

CareSouth

EVERY
DAY

Magazine Issue Seven

Inside

Carers bring
family together

Providing safe spaces
for queer kids

Young people on the
road to independence

ENTER

A man wearing a tan cap and a dark t-shirt is driving a blue utility vehicle. The vehicle has 'Hotondo Homes' and 'Mowdys' logos on it. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

Raising the Age

After a long, hard-fought campaign by Home Stretch and the CREATE foundation, along with CareSouth and other child protection advocates, the NSW Government in November agreed to extend the age of foster care to 21 from 18. CareSouth has been a vocal supporter of this campaign, working with Home Stretch and CREATE to lobby the NSW Premier and Families and Communities Minister.

Illawarra caseworkers David Allman and Sandy O'Halloran have been the driving force behind CareSouth's commitment to this cause. We would like to acknowledge and thank them for their dedication to this campaign.

The changes will take place in March 2023, and CareSouth will work closely with key industry groups to ensure the change is smooth and carers are kept informed throughout the transition.

Stay tuned for more details as they come to light.

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Executive Officers'

Welcom

Welcome to the 2022 edition of EVERYDAY, the CareSouth annual magazine. This year has been all about growth; of our organisation, of our positive presence in our communities and of our strong support capabilities.

CareSouth now helps more than 1000 children, young people and participants. Some 400 children and young people are in our foster care programs, with almost 300 in our Family Preservation program (formerly Brighter Futures), more than 300 in our NDIS programs, and a further 100 in our Aunties & Uncles program and Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS). We also recently expanded the Aunties & Uncles program to Batemans Bay to support vulnerable young people on the far South Coast of NSW.

Finally coming out the other side of a difficult few years has given our staff and leadership teams the space to reflect on what's important to CareSouth and the many families and communities we support.

One of the key things we have focused on is capacity building for children, young people and families. That's why we have been a vocal advocate to extend the age of state care to 21 from the mere age of 18.

This extension means young people in foster care will receive further support as they find their feet in their early adulthood. It's a life-changing outcome and will help us help young people to build a better future. CareSouth has long supported this hard-fought campaign by Home Stretch and CREATE Foundation to lobby the NSW Government and change legislation.

We want to thank CareSouth's David Allman and Sandy O'Halloran, both Illawarra case workers, for their dedication to this campaign; they have been the driving force behind CareSouth's commitment to this cause.

On the subject of growth, can you believe that CareSouth now employs more than 500 people across seven offices? Not bad for an organisation that started with just a handful of employees nearly 30 years ago and operated out of a converted squash court.

Over the years we outgrew that space, and in March, we were so excited to officially unveil our new head office in South Nowra. We celebrated the opening of the Jim McEwan Community Hub, named after CareSouth's founder, with a smoking ceremony led by Aboriginal elders from the Nowra community.

We've been working towards the Community Hub model across our footprint for several years to build cohesive communities by bringing together people from all walks of life. We believe healthy communities are happy communities, and our Hub model improves the health and wellbeing of staff, children, young people, those with disability and the wider community. It's an initiative we are proud of.

One of the most successful programs we run out of our Community Hubs is our Health Hub service. Health Hubs provide free optical, dental, hearing, occupational therapy, speech therapy and general health checks at all of our CareSouth offices. For the first time, we held a Health Hub in Griffith in October. It was a great success, with more than 25 children and young people receiving health checks.

This year, we also partnered with NSW Health, offering free flu and COVID-19 vaccination hubs in our Berkeley, Nowra and Batemans Bay offices to staff, clients and the community to ensure the health and safety of all those we support.

Another capacity-building initiative that's been incredibly successful this year is CareSouth's Driver Mentoring Program. Volunteer mentors from Nowra's HMAS Albatross and the community help young people in our SYSS and foster care services to clock up driving hours so they can get their licence and work towards independence. We also ran a pilot LEGO program out of our Berkeley Community Hub, where young people learned ways to build resilience, social skills and reduce anxiety using LEGO. Additionally, CareSouth's Deniliquin team started an art therapy group and set up The Rainbow Room, a safe space for queer/curious young people in Western NSW, where support services are limited.

We have also spent the past year developing CareSouth's Strategic Plan for 2022-2025, consulting with staff, carers, families, young people and CareSouth's Board to find out what is important to them. We've now updated our organisation's vision and values, based on the feedback we received to better reflect who we are.

CareSouth's new vision is to 'Embrace communities with kindness and humility to build a better future'. Our new values are courage, compassion, relationships, integrity and belonging. We're proud to lead an organisation where our people strive to realise our vision and values every day in the work they do.

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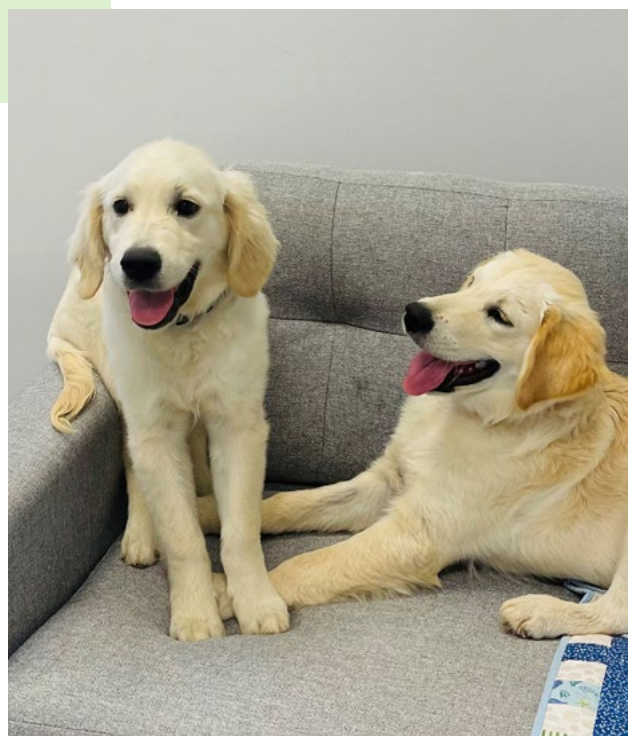
We want to extend a special thanks to everyone we have connected with and who has supported CareSouth this year.

