



## Dairy NSW

### Women in Dairy history

#### Sue McGinn OAM

It was 20 years ago that the DFA (Dairy Farmers Association) held a pilot program called 'Women in Leadership'. It was 1997. I was fortunate to be at the first program which was held in their Sydney location.

The facilitators were Cathy McGowan and Cheryl Phillips- two visionary Victorian ladies who had secured funding to develop women's roles in agriculture. Cathy and Cheryl were commissioned by the Dairy Research and Development Corporation (the precursor to Dairy Australia) to develop targeted extension programs across Australia to enhance women's contribution to the dairy industry. The program also supported by industry and processors, was funded for three years from 1997-2000. Both Cathy and Cheryl were instrumental in empowering dairy women of all ages to become change agents in our industry.

It's perhaps beneficial to remember the context of this period as this was the time immediately prior to deregulation of market milk in the milk quota states. For many farms, the future was uncertain. Investing in women as leaders, in the industry as well as within their own families and businesses, was a strategic investment in change management. Allowing women to rediscover and develop their own abilities and acknowledge their skills, helped to build resilience amongst the uncertainty being felt by the looming threat of deregulation. These women's leadership programs helped to facilitate and accelerate on-farm changes in order to ensure survival of the dairy industry in a deregulated world.

I recall being quite overwhelmed by my experience at the first Leadership Course. I remember feeling inspired by the other women. Of all my emotions, I particularly remember feeling *connected* with them. Even when many of us were meeting each other for the first time there was an overwhelming feeling of kinship and mutual respect. There was a sort of unspoken appreciation of how we played our own individual part in our industry which was about to be changed forever. We recognised ourselves in each other.

During the Leadership program we were encouraged to build on our experience by doing something positive that would enhance our industry.

Email was fairly new and one woman started an email discussion group called 'dairEmail' at the time which continued for some years. Some women returned to their communities and felt compelled to continue their connectedness by forming women in dairying groups as we know them today.

Also around this time the Dept. of Primary Industries (I think it was actually called the 'Dept. of Ag' then) facilitated the forming of those groups. In the Macleay, we formed the Macleay Association of Dairy Women, 'MAD women' and in other areas women's groups also flourished.

These groups provided a safe environment for women to participate as friends, partners, wives, mothers and farmers. They could seek friendship and conversation or education on various topics in much the same way as discussion groups' work today. Back in the 90's not many women attended farm field days. I'm not saying they were just for the men but there weren't many other women attending so it was uncomfortable for some and the women's groups better met their needs.

It was the Nowra, Southern Highlands and South Coast dairy women who conceived the idea of hosting the inaugural women in dairying conference less than a year after the first leadership program. It was held in Nowra in May 1998. The conference was called 'A BALANCING ACT' and thanks to their many sponsors, this event was an overwhelming success.

In September of 1999 a committee drawn from the Wauchope, Raleigh, Taree and MAD women in dairy groups hosted a second NSW women in dairying conference called – 'RIDING THE WAVE OF CHANGE' which was held in Port Macquarie.

The success of these conferences was due to the generosity of many sponsors and also the quality of the conference programs which were a balance of networking, personal development and farm education. The industry as a whole was very supportive of the movement.

Add to this a good dose of networking and fun and the family, the farm and the industry benefitted as we learnt about what makes a successful farming business in the face of the industry changing around us.

In 2000, the First International Forum for Women in Dairying called 'NURTURING OUR INDUSTRY' which was a concurrent session with the 10<sup>th</sup> World Holstein-Friesian Conference, was held in May 2000 at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre in Darling Harbour. This conference was borne from a motivation to create an environment where women could be united globally. It was held on a number of occasions afterwards in four year intervals in the USA at the World Dairy Expo.

The 2000 conference also signalled the finalisation of the formal three year dairywomens' project. Cathy and Cheryl moved on to other agricultural industries using the Women in dairy project as a template. To name a few, the cotton, horticulture and rice industries all invested in women's networks.

When the formal project ended the women in dairy groups around NSW met at frequent intervals meeting the needs of their own networks. The Department of Ag was very supportive providing administrative support such as meeting notices and running the bank account. As were the milk processor farm services teams.

I'm not really sure when the women in dairy groups started to peter out. It didn't happen all at once but like everything, I suspect there was a real hunger for it in the late 1990's and early 2000's but then the motivation waned and fewer meetings were held until in some regions there wasn't another. Deregulation had changed the face of the industry and many of the smaller farms ceased

operating so we lost a lot of ladies. For some groups the need wasn't as great and for others, on-farm workloads had increased making it difficult to schedule time off farm.

I like to think another reason is found in looking at the success of the Dairy discussion groups as we know of them today. If you attend one today you will observe there are men and women present, fully engaged and participating as bona fide farmers. I think part of the success of women in dairy is that many farmwomen gained the confidence to attend discussion groups as farmers. There didn't seem a need to have a separate group anymore.

As I said earlier, the Leadership program was a real catalyst for change and for me personally, it was inspiring. If it had not been for the initial Leadership workshop in 1997 I believe I would not have begun my own leadership journey.

Coming back to the present, I believe Women in Dairying movement can continue to enhance the personal journeys of dairy women whatever that means to the individual. That may be at a family, farm, community or industry level.

It's very contemporary now to accept women as farmers in their own right. Today it's considered acceptable to refer to women as farmers even if they don't actually drive the tractor or milk the cows- though many of us of course do! For many farms, the business is complex and there are many complementary roles. I think we all know them. The point here is that our contribution on farm is now **recognised** as being equally valuable.

When I married into dairy farming in the early 1990's it was unusual to see the women participating in field days and farm walks, let alone in leadership roles! Only 20 years ago I was even accused of being too feminist to suggest that women are DIFFERENT BUT EQUAL when I delivered my Nuffield Scholarship report at the International Forum in 2000. I had dared to suggest that women should be involved in the industry not because they could do the job better, but if they could do it as well as that was good enough for me. 20 years later, leadership across all sectors recognises the value of diversity in leadership and decision making. How foreign it would be today if women weren't recognised for their contribution as a genuine player on our farms and in our industry bodies. Today we embrace gender diversity at all levels of industry involvement both on- farm, and throughout the boarder industry. We take it for granted today that in 2017, Australian women's contribution on farm is mostly recognised for what it is. It's not too far back in history that the media image of dairy rarely included images of women's on farm roles which contributed to the perception of a male dominated industry.

I thank the women in dairy movement for helping to facilitate that change.

New Zealand dairy woman Robin Clements, wrote a report on women's networks in 2000 concluding that they are an opportunity for recognition and involvement in decision making at all dairy industry levels for the benefit of *all* people involved in dairying.

It is my firm belief that the experiment worked! Women indeed were –and still are- the change agents that our industry needed. I also think there's a correlation between the network's rejuvenation and the current turmoil caused by the Murray Goulburn crisis and \$1 a litre milk.

I hope you have enjoyed my recollection of the foundation of women in dairy. I enjoyed the research and revisiting the conference programs of 1998, 1999 and 2000. I'm personally delighted to see that the movement, despite its ebbs and flows, is again blossoming. Women in dairy can be responsive and flexible. It can be whatever it needs to be.

I'm excited by the future being in the hands of the current generation of motivated and talented women.

These gatherings are important for building resilience and confidence in individuals, families, businesses and industry and this is why our industry should continue to invest in women in dairy.

- Sue McGinn.