and show our honour and respect to Elders past, present and future.

VALE CHRIS LOFTS

CareSouth would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Goulburn foster carer Chris Lofts, who passed away earlier this year.

Chris and her husband Ian welcomed more than 400 children into their home during an amazing four decades as foster carers. The Lofts are loved and admired by all in the tight-knit Goulburn community where they worked alongside CareSouth for almost a decade, supporting and guiding children and young people in their care. The couple were recognised locally and nationally for their commitment to caring for young people and were named Goulburn's Citizens of the Year in 1978. In 2014, the couple won the Pride of Australia medal for care and compassion at both state and national levels.

It was with a heavy heart that Chris and Ian decided to retire as carers in 2022 so Chris could focus on her health. It was not an easy decision as the couple had been caring for a young man since he was nine-weeks old. He is now 14 and remains a part of their family, in the same way Chris and Ian will always be part of CareSouth's family. A Family Time room will be named after Chris in the Goulburn office.

It is carers like Chris and Ian who make a positive difference to the lives of vulnerable children, even when battling illness, and for this we are grateful. Our thoughts are with Ian, and the extended Lofts' family, including the hundreds of young people the couple loved and supported.

Our locations



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Executive Officers' Welcome

Welcome to the 2024 edition of EVERYDAY, the CareSouth magazine. This year was all about relationships; building them, maintaining them, improving them and nurturing them.

Focusing on relationships means we can provide the best opportunities possible for those we support to build better lives, no matter their circumstances.

Relationships are at the core of everything we do at CareSouth; with other staff, carers, children, young people, participants, families and communities. As organisational leaders, we're grateful and humbled to work with so many wonderful people who share our vision and values. We're thankful to lead teams committed to improving the lives of others through building positive connections.

This issue is dedicated to sharing heart-warming stories from across our footprint and showcasing what an incredible difference positive relationships can make in the lives of the diverse people and communities we support.

Creating trusting, respectful relationships with wrap-around support services can, and has, helped hundreds of families rebuild their lives. Three stand-out examples include the work of our Illawarra Therapeutic Care Homes team in supporting a family restoration of five young people and their mum; a young Aboriginal mum who, with the support of our Family Preservation team, found the confidence to leave a violent relationship and create a home where she and her children are safe; and a Wagga Wagga family extending their home to create a safe, secure, loving space for a teenage boy.

Relationship building and the importance of connection to family, community and culture is a recurring theme across all the programs we run at CareSouth.

Caseworkers from our Therapeutic Care Homes, Semi-Independent Living and STEPS teams in Illawarra, Deniliquin, Goulburn and Wagga Wagga work hard every day to build relationships and connections with young people working towards independence. Some of these young people have become disengaged from school. Our teams have helped them create support networks and enrol in alternative education or part-time employment so they can build a better future.

Providing additional support for young people moving towards independence is essential for their future success. It's why we're so grateful to the Variety Children's Charity for assisting six individuals in our foster care programs to build better futures. These teenagers from across our footprint have been chosen by Variety to receive a \$30,000 We Thrive Grant to help them access education and career opportunities, health and wellbeing support, resources for independent living and build connections to community, as well as grow in confidence and self-esteem.

Other relationship building highlights this past year involving young people include our Southern and Western Family Fun Days at Jamberoo and Altina Wildlife park. Our inaugural Griffith Skate With Mates event and the Rainbow on the Plains festival in Deniliquin were equally noteworthy. Permanency Support Program teams across our regions host these days to build stronger bonds between carers, caseworkers, families and communities.

CareSouth's Community Support program team also fostered a wonderful collaboration - Art With Heart - with Bundanon Trust. This innovative program supported 20 participants of diverse abilities to create various form of art, including sculpture and stop frame animation, over several months.

Strong family and community relationships are found at the coalface of our work. But much work also occurs behind the scenes, with CareSouth staff forming committees to improve service delivery across all of our programs. These committees include Domestic Violence; Diversity and Inclusion; Reggie (data collection); Green Team; Buwanha (Aboriginal collective); Diverse Abilities (disability); and our Wellness committee. These hard-working groups allow staff to come together to discuss ideas, policies and procedures to inform best practice and evidence-based outcomes for those we support. CareSouth's committees are integral to helping staff grow and nurture relationships across the organisation, across communities and across the sector to better the lives of those we work with.



CareSouth executive officers celebrating Aunties & Uncles Day with Shoalhaven Business Chamber.

Another way in which we've built relationships and connections is through CareSouth's CareDogs program. Check out our CareDogs calendar, showcasing playful pups from across our footprint. The Batemans Bay, Goulburn, Nowra, Illawarra and Wagga Wagga offices all have a resident CareDog and handler. CareDogs are available to work with children, young people, families, participants and staff to create feelings of trust and connection and bring a sense of playfulness and fun into situations that can sometimes be challenging.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the many inspiring stories featuring our people, our supporters and our communities.

Tracy and Renee

“
Creating trusting, respectful relationships with wrap-around support services can, and has, helped hundreds of families rebuild their lives.
”

National Aunties & Uncles Day recognises selfless volunteers



Aunties & Uncles, CareSouth's longest running program, connects children, young people and families with carefully matched volunteers who provide guidance and mentoring through simple acts of kindness and small moments of support. This might be taking the kids to the beach, sporting matches, fishing or simply cooking a meal together.

This early intervention program, operational for almost 30 years, doesn't receive funding but its benefits are priceless.

"Aunties & Uncles allows young people to share new experiences, or just everyday things, that can help them navigate challenges, build resilience and develop important social and emotional skills," says CareSouth Carer Engagement and Support Team Leader, Rebecca Henderson.

The program makes an incredible difference in the lives of children, as evidenced by an evaluation carried out by Dr Kylie Evans-Locke – CareSouth's Practice Improvement Quality (PIQ) Manager – and published in the *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*. Her study found the program improved social connections, time spent outdoors, physical activity levels and positive impacts on children and young people.



The success of Aunties & Uncles led to expansion of the program into Batemans Bay and Goulburn. To raise awareness of this highly successful program, CareSouth's Marketing and Stakeholder Engagement team launched the organisation's Warm Hearts, Warm Feet campaign on 26 July; National Aunties & Uncles Day.

CareSouth asked people from all walks of life to pop on a pair of slippers for the day and wear them to work to signify the invaluable impact of Aunties & Uncles volunteers as they help vulnerable kids to feel safe, snug and supported – just like a pair of cosy slippers.

Warm Hearts, Warm Feet was a great success, with businesses and preschools from across the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Eurobodalla regions signing up to support the campaign. Staff across all seven CareSouth offices also donned their slippers to raise awareness of our amazing Aunties & Uncles volunteers and acknowledge the crucial role they play in improving the lives of children and families.

The day was also an opportunity for volunteer mentors to share heart-warming stories with the broader community about the positive impact the program has had on them and the children they support.

Shoalhaven Aunties & Uncles volunteer John Lamont, a long-time supporter of the program and manager of NowChem, asked his staff to join in and wear slippers to work on the day to raise awareness of CareSouth's program. According to John, one of the highlights of his being an Aunties & Uncles volunteer was getting to experience things through the eyes of the twin girls his family was matched with.

"We took them to Sydney and they were fascinated by the escalators; they'd never seen them before in Nowra," recalled John. "It's the little moments that can bring so much joy."



Illawarra Aunties & Uncles volunteer Richard Barrett encouraged those interested in becoming a volunteer to "Just go for it!"


"It's changed my life for the better in so many ways," says Richard. "I work shift work, and life can get pretty busy, but I always make time for the young boy I support. Last week we went horse riding, and it reminded me of the days I used to go when I was a kid. It's such a privilege to be able to help create those memories."

Nowra MP Fiona Phillips was one of the many supporters who got behind the campaign, sharing a social media post of herself in a pair of CareSouth slippers, walking to the beat of The Proclaimers' smash hit, *I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)*.

CareSouth gave away 200 pairs of slippers and 50 information packs to community supporters, and more than 500 people entered CareSouth's Winter Warmer Pack social media competition. Stay tuned for an even bigger celebration come National Aunties & Uncles Day next year!