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And, saving the best news for last, we have launched an organisation-wide therapeutic support program called CareSouth CareDogs. The program features eight playful, friendly pups available to work with children, young people and families. We wanted those we support to experience the positive feelings that come from engaging with a dog, which is particularly helpful when feeling stressed or overwhelmed. It also gives CareSouth staff the opportunity to connect with dogs at work, providing light moments in what can often be an emotionally challenging job. We think CareSouth CareDogs definitely deserves a round of a-paws!

We want to extend a special thanks to everyone we have connected with and who has supported CareSouth this year. It's been one to remember, and we hope you enjoy the inspiring, heart-warming stories in this edition from the year that was.

Tracy and Renee



Justin the Postie delivers a dose of sunshine

Justin, one of CareSouth's NDIS participants, is the reason CareSouth Supported Independent Living Team Leader David Ellerington bounds out of bed each morning. Justin lives in one of CareSouth's seven supported living accommodation services, where he receives around the clock support.

David is one of many CareSouth staff members who've formed a special bond with Justin. Another is Administration Officer Elena Andrews.

Their bond began when Elena, who often asks staff travelling between CareSouth offices to transport mail and parcels, tasked Justin with the job of being CareSouth's mailperson for the day.

"One day, Justin's support worker asked if there was any mail for Berkeley. Unfortunately, there wasn't, so I thought we could make up some letters for the staff in the call centre," said Elena.

"We put some lollies in envelopes with positive quotes like 'On a scale from 1 to 10, you're an 11' and 'You're even better than a unicorn because you're real'. Then, Justin travelled to Berkeley with his support worker and hand-delivered all the letters with a huge smile. Justin loved it – and so did the staff. It made everyone feel so special. Importantly, it gives Justin the opportunity to visit different areas, meet different staff members and be a bit more social."

"I take letters and sometimes lollies," says Justin.

"We always make sure we put in a nice quote, don't we?" added Elena. "What did (Executive Officer) Renee's say today? 'I'm sure you sweat glitter!'"

"Yes!" laughed Justin. "That's a good one!"

Justin is a man of many talents and has badges for each role he takes on – Justin the Recycling Officer, Justin the Postie and Rusty the Maintenance Man. Justin collects and recycles bottles from the office and supported independent living homes. He also collects all the shredded office paper and takes it to the local pet shop for use as bedding.

Like David, Justin is excited to get up in the morning when he knows he'll be going to CareSouth.

"He just loves to be involved in things," said David. "He wants to help everybody. He's a young man who has an intellectual disability, and his traumatic background has dealt him a pretty bad hand. None of it was any of his doing,



and despite all his challenges, he makes me cry, not tears of sadness but tears of joy. Justin is a prime example of trying to get the most out of life and he loves being part of the organisation.”

When asked about his favourite job at CareSouth, Justin joked that it was KFC, a treat he often enjoys with staff who support him. Then he became serious and said it was working with David and Elena.

“They love me,” says Justin.

“We really do,” agrees Elena. “The joy Justin has when he comes into CareSouth is amazing. He makes everyone smile, and it makes everyone so happy to see him engaging with people. When Justin’s in one of our offices, everyone lights up when they see him. It’s like having family at work.”

David points out that the team personalises their support, tailored individually for Justin.

“They know how to get the best out of Justin, so he gets the best out of life,” says David. “It’s our vision for all our clients: to provide the best service possible and help them achieve their goals. Justin has a great team behind him who is truly dedicated to his success.”

It’s more than fair to say that the whole of CareSouth feels exactly the same way.



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Deniliquin's school-based traineeship a winner for student

In 2020, CareSouth's Deniliquin team designed a school-based traineeship program to encourage young people in rural communities to pursue a career in the Community Services sector – a growing field in Western NSW.

Deniliquin High School student Alyssa Townsend was the successful applicant. Alyssa started her paid traineeship in March 2021, proud to become CareSouth's inaugural school-based trainee.

During the panel interview process, the team knew Alyssa was a stand-out candidate – a feeling confirmed when she was declared Riverina school-based Trainee of the Year in the 2022 NSW Training Awards.

"The Deniliquin team was so proud of Alyssa's win for the Riverina at the regional conference," said Deniliquin Manager Georgia Henderson. "Alyssa joined CareSouth as a trainee in March last year and has exceeded all expectations in her role. She's reliable and organised and comes to work each day with a happy attitude, ready to tackle whatever tasks are required."

Alyssa applied for the role after hearing the CareSouth team present the school-based traineeship opportunity at Deniliquin High School. Alyssa's parents had previously been foster carers and she decided to apply because she'd seen first-hand the positive impact their support had on young people's lives.

Permanency Support Program Team Leader Jencie Pogue supervises Alyssa and says she always asks for more tasks and to be part of any new experiences or opportunities.

