

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4630

O'Brien, Clair

(1949 -)

Born 19490101, Babinda Queensland Australia

Occupation Cattle Farmer, Community stalwart, Local government councillor, Pastoralist

Summary

Clair O'Brien was the State winner (for the Northern Territory) of the ABC Rural Woman of the Year Award in 1996. She is a pastoralist and community worker with a strong commitment to improving the lives of women and children in remote and isolated communities.

Details

Clair O'Brien says that being announced the Northern Territory winner of the ABC Radio Rural woman of the year award in 1996 came as a 'huge surprise', but a marvellous one all the same. In her view, it wasn't only her twenty-five year career in the bush that had been recognised, it was those of all the families living in regional and remote Australia. Running a cattle station at *Carmor Plains*, 210 km east of Darwin at the time, Clair believes that it all comes back to family. 'When you are as isolated as we have been, family is your only support network'. Little wonder, then, that the vision for the future she articulated for the judges of the ABC Award was family-centric! 'The successful family unit is my vision for rural Australia – there is no more practical support mechanism than THE FAMILY.'

Her own physical isolation, however, has not stopped Clair from making sure that other people in remote and isolated locations can learn from her experiences. 'People think our lives in the bush must be quite boring,' she observes, 'but their eyes pop out when they see how much we've got to cope with.' Her consistent effort to offer advice and guidance to others in her position, helping them to cope, has been her hallmark. Even when that effort came in the form of a regular newspaper column, it came from someone who truly believes that 'sharing the knowledge' is the best way to lead people through tough times. 'I know I am nothing special,' she says:

There are plenty of other women living and doing exactly what I am doing and raising a family and trying to keep them and their business on an even keel. I do feel special though in the fact that I have the opportunity to share some of my family experiences in a way that may help another rural woman somewhere, realise that she is not alone; that she can relate to what I have to say in my column – that she too has 'been there done that' – and that then she also feels some sort of achievement and recognition.

As a winner of the ABC Northern Territory Woman of the Year Award, Clair O'Brien was eager to share the glory, with her family, here community and with all the other rural women she knows are doing amazing things in just getting by.

A native of Northern Queensland, Clair is the middle one of three sisters brought up on sugar cane farms around Cairns in the 1950s and 60s. The first in her family to complete senior high school, Clair planned to go to teacher's college in Brisbane once she completed school. A short stint in the city, however, taught her that it was never going to work. Brought up in space, she needed it to thrive and so decided she wouldn't live in town if she didn't have to. She returned to her family home near Cairns and secured a position as governess on a property at Mt Garnet, roughly 1000 kilometers west of Cairns. She has moved from Mt Garnet to the Northern Territory, but since that short sortie into Brisbane, Clair has never lived south of the Tropic of Capricorn.

Clair met her husband, Michael, while she was a governess at Mt Garnet and he was working on the next door property. They married in 1970 and she moved to the property he and his family established from scratch in 1964 in the Valley of Lagoons region, *Craig's Pocket*. Clair was used to outback living, but it would be fair to say that the conditions at her new home were rough. There were no services, including no running water, which needed to be fetched from the creek. Wood stoves in searing heat, kerosene fridges and pit toilets were the appliances available. Cows, chickens, pigs and vegetable gardens were the 'supermarket'. It was 1976 before they had a home generator for power on the property; 1989 before they had a

telephone. The two way radio was their lifeline, functioning as an emergency services provider, educator, business facilitator and social network. 'You wonder how we managed to run a business,' she says, 'but we did and quite successfully, it seems'.

You also wonder how she managed to run a family! If anyone understands the challenges faced by parents of children in remote and isolated locations, it is Claire O'Brien. With four children under the age of five, Claire had her work cut out for her. They were all distance educated for their primary schooling, and Claire played a major role in that, recruiting a governess at times for assistance. The children 'attended' the School of the Air and had their lessons supplemented by correspondence classes. The classes were generally looked forward to, although Claire soon realised that there was little to no coordination between what was being taught over the airwaves and through the mail. Her first foray, arguably, into campaigning on behalf of families in remote Australia, was when she lobbied for the improvement of the delivery of education to children in isolated communities.