FOSTER CARE



Wagga Wagga team helps family to build a forever home for teen

Wagga Wagga carers Chris and Jade were willing to move Heaven and Earth so their son Blake's best mate Andrew* could live with them.

"The two of them were born in the same hospital, on the same day, an hour apart," explains Chris. "We saw Andrew as a baby but didn't really hear or see anything more until he was about seven, when he started going to the same school as Blake. One day we arrived home and there was this little boy hiding in our garden."

The memory still makes Chris laugh. The then seven-year-old had walked to their house from three suburbs away.

"It probably would have taken him almost an hour," estimates Chris. "But he found our place."

Since that day, the boys became inseparable. Play dates evolved into sleepovers and for the past seven years

Andrew has spent every second weekend and half of the school holidays with the family.

When Andrew was placed into foster care Chris and Jade insisted that he continue to spend the same amount of time with them.

"We were one of the constants in his life," says Chris. "He's like a son to us; he and Blake are best buds, brothers from other mothers."

Andrew moved into a CareSouth Therapeutic Care Home, with round-the-clock support from the Wagga Wagga Permanency Support Program (PSP) team, a crew of support workers, and respite carers in Albury. But he still spent alternate weekends and holidays with Blake and his family.

In late 2022, the PSP team told Andrew his respite carers wanted him to live with them permanently. The only sticking



Wagga Wagga carers carry out home renovations, with the support of the local community, to give a teen a room of his own.

point? In Albury, they were nearly two hours away from Blake and his family and Andrew had built a life in Wagga Wagga. While the youngster loved spending time with his respite carers, and had learned many new life skills, he didn't want to move away from his best mate.

"We really didn't want him to go either," admits Chris. His education was starting to boom. When he first started Year 7, he'd walk into class put his head down on the table and refuse to do work. I'd say to him, 'If you don't do your work at school, we can do it on the weekend when you come over and stay.' We knew that if he changed schools things would regress and go backwards big time."

Andrew's CareSouth caseworker Lisa Pinn was determined to find a solution to keep the teenager in Wagga Wagga.

"The boys have such a beautiful friendship, it's so lovely to see them together. Blake is non-verbal and he just lights up when he sees his friend," says Lisa.

"When Chris and Jade heard the youngster might be moving to Albury, they reached out and said they'd like him to live with them. They told me they loved him like a son and consider him a part of the family. That really pulled at my heartstrings. But the only problem was they didn't have enough space; he needed his own bedroom."

Lisa contacted CareSouth's managers and asked them to consider Chris and Jade as carers if they could find a solution to the space issue. Lisa went to visit and explore some options to increase the home's footprint, only to find that Chris had already come up with rough plans to extend the house.

Lisa put forward a proposal to the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to fund a home extension so Andrew could move in. She started sourcing quotes from local builders. A Wagga Wagga builder was given the green light to begin work in mid-2023 and in December, just a few weeks out from Christmas, Andrew was able to move in with his best friend and his family.

"This was a real passion project for the builder, who's opted to remain anonymous," says Lisa. "He held out all year waiting to get approval for this job and as soon as he did he was there the next day, ready to go. The whole process has taken a really long time to make it all happen. But it's been the absolute highlight of my career. I don't think I can top it."

The Wagga Wagga community came together to ensure that the extension was complete before Christmas, with a local painter donating all the paint needed for the finishing touches to the build.

"Andrew has his own room now, which he helped furnish," says Chris. "He even helped us build some of the furniture to put in there. It's 100 per cent his room. Every day he wakes up and gives us cuddles, tells us how much he loves us and how awesome it is."

"There was never any doubt that we were going to have him live here. We were going to make it work one way or another. Even if we didn't get DCJ funding we would have figured out a way to do it."

CareSouth Wagga Wagga Regional Manager Dana McLay says the passion and commitment of the PSP team in making this happy ending happen was amazing.

"The team's collaboration with DCJ, their coming up with the funding, and watching the community band together to help out is a really great example of wonderful individuals working together to achieve the best possible outcomes for young people," says Dana.

"It's always really magical when people start thinking outside the box," agrees Lisa. "Chris and Jade weren't going to give up on this dream and we feel so privileged to have had a part in making it happen."

"Everyone we know has been rallying round, asking, 'What do you need? We can help get stuff for you.' We have an absolutely amazing community here," Chris declares.

* Names changed for privacy reasons.



Family Preservation team create meaningful opportunities

CareSouth's Family Preservation teams in the Shoalhaven and Illawarra support families in crisis and help give them the tools they need to get back on track when they've been derailed by hardship. Family Preservation teams support families with vulnerabilities, including drug and alcohol addiction, mental health issues, homelessness, domestic and family violence, health issues and school attendance concerns.

Almost half the families in the program are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, so it's important that teams have a profound understanding of an individual's cultural needs to create trusting, respectful relationships and build meaningful connections.

"Our Family Preservation teams work with up to 121 families at any one time, and more than 40 per cent identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander," says Wiradjuri woman Greer Ryrie, an Illawarra-based Family Preservation Caseworker.

Recently, Greer worked closely with an Aboriginal mum, a historical victim of domestic and family violence, to deliver SafeCare, an evidence-based support program to make parenting more manageable and less stressful for families of children aged 0-5 years.

SafeCare is split into three modules: **Parent-Child Interaction, Health, and Safety.**

As part of the SafeCare program delivery, Greer visited the mum and her baby in their home each week over several months. Greer helped with tips and resources, like health manuals and safety kits, to support the mum in keeping her child healthy and safe. Most importantly, Greer listened to the family's needs and created a trusting, respectful

relationship. One of the mum's main goals was to work towards the restoration of her eldest child, who'd been taken into foster care. Greer and the Family Preservation team gave her the tools and the confidence to achieve this.

"We work with the family holistically and with the extended family as well," explains Greer. "Building a trusting relationship with the mum, and her knowing that I would be there to support her, gave her the confidence to meet all her case plan goals."

SafeCare allowed Greer to source the education and support networks needed to expand the mum's skill set and build confidence in her abilities. Building a relationship and supporting her to achieve being reunited with her child was a highlight for the Family Preservation team and a testament to the time caseworkers like Greer invest in building relationships and supporting families.

"I was able to give her the tools and resources she needed to learn new skills and build a better life," says Greer. "With the proper support, she found her confidence and was able to create meaningful opportunities for her and her children."

"Mum successfully completed SafeCare and now has her driver's licence, a job and a home where she and her children are safe. She independently completed the legal process required to have her eldest child restored to her. It was a real privilege to be a part of her journey and that of her family."

More than 100 families have graduated from CareSouth's SafeCare program since its inception in 2017 – each a wonderful achievement.



DISABILITY SUPPORT



Bundanon

Art With Heart

program showcases participants' talent

In early 2023, CareSouth's Disability Support Program Manager, Samantha Dawson, and Shoalhaven Regional Manager, Denise Hanley, hatched a plan to use art to enrich the lives of participants in the Community Support and Supported Independent Living (SIL) programs.

Samantha and Denise reached out to art educators from beautiful Bundanon on the Shoalhaven River, inviting them to collaborate with the Disability Support program team to run six art workshops across six months. Bundanon has been a long-time supporter of CareSouth, facilitating Aunties & Uncles art programs for several years. Educators jumped at the chance to make art more accessible to everyone and welcome participants with diverse abilities on site.

For this latest collaboration, up to 20 participants of varying abilities took part in the program. Art With Heart featured five art sessions utilising mediums such as sculpture using recycled materials, painting, drawing and stop-frame animation.

Participants began each daily session with a visit to the Bundanon Museum where they viewed a range of different art styles from across the nation before creating their own masterpieces, including drawings and paintings featuring the Shoalhaven River and Bundanon landscape.

The sixth and final session was an exhibition of participants' artworks, with family, friends, CareSouth and Bundanon staff invited to celebrate their successful creations.





“Our participants were so proud of their art, and we’re so proud of them. We hope to do this again next year and welcome even more participants.”

