

Review of the visit Fri 24th – Tues 28th May, 2019 to Lightning Ridge, by Michael and Gunilla Austin, on behalf of the Rotary Club of Sydney Cove



Preamble:- In recent years, I was the “Rural Voice” in the Community Services Committee of RC of Sydney Cove. This “mantle” was passed to our younger and active member Kate Parsons in 2018. The RCSC Constitution insists that the Club has a “hands-on” approach when allocating money to a project, so on Kate’s unexpected resignation from the Club, I volunteered to be that “hands-on” person. I have recently transferred to the Rotary Club of Laurieton in District 9650 and am pleased to find that the Rotary Club of Lightning Ridge is also in this District.

The Project:- Being overseas at the time, I was not involved with setting up and financing of this project which is titled “**Rotary Community Outreach to Drought-impacted Farmers in Lightning Ridge, NSW**” and is jointly funded by The Rotary Clubs of Lightning Ridge, Sydney Cove and a grant from District 9675. The details can be seen in the “Memorandum of Understanding”, prepared by Edei Ledet on behalf of the RCSC.

The Review:- The journey to Lightning Ridge helped me to assess the effects of our previous financial support to “**Soils for Life**” and I was heartened to witness a growing number of farms where SFL mentoring has led to better irrigation and land management in preparation for when the rains eventually come.

We were fortunate to arrive during a visit by over 20 members of Gunnedah Rotary, so spent the first evening at a meal with them, together with members of Lightning Ridge RC and three exchange students. There was much interest in why we were there and it was a great opportunity to “spotlight” Sydney Cove!

Down to business:- The next morning, meeting with Club Secretary Neroli Bevan, husband John and others early to collect (and pay for) parcel components from local suppliers and loading them for onward distribution by a cheerful farming couple, Pam and Doug Caley in their monster 4-wheel drive. RCLR’s distribution system in this vast region has been split into four areas, each of which has delivery volunteers such as Pam and Doug, serving a total of 125 remote farming families. This system produces the added benefit of their receiving, not only food aid but a visit and a chance to chat. It is easy to realise why the suicide rate among this group has been nil since our work here began. I took the opportunity to recommend their contacting a “Soils for Life” mentor whenever possible.

Early during our visit, Neroli and I looked through the “Memorandum of Understanding” and I am very happy that the spirit of this agreement is underpinned by what I have seen and been told. Some financial support has been given to the work of **SALT** (the “Tradie Ladies”, I call them), helping with their voluntary maintenance of farm buildings, etc. Evidence of the “**Adopt a Town**” approach hit home when the local butcher told me that he would have gone out of business, had it not been for this Rotary project. It clearly affects other local businesses positively, including the bakery, clothing store, agricultural supplier and pharmacy, all of whom are tied up in this scheme.

There was evidence of some “extras” to the MOU that are having a beneficial effect to this community during a very difficult time – books for children delivered with the food parcels and a Christmas party, bringing many people together, was greatly appreciated. Additional funding may well have been contributed for this by RCLR.

I thanked and encouraged hard working RC Secretary **Neroli**, who somehow holds down a day job on top of everything else that she does, together with husband **John Bevan**, the local Fire Brigade Captain and part-time tour guide. Neroli is making time to prepare a report to Sydney Cove on behalf of RC of Lightning Ridge which I hope will be well received.

Finally, Gunilla and I very much enjoyed this trip and found a special and grateful community in Lightning Ridge. Sydney Cove can be proud of this joint achievement. It has literally saved lives and I strongly recommend that the Club continues supporting this venture in the coming Rotary year.

Michael Austin

“Oh may the showers in torrents fall and all the tanks run over; And may the grass grow green and tall in the pathways of the drover”. Henry Lawson (first published in the Australian Town and Country Journal - October, 1888).