

Nourishing the spirit

SISTER CHRISTINE HENRY OFFERS A LISTENING EAR AND PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE TO RURAL FAMILIES RECOVERING FROM NATURAL DISASTERS.

STORY **HEATHER GRANT** PHOTO **DANA GLUZDE**

DOWN THE TRACK she comes, mud clinging to the four-wheel-drive undercarriage, tooting the horn in a cooee. A blue heeler comes out from the shade to investigate the new arrival who, once parked, proceeds to remove a bag of pantry items and another of toiletries, calling out: "Hoo-oooo, it's me: Sister Christine."

A door opens and a woman emerges, arms open for a hug. It's like an old mates' reunion but this is Downs & West Community Support (DWCS) pastoral care in action, supporting farming families facing yet another natural disaster.

The visitor is Sr Christine Henry, a nun from the Sisters of Charity congregation and coordinator of DWCS. 'Coordinator' is a grandiose title: organisationally, she is 'it', relying on a network of volunteers in the state's rural south-west to relay information about families in dire need.

Fifty-something, Sr Christine feels she's come full circle in her life's work. The daughter of a successful grain merchant, horse trainer and shire mayor, she grew up on Queensland's Southern Downs in Allora: the same town in which Mary Poppins' creator PL Travers spent her childhood — and there is something positively Poppinesque about Sr Christine's soothing ways, much as she would deny it.

Having left the Downs to train as a nurse and midwife, Sr Christine shocked her family by entering the convent in 1976. "My mother thought she'd done something wrong," she says. "It took a while for the family to accept it. In reality I'd been prepared for this life by my parents' demonstration of the importance of caring for others and reaching out to the local community. They were very giving, big on charity and I suppose it impacted on me in a way no one expected."

After decades nursing, including at executive level, and seven years working with street kids, Sr Christine was assigned a new mission based in Brisbane. It was 2007. The Downs & West Drought Appeal was established as a response to rural families suffering from years of cloudless skies. "It was supposed to be for perhaps a year, but the response from people in cities and the coast to our country neighbours was so overwhelming, it sustained our efforts for three years," Sr Christine says. "And then came the floods — and our name change to DWCS — because there's no end in sight to the conditions beyond families' control that are taking them to the edge."

DWCS, which receives no government funding, serves families (irrespective of faith) from Gatton and the Lockyer

Valley across the Darling Downs to St George and north through the Burnett. Last year, Sr Christine clocked up 51,254 kilometres visiting families, offering a listening ear and practical assistance, such as 400 hampers, and many grocery and petrol vouchers. Almost 1200 country women attended wellness days in 16 locations. Another 107 attended the signature Dragonfly retreat, a three-day, all-expenses-paid weekend away, addressing physical health checks, relaxation, socialising and emotional wellbeing. Mental-health awareness is high on the agenda.

"Desperation is a long journey to return from," Sr Christine says. "I've seen so many facets of it: looking into the farmer's face when his crop has failed for a fourth year in a row; watching a four-year-old boy nurse his pet rooster, oblivious to his daddy not coming home after a farming accident; consoling a woman whose husband and son took their lives within months of each other.

"There is a case for putting food on the table but the spirit needs nourishment too. To give something unexpected — something that makes a person feel special or valued and puts a smile on their face and gives joy."

Wellness days and the Dragonfly retreat are on the lips of many women Sr Christine drops in on during a tour of the Burnett, land sodden from relentless rain in the first quarter of 2013. Crops were ruined, roads, livestock, topsoil, powerlines and irrigation infrastructure were washed away in the night.

Winderera cattle breeder Pat Eagleson, based in the Burnett, says men often don't know how to accept help. "Some feel their pride is bruised but I tell them to accept it now and when they are in a position to help another, in a year or two or five, they can repay the kindness," Pat says.

Wooroolin pig farmer and counsellor Karen Seiler, one of DWCS's 'ears to the ground', says Sr Christine provides a lifeline. "She's a sanity saver; a bubbly spring in the middle of a desert providing us with a chance to step back, draw breath and feel loved," she says.

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