



Children Australia welcomes Linda Freedman as guest editor for this issue, dedicated to rural Australia. Linda's career has included research and policy, journalism, social work and social work education. She has worked in both Commonwealth and State government departments including a very substantial stint as senior social worker in Swan Hill, Northern Victoria.

That stint followed research experience in Melbourne and some time as a journalist for a daily newspaper in Mount Hagen, Papua, New Guinea. She is a parent of two young people aged 17 and 18 years. Academic pursuits in Arts, Criminology and a masters degree in Social Work have contributed to her work of the past three years where she has co-ordinated an extended campus social work education program in Mildura.

Linda has a strong interest in rural concerns, Aboriginal issues and women's affairs. Her interest in the delivery of appropriate services extends to participation in the rural and remote community workers network. She is an active advocate in community and political arenas and is a member of the Victorian Community Council Against Violence.

Editorial

Rural Australia receives scant attention in the mainstream literature, and rural dwellers assert that they are excluded from the political agendas of capital cities. Recent attempts to take rural concerns to town have highlighted some of the frustrations felt by those endeavouring to maintain a sound social and economic base in the face of the declining countryside.

There appears to be a great deal of mythology surrounding rural life, a romanticised notion of the great outback, pioneering spirit, enhanced quality of life and freedom for children. To some extent this mythology has a basis in fact. Many rural dwellers would never contemplate moving to a large city and readily proclaim the benefits of rural life – a health environment, a relaxed way of life, neighbourliness and safety. Yet underlying these positive dimensions, we hear of a great deal of hardship suffered by many. On most social indicators, including income, education and employment, rural dwellers are disadvantaged when compared with their city counterparts. Particular groups in rural settings face significant disadvantage, including farmers, Aborigines and youth.

In this edition of *Children Australia*, a snapshot is provided of some aspects of rural life. The edition departs from the usual format, providing a variety of approaches and styles in order to encourage rural practitioners to write about their experiences. Broadly, the articles fall into four categories: those focusing on the rural recession, those demonstrating particular aspects of rural life, those offering a glimpse of rural practice and examples of rural projects. Across all areas emerge common themes of isolation, creativity, optimism and a sense of the uniqueness of rural Australia. Most importantly, is evidence of communities owning their own problems and working to find their own solutions.

From the diversity presented, we are reminded that rural Australia is not a homogeneous entity, and that the needs and solutions for a Wimmera wheat farmer in no way resemble those applying to a Queensland miner.

Three articles on the rural crisis set the scene for the edition. Each take a different perspective, analysing specific aspects of policy with a bearing on the rural decline. Through the case studies presented, we become aware that the rural crisis is not merely about economics, but has a very real human toll. Children are often the forgotten victims. The interview with Simon Crean demonstrates an attempt by Canberra to grasp some of the policy anomalies facing rural Australia, and shows that there is a listening ear and a recognition that, although governments can set broad directions, the impetus for change must rest with those who are closest to the issues and who stand to benefit from such change. Obviously, advocacy and lobbying are important tasks for rural dwellers in ensuring a responsiveness by policy makers to their plight.

Glimpses of rural life are presented by a number of authors. Peter Munn moves away from themes of hardship and demonstrates the optimism of children living in his own town of Whyalla. His article also demonstrates that research possibilities, however small, are available in one's backyard, something which is starting to be recognised increasingly by rural practitioners. In describing her position as a mobile support teacher, Jenny Cruise provides an example an unusual work role in an isolated part of Australia. She also provides a picture of the life of station women, highlighting both their hardships and their resourcefulness. Margaret Alston examines more closely the situation of women and gender relations, as described in two recently

published works. Patriarchy is certainly alive and well in most country communities and from my own experience of sixteen years in rural Victoria, there is no doubt that the 'Ladies a plate please' ethos still pervades.

Young people in a mining town rarely rate a mention, yet as Jane Danzi reveals, they face their own particular set of problems in a company-owned locality. The isolation she describes is no doubt beyond the experience and comprehension of the majority of Australians.

Aboriginal people continue to suffer in their own land and in too many rural communities experience exclusion, discrimination and prejudice. In the interview with Teresa Donaczy, the impact of past injustices on present suffering is highlighted.

The rural projects described reveal how such universal concerns as child safety and environmental awareness are translated into programs. Both articles provide examples of innovative responses to complex questions. The 'Woolies' poem by Karyn Sassella provides a humorous touch and no doubt many rural practitioners, facing problems in maintaining a degree of anonymity, will identify with her sentiments.

Although rural Australia needs to find its own solutions to its diverse problems, Vernon Knight's conference report demonstrates that we do not live in a vacuum. By gaining ideas from the experiences of others, both within Australia and overseas, a process of adaptation of ideas into our own context can provide a freshness to the solution-seeking process. Although rural communities are resistant to 'outside experts' and have a strong sense of pride in dealing with their own problems, innovative ideas emerging from other localities point to the need for a sensitive balance between local and adapted problem-solving. Hopefully, some of the ideas appearing in this edition will contribute to this process.

It is also to be hoped that this edition will encourage further contributions from rural practitioners. Although country-based workers are establishing their own forums and developing their own newsletters and journals, there is often little opportunity to explain to urban dwellers the unique nature of rural life, both positive and negative. In a shrinking world, and in tough times when there are less dollars to meet all needs, it is imperative that rural dwellers utilise as many avenues as possible for expressing their viewpoints. ♦

WOOLIES

*Woolies is the place to be seen
in my home town of Katherine
you can catch friends, foes, freaks,
family, fauna, EVERYBODY
down those Big W wondrous aisles
squeaky clean*

*If indeed you spot me
hiding behind the baked beans
I haven't quite lost the plot
gone loopy
I'm looking for my lost anonymity*

*And you can't pull the Woolies over my eyes
there's no such thing
as good buys
in high-rise territorial skies*

*But Woolies is where the ACTION is
forget city-slick group work bizz
there's all sorts of groupy-groupies festering
alongside the fruit and veg*

*And you can't pull the Woolies over my eyes
the prices might be high
but so am I
as I walk down those friendly aisles*

*Yes Woolies is the place to be seen
its the CENTRE for rural and remote networking
in my home town of KATHERINE*

by Karyn Sassella, Social Worker Department of Social Security Katherine, Northern Territory.
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