Building pathways for Coonamble’s youth

A recent grant provided by the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW Foundation has provided Coonamble students with the opportunity to develop agricultural skills to give them a brighter future.

WORDS: ALEXANDRA MALFOY

Coonamble High School’s agriculture teacher, Adam Macrae, is leading the charge to change minds and help shape futures for his agriculture students. In April, 2015, the 33-year-old was awarded a Royal Agricultural Society of NSW Foundation (RASF) Community Futures Grant, which he used to fund the purchase of a mobile agricultural workshop trailer and equipment to train his students in industry-scale agricultural activities.

“I’m a member of the RAS and saw the Community Futures Grant program advertised in RAS Times and thought it would be worthwhile to apply. The mobile agricultural workshop supported some existing programs we already had underway, such as working in partnership with the local shire council to develop the 800-hectare Coonamble Common as an agricultural student training centre,” says Macrae.

The school’s seven-hectare farm and Coonamble Common are used for students, many of whom are indigenous, to gain practical skills in farming and primary industries. The mobile agricultural trailer is taken to these sites, and under the guidance of Macrae and other local mentors, the students learn skills such as building fencing and cattle yards, breeding and managing livestock, cropping and beekeeping. This work helps students achieve school qualifications, and in some cases, assists them to gain work placements and future employment.

The $20,000 of RASF funding not only purchased the trailer, but also power tools, fencing tools, a generator and safety equipment. “It’s important that the kids use the same gear that the rest of the people in industry are using, so they’re trained and given the right skills,” explains Macrae. “Safety is a big issue for us – making sure the gear is industry-standard and safe, so the kids are safe.”

One of the main reasons for Macrae’s unwavering ambition to set his students on a positive path is his awareness of some of the challenges they face. Youth unemployment in Coonamble is nearly 19 per cent, and the shire is ranked fifth in the state for socio-economic disadvantage. Macrae explains, “When it comes to the kids’ schooling, we’re often competing with things that are more fun, and less rewarding in the long-term. The aim of the mobile agricultural workshop trailer, and some of our agricultural programs, is to capture the interest of the students.”

Fortunately, agriculture has been identified in the community as a successful means to combat some of these challenges and is the central focus of the school’s ‘enterprise education program’.
which supports students who wish to focus on improving their attendance and preparing themselves for work.

"We have to be fun, we have to be relevant and we have to be safe, so that's first and foremost," says Macrae. "Once they're here and engaged, and doing something they like, then we start to look at really building those practical skills, under the primary industries vocation, education and training framework. Following that, the end goal is getting kids placed either in traineeships or employment."

An added benefit of the trailer is that it allows Macrae and his students to travel to local and interstate shows to exhibit their cattle – they store their cattle-showing gear in the trailer and can camp onsite at some country shows. "We turn over about 40 show steers each year. Being able to travel to these shows to exhibit the steers is great for the kids as it keeps them engaged," says Macrae. "They're obviously learning agricultural skills, but also life skills such as learning to cook for each other, maintaining a clean camp and working in a successful team environment."

Executive Officer of the RASF, Kate Ross, says Macrae’s project was selected as it ticked many boxes. "The Foundation was thrilled to be able to support such a unique project which not only equips students with some great skills for the future but delivers a bridge between secondary school and employment," says Ross. "On a recent trip to Coonamble, I experienced the energy and enthusiasm of some of Adam’s students’ first-hand and I was incredibly inspired to see the positive impact this grant is making."

Juggling his own family and farm, as well as his students and teaching work, doesn’t come without its challenges for Macrae, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. “I’ve been on the land all my life and just love teaching agriculture. I’ve seen the benefits that the trailer and programs we’re running have had on the kids and that’s rewarding. Seeing them get hooked and start enjoying the work is great, as they start to become really good little workers – at school and away from school,” he says. “Ultimately, the long-term reward is when you see kids who were a little bit 50/50 or maybe even worse, end up in full-time employment and successful. That just rocks my socks off."

Do you have an idea for a program that will deliver strong community benefits that requires funding? Applications are now open for the next round of RASF Community Futures Grants. Visit www.rasf.org.au for more information.
REALISE YOUR VISION

Adam Macrae
Recipient of RASF Community Futures Grant 2014

Through grants and scholarships, the Royal Agricultural Society Foundation helps to support young people, like Adam, to make a difference in their community. RASF Community Futures Grants provide up to $25,000 towards an innovative, youth-led community project in rural or regional NSW.

For more information and to submit your application, head to rasnsw.com.au/grant

Applications close 8 December 2014 at 5pm