

MAY 2021

# FrontierNews

## Hope comes to the gate



**Frontier  
Services**  
Standing with  
people in the bush



# A message from Jannine



**As we go to print, much of New South Wales is mopping up in the wake of the devastating floods. My heart breaks for every Australian impacted by this once-in-100-year event.**

For the farming families affected, it's just another blow from mother nature: one that will impact their livelihoods for many years to come.

First, the brutal drought. Then the ravages of the bushfires, followed by the fear and uncertainty of Covid. And now the floodwaters. There's only so much the human spirit can take!

## **The mouse plague intensifies**

Across eastern Australia, there is another disaster in full swing: a mouse plague of biblical proportions.

Earlier today, one of my team members was briefing me on the latest developments in Coonamble in NSW. It's just one example of many outback communities reeling from this grim plague.

Folks in this corner of our country are trying to rebuild from the worst drought in Australian recorded history. They were celebrating their first good season in years, and now their harvest has been ruined by mice.

The stories our Chaplains and our farming families are sharing with us are shocking. Mouse droppings in kitchen drawers, in children's toy boxes and rotting atop water tanks. Stock food destroyed. Houses damaged because mice are eating away at the concrete foundations!

**One farmer estimates he has killed 35,000 mice in the past 10 weeks.**

The stench is said to be unbearable, and the associated health risks are alarming.

## **Hope comes to the farm gate**

Outback communities like these were already struggling financially and emotionally. Now, many of them are overrun with mice – and overwhelmed by the mammoth task ahead.

But there is hope. And that hope springs from the support of people like you.

For our farmers and graziers, hope comes to the farm gate in a visit from our Bush Chaplains across the country: on hand for a chat, or to offer practical, emotional and spiritual support to those doing it tough. It also comes in the can-do attitude of our amazing Outback Links volunteers, ready to lend a helping hand with property maintenance and other urgent tasks that keep our farmers awake at night.

Your support helps to give our friends in the outback real hope for better days ahead.

**Thank you for continuing to stand with people in the bush.**

**Jannine Jackson**  
National Director



***“This has been the most difficult 12 months I’ve ever had as a Bush Chaplain”***

Reverend John Dihm, Frontier Services  
Bush Chaplain, Pilbara region: WA.

Like all our Bush Chaplains, John has witnessed the number of suicides and domestic violence cases soar during the pandemic. In just one week alone, he learned of four suicides in his community. It’s heartbreaking!

**The need for support in rural and remote Australia has never been greater.  
Our Bush Chaplaincy is under pressure and needs your support.**

## How you can help right now:

- ✓ Make a tax-deductible gift by completing the self-sealing envelope in this magazine, or donate online at [frontierservices.org/donate](https://frontierservices.org/donate)
- ✓ Help farmers direct! Register to volunteer at [frontierservices.org/volunteer](https://frontierservices.org/volunteer) or check current volunteering opportunities in areas of most need.



Frontier Services is an agency  
of Uniting Church in Australia

**Published by**  
Frontier Services  
PO Box 3424  
Parramatta NSW 2124

Suite 53 / 2 O’Connell St  
Parramatta NSW 2150

**T** 1300 787 247  
**E** [enquiries@frontierservices.org](mailto:enquiries@frontierservices.org)  
**W** [www.frontierservices.org](http://www.frontierservices.org)

May 2021 Vol 124 NO1  
Registered by Print Post – PP255 003/01721  
ISSN 1033 – 2235

**Editor** Krystie Erickson  
**Front Cover**  
Outback Links Volunteer - Lee O’Neill with his dog Casper

**Circulation** 10,500

**Copyright notice** Frontier News is the quarterly newsletter of the Uniting Church Frontier Services. Copyright in this publication is owned by Frontier Services. Congregations or fellowships wishing to reproduce material contained in Frontier News, may do so without permission providing that material is attributed to Frontier Services.

**About Frontier Services** Frontier Services is a national agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, established to continue the unified work of the Australian Inland Mission, the Methodist Inland Mission, and the inland mission of the Congregational Union, and works with people across 85% of the continent, including Aboriginal communities and isolated properties.

