

Leading rural change, helping rural families

Carol Watson was seeking the skills she needed to do more for her community when she applied for the Australian Rural Leadership Program

By Jane Milburn and Kellie Penfold

New England Merino wool producer Carol Watson came to wool growing with a background in agricultural science. She is just completing a psychology degree and is interested in focusing on relationships in farming families to better understand the emotional aspects of running a family farm business. Carol is also exploring how leaders influence the management of change in rural Australia.

Carol, who runs 'Ruby Hills' fine-wool Merino stud at Walcha, NSW, with her husband Andrew Burgess, is

the current AWI-funded participant in Course 14 of the Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP), a two-year program that she began in February 2007.

Carol says she is honoured to have been selected along with 30 other rural leaders for the highly regarded ARLP program. "My main motivation was to find out what skills I needed to become more influential in decision-making in the community," she says.

Carol, who has previously worked as the executive officer of a number of livestock breed associations and served on community organisations, such as school parent

groups, is currently a director of NEGS Limited, which operates the New England Girls School at Armidale.

"I had left my professional working life to spend more time with my young family, and on the farm, and having jumped off the merry-go-round I wanted to see what skills I needed to do more for my community."

After initially working in agricultural science, Carol's interests moved to the humanitarian side of rural Australia and the role of leaders.

The ARLP participants start their program with a survival exercise in the Kimberley. This is followed by further study on leadership and an overseas trip looking at further study on leadership and an overseas trip looking at rural communities in other countries.

Carol says she is already feeling more inspired and confident, especially after the challenging Kimberley experience. "The great thing was that when we were out there everyone was at the same level. The bloke who might have the biggest sandwich in his lunchbox back at the office, is stripped down to the essence of self – having to establish just what are the essentials for personal survival and team building.

"It was about your identity as a person away from the working environment, and working together with others in teams. It was about your core values and beliefs.

"Out of it came a very supportive, caring group of people. Sometimes women in the wider community concentrate on bringing other women down, whereas here it is all about supporting each other to achieve our goals. There is a strong culture of support and professionalism."

A standout leadership skill observed by Carol is the ability of leaders to network, not just in their own area of expertise but into other industry networks. "It's about having links into the social capital in diverse areas ... not just farming, or just education." Emotional intelligence, or getting along with other people, is also a key leadership skill.

One of Carol's goals for her own community is to invigorate the amount of grassroots grower education available through extension programs and field days to promote the latest research and what is on offer through groups such as AWI and grower education group Wool4Wealth.

"Our enterprise has gained a lot from being involved in producer programs and it is important that good information is shared," she says.

A 'Ruby Hills' fine wool Merino sire is one of only four specially selected wool sires to contribute genetic material to the SheepGenomics gene mapping flock at AWI's Falkiner Memorial Research Station.

'Ruby Hills' has been performance recording and evaluating fine-wool Merinos for 16 years to reduce micron and increase cut and the commercial profitability of fine-wool sheep.

Australian Rural Leadership Program participant and woolgrower Carol Watson: "My main motivation was to find out what skills I needed to become more influential in decision-making in the community."



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More information: www.rural-leaders.com.au,
www.rubyhills.com.au