“Art With Heart participants have had a wonderful time. There was lots of joy in the room with the art-making, lots of experimenting and some genuine pride in the work they’ve produced,” says Sam McMahon, Bundanon’s Learning Manager. “Over multiple visits there was also a sense of belonging here too, which was really lovely to see. And it was wonderful to see the relationships that the participants developed with each other.”

Shoalhaven Community Support Team Leader, Craig Hissey, explains that Art With Heart has enriched the lives of participants by bringing them together in a group activity so they’re not as isolated as they sometimes can be.

“Art With Heart is an amazing program. We’ve seen people really create some extraordinary works of art – sculptures, paintings, drawings – and bringing out a creativity that some of them didn’t even know they had,” says Craig. “The program gave participants a common interest and common goal to create something tangible that they can be proud of. Participants have been able to work on their strengths, as well as build new skills by being creative in a group environment, while chatting with their friends and enjoying each other’s company.”

Samantha agrees.

“The friendships that were formed with Art With Heart have been absolutely amazing,” she says. “We’ve got participants from different program areas, so some from our Community Support program and some from our SIL program. Watching them come together, smile, laugh and have a great time was what has made this project such a success. Inclusivity is so important to us as an organisation. That’s what Art With Heart is all about, and that’s how this program came about, to ensure we create opportunities for our participants to build capacity and enrich their lives.”

Bundanon participant Luke embraced the opportunity to learn new skills and rediscover old ones during the Art With Heart program.

“I had a lot of fun,” he says. “There were a lot of things that I was able to do and see. I’d done visual art for a few years but dropped it before my doing my HSC. I hoped this would reignite some spark for me to do more drawing and sketching. I do like creating stuff but painting is very difficult, every detail is deliberate.”

Luke thinks he’ll stick to paper and lead pencil sketches. But he was very happy to show off all his creations at the Art With Heart exhibition, which not only celebrated participants’ art, but brought friends, family and staff together to share in their pride.

“We were so thrilled to have an exhibition at the end of the program, where participants showed off their artwork to their family and friends and talked about what they’d created,” says Samantha. “Our participants were so proud of their art, and we’re so proud of them. We hope to do this again next year and welcome even more participants.”

SHOALHAVEN YOUTH SUPPORT SERVICE

Shoalhaven Youth Support Service provides a space for healing

Former Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS) client, Dru, spent four months in hospital recovering from significant physical injuries. However, after his discharge he had no safe housing to return to. A hospital social worker referred him to SYSS. It changed Dru's life.

"I met some really special people at SYSS," says Dru. "They created a safe, supportive space for me to recover, and the healing effect that had on me both physically and mentally was incredible."

CareSouth Executive Officer – Business, Renee Knight, says youth homelessness in the Shoalhaven is a critical issue, with young people making up more than a quarter of those in housing crisis in the region.

"Early intervention, through programs like SYSS, is key to providing solutions to this crisis," says Renee. "CareSouth is committed to playing our part in the local community to reduce both the risk of young people becoming homeless and to provide a safe place to stay for those who need it."

In the Shoalhaven, 704 people were homeless on the night of the 2021 census – more than a quarter of which were young people. Nationwide, almost 40,000 young people are homeless and locked out of social and affordable housing, with 50 per cent of homeless youth experiencing family conflict or violence.

SYSS offers short-term accommodation for up to two months in self-contained units in Nowra. On hand is a caseworker to help young people access services and identify the supports they need, and advocacy to help them voice their opinions and apply for services or support.

Statistics show that 72 per cent of homeless young people were disconnected from all forms of education, training and employment. SYSS helps such individuals find pathways to education, training and employment and create links to networks in housing, legal and health support for referrals and advice.

SYSS is ideally tailored to meet the needs of young people, says Dru. Staff taught him how to shop, budget, cook, clean, apply for rental accommodation and jobs.

"SYSS didn't just provide housing, they made me feel at home," says Dru. "The whole program was created so that you know you have a voice and that's so empowering. The mentoring, motivation and connection they gave me helped me set myself up with future accommodation and work. Staff helped me lay the groundwork for a functional life."

Fast forward two years and Dru, now 21, has stable housing in a private rental and a job he loves, as a support worker for vulnerable young people.



"It doesn't feel like a job, I feel really privileged," he says. "I get to build the same connections and rapport with the kids I work with, just like the SYSS staff did for me. It's incredibly important to create that trust, build those positive relationships. I didn't have that growing up but I found it at SYSS. Being able to do the same in my work is really rewarding."

Young people in foster care are the cohort most likely to become homeless if no supports are in place, with one in three who leave out-of-home care experiencing homelessness within 12 months of leaving, according to recent research and statistics from a Nous analysis paper.

"Extending the leaving care age to 21 has helped provide stable accommodation but many young people are still falling through the cracks, with over 100 in the Shoalhaven area seeking support from SYSS each year," says SYSS Program Manager, Tony Briggs. "More than 30 per cent of these young people identify as Aboriginal."

"It takes a community approach to ensure young people are supported in all aspects of their lives – whether it's their mental health, job opportunities or somewhere to stay until they're back on their feet."

"Staff at SYSS support young people holistically. It's genuine care and that's what makes our team special. We really care about the kids that come through our service," says Tony. "We're accidental counsellors when we talk to them in the car, we're positive role models when we teach them basic life skills, and we're a safe sounding board when we provide different perspectives on life."

Tony says SYSS achieves the best outcomes when working together with other local support services, networks and referral pathways, like Headspace and TAFE.

"Our aim is to empower young people and help them become independent," explains Tony. "Dru is a great example. He embraced all the opportunities he was offered and did everything he could to improve his life. He's one of our many success stories and we're so proud of him."

CAREDOGS

CareDogs lend a paw to support wellbeing

CareSouth's latest program – CareDogs – uses our four-legged friends to enrich the lives of those we support. Six specially trained dogs provide therapeutic support and companionship to children, young people, families and people with disability. CareDogs is one of many CareSouth programs designed to improve the lives of those we support by creating a calm, safe space for animal-assisted therapy.

CareDogs live with CareSouth staff members who've been trained as handlers. They go to work with their handlers, or respite handlers, in our Batemans Bay, Nowra, Goulburn, Illawarra and Wagga Wagga offices. Keep an eye out for them when next you visit.

CareDogs are trained to respond to the needs of those we support, under the guidance of their handler. A child, young person or participant might be encouraged to gently pat or cuddle a CareDog to help them regulate their emotions, or to feel safe and calm in an unfamiliar environment.

The concept for the CareDogs program came about after staff witnessed the positive impact Buster the Story Dog had on children and young people during his weekly visits to CareSouth's Illawarra office to read books with kids. Young people from CareSouth's foster care, Family Preservation and Aunties & Uncles programs felt calm and safe with Buster and their reading also improved.



Woody

Frankie

Nora

CareSouth CareDogs



CareSouth EVERYDAY

Charlotte

Iris

Buddy


Research confirms many benefits to animal-assisted therapy, including reducing symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety in children, young people and participants who have experienced trauma by helping them regulate emotions and feel safe and calm. Research has also shown clinicians who use dogs as part of their sessions are often seen as less threatening. The presence of a CareDog during therapy creates positive connections between staff and those they support.

Interacting with CareDogs also has physiological benefits and can reduce the stress chemical cortisol and trigger the release of oxytocin, which plays a positive role in social bonding.

The CareDogs program can also teach empathy and improve communication, social, cognitive and emotional functioning through the power of touch, connection and feeling valued. Let's face it – it's impossible not to feel loved when you're enthusiastically greeted with a wagging tail!

CareSouth is celebrating this innovative service with the launch of our 2024 CareDogs calendar, featuring all of our pawsome pups. Each month you'll meet one of CareSouth's cute pooches happily posing for a pic. Try not to smile, we dare you!

Foster carers have hearts of gold



Some of the CareSouth Illawarra team representing a foster carer's heart of gold. Image by Mark Newsham.

Foster Care Week is held every September to celebrate and raise awareness of the wonderful contribution of carers in the lives of children and young people. Close to 350 foster carers work alongside CareSouth staff to support hundreds of children and young people across the organisation.