"Alyssa's favourite days have been ones where she's able to go to a foster carer's home with one of our caseworkers, to visit and play with the children," said Jencie. "Alyssa is able to connect with people of all ages and has shown maturity beyond her years, along with a host of other positive traits."

"Alyssa was a stand-out candidate during the recruitment process and the panel could see how passionate she was about foster care and child protection. Her workload is large, but she has managed to juggle work, school and the study that comes with her traineeship by completing assignments on weekends and any other spare time she has."

As part of the traineeship program she'll finish this year, Alyssa has to complete 100 work placement days. She's also studying for a Certificate III in Individual Support on top of her HSC. Alyssa works one day a week during the school term and up to five days during school holidays.

"My teachers warned me that the traineeship, along with studying for the HSC, would be a huge workload but I have managed to balance schoolwork and paid work," said Alyssa.

"When I finish high school, I plan to study at Sydney University to become a paediatric psychiatrist. The knowledge and experience that I've gained by completing this traineeship will be a step in the right direction towards my career goals."



My teachers warned me that the traineeship, along with studying for the HSC, would be a huge workload but I have managed to balance schoolwork and paid work.

Alyssa's role as a CareSouth trainee includes carer recruitment and administration tasks, which she believes give her a better understanding of the broad array of skills required to work in the child protection sector.

"We have no doubt that Alyssa will achieve anything that she puts her mind to, as she has the dedication and drive to succeed. Alyssa has been a huge asset to our team," concludes Jencie.

But Alyssa's achievements don't end there. She was also one of nine high school students, from hundreds nominated by their principals across NSW, to win the prestigious Dame Marie Bashir Peace Award. Her nomination acknowledged Alyssa's significant contribution to harmony or social justice through her work with CareSouth's Rainbow Room and art therapy program.

"This has been a great experience for my traineeship and for me. I've been able to learn from some of the students, even in the art group when we had LGBTIQ+ based discussions, about appropriate pronouns for different genders," said Alyssa. "I've been able to understand different sexualities, which I think is extremely important. Especially with the significant growth in people who identify as part of this community, to ensure everyone is supported and encouraged to be who they are."

Health Hubs hit the road

With the cost of living ever rising, accessing basic necessities like healthcare can be out of financial reach for many families. It's also increasingly difficult to access GP appointments and bulk billing services.

This is where CareSouth's free Health Hub service comes in. Launched in our Berkeley office in 2017, Health Hubs are now held in all seven of our sites, including Berkeley, Nowra, Batemans Bay, Goulburn, Wagga Wagga, Deniliquin and, for the first time this year, Griffith.

Health Hubs offer a one-stop shop where children and young people aged 2-17 can access free dental clinics, eye tests, hearing screening, occupational therapy and speech assessments, as well as mandatory 2A health checks for those in foster care.

A wonderful group of local dentists, optometrists, audiologists, nurses and speech therapists, along with CareSouth's in-house occupational therapists, provide vital free services once a year during school holidays.

More than 25 children and young people attended Griffith's first Health Hub in October, despite the torrential rain and the risk of flooding. Health Hubs in Wagga Wagga and Deniliquin were also kept busy, with almost 100 appointments booked for the three Western Region sessions.

CareSouth's Events Development Officer Natalie Nicastrì designed the Health Hub model after recognising that accessing health care is difficult for vulnerable families, especially when travelling long distances to get to appointments. Natalie's vision was to provide multiple health care services in one location so families could receive all their free health checks without worrying about the high cost of healthcare. The Health Hub model also alleviates the problem of getting to and from multiple appointments with different providers.

"Health Hubs make it easier for families to access all the services they need in the one spot," said Natalie. "For our first Health Hub in Griffith, we provided OT, hearing and speech assessments, as well as primary 2A health checks, with more services planned for next year.

"Since they started, almost every Health Hub session has been booked out. So, there's obviously a need out there. The feedback from young people and their families has been overwhelmingly positive, and in some cases, nothing short of life-changing."

More than 1000 children and young people have benefitted from appointments with health professionals since the program began.



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For the past five years, the IMB Bank Community Foundation has funded CareSouth's Health Hubs, providing more than \$50,000 to ensure the health and wellbeing of children and young people is a priority focus. CareSouth is grateful for such ongoing funding and support to date. However, with the five-year funding stream coming to an end this year, CareSouth will fund this important program internally to ensure the good work continues while exploring other funding partnership opportunities.

Executive Officer announced Outstanding



Image by Josh Brightman.

The IMB Illawarra Business Awards 2022 was certainly an October night to remember for CareSouth, with Executive Officer Renee Knight winning Outstanding Business Leader.

Renee is one half of the dynamic duo who leads our organisation alongside Tracy Mayo, and she was honoured to win the top accolade.

“CareSouth has had a difficult two years but has also enjoyed some great achievements, including opening a new, multimillion-dollar office, The Jim McEwan Community Hub, in Nowra,” said Renee.

“Resilience has been a massive thing for us, trying to inspire our teams every day and really support them. The key to leadership over the last couple of years is really walking alongside our staff and taking them on the journey.”

Renee credits CareSouth’s unique leadership structure – with Tracy as Head of Practice and Renee as Head of Business – for steering the organisation through some rough waters recently.

“I’m the boring, introvert accountant, and Tracy is the fun, cool social worker,” laughs Renee. But their yin/yang leadership style works well, as evidenced by the organisation doubling in size under their strengths-based leadership model.

