

'I wouldn't swap this job for a million bucks!'

Tireless Queensland crusader Christine Henry drives 50,000km a year to offer a helping hand to those doing it tough, writes *Heather Grant*

Christine Henry looks out at the clear blue sky and sighs. There'll be no reprieve today. If anything, a light sprinkle of rain, drying as it hits the dusty ground, will do more harm than good.

As coordinator of Queensland's Downs & West Community Support (DWCS) mission, Christine knows all too well that a farmer can only hold onto hope for so long.

Over the past year, she's witnessed a decline in the mental health of those doing it tough in the bush.

"Desperation is a long journey to return from," says the 59-year-old Sisters of Charity nun.

"I've seen so many facets of it: looking into the farmer's face when his crop has failed for the fourth year in a row; consoling a woman whose husband and son took their lives within months of each other; supporting a young woman who was so devastated by the death of her fiancé in a farming accident that she was convinced adoption was the only option for their unborn child," Christine says.

"This mission initiated [in 2007] because of the profound impact of years of drought. When the floods came, we realised there's no end in sight to the harsh conditions taking families to the edge – conditions out of their control."

Christine and a network of dedicated volunteers serve families (irrespective of faith) in an area extending from Gatton and the Lockyer Valley, west across the Darling Downs to Mitchell and north through the Burnett region.

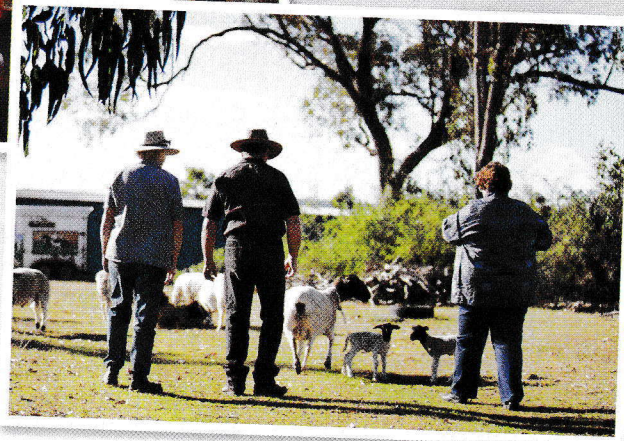
The DWCS's time is divided between seeking donations (it doesn't



LIFE ON THE LAND
Christine loves spreading joy far and wide through the rural community



GOING BUSH
Sometimes just a visit or a chat over a cuppa is all these families need to feel supported



receive government funding), distributing goods and hosting morale-boosting get-togethers.

Her trusty four-wheel drive will clock up at least 50,000km this year as she swings into properties for “a chat”. Last year, she delivered grocery and toiletry hampers to 550 families, along with fuel vouchers and magazines. Christmas gifts were sent to 207 youngsters. DWCS also ensured nearly 400 rural kids were able to attend school excursions. The recipients won’t have asked for charity: Christine’s “ear to the ground” would have helped send aid their way.

“There’s a pride in the bush. People don’t want to let on how hard up they are,” she explains.

Christine is keenly aware of bushies’ ways. Her childhood was spent in the Southern Downs in Allora, Qld, where she recalls being toted around to homes where a helping hand was needed.

“My parents were very giving, big on charity,” she says.

Her decision to join the convent after completing nursing and midwifery training in 1976 stunned the family.

“My mother thought she’d done something wrong. I’d been seeing a fellow for years, and in many minds we were married off. I just knew he wasn’t the big love.

“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.”

While Christine takes a quiet, one on one approach with blokes, chatting over a beer on the back porch or during a stroll down a track, she knows women thrive when they’re together.

About 485 women attended the 18 DWCS wellness days held last year, where they were treated to foot massages, facials, relaxation exercises, health check-ups and plenty of laughter.

“There’s a case for putting food on the table, but the spirit needs nourishment too,” says Christine of the pamper days.

“To give something unexpected – something that makes a person feel special or valued – puts a smile on their face and gives joy. If we can keep the women well, we keep the families well and intact.

“Even the announcement of the federal [drought] assistance package hasn’t put worries behind them. There’s a lot unknown: when will it roll out, who will get what and how?”

Initially, Christine took up the rural relief role for a year. It was a welcome change after decades of nursing and working with street kids. Seven years on, her job is just as demanding yet Christine has no desire to walk away.

“You could offer me \$1 million and I’d keep doing what I’m doing. In fact, I’d give that to Australian rural families. It’s the love of the people that keeps me going.” ●