CareSouth founder Jim McEwan, himself a foster carer, believes that “Every kid deserves a terrific life.” For almost 30 years, Jim’s vision has acted as the driving force behind the work CareSouth staff tackle every day. But it’s our foster carers who have made Jim’s dream a reality for thousands of kids. From the moment a carer opens their heart and home to a child or young person, they give them a terrific life.

Foster carers create opportunities for children and young people that they might not otherwise have; teaching kids new skills or going bushwalking, camping or fishing on weekends. Perhaps even coaching sport like Jim did and giving kids a chance to join a team environment.

Each Foster Care Week, CareSouth staff embrace the opportunity to say “thank you” from the bottom of our hearts to all our foster carers. We also raise awareness of the need for more carers by running campaigns across our footprint and sharing heart-warming stories to encourage more people to consider fostering. Here are some of those stories.



Julie Heck (left) and Karen Hooper (right).

Becoming foster carers ‘fulfilled our lives’

Illawarra foster carers Julie and Peter Heck joined CareSouth as foster carers in 2019 and say it's the best decision they ever made.

"We've got so much love to give, so thought we would go down the fostering path after considering it for a fairly long time," says Julie. "Then one day we just took the plunge and I made the phone call and we've never looked back. Now I can't imagine life without these two little people in it." CareSouth Illawarra carer engagement team leader Karen Hooper says there is an urgent need for more foster carers like Julie and Peter to provide a loving home for children and young people who are unable to live with their own families.

Research by the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) has found that in the past five years the number of foster carers in NSW has decreased by 15 per cent. Mortgage stress and the rising cost of living has resulted in an erosion of the middle class in NSW, the traditional demographic of foster carers.

"CareSouth have been wonderful in supporting us," says Julie. "The youngest little one came to us when he was six days old, and we had two days' notice to get prepared. CareSouth made sure we had a capsule in the car, a cot, formula, nappies everything we needed.

"The cost-of-living has become quite expensive but we do get an allowance to care for the boys. It helped with nappies and formula when the youngest was a newborn and now it helps with sending the oldest to karate lessons. The allowance ensures we can provide the children with opportunities they may not have had if they hadn't come into our care."

Ms Hooper says foster carers take on the responsibilities of a parent by providing a safe, nurturing and secure family environment.

"The requirements needed are to be loving, caring, kind and respectful to kids, have the time and space to care for them, and be willing to undergo training, background checks and have open conversations with CareSouth's Carer Recruitment team so they can find the right match for both carers and children."

Types of foster care offered by CareSouth include long-term, short-term, respite, and emergency foster care, along with restoration to family, kinship care, guardianship and adoption. Julie and Peter are long-term carers, but have also taken on respite care, short-term care and have been emergency carers.

"Becoming foster carers has just fulfilled our life," says Julie.

Goulburn carers find support networks invaluable

CareSouth Goulburn regional manager Lauren Holmes supporting Foster Care Week. Image by Goulburn Post.

Southern NSW foster carers Ross and his partner Simon have only been fostering for a short time. However, they've already made an incredible difference in the life of the six-year-old they're supporting.

"They had a bit of a rough start to life and didn't have the structures and stability that a six-year-old should have," says Ross. "They weren't attending school regularly, and there was volatility in the home. We saw this as an opportunity to act as a bit of a circuit breaker to help them move forward by putting structures and stability in place."

Ross describes their foster care journey as "a bit chaotic for everyone at first."

"But once we started to learn about them as a person, what they liked and didn't like, and we began to get to know them and build that relationship, we were able to put routines in place pretty quickly," says Ross. "And kids are so resilient, they learn to adapt very quickly."

"Now they're going to school, and there's structure around breakfast, lunch and dinner. They're learning to read, and it's really exciting to see this little person achieve these amazing things and feel proud of themselves."

Ross and Simon became foster carers after reaching a point in their lives where they felt they had the time, stability and capacity to care for a child.

"There's a real need for foster carers, so we decided to go down that path," says Ross. "There are something like 16,500 children in foster care in NSW alone. So many young people who, through no fault of their own, need a little help in their life to get back on track or find that longer term stable home. We decided we could offer that."

Ross admits the decision to become foster carers was a little daunting initially.

"Simon and I have no parenting experience beyond minding other people's kids, but we're doing it," he says. "And the journey to become a foster carer isn't something you do alone. There's support from CareSouth for both the child in care and the carers themselves, so you're not on your own. When we've had those challenges, there's always been someone we can approach."

"I would thoroughly recommend foster caring for anyone who has the capacity. It's not always going to be easy; there are definitely going to be challenges, but then, there are challenges in everything we do in life."



CareSouth Wagga Wagga permanency support program manager Scott Lewis (right) with foster carer Carol (left) supporting Foster Care Week. Image by The Daily Advertiser Wagga Wagga.

Wagga Wagga carers always put their hands up to help

Wagga Wagga foster carers Carol and her husband Martin have been fostering for the past 15 years. The couple, who became carers at a family member's suggestion, have provided emergency, short-term and long-term care.

"We're currently long-term foster carers for a three-year-old girl who's been with us since she was a newborn," says Carol.

"Most of the care we've provided has been short-term and emergency care, and the children have gone back to their families. It's very hard saying goodbye; even if you know they'll be going home, you still get attached."

Carol credits a wide support network, including her biological adult children, with helping her through the emotional goodbyes.

"We have a lot of support around us," says Carol. "And when one child leaves, we put our hand up to help another in any way we can. That's what we're here for. We still see some of the children we've cared for over the years. Two are adults now – they pop in whenever they can – and we regularly speak on the phone to two teenagers who've returned home to their families. And that's great."

Carol encourages anyone considering becoming a foster carer to look into it.

"Being a carer is very rewarding. You have your ups and downs, like anything, but seeing the smiles on the kids' faces makes it all worthwhile."

Deniliquin carers bring family together

For the past 28 years, Deniliquin foster carers Norma and Roy have opened their hearts and home to almost 300 children across all types of care. The couple have been emergency carers, respite carers, short-term restoration carers and long-term foster carers. They've also adopted two young people, one of whom was in their care since she was six weeks old. She's now 24.

"If there's a child out there that needs a home, we're here; our door is always open," says Norma.

Regardless of the type of caring roles Norma and Roy have taken on, they do it with love, respect and an unwavering commitment to making a difference in the lives of children, young people and their families. The couple were the first foster carers to join CareSouth when the Deniliquin office opened in 2013. In fact, they're so well-known across Western NSW that dozens of children, some now adults, still affectionately refer to them as Nan and Pop.

Ask Norma and Roy how many grandchildren or great-grandchildren they have, either biological or those of the

children they've cared for over the years, and there's a great deal of back and forth before they agree on an answer.

"Lots!" laughs Roy. "Too many to count!"

In 2021, the couple officially retired as foster carers after they both became ill. But their retirement was short-lived, with Norma and Roy moving to Queensland once they recovered. The Deniliquin team still call on them as carers and the couple couldn't say no when asked to support several restoration placements and, most recently, a long-term care placement.

"CareSouth asked us to have a nine-year-old who we'd been respite carers for in Deniliquin," explains Norma. "Of course, we said yes. He'd packed his bags and asked to live with us, and if there's a child that needs a home, we're going to give them one."

A short time later, Norma and Roy took in the boy's younger sibling and both brothers are now in their long-term care.

The couple's adopted son still lives at home, and their adopted daughter still lives close by. They regularly babysit her child and have their biological grandchildren and great-grandchildren sleepover in tents in the backyard.

"Sometimes there are 15 kids out there," laughs Norma.

"Christmas can get a bit crazy, totally out of control!"

declares Roy. "But we have lots of love to give and will continue to be foster carers for as long as we can. They're your child while they're with you, but if they go back to their family, we're always very happy for them."



CareSouth Deniliquin foster carers Roy and Norma.



CareSouth Shoalhaven & Eurobodalla carer recruitment team leader Rebecca Henderson (left) with foster carer Tracey (right). Image by South Coast Register.

Shoalhaven carers become guardians of young girl

Shoalhaven foster carer Tracey and her husband Ryan have cared for more than a dozen children and young people in the seven years they've been CareSouth foster carers.