CareSouth also won two of the top tier awards at the Shoalhaven Business Awards in August, the first stage in the lead-up to the Illawarra Business Awards.

Business Leader



In the Shoalhaven awards, CareSouth was named Outstanding Community Organisation, and Renee Outstanding Business Leader. CareSouth was also Highly Commended in the Excellence in Inclusion Award; an accolade also won in 2021.

“Winning these many accolades is wonderful recognition of CareSouth’s commitment to assist others in building a better future,” believes Renee. “We’re proud to stand alongside businesses and business leaders representing our region’s rich diversity of talent and expertise.”

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FOSTER CARE

Goulburn couple honoured after 40 years as dedicated carers

Goulburn carers Chris and Ian Lofts have warmly welcomed more than 400 children into their home during an amazing four decades as foster carers.

The couple is admired and loved by all who know them in their tight-knit community, and they still receive visits from the many children and families they've helped over the years. The Lofts have also been recognised locally and nationally for their enduring commitment to caring for vulnerable young people.

The Lofts' outstanding contribution was recognised early, with the couple named Goulburn's Citizens of the Year in 1978. In 2014 they won the Pride of Australia Medal for care and compassion at both state and national levels. They're genuine, salt-of-the-earth people; proud but humble award recipients who prefer to fly under the radar than be in the spotlight.

During the national award ceremony at Sydney Town Hall, Chris asked Ian, "Why are we sitting with all the hierarchy? This isn't where we should be." Chris had no idea they were about to win a national award for their selfless work as carers. In fact, she'd kicked off her high heels, which she was definitely not used to wearing, and was barefoot when they called her name out.

"I had to quickly put on those uncomfortable shoes, and all I could think about was, 'please don't fall down the stairs and



make a fool of yourself!' So anyway, I didn't fall flat on my face!" laughed Chris.

The couple were also invited to dine with the Governor General in Canberra after receiving an Order of Australia (OAM) medal in 2019. However, they turned down the invitation as they'd already organised a celebratory dinner with Ian's brothers and several friends.

"I said thank you so much, we're very honoured, but we've prearranged a dinner with our family," said Chris. "Family always comes first."

Chris and Ian have lived by that motto from the moment they walked into a local orphanage and began taking children



“It’s lovely when we get cards or visits from our foster families; it’s so good that they still have that connection with us and know that we’re family.”

out for day trips on weekends and school holidays.

“We didn’t realise at the time we were starting on our foster care journey,” said Chris. “We just wanted to help children. Then, when we were adopting our two girls, we were contacted by a Department of Community Services Officer who I was friendly with, and she asked if we’d take a baby for emergency care,” said Chris.

The rest, as they say, is history. As well as fostering hundreds of young people, the couple adopted five children, two of whom were in foster care, including their 13-year-old daughter, who signed her own adoption papers.

So, in 2022, it was with heavy hearts that Chris and Ian decided to retire as carers after more than 40 years of selfless contribution, eight of which were with CareSouth.

It was not an easy decision to make, not least because the couple has cared for a young man since he was nine weeks old. Now 14, he’ll always be a part of their family. However, his high needs require a level of support that Chris and her husband are unable to meet while Chris is battling cancer.

“It breaks our heart that we can’t continue caring for him,” said Chris. “Retiring wasn’t on our to-do list, but we did it because of my health. We had to think about what was best for the young man we’ve been caring for and for me to get through my cancer treatment,” said Chris.

Many of the children and young people Chris and Ian cared for, some now adults, have reached out to Chris during her treatment to thank her and Ian for changing their lives. Others frequently “pop in out of the blue” to see the caring couple.

“We miss all the children we’ve cared for, but fortunately, we still get to see some of them,” says Chris.

Chris likes to joke that their postie “does not like us at all” around Christmas time due to the constant stream of cards from those whose lives they’ve touched across more than four decades of caring.

“It’s lovely when we get cards or visits from our foster families; it’s so good that they still have that connection with us and know that we’re family. We’re Nanny and Poppy to so many, and we always will be. We always have a full jar of lollies ready for those visits.”

As a way of marking the Lofts’ incredible contribution to improving children and young people’s lives, the Goulburn team will name a family time room in their honour. It’s a fitting tribute to two people who have so selflessly cared for so many during their eight years with CareSouth.

“We were quite honoured that the Goulburn team thought to do that for us,” said Chris. “It’s an end of an era, and we miss the children badly, but that we still get to see them and hear from them is fantastic.”



Nowra family wins regional foster care award

When Nowra carers Michelle and Marcus Duffy became foster carers to twin boys, and the boys' older sister soon after, they not only opened their hearts and home but completely remodelled it numerous times based on the needs of the children.

Michelle and Marcus took on the care of the twins when they were just four months old, initially for a restorative three-month placement. Nine months, then a year quickly passed. But as the children grew, the couple noticed they weren't progressing as expected. And when they were two, the boys were eventually diagnosed with global developmental delays and Level 3 autism.

In addition to raising their own nine-year-old son, the Duffys have now been the twins' carers for five years and their sister's carer for three – going from one child to four in fewer than five years. Along the way, they've had to learn to parent babies again and discover and research everything they could about autism and developmental trauma. Not only that, the couple have become fluent in Auslan as one

twin is non-verbal and communicates via sign language.

Each night at the dinner table, Michelle, Marcus and the children learn a new Auslan word so they can all talk with each other.

