No respite in sight

As I write, it’s drizzling in Brisbane and I can’t help but think of the pain this would cause out west. It’s not useful rain. It dries almost as soon as it hits the ground. It’s a tease – only it is anything but funny.

More than 60% of Queensland is drought-declared. For once, Downs & West Community Support’s area of action – the Western Downs, Southern Downs, Toowoomba, North Burnett, South Burnett and Lockyer Valley – are not shaded an alarming red on the drought maps. Unfortunately that doesn’t mean these communities are on Easy Street. The extremes of drought and flood have changed their landscapes forever. Many are yet to realise a harvest or to restock. Will the federal government’s rural assistance package help them? If so, how and when? Those are questions I’m hearing when I visit. Anxiety remains high as families continue to do it tough.

For seven years, Downs & West Community Support has witnessed a real desire to bridge the divide between city and country. It’s been evident in the support our group has received – through donations and volunteering. It is heart-warming to see that spirit also translate to other groups with aligned specific purposes like Blaze Aid and Baked Relief.

Every family really does need a farmer. Let’s continue to show our love and thanks for farming families through the actions of DWCS.

Sincerely

Christine Henry rsc
DWCS coordinator

Donations to Downs & West Community Support will soon be tax deductible!

See page 2 for details

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Around the Black Stump

From Rod Saal OAM, AgAssist

It is often thought that the ‘Black Stump’ is a blackened tree stump somewhere near the edge of the Simpson Desert. I disagree: the black stump exists anywhere Australians gather to yarn, solve problems and help their neighbour. Whether the ‘black stump’ is a ute bonnet, kitchen table or mediation conference with banks prior to foreclosure, I’m astounded by the stoicism of rural and regional people facing tough and cruel issues. There are always options and people to help deal with any situation, no matter how dire and tough. None of these options include suicide.

In 2014, I will run a six-month pilot project for Queensland Health in Toowoomba and South Burnett regional council areas. It’s aptly called ‘Mates who Open Gates’, having evolved from a very simple action. Many years ago, a bloke with severe and debilitating back problems found getting in and out of his truck well-nigh impossible. Another man volunteered to ride with him, to literally open the gates. This allowed the farmer’s off-farm trucking business to prosper and saved the farm. ‘Mates who Open Gates’ now are volunteers who are ‘there’ for farmers and graziers, offering what seems very simple help (e.g. opening gates when they are checking or moving around their farm or property). There’s more to it of course. In ‘opening gates’, through support and help, relationships develop. We are not looking to compete with the wonderful volunteers of, for example Blaze Aid. Rather we’re providing a more ‘pastoral care’ service.

Anyone interested in being involved should call me: 07 4632 1388. Nationally recognised mental health first response and safe talk training is involved before volunteers are allocated to farming families. Some out of pocket expenses (e.g. a contribution to fuel cost to travel to farms) may be available.
Getting the word out

DWCS does not have an advertising budget. We raise awareness through contacts with schools, parishes and organisations. Our contribution was included in a book Reflections – the Burnett flood. We also achieved mainstream media coverage in 2013 in Outback magazine.

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All I wanted for Christmas ...

Because the Christmas wish list was longer than ever, DWCS joined forces with St Vincent de Paul and GIVIT in 2013. Together we delivered hampers to 104 families and gifts for 185 children.

Our receiving — and giving

In 2013, Downs & West Community Support received:

- $7,157 in cash donations from individuals, schools and organisations
- $22,655 in-kind donations of Christmas Hampers and gifts
- $1,635 in-kind donations of baby items
- $10,000 in grants from Catholic Religious Australia Queensland
- $82,500 in-kind donations of household goods

Special thanks for the $25,000 donated by St Vincent’s Health and Aged Care.