They're guardianship carers for a young girl who "will always be with us" and long-term carers for two young boys. The couple have also been short term carers for 11 children and young people.

"While it's certainly heartbreaking to say goodbye, you manage that heartbreak by keeping in contact," says Tracey.

"These kids will always be a part of our lives. Every child I've cared for, I've never let go of one of them. I still see all of them, either as a respite carer for the little ones or as adults who come to visit.

"One little one we cared for has already invited me to his wedding. He's three! We've built wonderful relationships with the families of the children we care for, which has allowed us to continue to be a part of their lives. It's just so rewarding to watch the children we've cared for thrive."

Batemans Bay carers spark tears of joy with new puppy



Cliff and husband Anthony, who live just outside Batemans Bay, became CareSouth foster carers in 2020. Each year, the couple celebrate the anniversary of when a young girl came into their long-term care.

"We get a photo book made of all the memories we've created that year, and we all choose our favourites," says Cliff. "We have a little party with a cake and she gets to pick what we'll do for the day."

The couple became foster carers after moving to the South Coast from Sydney.

"We knew there was a need and we'd considered it for a while," explains Cliff. "When we made the move, it all lined up for us. We had the space and the time and the love to give."

Cliff describes the couple's foster care journey as a "wild ride" of constant learning. Earlier this year CareSouth hosted its annual Jamberoo Family Fun Day to create connections between kids, carers and caseworkers.

It was there that the young girl ran into her former respite carers, Rebecca and Daniel. She was delighted to reconnect with the carers and the young girl she shared a placement with. The two girls consider themselves foster sisters and spent the entire day at Jamberoo together.

Cliff was also able to create an ongoing connection with the Illawarra-based foster carers and knows he and Anthony can always reach out if they need help or advice about parenting in general or more specific things like the difference between leggings and jeggings.

"I'll never forget, one day she asked for tights, and we got stockings," recalls Cliff. "That was a big no-no. But we didn't understand the difference! Then there was the time we bought leggings instead of jeggings. There's so much to learn, and we weren't aware of the importance of those little things to a young girl. But she instructed us to go back to CareSouth and learn the difference. Choosing the right things is so important to her, it shows we care enough to learn what they are. Now we know."

When Cliff and Anthony find themselves stumped by fashion or femininity issues they don't hesitate to ask Rebecca for her insights and look forward to both families catching up again at Jamberoo this year.

"The most important part of this journey for us has been having a good working relationship with our CareSouth caseworker, and some of the best lessons have come from chatting with other parents and foster carers," says Cliff. "Having a network of support is vital."

Cliff and Anthony recently added a new puppy to their growing family. While liaising with the breeder via email, their young girl saw its photo and unexpectedly burst into tears.

"I asked her what was wrong," says Cliff. "She said, 'These aren't sad tears, they're happy tears, that's never happened before.' It's little moments like those that make the foster care journey worth it. The simple act of bringing a puppy into our home brought her so much joy."



CareSouth's annual Fun Day at Jamberoo Action Park brings people together.

Family is everything for Griffith foster carers

Griffith foster carers Paulette and her husband Anthony married late in life and couldn't have children of their own.

"We looked at all sorts of other options but eventually decided that fostering was how we wanted to bring children into our lives and give back to our community," says Paulette.

The couple have been long-term carers for a young boy for the past five years and "have reached a point where he's really settled into his life here."

"I'm of Lebanese descent, and Anthony is of Italian descent. For us, family is everything," maintains Paulette. "We encourage this lovely young boy to see his family as often as possible, which has extended to



CareSouth Griffith team leader Joel McIntyre with foster carers Paulette and Anthony. Image by The Area News Griffith.

our family as well. There's no differentiation between us and them; what I'm trying to create for him is a world where everyone loves him equally."

Paulette says while fostering can have its challenges, the rewards far outweigh the tough times.

"It's not always an easy journey but being a parent in any kind of way isn't easy," she says. "Foster care has been so rewarding for us because you can give kids an opportunity they might not get otherwise. I would recommend becoming a foster carer to anyone; I've even encouraged a couple of our friends to become foster carers because they've looked at our situation and are amazed by the positive impact foster care can have on a child's life."

Innovative placement model keeps family together



Winners are grinners: CareSouth Illawarra therapeutic care team accepting NSW Youth Work award for innovative care model.

For the past year, CareSouth caseworkers, clinicians and support staff have piloted an innovative support model to provide round-the-clock care for five siblings and their mum working towards a family restoration. Key to this program's success, run across several teams, was clear communication, strong connections and effective relationship building.

The family came to CareSouth with a history of domestic violence and homelessness. Extended family placement for the five children, all aged under 15, was not an option. Consequently, the siblings were separated across four foster care placements over two organisations until CareSouth teams came up with an innovative solution. Four siblings were placed in a property rented by CareSouth and staffed 24/7 by support workers. The mother and youngest sibling

lived off-site until mum completed the steps required to be reunited with all of her children.

For the family, the model was life-changing.

"The fact that the kids were together in a safe environment was the biggest positive of this model," says Mum. "They had never been separated before, and they lost that bond and connection as a family living separately. Being able to come back together in one house was extremely important. Knowing homelessness would no longer be an issue for us going forward was also huge."

Mum says the support she received from CareSouth staff was invaluable. Many support workers were parents themselves and were able to provide a sympathetic ear. Most importantly mum felt she could talk about how she was

feeling without judgment.

"I want to thank the staff for all their hard work, you knew that they cared, they absolutely loved our family," she says. "The relationships the staff built with the kids and myself have been so important, one staff member was with us from the beginning and she was amazing, she became like the kids' second mum. This (model) has given me a really stable foundation to rebuild. It has given me secure accommodation but it has also given me an opportunity to study, to do parenting courses."

Illawarra Regional Manager, Tamara Lacelles-Smith; Illawarra Permanency Support Program (PSP) Manager, Iman Aziza; Therapeutic Care Homes Manager, Daniel Van Anen; PSP Caseworker, Jorden Morris; and Illawarra Residential Team Leader, Michael Prince, each played a key role in designing and running the restoration support program to keep the family together. They carefully curated a team with the skills and knowledge to offer essential support.

Staff included Dot Phillips, John Ryan, Lillian Nielsen-Brown, Natalie Mansfield, Melissa Hellmund, Monica Axam, Debbie Cohen and Phoebe Lammers. The Family Connections team, led by Sally Howe, also helped when needed, with Bryn Lawlor and Gamze Yazici providing consistent care for the family.

"One of the essential elements of therapeutic care is relationships," says Daniel. "Building strong, trusting relationships with caseworkers and support staff in the house is the only way for a child to feel safe and secure."

The dedicated team of Illawarra Therapeutic Homes managers, caseworkers, clinicians and support workers was recently recognised for their innovative care model by winning the Outstanding Therapeutic Residential Care Team category at the 2023 NSW Youth Work Awards.

Youth Work Awards judges commended the team for their innovative placement model and for creating a warm, welcoming home featuring 24/7 support for the family, with a focus on positive parenting skills, routines and creating long-term community connections and support networks.

"What truly stands out in this story is the enormous effort and unwavering focus of the therapeutic care team in maintaining the siblings' connections throughout their care experience," says Kelly Royds, General Manager, Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care, a sponsor of the award.

"The team quickly recognised the significance of these relationships for the children and young people's sense

of safety and security. They worked diligently to create a home-like environment that kept them connected and safe. All too often, siblings experience painful separations and disruptions to their relationships in out-of-home care. This program exemplifies how and why this doesn't have to be the case."

Staff worked hard to create a safe, loving environment with managers, caseworkers and house team leaders, explains Jorden. Together, they met the needs of the young people on any given day.

If the children had a counselling session, a specific worker they trusted for support was put on shift. Likewise, successful relationship building was imperative for mum to gain confidence in stepping back into a parenting role. She had to trust staff to help her build her skillset to support her children.

"We collaborated with every CareSouth team to do the best by this family," says Jorden. "They're such a close-knit unit, and had such a strong bond. We wanted to make sure housing was no longer a challenge so the mum could focus fully on parenting and loving her children."