# Outback Links: Volunteer Services

Do you have a thirst for bush travel and a volunteering spirit? Register as an Outback Links volunteer today by signing up at [frontierservices.org/how-we-help/outback-links/volunteer/](https://frontierservices.org/how-we-help/outback-links/volunteer/)



## Friends for life

In the dozen or so years Maree Anning has been an Outback Links volunteer, our team estimate she has contributed more than 300 hours of unpaid service to farming families across Queensland. But Maree doesn't measure her volunteering in hours, or even in the number of placements she has chalked up over the years.

For this dedicated volunteer, it's all about connecting with people; about 'mucking in' and doing what needs to be done to help country folk out of hardship. In return, she says her volunteering has resulted in many lifelong friendships, and plenty of adventurous travel experiences along the way.

Her most recent placement was with a farming family in Theodore, Queensland. *"Mum and dad, Michelle and Scott, had so much on their plate!"* Maree says. They do, indeed.

The couple have three daughters: 10-year-old twins Addison and Isabella and 8-year-old Sophia. In between juggling family duties, they run a cattle

property alongside horse and dog breeding operations. Scott also spends every second week working out at the mine and Michelle runs her own management consultancy as well as equestrian clinics.

*"To say they have a lot of balls in the air is quite the understatement,"* Maree told us.

Michelle reached out to Outback Links for support as she was snowed under with jobs coming out of the drought and Covid-19. She and her husband also wanted to get the house in order ahead of family visiting for Christmas.

Our intrepid volunteer was only too happy to help. Maree got into an easy routine with the family, helping the girls out with their daily chores.

*"They put me on that roster quick-smart,"* she said. Maree's duties involved everything from mucking out the horse stables and feeding the sheep, to cleaning the dog kennels, tending to the puppies and walking the girls to the bus stop, a kilometre down a dirt track.

As well as helping to tidy up indoors, Maree also completed some special projects: sprucing up the outdoor patio and crafting a bench seat for the children to sit on while waiting for the school bus.

She initially intended to stay with the family for two weeks but extended to four weeks so Michelle

could travel for work. While she slept in her motorhome parked beside the main house, Maree says she was very much part of the farming family's daily life: sharing meals and helping in the kitchen when asked.

Maree told us that she loved the routine of the busy farm, and particularly enjoyed watching Farmer Scott work with his horses. *"Scott was like a horse whisperer,"* she said. *"I could stand there for hours just watching him with those magnificent horses."*

Maree returned to her Gold Coast home following her 4-week stint with the family, and she was delighted when they invited her back to join them for Christmas. She regularly keeps in touch with the family and says she had no doubt that they will remain friends for life.

***"That's the beauty of volunteering for Outback Links,"*** Maree said. ***"As much as you give, you get much more in return."***



# Outback Links: Volunteer Services

## Volunteering is in Lee's blood

Lee O'Neill couldn't agree more with Maree's observations about the benefits of volunteering with us.

The Vietnam veteran and former Army Major, who gave 20 years' service to the Army, has experienced debilitating PTSD due to his service.

Lee speaks candidly of his struggles with his PTSD and alcohol over the years.

*"I was a workaholic and an alcoholic," Lee admits. "I would have nightmares. I'd wake up in a sweat and would drink more to fall back asleep. I knew something was wrong: I just didn't know it was Vietnam."*

After retiring from the Army, Lee became a courier driver and later started a mowing and landscaping business with his wife. His world came crashing down one morning when he woke up and had no idea where he was or what he was doing. He would later discover that he had suffered a complete mental breakdown and was forced to undergo five weeks of treatment at a mental health institution.

*"My wife Lindy was an incredible support through it all, but in the end, I was forced to sell the business and retire."*

In retirement, Lee turned to volunteering. *"I've always wanted to give: I have the need to give back, is how I would describe it,"* he said.

Lee initially volunteered for the Rural Fire Service. (Trivia of the day: at one base, he even served alongside former Prime Minister Tony Abbott!) When his knees started to 'go', Lee looked around his community to see where else he might be of service. His daughter Natalie suggested he volunteer for Frontier Services Outback Links.

Lee says he hasn't looked back since joining our volunteer frontline.