This is how such generosity was put to work:

- 485 women attended the 18 wellness days for country women that we organised, providing health checks, motivational speakers, pampering, relaxation and fun.
- 207 children received Christmas gifts.
- 3 Mental Health Days for families were funded.
- 30 country seniors and 100 daughters attended Mother’s Day wellness days on the Downs and in the Burnett.
- 550 household hampers were distributed along with 854 Better Homes & Gardens magazines.
- 44 families affected by multiple flood events received direct financial support.
- 6 families were set up with baby supplies (cots, high chairs, baby clothes and Manchester).
Suffer not the children

DWCS was pleased to work with primary and secondary schools to ensure farm kids did not miss out on educational opportunities. We funded 345 places in Life and Health education classes at five schools and saw 45 high school students go on excursions.

Why is this important?

Inclusion encourages the children to develop positive self-image and self-esteem; it keeps them engaged at school, and helps shape a positive journey into adulthood, setting them up to make healthy choices in later life.

This initiative also took some of the pressure off parents trying to make the most of what they have and really feeling heartsick when it came to saying ‘no’ to their children’s education.

Funds for Life and Health education classes were directed to St Mary’s School, Taroom; St Patrick’s School, Allora; St Joseph’s School, Tara; St Patrick’s School, Mitchell and Ma Ma Creek State School, Grantham.

Wellness days 2013

In a change of format, our wellness days in the Burnett Lockyer Valley and Darling Downs were smaller — capped at around 25 a session — to allow more one-on-one emotional and pastoral support. Professional counsellors were also on hand, at no cost to participants, organised by the Rural Counselling Service.

A prayer written by Sister of Charity, Sr Maureen Parker, for our country Australia and all its people

Bounteous God,

We give thanks for this ancient and beautiful land.

We pray that your Spirit may continue to move among us and bring many blessings to our nation and its people.

Amen

About the Sisters of Charity Community Care

Sisters of Charity Community Care provides direct relief of suffering, distress, isolation, misfortune, destitution or helplessness by operating programs to serve the people of Australia without discrimination.

We congratulate DWCS’s own Rod Saal on his appointment to its board.

Other board members are Peter Hennessy (chair), Sr Laureen Dixon rsc, Sr Suzette Clark rsc and Ray Brennan.
Household Hampers

In 2013, DWCS delivered 550 hampers to rural families in need.

Hampers included groceries, toiletries and household items like mugs or linen.

Taking a family shopping, shouting a cup of coffee and a delicious cake from a local store provided joyous respite as we laughed, cried and shared experiences, hopes and fears.

Once spoken aloud, fears often lose their power and hopes gain strength.

Fund Raising Events

The residents at Marycrest Hostel at Kangaroo Point and the past pupils of Mt St Michael’s College organised fund raising events this year in support of our neighbours in rural and remote areas of Queensland.

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Contributions from all ages are welcomed and appreciated.

Spending time with the locals is key to knowing what is going on in the local area!
Downs & West Community Support’s work could not have been realized if not for the support we gained, financially or in-kind, practically and physically from the following in 2013:

- Sisters of Charity of Australia
- CRAqld
- St Vincent’s Health and Aged Care
- St Vincent’s Care Services
- Staff and residents of Marycrest Retirement Centre
- Students, past and present, of Mt St Michael’s College, Ashgrove
- Marist College, Ashgrove
- Mater Dei/St Peter Chanel Conference of St Vincent de Paul
- Mater Dei School
- St Peter Chanel School
- St Thomas Aquinas Parish, St Lucia
- Passionist Fathers, Oxley
- Knitters’ Friendship Group, Brisbane
- GIVIT, and their supporters
- QIA Social Bridge Club
- Dentists of Brisbane.

31 December 2013 was a very special day for the Sisters of Charity of Australia.

It marked the 175th anniversary of the arrival of the FIRST women Religious to set foot on Australian soil.

Impelled by Christ’s love, five courageous nuns volunteered to the Australian mission.

From January 1839 the Sisters lived at Parramatta and visited the Female Factory where many women convicts lived and worked for the government. The Sisters’ main concern was religious instruction and care of the sick poor. Parramatta and Sydney still had few good roads and the Sisters walked everywhere, going to government hospitals, orphanages, schools and gaols. 175 years later, the Sisters continue to respond to the needs of the people in many ways.