"The family moved from Queensland to find safe, stable housing but the housing crisis meant they were unable to – it was one reason why the children were placed in care," explains caseworker Jorden Morris. "One of the main reasons we came up with this creative model was because it had become a real Catch-22 for the mum."

She couldn't have her kids restored to her unless she had a house, yet she couldn't get an appropriate house unless she had the kids in her care.

"Our teams came up with an idea where the children could stay together and be supported full-time in a house staffed and rented by CareSouth. Mum could visit alongside a family counsellor who provided parenting guidance. Our care model allowed for a gradual increase in visits so she could eventually move in full-time with her children and have safe, stable housing. And that's exactly what happened."

Team leader Michael says the key difference of this style of placement model from other types of care was that it not only supported the children but also supported mum and helped her to rebuild her family. Michael is keen to see this placement model rolled out to more families seeking restoration and struggling with housing.

"I believe it can change the industry as a whole," he maintains. "It opens the door for so many more families that haven't been given an opportunity to come back together because they struggle to access basic services like housing and having a network of support. We want this model to become the new norm for families where restoration is an option. It can potentially break the cycle of children going into foster care and break the cycle of domestic violence."

“What truly stands out in this story is the enormous effort and unwavering focus of the therapeutic care team...”



Staff advocacy helps change leaving care legislation

In November 2022, the NSW Government joined the rest of the nation in agreeing to extend the leaving care age to 21. In February 2023, eligible young people in long-term Out-of-Home Care – those who were 18 – began receiving additional support up until the age of 21. Such important legislative changes like these occur because of advocacy by CareSouth staff and lobby groups such as the Home Stretch campaign.

Illawarra caseworkers Sandy O'Halloran, Team Leader Therapeutic Homes Illawarra; and David Allman, Carer Recruitment caseworker, were vocal campaign supporters.

"I joined Home Stretch because every young person in foster care deserves equal access to extended care and support until they're 21," says Sandy. "They also need priority for housing during their years in extended care because they're in the cohort most likely to become homeless if no supports are in place."

Known as the NSW Government's Your Choice, Your Future support package, it includes four key elements:

1. **Staying on Allowance to support young people who remain with their carers until 21**
2. **Independent Living Allowance – a fortnightly payment for young people who live independently and need financial support until the age of 21**
3. **An expansion of the Specialist Aftercare Program – increasing the availability and location of targeted supports for young people when they leave care**
4. **Available casework to support young people to plan their successful transition out of care.**

"This new assistance will help many young people have a better start to adult life, by supporting the best options for them, including remaining in their current care arrangements," believes Sandy.

In June 2023, Sandy and four staff from CareSouth's Permanency Support Program (PSP), Clinical Services, and Practice Improvement & Quality (PIQ) teams attended the Home Stretch Symposium in Melbourne. Discussions covered how the new assistance package would be used on the ground to help improve the lives of young people aged 18 and over.

"One event highlight was hearing several young people speak about their leaving care experience," recalls Sandy. "They discussed what they needed from caseworkers and talked about how they've excelled with the additional supports that can be put in place with the new funding package, especially the importance of the supports required for our Aboriginal young people."

Tracy Mayo, Executive Officer – Practice, believes the Your Choice, Your Future support package is an integral part of leaving care planning and preparation, allowing young people sufficient time to maintain their support networks while finding their feet as adults.

"The new after care allowances will provide greater stability for young people leaving care and provide better support with housing and the cost of living," she says. "Before this support package was introduced caseworkers had discussions with young people at 15 about the reality of their life after 18. They helped them make decisions about housing, about their career. Imagine having a conversation with a 15-year-old about leaving behind all the supports they've ever known once they turn 18. These are decisions they're simply not developmentally ready to make. Now that the age of leaving care has been extended, they won't have to."

Along with advocacy, Sandy and the Therapeutic Homes team she manages have worked hard to build positive relationships with young people in CareSouth's Semi-Independent Living (SIL) homes. Teams provide the support and skills needed for young people on their journey to independence. "We know that young people in the foster care system are at a greater risk of homelessness than their peers," says Sandy.

Ongoing casework support helped eight of the 10 young people in the Illawarra SIL program return to school or find employment. All 10 were disengaged from education when they joined the program; now 80 per cent are enrolled in education or part-time employment.

In Deniliquin, staff support young people working towards independence in two Supported Transitions and Engagement Program (STEP) houses. Young people work closely with their support team who mentor towards independence and teach them skills like cooking, managing finances, healthy living and job readiness, says Team Leader, Natasha Mison.

"CareSouth is committed to building independence, through teaching life skills, providing stable housing and creating trusting relationships, for all the young people we support during their critical transition into adulthood," says Natasha.

Executive Officer wins Shoalhaven Outstanding Business Leader

Tracy Mayo, CareSouth's Executive Officer – Practice, was named as Outstanding Business Leader of the Year at the Shoalhaven Business Awards 2023.

Tracy was recognised for her mentorship, being a passionate advocate for diversity and inclusion, and most importantly, for her ongoing commitment to supporting families to enhance their quality of life, no matter their circumstances.

Tracy has more than 30 years' experience working in the Community Services sector, including disability services, foster care, residential services, homelessness and therapeutic counselling services. A senior leader at CareSouth for more than a decade, she stepped into the role of Executive Officer – Practice, alongside Renee Knight, Executive Officer – Business, four years ago.

Tracy was a vocal advocate for Raising the Age – a campaign to support children and young people in foster care until the age of 21 – and strongly believes in keeping families together wherever possible, providing appropriate cultural support to Aboriginal families, and giving society's most vulnerable a voice.

She is also a key driver of cultural diversity and inclusion across CareSouth. Tracy is the practice lead of Buwanha – an 11-strong committee who meet monthly to support Aboriginal families and staff and drive reconciliation.

"I'm passionate about ensuring the families and young people CareSouth staff work with are supported culturally, with caseworkers developing tailored support plans for Aboriginal children and young people and those from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background," says Tracy. "I'm very proud to say that at CareSouth, reconciliation is at the forefront of every interaction, conversation, decision and action. It underpins all the work that we do alongside Aboriginal families and stakeholders."

In 2023, Buwanha also began assisting with the cultural component of foster carer recruitment to assist those supporting Aboriginal families. As part of the Step by Step assessment tool used for prospective foster carers, Buwanha helps assess the Aboriginal Cultural competence of new foster carers. The committee has also developed the Buwanha Cultural Consult Panel, a referral process for staff to tap into the expertise of Aboriginal staff members in facilitating cultural connections through Family Finding, additional support in identifying a family's Aboriginal descent, connecting families to culture, community, services, programs and resources, and providing culturally appropriate support for initial foster care placement or a change of care placement.

"It was an honour to receive the award and it's testament to the work being done by teams across the organisation to build strong relationships and connections with those we support," says Tracy. "Listening and responding to the needs of those we work with, whether it's children and young people, parents, carers, participants or staff, is key to our ongoing success as an outstanding community services organisation."



CareSouth executive officer Tracy Mayo all smiles after her award win.

Carers help young person find her path in life

These were the powerful words a young woman shared with CareSouth caseworkers and foster carers recently, providing an invaluable insight into what it's like to grow up in care.

Now 28, Tylara* entered foster care when she was 14, placed with CareSouth carers Bev and Brad for almost five years. Her siblings were separated across placements but Tylara and her younger brother, who has autism and who recently turned 18, stayed together. He still lives with Bev and Brad. Tylara and her 18-month-old son frequently visit the family.

"If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be where I am and that's something I can't thank them enough for," says Tylara. "Their consistency of care taught me that I don't have to be fearful all the time, that their home is a safe space. They are still my biggest supporters to this day. I know what I deserve because of them and they always tell me they're proud of me."

Tylara is studying a Bachelor of Social Work, keen to become a caseworker and "make the world a better place" through frontline practice and changing policies. She credits her carers, who she calls Nan and Pop, for supporting her to finish school and go to university. "I want kids to feel safe, secure and supported, in the same way my carers and caseworkers made me feel."