His first volunteer placement took him on an adventure to Gravesend: some 580 kilometres from his home in the Blue Mountains. With his trusty dog Casper by his side, he drove his camper van to the farm of Chris and Heather, who run a mixed business property, with cattle, sheep and goats. Lee spent two weeks with the farmers, lending a hand when and where asked.

*"I even helped Chris remove the tracks off a bulldozer at one stage,"* he chuckles. *"I had no idea what I was doing but Chris was very good at giving me instructions."*

Lee says that volunteering with us has given him a different perspective on life. *"I know there is always someone out there suffering worse than me."*

When we asked Lee how he felt about volunteering, and if he would continue to volunteer for our Outback Links program, he quoted this famous line from a poem by Edgar Guest.



*"As you close your eyes in slumber do you think that  
God would say, You have earned one more tomorrow  
by the work you did today?"*

It's not surprising that Lee quoted poetry as he is an accomplished poet in his own right. His stirring prose is included in the International War Veterans Poetry Archives.

**To read Lee's poetry,  
visit [www.iwvpa.net](http://www.iwvpa.net)  
and search for 'Lee O'Neill'.**

# Good news update from one of our farmers

In late 2019, we shared the story of Rhonda and Paul: farmers out Gravesend way, around 50 kilometres east of Moree in New South Wales. Rhonda was the public face of our urgent Christmas Appeal when much of the country was still gripped by the worst drought in Australia's history.

At the time, we implored our supporters to 'Keep Their Spirits High Until The Rains Return'. We recently checked in on Rhonda to see how life is treating her and her husband these days.

When we last met them, the couple had recently welcomed a group of Outback Links volunteers to their property. They had been in desperate need of help.

Rhonda recalls that back then, they were doing it especially tough. *"We had no feed, we had nothing: we were just living hand-to-mouth,"* she told us. She shared distressing memories of her husband regularly having to shoot emaciated cows to put them out of their misery. *"It was soul-destroying."*

One of the few positive memories Rhonda has of those days is the visit from Outback Links volunteers. They quickly got to work, removing hazardous old fencing so Rhonda and Paul instantly gained more use of their paddocks for their cows to roam. *"They were just brilliant!"* Rhonda says.

Farmer John and his wife were particularly grateful for the additional helping hands, as Rhonda is legally blind and unable to pitch in with jobs such as fencing maintenance.

Fast forward to 2021, and the couple are feeling a lot more optimistic. *"We have semi-retired,"* Rhonda explains. *"We have water flowing and we are going into winter with lots of feed, which is an incredible relief."*

Rhonda reports proudly that she reared 14 calves last year that are now ready for market. *"We were lucky that we got to keep our breeders and that we could use Paul's superannuation to pay down our debt. So many of our friends have either lost their properties or are drowning in debt."*

Despite Rhonda's upbeat outlook on life, the hard times are far from over. *"We are now in the middle of this wretched mice plague, and it's a shocking situation!"* she says. *"I've spent \$500 on baits in the last couple of months alone, but we're among the lucky ones. If you have grain stores, you've got no hope."*

Rhonda knows of many other property owners who are in desperate need of a helping hand from Outback Links volunteers. And she had this message for anyone weighing up their options to join our volunteer crew.

*"When you're living on a remote property, it can be incredibly lonely and isolating. Just knowing that other people care – that other Australians have not forgotten us folk out in the bush – it's an incredible feeling. And knowing that there are people willing to muck in and help, it takes a huge weight off your shoulders."*





*“When you’re living on a remote property, it can be incredibly lonely and isolating. Just knowing that other people care – that other Australians have not forgotten us folk out in the bush – it’s an incredible feeling. And knowing that there are people willing to muck in and help, it takes a huge weight off your shoulders.”*

# Isolated in #NSWfloods



Follow us:  
[@FrontierServic6](https://twitter.com/FrontierServic6)

As the horror flooding of New South Wales unfolded, this tweet from the heart caught our eye. **Mother nature can be so cruel.**



**Kirralie Smith** @KirralieS · 7h

I'm currently isolated with my family in the [#NSWfloods](#). We are safe, have food & power. The recovery for my community will be long. Our driveway is wrecked & no accessible roads to town. So tough as so many are still recovering from drought, damaging storm, fires, lockdown & this



13

7

50



Your compassion for those in the bush can help heal the hurt and rebuild shattered communities. Thank you for your continued support

Not everyone is able to help out on the frontline as an Outback Links volunteer, but every Australian can do their bit. Your one-off donation today will enable us to continue sending care to these struggling communities. Better still, put it towards a regular contribution to Frontier Services. A takeaway coffee a day costs around \$150 a month. You can become a regular donor for as little as \$20 a month.