"I didn't think at this time in my life I'd be learning Auslan," laughs Marcus. "But we've learned to be fairly flexible, fairly quickly from the beginning. It was a bit of a blur having to get back into baby mode and set up two of everything."

As if life wasn't busy enough, the Duffys recently added another member to their family; their cobberdog, Tilly.

The twins will start school next year, and as part of their transition to kindergarten, Michelle and Marcus have taken them to the local primary school to meet their teachers and classmates, which includes two learning support dogs.

"The boys just loved them," said Michelle of the dogs. "It made such a positive difference to their transition and feelings about school. So, we looked into getting our own dog and ended up with Tilly. Now we don't know how we ever lived without her."

Marcus admits he was sceptical when Tilly's trainers explained that cobberdogs are the ideal therapy dog due to their ability to intuit what everyone in the household is feeling. But he quickly saw the benefits.

"Tilly has the ability to give everyone exactly what they need, when they need it," believes Marcus. "Whether it's a cuddle or a wrestle, she's calm and tolerant, and spending time with her makes everyone happy."



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Getting a therapy dog is just one of the many ways Michelle and Marcus have supported their family to become the best versions of themselves. The pair colour-code everything from cups and bowls, to towels, school bags and rooms so that the twins know what to expect and when.

"It's certainly been a steep learning curve, having kids with disabilities," said Michelle. "We've had to learn so much, and there have been some challenges, but we've adapted. We can't go to cafés or on holidays because the change in routine is just too much. Even going to the park isn't an easy journey for us."

So, the Duffys decided to "focus on their house and make it the best resort we can for the whole family". There's a pool, a giant sandpit, a play area and plenty of space for the kids to run around with Tilly. The Duffys really have gone above and beyond to create a safe, fun and loving home for their family.

"My family fostered children when I was growing up," shared Michelle. "Marcus and I had talked about fostering when we first got together. Then I fell pregnant, and we moved overseas. When we came home, and our son was a bit older, we were finally in a position where we could do it."



Earlier this year, after being nominated by Shoalhaven carer recruitment caseworker Julie Strickland, the couple won the My Forever Family Carer Recognition Award in Regional and Remote Care. This annual award recognises the valuable role carers play in the lives of the children and young people in their care.

"Michelle and Marcus have shown absolute commitment to these children with high needs," said Julie. "They've renovated their home numerous times to meet their needs and keep the children connected to their family. They successfully balance the needs of all three children as well as their own child. The demands have been enormous and have come with huge changes for them and their family life. However, they continue to be fully committed to this sibling group."

The award is a fitting tribute to the Duffys' selflessness, curiosity and willingness to learn new ways to help the twins and their sister better understand the world and their place in it.

FOSTER CARE

Deniliquin carers bring family together

Norma Preston and her husband Roy were CareSouth Deniliquin's first foster carers. The couple transitioned from the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) when the Deniliquin office opened its doors in March 2013.

The Prestons have been carers for 26 years – nine with CareSouth – and were inspired by Norma's sister, also a foster carer. The couple have opened their hearts and home to almost 300 children and young people in that time. Sometimes the children stay for a week, sometimes years, and sometimes forever, with the Prestons adopting two young people.

Norma's motivation to start fostering was the realisation that so many children were in need of a safe and nurturing home. Both Norma and Roy had difficult upbringings and understand the importance of unconditional love, consistency of care, routine, and stability.

"We know how hard it can be for some parents, not to have enough money to feed their children, to look after them in the way they want to," said Norma. "If we can do that for them until they're ready to go home, we'll do it. It's really important to have that empathy and understanding with birth parents. We're here to work with them."

Recently, Norma, Roy and the Deniliquin Foster Care team helped reunite and restore two young children to their extended family in New Zealand. It was one of the carers' and Deniliquin team's proudest achievements.

"Our shared goal was to restore the children to their birth parents when it was safe to do so," explained Deniliquin Manager Georgia



Henderson. "CareSouth was told early on that a move to another country was not an option for the children because they weren't born there. We had to really strongly advocate for the family and convince DCJ it was in the children's best interest. We knew they had an amazing family in New Zealand, and that's where they needed to be. We never lost sight of that."

During the lengthy restoration process, matters became even more difficult after both Norma and Roy were diagnosed with cancer. However, the couple insisted on continuing to support the children and their extended family.

"I told Roy that if anything happened to me, he had to keep caring for the kids," Norma tearfully recalled. "I promised their mum I would look after them, and when I make a promise, I keep it. There was no way we were going to chop and change and have them go elsewhere."

Norma and Roy ensured the children stayed in contact with their extended family, facilitating Skype calls several times a week to maintain a strong connection. While the Deniliquin Foster Care team processed the complex intercountry kinship transfer, they supported Norma, Roy and the children in any way possible.

"Norma and Roy are amazing carers, and their health was our priority," said Georgia. "It was a team effort to care for the kids until they were able to go home to New Zealand. Everyone took turns taking them to day care and appointments to make sure they had consistency of care. It was such a drawn-out process, but they're now in the best possible place they can be, with their family, and they're absolutely thriving. The family is incredibly grateful to Norma and Roy and to CareSouth."

"The most beautiful thing of all was Norma and Roy's relationship with



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the children and their family. For their whole time in care, the children had only ever seen their extended family on a computer screen. So, when their grandmother travelled to Australia to take them home, Norma and Roy welcomed her, inviting her to stay for two weeks to help with the transition. They're just amazing carers.”