Recently, carer recruitment caseworker, David Allman, asked Tylara to provide insights into her care experience. He invited caseworkers and carers from across the organisation's footprint to take part in a question and answer session



“My life has been hard since leaving care, I'm not going to lie. But I am resilient.”

designed to close knowledge gaps and recognise the important role carers played in the lives of those they support.

Tylara acknowledged she was fortunate to have only been in one foster care placement with carers who changed her life for the better. "They're my family," says Tylara, who still regularly drops in for a cuppa when she needs advice or a shoulder to cry on.

But it wasn't always smooth sailing. When Tylara and her brother were first taken into care, a Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) caseworker drove them to their new carers' house. She remembers saying, "I'm going to make their life hell. They're not going to want me."

"We turned up and they were waiting out the front. I thought, 'Oh, they're old, I can't give them a heart attack.' Being in care, you're always looking for an exit; you're in survival mode and it's very hard to come out of that. And it's really terrifying walking into a stranger's home not knowing what they're like."

Tylara credits her carers' calm, no nonsense attitude with making her transition into care that little bit easier.

"On the night we arrived, they took us to the shops to get toiletries and all the things we might need," says Tylara. "They raided their own grandkids' wardrobe for clothes for us to wear. Looking back on it now, that practicality, that calmness, was exactly what my brother and I needed. It did take me a while before I felt comfortable and began to respect their rules and boundaries. But once I knew I wasn't getting shipped out, it became a lot easier."

Tylara says it took her a very long time to let her guard down and begin to open up to and trust her foster carers.

"I was always on guard, it took me quite a few months to warm up," she says. "But they were very respectful of giving me my space, they didn't pressure me to talk when I didn't want to, they didn't pressure me to call them anything except their names. But eventually I asked if I could call them Nan and Pop. To this day, it's still what I call them and my son will call them great-Nan and Pop."

Over the years came the inevitable clashes about school, homework and the over-use of technology. But, with the help of Tylara's caseworkers, her carers were able to navigate these ups and downs, while always providing her and her brother with the unconditional love and support they needed to thrive.

"It was so important to know that they had my back, no matter what," says Tylara. "There were times where I wanted to drop out of school, but they got me through it. During my HSC, Nan picked me up after every exam and took me out to get food so I could talk about it. They encouraged me to join a program for Aboriginal students to get into teaching. I didn't think I could do it but Nan and Pop believed in me. They set me up for success."

Seeing Tylara thrive has been a highlight of Bev and Brad's foster care journey. "She's a very bright student, but she was so withdrawn when she came to us," says Bev. "To see her come out of her shell and break down those barriers was so rewarding. Just watching her blossom at school! She ended up doing a university course; the first one in her entire family to go to university. We're just so proud of her."

Tylara recounts that one of the most difficult experiences she faced going into care was separation from her other two siblings.

"That was quite hard. I also found it difficult to allow the carers to take on the role of being responsible for my brother. That was always my job. I remember them saying to me, 'It's ok, you just need to be a kid.' They let me be the child I was never allowed to be, they taught me to be a teenager without worrying about what was going on at home."

Bev recalls Tylara struggling to let go of her parenting role but once she allowed herself to be a child again she "reverted back to being a younger kid."

"She played with Barbies and did the stuff that she hadn't been able to do," says Bev. "She basically looked after her brother, brought him up, so she'd missed out on that part of her life."

Tylara was able to experience the joy of annual family holidays with her carers, childhood memories she cherishes. "Every year we'd go on a family holiday in the caravan and I got to explore Australia, explore my country and my culture," says Tylara. "Those trips away were family time and they were so special, but Nan and Pop also made sure there were opportunities to explore who I was culturally. I really miss those trips away! My brother still goes with them every year."

Bev and Brad credit those family holidays as their reason for becoming foster carers. With five kids and 18 grandkids between them, they took their extended crew on holidays each year for more than a decade. Then the grandkids grew up, but the couple had so much more time and love to give.

"When I retired and the grandkids got bigger we thought well, let's give some other kids a chance," says Brad. "And basically that was it. That was the reason we became foster carers."

"They didn't ask to be born with what they came into," says Bev. "All kids should have a chance in life and they should have someone to look after them and to help them on their way. We have always been proud of Tylara and we're immensely proud of her achievements – both academically and personally – since leaving care."

"Bev, Brad and their whole family showed me love and that's really all I could ask for," says Tylara. "I will be forever grateful."

*Name has been changed for privacy reasons



Griffith Skate With Mates fun day brings community together

CareSouth's Griffith team successfully hosted two Skate With Mates school holiday events.

More than 200 young people from the local community attended to enjoy the sunshine, a sausage sizzle, the DJ, and a great skate competition. A true highlight was Griffith Police Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, Dookie, singing Stand By Me to the crowd, reminding everyone to look out for their mates. Dookie also sang a Gurrumul Yunupingu song in traditional language, with an important message for everyone: events like this are all about inclusion. The event included a range of community supporters such as the Griffith Aboriginal Medical Service, Mission Australia, Headspace, Wellways, Centacare, Vinnies, Linking Communities, My Plan Connect, Service NSW and of course CareSouth helping kids to access services.

"It's evident that we're breaking down cultural barriers and we all have the same aim; to make a difference in our community and show these kids we're here for them," says Griffith Foster Care Team Leader, Joel McIntyre. "There's a network of us from all different sectors of the community and we all play a role in supporting our kids."

The first Skate with Mates event in January was so successful, staff held it again in October 2023, this time inviting local professional BMX rider, Matt Spencer, along for the ride. Matt gave competitors some brilliant tips, and showed off some amazing tricks before kids took on the Griffith skate bowl. They had fantastic fun demonstrating their repertoire of skills on bikes, scooters and skateboards, and drew plenty of admiration from the enthusiastic crowd.

Kids also enjoyed free drinks, popcorn and a sausage sizzle, beautifully cooked by the Griffith Foster Care team.



Joel, says the aim of Skate With Mates events is to create positive, mentoring-based school holiday activities in partnership with other local organisations.

"We had more than 200 kids show up, along with a bunch of local services, and it was so great to have other agencies here supporting us," says Joel. "It's important to be able to do this for the community. Young people who engage in fun, safe, confidence-building activities are less likely to be involved in risk-taking behaviours."

"At CareSouth, we're all about supporting and empowering young people in our community to help them create a better future for themselves. Days like this give our kids a chance to see us as their champions, and that's what we're here for."

CareSouth would like to thank event supporters Griffith Council and Griffith Ex-Services Club.



Deniliquin supports diversity and inclusion at Rainbow on the Plains festival

CareSouth proudly embraces diversity and inclusion. Ours is an organisation that takes great pride in welcoming and supporting the LGBTIQ+ community.

Visit any of our seven offices across NSW and you'll see prominent signage declaring "Everyone is Welcome Here". Nowhere is that more evident than in Deniliquin, where staff recently donned their brightest, sparkliest outfits to support the region's LGBTIQ+ community at Hay's Rainbow on the Plains festival.

"One of the things we're very proud of here at CareSouth is that we encourage

same-sex foster carers, volunteers and staff to join our programs. We also design programs for young people from the LGBTIQ+ community if there's a gap in service provision," says Deniliquin Manager, Georgia Henderson. "Rainbow on the Plains is a celebration of diversity and inclusion in a fun, supportive space and that's what we're all about at CareSouth."

Deniliquin also hosts a fortnightly support group – CareSouth's Rainbow Room. It's just one of the many ways CareSouth caseworkers and clinicians offer tailored support, providing a safe space and connections for transgender, gender diverse, non-binary young people and those exploring their sexuality and gender identity with like-minded peers and mentors – all without judgment. The program also helps parents, carers and educators understand how to best support young people in the LGBTIQ+ community.

"We know that positive mentoring and peer relationships are a proven protective factor in the mental health and wellbeing of young people, particularly those who are marginalised," says Georgia. "We also

know that 66 per cent of Australian LGBTIQ+ youth experience bullying or harassment based on their identity. The Rainbow Room has allowed us to connect like-minded peers in a supportive environment."

