Entry type: Person
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Mitchell, Sally

(1962 -)

Born	19620101, Cohuna Victoria Australia
Occupation	Educator, Farmer

Summary

Sally Mitchell was the Victorian state winner of the ABC Rural Woman of the Year Award in 1994.

Details

Sally Mitchell was the inaugural winner of the Victorian ABC radio Rural Woman of the Year Award in 1994. From a dairy farm at Torrumbarry, on the Murray River near Echuca, she said, ‘I accept this award on behalf of all the women in Victoria who get up at 5.30 every morning and milk the cows, sow the fields and do whatever they do, and do it well. Then they … get the breakfast, do the washing, get the kids to school … and it just goes on.’

The routine of Sally’s life is typical of that of many women on the land, except that at the time she won the award, Sally was unexpectedly managing the routine on her own. In August 1989, Sally and her husband invested all they had in a dairy farm, deciding for various reasons that they wanted to establish their own farming business, rather than work on her husband’s family farm. Two years later, around Christmas, he slipped into a coma, the result of brain injury caused by a congenital cyst. He died in June 1992 and three weeks later, their daughter was born.

What happened next it testimony to Sally’s remarkable courage and the strength of the support she got from her family and the community. Life immediately after the tragedy was stressful and emotionally charged, and Sally knew that in that state of mind, she should make no big decisions about what to do next. She stayed, and with the help of a life insurance policy payout, purchased more land, so she could run more cows, which meant she could afford to employ someone to help. She worked incredibly hard herself, noting the importance of the physical work to her own survival and capacity to cope. Being busy was great therapy, not only because it took her mind off things but because it enabled her to sleep.

Sally knew it would have been important to her husband that his child be brought up on the farm. With the passage of time and the support of family and friends, Sally came to the conclusion that staying wouldn’t only be the right sentimental decision, it would be a good business decision. Supported by most of the local community in her quest to manage the farm, Ms Mitchell said the occasional traditionalist forecast doom: ‘Never to my face; nobody would be game enough to say that to my face.’ In any case, they would have had to eat their words. In the two-and-a-half years after the death of her husband, Sally expanded her property, doubled her dairy stock and adopted innovative farm practices.

It was her mother and sister who nominated Sally for the award, and she suspects that it was the novelty of her story as a single woman running and growing the business which tipped her over the line, because it really wasn’t common at the time. If she thought she was busy before winning, it was taken to a whole new level afterwards! She was invited to join several boards and advisory councils, and discovered she had real skills in public speaking, thus making herself a much wanted commodity at public events. She also began to establish a career in agri-politics, serving as a central councillor for United Dairy Farmers and on the board of Goulburn Murray Water.

Not that she resented most of the activity, because it opened her up to a world of opportunities and experiences she would not otherwise have had. The schedule of public speaking engagements that came with the award opened her eyes to the extent of rural women’s marginalisation. Because she was a confident woman capable of speaking out, she simply wasn’t aware of the number of women who did not share that confidence. She was invited to join the Victorian Government’s newly established Women’s Advisory Council and was amazed by the extent to which women were marginalised from decision making in most organisations, not just rural organisations. She was confronted by the constraints placed upon women from other cultural contexts. She learned how lacking in financial nous many ordinary women were and realised how crucial this knowledge was in establishing gender equity.

Most importantly, she was distressed to learn through her travels how many women were insecure about their own abilities. ‘The greatest obstacle to rural women is themselves,’ she said, adding that ‘poor self-confidence’ is what holds back most country women. It’s a mindset she recognises herself, because she admitted to feeling uncomfortable seeking recognition for her work. ‘It’s about overcoming a mental barrier more than anything,’ she believes. ‘You think you’re not special or different, but when you step forward you realise you actually are. That being the case, she believed that the ABC rural radio awards were a vital to encourage rural achievers. ‘Women don’t realise their own potential or the extent of what they have achieved, and that’s not just rural women.’

While Sally herself didn’t get much enjoyment from her involvement on industry boards, she hopes that other women will get involved and believed that the ABC award played an important role in getting women to step up to that responsibility, ‘because it helped women to become more accepted both on farm and in farming-related managerial positions.’ In her opinion, industry organisations would work better with more women involved because women, by virtue of the frequent need for them to work off farm, have a bigger picture view of what works. This often means that they are the more ‘strategic’ thinkers in farming partnerships while men are focussed on the operational matters. There is an important place, therefore, for women at the board table, not just the kitchen table. The ABC award taught her that if you ‘believe in yourself,’ you can sit there if you want to

Events

1994 - 1994
Winner – ABC Victorian Rural Woman of the Year

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Resource Section
1994 ABC Rural Woman of the Year State Winners, ABC Radio, 1997, http://www.abc.net.au/rural/rwoty/previous94.htm#sta

Newspaper Article
Sally Sets Fine Example, Borrell, J., 1995

Lack of esteem hinders women, 1995

Vision that survived a personal tragedy, Brady, Nicole, 1994

Laborers of love tend the farm, Murdoch, Anna King, 1995

Site Exhibition
Brilliant Ideas and Huge Visions: ABC Radio Australian Rural Women of the Year - 1994-1997, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2011, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/rwya/rwya-home.html

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Sally Mitchell interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Rural Women of the Year Award oral history project [sound recording]

Author Details
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