Norma and Roy decided that once Norma's treatment was complete and the children safely home in New Zealand, they'd leave Deniliquin to be closer to their own family in Queensland. Although Norma's treatment was successful, and she's getting stronger each day, Roy's cancer has returned. Their Queensland plans are on hold now as the couple focus on Roy's health.

Despite these challenges, Norma and Roy continue to provide short-term foster care for CareSouth while they're still in Deniliquin, and they frequently speak to the children they supported to return home.

“We'll continue to help out wherever we can,” says Norma. “We've done some respite care for a few children since our 'retirement' because it's important to give the long-term carers a break, and the children get a holiday with us.

“We've cleared out our house of furniture and we'll no doubt get to Queensland one day, but for now, we'll continue to help CareSouth and our community in any way we can. It's been such a worthwhile experience.”

In recognition of the Prestons' amazing work, the Deniliquin team recently unveiled a Family Time room, where children and young people are visited by their parents, dedicated to their incredible efforts in making a difference in so many young lives.

Pru McManus, the Prestons' first caseworker and now Regional Manager, Western, paid tribute to the couple's selflessness and unending love for those they've cared for so wonderfully over the years.

“Norma and Roy are passionate about supporting children to return to their families and get great pleasure seeing them grow and flourish,” she said.

Volunteer carer gains an extra family

When Nowra businessman John Lamont joined CareSouth's Aunties & Uncles program almost a decade ago, he never dreamed he would gain an "extra family".

John and his then-wife Louise signed up for Aunties & Uncles "purely to give back to the community as volunteers" when their own daughters had left home. They were soon matched with nine-year-old twin girls.

"We got two for the price of one," laughed John. "Identical twins, so that was fun to start with. Now I can tell them apart like chalk and cheese. When we went through all the training, it seemed to take forever. But it was good because of the matching and the pairing of personalities. We wanted these relationships to last forever, and they have."

John and Louise bonded with the twins "quite quickly", and monthly visits soon became fortnightly.

"Then they started coming more regularly," recalls John. "We'd go to the beach, or Kiama markets, watch their netball, or go out for fish and chips. We just did everyday stuff but always tried to make it fun."



“

It's such a valuable program and a great way for people to experience what giving back and making a difference can do to a child's life.

”

It wasn't just the twins who became an important part of John's life. He also grew close to the girls' grandmother, who was their primary carer at the time.

"Nan had a very full household with a lot of kids, and so it was a good respite for her and the children, and we really enjoyed the girls' company," said John. "It was really obvious from early on that it was a great match."

After a year in the Aunties & Uncles program, the twins were placed in foster care with John and Louise.

"We were considered the best option as carers at the time, and we were," said John. "But the goal was to get the girls to their paternal aunt, who was very happy to have them. That eventually happened, and the twins were placed under a guardianship order with their aunt, who they called Mum. But I still kept in contact with the girls as an Uncle."

Spending weekends with John gave Elizabeth* and her twin some time out from a very busy household of nine kids, including siblings and cousins.

"At home, it's usually quite busy with eight other kids, so it's nice to get a break and hang out with John and do something fun or even just watch a movie at home," says Elizabeth. "I don't really remember a time without John. Looking back on it, we probably wouldn't be back with all our siblings without having him and Louise in our life. We might not have finished school because who knows where we would've ended up."

Elizabeth and her sister have been equally important in John's life.

"For me, particularly the last couple of years after my marriage ended, it's given me this extra family to be involved with; helping them has given me extra purpose," he says. "And they always make me laugh."

"My own kids have been enriched by the whole experience of having a couple of extra little sisters too. The twins have been part of our family events over the years, and reciprocally I've been able to do the same. I get on great with the girls' nana, and having a common goal with her guardians – Mum and Dad, as we all call them – has been really good."

"We all want what's best for the kids. Sometimes that doesn't happen in the foster care system; it can be quite adversarial. I see my role as the overly emotional uncle trying to help everyone out and give advice when I can."

Elizabeth recently turned 18. When she decided she wanted to leave school, her mum phoned John. The pair came up with a plan for Elizabeth to begin a Certificate III business traineeship, working three days a week with John at NowChem (a chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturer) in business administration.

"The high level of trust we've built with the girls and their family has allowed me to give them advice and help as an uncle can," says John. "Both girls have worked at NowChem, as have other family members. I'm teaching the twins how to drive, and I'll teach their brother when it's his turn. It's just about helping out when I can and always having fun."

Driving lessons inevitably end at an ice creamery somewhere along the coast, says John. "Every Wednesday after work, we go out driving, and we usually go for ice cream too."

"It will definitely be my turn to buy him one when I get my licence," says Elizabeth. "Yes, a triple scoop!" laughs John.

While John never intended to become a foster carer, he credits the Aunties & Uncles program with helping him make the leap.

"Louise and I got tipped into the foster care system, it wasn't part of our plan, and it certainly wasn't part of Elizabeth's plan. But I strongly believe Aunties & Uncles is the perfect soft entry point for anyone considering it."

Since the twins were placed under a guardianship order, John has continued to be a foster carer for 21 children and young people. He recently helped his 18-year-old foster daughter, who calls him Dad, to move to Canberra to embark on a heritage and culture degree at Canberra University.

"I know so many people want to make a difference and give back through fostering a young person, but they're worried they might not get along with the child," says John. "I tell them to go and do the Aunties & Uncles program."

"It's such a valuable program and a great way for people to experience what giving back and making a difference can do to a child's life. There's no reason why this relationship with the twins and their family won't go on forever. It's brought me so much joy walking beside them on their journey."