**Please see the enclosed donation form for your giving options, or visit [frontierservices.org/donate](https://frontierservices.org/donate)**



## Mental health crisis in the bush

We are so blessed that we have so many amazing Bush Chaplains and talented volunteers who spring into action right across Australia. We are seeing the demand for our services increase at a level we have not previously experienced.

Loneliness and isolation can take an enormous toll on the human spirit. For our friends in rural and remote Australia, loneliness and social isolation often go hand-in-hand with life on the land, and it comes at a devastating cost.

There is a mental health crisis in remote Australia, as our Bush Chaplains are continuing to experience first hand. Their reports are telling us of the crisis increasing over recent years. Research out of the Australia Institute of Health and Welfare confirms<sup>1</sup> it. This research found that approximately 1 in 7 people in the bush have attempted suicide at some point in their life.

Indeed, the suicide rate in the bush is more than two times higher than metropolitan areas. Equally shocking is the finding that Torres Strait Island and Aboriginal people aged 12-24 years are 3 times more likely to be hospitalized with mental health illness than their non-indigenous peers.

This is the result of so much more than simply loneliness and isolation. Many of our farmers, still recovering from the worst drought in recorded history, lost much of their land and livelihoods to the bushfires. Now floods have claimed many more properties in recent times.

Our friends in the bush need us to be a part of their lives more than ever. We know that we have some amazing volunteers and Bush Chaplains who are always willing to help and serve. They are ready but we are being asked to do more. Whether that's helping to fix a fence, hand-feeding livestock or ferrying the kids to school during especially busy times, it can take weeks of labour off farmer's hands: enabling them to focus on getting their livelihood back on track. And year round, our Bush Chaplains are on hand to provide spiritual, emotional and practical support when and as bush communities need it.

**It is your continued support that makes this possible. On behalf of our mates in the bush, thank you sincerely.**

<sup>1</sup> Rural and remote health: Snapshot. Release Date: 23 July 2020. AIHW

# Easter Reflections

As we reflect on what has been an intense 12 months we are taking the season of Easter to pray for Hope and new beginnings

*"Easter is a time to remember that although Good Friday is a sad time for many Christians, Easter Sunday brings us hope in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."* **Caine Hartigan, Bush Chaplain of Cunnamulla-Burke & Wills QLD**

*Easter is the climax of the Christian calendar. It marks the end of Lent and leads into a celebration of new life."* **Lindsay Ginn, Bush Chaplain of Goldfields - WA**

*For me, Easter means hope. Hope for the environment, hope for traumatised people, hope for a new and better life that extends beyond death. Hope that in the end, love wins. I hesitate to use the word 'hope' though, because for me it isn't a wishing-well type thing. It's based on the words of Jesus, backed up by him coming back to life. The resurrection defies other explanations but is beyond reasonable doubt as a historical event. Much like the hope expressed above. It seems unlikely, but in the face of the unlikeliness of a resurrection it becomes a real possibility. So that's what I'm putting my trust in. It's the basis of everything I think and do."* **Benjamin Quilliam Bush Chaplain of Centralian - NT**

*"I love the journey of Easter. It takes us through joy, fellowship and sadness. It symbolises darkness and light."* **Phill Matthews, Bush Chaplain of Narwon - NSW**

*"Easter time for us is a time for our family to come together and to give thanks for what we have."* **Lou, Farmer QLD**





***“On my many travels  
visiting property owners,  
I stress that Frontier  
Services is here to help  
them: that we’re friends  
of those in the bush.  
They get that, and they  
truly appreciate it.”***



# Outback pub hosts church service

When the community calls our Bush Chaplains get creative. How do you run a service when there is no church or hall available. You ask the local pub.