Claire's experience also demonstrates how hard it is for parents in isolated communities to gain access to a range of services and experiences that urban dwellers take for granted. One of her children had a speech impediment that health authorities claimed was behavioural and that would improve if she changed her behaviour. They offered her no support or assistance, and the experience was both worrying and demoralizing. Living in isolation, and without a network of support or a basis of comparison, it was hard for her to argue against this diagnosis, or ask for the advice of other parents in the community. Nevertheless, her instincts told her that she should persist and get a second and third opinion. Eventually, she found someone who confirmed her suspicions that the impediment was the result of a physical condition that could be fixed through a course of speech therapy.

The unhappy battle with health authorities knocked her confidence about and reinforced the importance of organisations such as the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA), of which Clair is now a life member. Through the airwaves, she was actively involved in a number of organisations, including ICPA, the Country Women's Association and the Parents and Citizens Association of the School of the Air. These organisations, she says, were as much a lifeline to the members as the airwaves that carried the meetings. They helped isolated women to keep in touch and to gather the confidence to trust their instincts.

After establishing a successful business in northern Queensland, the O'Brien's decided to transport their operations over the border into the Northern Territory. *Carmor Plains*, in the Northern Territory flood plains, shared a border with Kakadu National Park and presented the O'Brien's with a series of challenges and interests that were not part of the Mt Garnet experience! Being less isolated geographically made it easier for Clair to become involved in community organisations in a 'hands on' and practical way. Smaller distances, better roads and cars meant sharing knowledge with real people could be a reality. Clair was elected President/ Secretary of the Lower Mary River Landcare Group, and also represented Coastal, Rural and Horticultural Groups on the Landcare Council of the Northern Territory, where she was a member of the regional and state assessment panels for the National Landcare Program submissions. Her environmental concerns became personal; she embarked on a mission to rid the country of feral pigs and make money out of it. 'Feral pigs degrade the land, but rather than leaving them, we've decided to use them as an export product and put the returns back into the property.' They must have made good eating – she served some up an Australian Women in Agriculture dinner one year, much to the appreciation of the diners.

It was while she was living at *Carmor Plains* that Clair won the Northern Territory Rural Woman of the Year Award. It was very important to her, not only as a measure of recognition of her own community involvement and vision, but because it focused attention and resources on other Territory women. Like other winners, she got an enormous amount out of the Canberra awards ceremony and training program, especially the networking opportunities that it provided. 'Everyone who attended was a winner,' she said. She is certain that it encouraged more women to get out, speak their minds and get involved in community organisations, although she points out that, due to the relatively small population, the Territory has always provided opportunities for women that might not be possible in other states. It encouraged her to continue developing her own leadership skills so that she can be a better advocate for and on behalf of rural women. She participated in the Australian Rural Leadership Program in 2002-3 and was elected Deputy Mayor of the Roper Shire Council in 2010.

After several years at *Carmor Plains*, the O'Brien family decided to move in 2001, to drier country where they would focus again on cattle. They now manage properties in the Roper Valley district, at *Coodardie* and *Numul Numul* stations, not far from Mataranka about halfway between Darwin and Tennant Creek. They lease land from traditional owners with whom they have an excellent relationship. Says one traditional owner of the sharing of knowledge between the community and the family, "It's really, really good I think. I've been a stockman all my life ever since I was very young, 20 years old. [The O'Briens] show me what they're doing out in the paddock and I think that's alright." Clair suspects that the mutual respect and trust comes on the back of mutual appreciation of family.

But then again, for Clair, it has always been about family.

Events

1996 - 1996

Winner – ABC Northern Territory Rural Woman of the Year

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Resource Section

1996 ABC Rural Woman of the Year State Winners, ABC Radio, 1997,
<http://www.abc.net.au/rural/rwoty/pastwin.htm#96state>

Newspaper Article

Family the key to rural woman's win, 1996

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

[Clair O'Brien interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Rural Women of the Year Award oral history project \[sound recording\]](#)

Author Details

Nikki Henningham

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