

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4620

Bennett, Jane

(1969 -)

Born 19690101, Devonport Tasmania Australia

Occupation Cheesemaker, Dairy Farmer

Summary

Jane Bennett was winner of the Australian Rural Woman of the Year Award in 1997.

Details

Jane Bennett wishes that she had taken the possibility she might win the ABC Radio Australian Rural Woman of the Year Award more seriously when she was nominated in 1997. The quality of the field was so impressive she didn't think she had a hope, so she didn't bother inviting her parents or partner to the award dinner. When her name was announced, it came as a genuine shock to her, but not to others who knew her. As the ABC's National Editor – Rural, Lucy Broad, said, 'Jane's achievements in all aspects of her industry, her commitment to developing business opportunities within her community, and her vision for promoting primary industry at a wider level, impressed the judges greatly.' At the age of twenty-eight, Jane Bennett had already developed a reputation as a woman with brilliant ideas and huge vision. More than a decade on she is still being described as 'an outstanding role model for rural women in Australia'.

Jane's achievement was to turn the family's century old dairy-farming operation into one of Australia's most internationally recognised, premier cheese brands, all the while using her own business as a tool for promoting Tasmanian rural industries and communities. Ashgrove Cheese is a highly recognisable outlet in the 'Foodies trail' that attracts tourists to Northern Tasmania. In the three years to 2010, when Bennett won the Tasmanian Business Woman of the Year Award, cheese sales had doubled and turnover had increased by 220 %. As Bennett insists, the success comes on the back of a lot of hard work and a bit of risk-taking. But for this highly driven woman with a talent for innovation, running with opportunities rather than being scared of them is what makes her tick, even if stepping out of her comfort zone means stepping up to more responsibility.

Jane grew up on the family dairy farm at Elizabeth Town, near Deloraine, in northern Tasmania. Her childhood was a busy one. If she wasn't attending school, playing sport or acting in local theatre productions, she was working on her own farm, or that of her uncles in the district. She suspects that her desire to stay working in the agriculture industry stems from her 'guilt' at not being a boy who could help her father out. As a child, she wanted to do the work that boys might do. She learned how to shear sheep, drive tractors, handle stock and so forth. The notion that a farm career might be possible continued to gain momentum when a visiting Englishwoman came to work on their farm, providing a model of women working on farms that was not visible in her own community.

The final push came when, at the end of school, Jane decided that she really didn't want to continue with study. Her father, who had a life long interest in food and food cultures suggested that she go overseas, learn how to make European style cheeses, bring those skills home and use them to add value to the milk they produced on the farm. It took him six months to convince her that she was the woman for the job, but once down that road, she has never looked back.

Jane studied Dairy Technology at the Gilbert Chandler Campus of the Victorian Colleges of Agriculture and Horticulture in Werribee. On completion of her studies Jane moved to the UK to work with leading farmhouse cheese makers in Britain for two years to hone her skills in the art of small scale cheese making. She returned to Tasmania in late 1992 and began production of Ashgrove Cheese in 1993.

In the early days of Ashgrove Cheese, Jane made the cheese, packed the cheese, developed the quality assurance and human resources systems and served in the family shop. Today she manages the financials, sales and marketing and 60 employees of the business that has become one of Australia's premier cheddar cheese brands. She sells product to a range of retailers; cheddar cheese to Aldi supermarkets and wasabi flavours to Japanese imports.

Her passion and enthusiasm for her industry and her region has seen her win other awards, including the Tasmanian Young Achiever Award in 1995, the Regional Development Award of the Young Australian of the Year in 1998 and the 2010 Tasmanian Telstra Business Woman of the Year. She was inducted into the Tasmanian Honour Roll of Women in 2008. Jane has always been a staunch promoter of her own state, talking up the resourcefulness that being part of an 'island culture' creates in its population. And like Robyn Tredwell, she recognises the importance of a thriving arts culture to the health of regional communities. 'An arts culture encourages change and brings tourists,' she says, 'as do good food and good coffee!' This, she believes, is part of the reason why her own region, around Deloraine, has been able to ride out the peaks and troughs of the economic cycles that have so badly impacted upon the lives of people on the land.

As a member of numerous boards and committees Jane has played a leading role in shaping agribusiness and regional community development. Some of the roles Jane has been involved in include:

The first female president of the Tasmanian Rural Industry Training Board
Member of the National Telecommunications Inquiry into Rural Services
Chairman of Tasmanian Food Industry Council from 2002-2007
Member of Brand Tasmania Board 2004- Current
Attendee at the Australia 2020 Summit.

Jane may have been somewhat casual in her approach to the ABC award in 1997 but she was nothing but positive and proactive about it after being announced the winner. 'The ABC Award was one of the most significant events in my life,' she says. 'It gave me new skills, opened doors to rural leaders and organisations and exposed my business to new and overseas clients. The credibility and recognition the Award gave me I couldn't have bought'. The general message it sent to other women about the importance of backing themselves to develop their ideas, and the confidence to express them, was a crucial one. She believes that women can be real agents of change in rural communities, but not if their talents and leadership potential are underutilised and unrecognised. The award, in her view, was extremely important in encouraging recognition of them in the community at large. 'There are so many rural women out there at the coalface with brilliant ideas and huge visions without the resources to realise them,' she said in a speech to promote the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) Rural Women's Award in 2000. With the help of the ABC Radio Rural Woman of the Year Award, the achievements of some of them, like Jane Bennett, were brought to our attention. We are all the better for it.

Events

1997 - 1997

Winner – ABC Australian Rural Woman of the Year

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Ashgrove Cheese Website, Ashgrove Farm Fresh, 2011,
<http://www.ashgrovecheese.com.au/>

Rural women urged to give it a go, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, 1999,
<http://www.rirdc.gov.au/news-&-events/news-display.cfm?article=7A40C7D1-F1FE-4F78-ABF7-A079F63B9FE4>

Resource Section

1997 ABC Tasmanian Rural Woman of the Year Award Winners, ABC Radio, 1997,
<http://www.abc.net.au/rural/rwoty/tas.htm#reg>

Article

Bennett is 2010's top businesswoman, 2010

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>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

Jane Bennett interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Rural Women of the Year Award oral history project [sound recording]

Author Details

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Created 18 October 2010

Last modified 24 April 2017