Casting his eye around the small town, Bush Chaplain Cain, who is our Bush Chaplain from Cunnamulla-Burke, decided the local pub would make an ideal venue. The community-spirited publican agreed and in March, Cain hosted his first church service in the dining room of the almost 100-year-old pub.

*"We'd had some terrific rain in the leadup to the first service, so we only had a few in attendance as many locals couldn't get off their property without ruining roads,"* Cain said.

*"As word-of-mouth spreads, we expect more property owners from surrounding areas to make their way into Wyandra to join us in worship."*

Cain's Cunnamulla-Burke remote area is vast: covering some 450 000 square kilometres of southwest Queensland. In the almost two years he has been in the role, he has seen drought and Covid hardship take a toll on the mental health of locals.

*"People on the land: they're tough cookies, but they're also doing it tough out here,"* Cain said. *"They want to hear something to give them hope and that's what the Bush Chaplain ministry is about."*




# Bush Chaplain - Lindsay Ginn

**It's his incredible talents  
that are creating magic  
and is music to our ears.**







In January last year, Bush Chaplain, Lindsay Ginn joined us in the Goldfields Remote Area in Western Australia. Lindsay's region is vast: from Kalgoorlie where he is based, up to Leonora, Laverton and Menzies and down south to Esperance.

Lindsay estimates he drives around 1200 kilometers a week. That's one big petrol bill each week. And it is because of the kindness and generosity of people like you, our Bush Chaplains like Lindsay Ginn are able to be on the road each week.

Music is Lindsay's passion. So much so kids are coming back.

*"The idea," says Lindsay "is to incentivise students to attend school."* The truancy rates have been an issue and had increased since Covid-19 with many students refusing to go back to the classroom.

Music is magic. Imagine having a tiny school where kids are returning because of music. Many of those he is reaching through his school music program are indigenous students in small, remote schools with few resources. Because he offers his music program free, the response from students has been incredibly positive.

***"The kids love it," Lindsay said. "It's a great way to connect."***

He is using his music talents to help with mental health too. Lindsay is so committed he is working on being a trainer for suicide prevention conversations not simply engaging with the kids but also with their families.

***"There is a huge mental health issue in the goldfields and the safeTALK program enables anyone over the age of 15 to become a suicide-alert helper. I want to teach those skills to as many people as possible in the remote communities in which I am privileged to work."***



## Shout out to our official Mobility Partner

Outback Links has a wonderful long-term relationship with the NRMA, and New South Wales farmers are immensely grateful for this corporate partnership.

Since 2017, NRMA technicians from the Sydney metropolitan area have headed out bush to support drought-affected farmers in the north west of the state. While the program was paused last year due to Covid, farmers will be lining up again to welcome the band of NRMA volunteers to their properties later this year.

At the time of writing this we are organising teams to help rebuild bushfire ravaged towns in southern NSW. We are helping families who have lost everything.

This is a significant project for us and for the snowy regions of NSW following on from the bushfires.

We are taking a team of NRMA technicians as one of our first group trips back after COVID lockdowns to Rockton NSW, near the Victorian border. We are really humbled and excited to be getting back out and doing what we do best. Changing lives.

There are families who have had their lives deeply impacted by these fires. One couple we are helping are still living in a makeshift shed. They lost everything including their pet Labrador and the pain still feels like it just happened yesterday.

Despite these hardships, we have been welcomed into these “homes” and thanked for showing up, and showing that we care. Its things like this project that make us incredibly proud of what we do. There is no one else in this small town to help and yet there is so much to do.

We know that we are providing hope by showing up. We realise that we will be with them for a long time in their recovery and understand that we are not the answer but just a small part of the solution.

If you own or work for a community-spirited company that wants to give back to those in the bush, please contact **Michelle McLeod** at [michellem@frontierservices.org](mailto:michellem@frontierservices.org) for an information on corporate volunteering.



“Partnerships like these make a huge contribution to our ability to scale up our volunteering in remote and rural communities.”

**Michelle McLeod**



**Frontier  
Services**

Standing with  
people in the bush



[frontierservices.org](http://frontierservices.org)

1300 787 247