This year all staff also had an opportunity to join a series of workshops hosted by Zoe Kennedy, founder and CEO of Spark & Co. Zoe is an LGBTIQ+ advocate with more than 20 years' experience in the practical application of diversity and inclusion in workplaces. She provided concrete examples and resources to help staff understand the issues facing young people questioning their gender and/or sexuality and ways to better support them.

Dr Kylie Evans Locke, Chair of CareSouth's Diversity and Inclusion Committee, says the successful workshops were a tailored learning and development opportunity for staff to help them support LGBTIQ+ youth through safe, inclusive and therapeutic practice.



"At CareSouth, our service is to build our clients' capacity to help guide them toward a better future," says Kylie. "That goes for our staff too; we're dedicated to equipping everyone with the knowledge and resources they need to support people as best as possible.

"CareSouth is an inclusive organisation guided by our core value of belonging to ensure we create a nurturing environment and celebrate our diversity. We do this through upskilling our teams in the areas that matter most to those we support."



A man with glasses on his head, wearing a blue patterned shirt and khaki pants, stands in front of a large, ornate stone building. A silver car is parked to his left. The building has multiple windows and a classic architectural style.

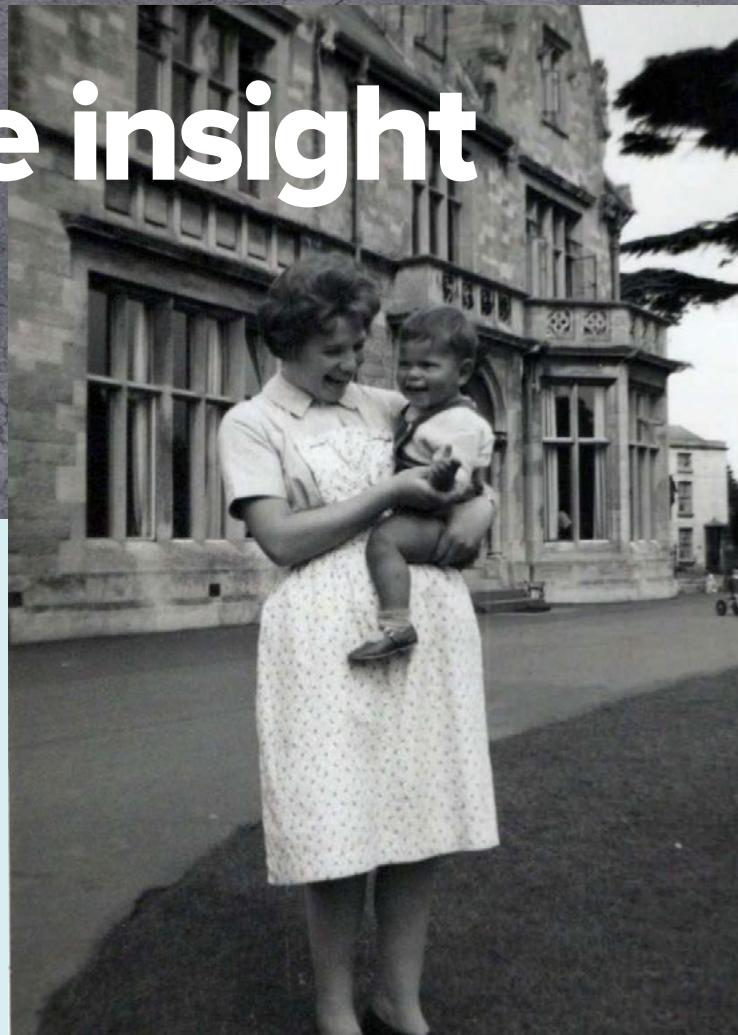
Caseworker's lived experience provides invaluable insight

CareSouth Illawarra carer recruitment caseworker David Allman, now and then at his foster care home in England with 'Auntie' Janet.

Illawarra carer recruitment caseworker David Allman doesn't pretend to understand the journey children and young people experience growing up in care. But he does know firsthand how important it is for a significant adult, outside of one's immediate family, to have your back.

David, a caseworker for almost two decades, spent the first four years of his life in care. Born in England in the 1960s, his mother made the heartbreaking decision to relinquish care in the short term so she could build a better long-term future for herself and her son.

"I ended up in care because I was conceived out of wedlock," David explains. "Socially and morally that was a no-no in the 50s and 60s. Also, my dad was Caribbean



– another big no-no. My mum had to give up a good job and move away to have me. When I was born, societal expectation was that I would be given up for adoption because that's what you did in those days, but she made a decision not to conform."

Instead, David's mum decided to retrain as a teacher. With a well-paid job and school holidays off, she could be there to look after him and create a comfortable life for the two of them.

"To do that, she had to put me in a care home. Back then, large care homes were the norm," says David. "In my home, a rambling Victorian mansion in the Cotswolds, children were grouped into 'families' of five. A care worker, who lived in, would be responsible for this family group and was known as 'Auntie'. Mine was Auntie Janet."

Memories of his first four years are "hazy and fractured" but David remembers Janet as a "warm, nurturing, attentive woman who helped keep me safe and supported me in navigating my formative years."

"Our first few years can have a profound impact on future outcomes and I know that Janet's time with me had significant and positive long-term implications on my life," says David. "That consistency of care is so important, and for that I'm very grateful."

Gratitude is something David has thought about a lot recently, after returning from a trip home to England where he reconnected with Janet and some of the other children in his "family" during his time in care.

"Over the years, I've heard the expression '*Don't expect thanks from the kids you work with*' a number of times," explains David. "As a caseworker, I've even said it myself, but over the 18 years I've been in this field, there have been experiences and incidents that have led me to doubt that it's as black and white as that."

"Recently I was thinking about this and looked up the definition of 'thanks'; *an expression of gratitude*. I looked up gratitude; *the quality of being thankful*. Both acknowledge that a person has appreciated something. The difference? One is expressed, one is unspoken. I realised that as a caseworker, I'd come across both these forms of appreciation."

David recalls as he was saying goodbye to those he supported in foster care before emigrating to Australia, the impact of hearing a simple, 'Thank you' from a young person he'd worked with for several years.

"That one word meant so much and validated some of the work I'd done on behalf of that individual," says David.

But what about when thanks aren't verbally expressed? What impact does that have on the relationship between a caseworker or carer and a young person?

"I once worked with a young person who, as in so many cases, had a number of placements," says David. "They hadn't wanted to reconnect with one of their carers following the breakdown of the placement. Sadly, she passed a few years ago, as did another carer who'd supported him. When he turned 18, he spoke to me about having the two carers' names tattooed on his arm. They would never hear his thanks, but it had been there, locked away. That's gratitude."

David says becoming a caseworker was "purely accidental". Before studying to be a social worker he was an actor,



“I ended up in care because I was conceived out of wedlock.”

Socially and morally that was a no-no in the 50s and 60s.

”

featuring in many West End productions. "I only realised after I started working with kids in care in London that my life had come full circle. My history isn't the reason I got into this, but it certainly informs the way I work. I know that a significant adult, whoever that might be or whatever their role, can have a huge impact and influence on someone's life."

For David, that was Janet.

"I've seen Janet several times since leaving the home in 1964, but this was the first time in about 25 years," he says. "I went because I'd reached a point in my life where I felt like I wanted to express my gratitude for what she'd done for me. I wanted to say, 'thank you.'"

David firmly believes that even if foster carers and caseworkers don't receive thanks or gratitude from the young people they support, the sentiment is there, bubbling beneath the surface.

"People may or may not say thank you for the things that you've done for them. If they don't say thank you, I do believe there will always be gratitude, even though it isn't expressed. The expression of gratitude may be immediate, it may come after 18 years or, nearly a lifetime. But it's there."

Gratitude is often something children and young people, even adults, discover in hindsight, when they reflect on an experience or outcome, explains CareSouth Clinical psychologist, Christine Gregory.

"In a culture that thrives on instant gratification and getting everything immediately, it's often difficult to reflect in the moment about the things we're thankful for," she says.

"But gratitude teaches us to look outside of our own world and see the impact and role of others. It teaches us to be sensitive to their feelings and gives us the ability to see situations positively."



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Jim McEwan
CareSouth Founder

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