**Name has been changed*

Our Programs

CLINICAL SERVICES

Art therapy provides safety, healing and connection



A big part of helping children and young people recover from childhood trauma is creating a safe space, like the art group, where they can express their feelings.

CareSouth Behaviour Support Practitioner Anna Suckling joined the Deniliquin team two years ago.

In that short time she has set up a range of programs to support children and young people. Anna works therapeutically, one-on-one, with those who've experienced trauma or who need additional emotional support to be the best version of themselves. Anna also provides training and upskilling for carers and staff, creates behaviour support plans for children and young people in foster care, and has recently started an art therapy group in Deniliquin.

"We recently started running an after-school art program based on requests from young people in foster care," Anna explains. "Deniliquin is a typical country town in that the majority of extra-curricular activities offered to young people involve sport. CareSouth decided to address this gap. The art program has been amazing, with 10 kids from CareSouth and the wider community coming along each week."

The group has been such a hit that Anna and her team are now organising next term's art program.

"I'm truly passionate about child safety," she declares. "A big part of helping children and young people recover from childhood trauma is creating a safe space, like the art group, where they can express their feelings."

"Creating art together has helped many of the young people feel comfortable and open up about their lived experience of the child protection system, their gender identity, issues around diversity and the support offered to young people. They talk about the things that matter most to them. Being able to openly express their feelings, without fear of judgement or discrimination, to others who understand them is so important."

"It's also a great opportunity for children and young people in our community who don't play sport to have access to a fun after-school activity."

Anna grew up in Deniliquin but moved away to work in a range of community services roles, including as a caseworker, counsellor, residential care support worker and with children and young people who have experienced family violence or homelessness.

Two years ago, Anna moved back to her childhood town after returning for her father's funeral in early 2020.

"The support we received during that really difficult time made my family and me realise that Deniliquin will always be home. I missed my friends, family and our fantastic community," said Anna. "I was so excited to bring my experience and the skills I had learnt back to my hometown. I was lucky to get a job working for such an amazing organisation, and my colleagues have become my second family."

When Anna returned to Deniliquin, her goal was to help CareSouth provide as many services as possible to support vulnerable children in regional and rural communities. Art therapy is the first of many program ideas Anna has delivered to help children and young people heal and recover from trauma. Another program Anna has successfully implemented is the Rainbow Room (see opposite page).

"I have so much I want to achieve in the next five years," said Anna. "I recently completed a diploma of counselling and I'm keen to start a social work degree next year. I want to continue to broaden my knowledge and experience working therapeutically with children and young people. I'm looking forward to helping my workplace expand and provide as many services as possible to support vulnerable children in our community."

Rainbow Room a safe space for young people

CareSouth offices have always acted as safe spaces for the children and young people we support. So, when Deniliquin Behaviour Support Practitioner Anna Suckling began running an art therapy group, it didn't take long for the young people involved to open up about the things that concerned them.

One of their biggest issues was a lack of support services for young LGBTIQ+ people in Deniliquin and surrounds.

"Students who were curious about their sexuality or gender identity had nowhere to go to discuss their thoughts and feelings with like-minded peers and mentors; they had nowhere to go and be themselves," said Anna. "School is difficult. It's hard for them to talk openly and not be judged. Many of these kids don't have the support of their parents either."

The art therapy group soon doubled as a safe space to discuss sexuality and gender, with many students offering insights and opinions on the impact such a lack of support

services has on self-esteem and the increased risk of suicide. It was a real "Eureka!" moment for Anna. She decided to do something about the gap in services.

After successfully securing funding support from an Australia Post community grant, Anna set up CareSouth's Rainbow Room – a support group for LGBTIQ+ young people in Deniliquin and surrounds.

"The Rainbow Room connects young people exploring their sexuality and gender. It's a safe, supportive space to share similar stories and experiences while also offering support for parents and carers," she explains. She grew up in Deniliquin herself and saw first-hand the impact on her peers who had to suppress their sexuality.

"Although times have changed and a lot of people in Deniliquin are really progressive and understanding, there are still those who don't understand and are quick to pass judgement. I also want to provide support and education for parents and carers as some don't have a supportive, accepting network around them."

When young people told Anna, "You're the kindest adult I've ever had in my life" or "Thank you for being supportive" she knew the Rainbow Room was not only changing lives but saving them.

"We know that positive mentoring and peer relationships are a proven protective factor in the mental health and wellbeing of young people, particularly those who are marginalised," says Anna. "We also know that 66% of Australian LGBTIQ+ youth experience bullying or harassment based on their identity. The Australia Post grant has allowed us to set up and facilitate the Rainbow Room to connect like-minded peers in a supportive environment."

Anna has also connected with the Alphabet Crew in Albury Wodonga – one of the closest LGBTIQ+ support groups to Deniliquin – and has plans to introduce the young people from both groups to broaden their community networks. She also plans to facilitate sex education workshops that focus on LGBTIQ+ relationships.

"The feedback we've had from the kids is that sex education at school is very heterosexual and doesn't address LGBTIQ+ relationships. I want these kids to have the opportunity to learn about healthy queer relationships too."

SHOALHAVEN YOUTH SUPPORT SERVICE

Driver mentoring puts young man on road to independence

Brennan was desperate to get his driver's licence, knowing it was his key to independence and future job opportunities. But when the 18-year-old became homeless, it looked like he'd never achieve his goal. With 15 driving hours of the required 120 already notched up, Brennan had to put his dream on hold while he focused on finding stable housing and completing his HSC.

After couch surfing for several months, Brennan was referred to CareSouth's Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS) in November last year. It was here he heard about the organisation's Driver Mentoring Program.

This innovative program began several years ago when CareSouth staff identified that paying for driving lessons is a major barrier to independence for homeless young people and those in residential or foster care.

"Without family support, these young people have no opportunity to achieve the 120 hours of driving experience needed for their licence," explains SYSS Team Leader Tony Briggs.

"As part of the Driver Mentoring Program, they get access to CareSouth's pool cars, a free professional driving lesson, and ongoing lessons with trained volunteer mentors from HMAS Albatross and the community who commit to driving at least an hour a week with the young person."

With the help of CareSouth and his driver mentors, Brennan soon got his P-plates, achieving his long-held dream.

"I didn't think I'd ever be able to get my licence," said Brennan. "But with the help of the volunteers, I was able to drive a few times a week to get my hours up. I can't thank them enough. It's opened up a lot of possibilities for me. I've got a full-time job, so my next goal is to get a car."

Tony, one of five volunteers who helped Brennan achieve his goal, is proud of the young man's resilience and determination.

"Brennan's extremely motivated, and he has a great attitude," says Tony. "He was on the phone every week, ringing up to see who could take him for a drive, and between the four volunteers and me, we were able to get him the hours he needed. The

Driver Mentoring Program makes such a positive difference to these kids' lives."

Brennan agrees.

"My licence is my lifeline," he declares. "When I got to CareSouth, I only had 15 hours all up, five of those hours with a driving instructor, and that cost me \$350. I've done the calculations, and if I got my 120 hours with just an instructor, it would have cost me almost \$8500."

"I don't know where I'd be if it weren't for CareSouth. My parents don't have their licence, so I couldn't get any hours with them. We never had a car. Now I have an opportunity for a full-time job that needs drivers. It's totally changed my life."

Janice Davidson was another volunteer who helped Brennan. She began volunteering with CareSouth's Driver Mentoring Program after she retired.

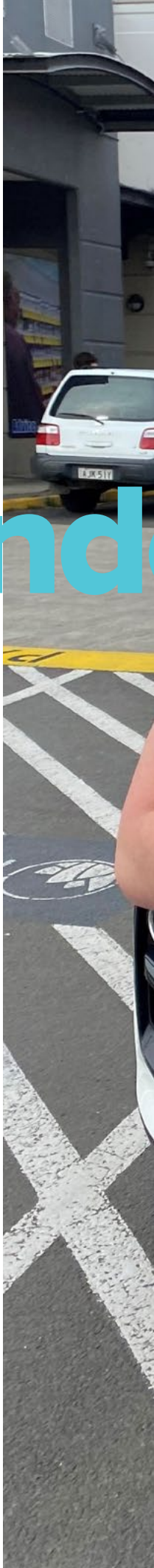
"I enjoy the company of young people and I think they help keep me young," says Janice.

"I wanted to help as I felt there are many young people who are doing it tough these days. Often during the trips, we'll stop for a break to check out the sights or have a bite to eat and a chat. I'm amazed by their stories, and it makes me appreciate how lucky I was to grow up in a safe and stress-free environment."

Nigel Marsden also volunteered after hearing about the program through his local football club.

"There's no greater thrill than seeing a young person master the art of a new skill," maintains Nigel. "I feel incredibly privileged to have helped support this young man fulfill his ambition for independence."

"Brennan is such a nice kid, who's had a tough time. But we all knew what he could achieve once he got his licence: freedom, independence and the endless opportunities that brings. We all wanted to help in any way we could."





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”

Horse-mad youngster's brush with royalty

Earlier this year, one of CareSouth's NDIS participants was chosen to represent Goulburn Riding for the Disabled (RDA) at the Royal Easter Show, where she was fortunate enough to meet a member of the British Royal Family.

Kaity and her RDA instructor Jolene participated in an exhibition where Kaity showed off some of the skills she'd learned to the horse-loving Princess Royal. Princess Anne was so impressed with Kaity's skills that she presented her with a rosette for her riding abilities.

Kaity has participated in RDA for the past four years. She's assisted by Jolene, who's been supporting Kaity in equine therapy every fortnight for the past three years.

"Kaity has progressed steadily over these years in different areas, including mounting and dismounting a horse, balance and rein control," says Jolene. "Her passion and dedication to RDA were some reasons Kaity was selected to perform in a Show Case for Riding for the Disabled Association at the Sydney Royal Easter Show this year."

Kaity's carer Niki said meeting Princess Anne was a beautiful experience for her and Kaity.

"It was such an honour to meet royalty," enthuses Niki.

CareSouth was recently successful in applying for a Variety Heart Scholarship to continue to foster Kaity's love of horses. As a result, Kaity will now be able to attend additional RDA sessions where she'll be kept busy grooming and working with the horses as well as riding in a controlled environment.

"This activity will help her in the next stage of her development with confidence, following instruction, communication, and improving her equine skills," believes Jolene.

At CareSouth, we support participants in pursuing the things they love, empowering them to live full and meaningful lives. Kaity's story is a fine example of that support.

"It's one of our core principles to provide independence where we can and give our NDIS participants control over their own lives," says NDIS Manager Samantha Dawson.



FAMILY PRESERVATION (BRIGHTER FUTURES)

Future looks bright for Family Preservation

CareSouth's Brighter Futures Program will now operate under a new program name – Family Preservation – after the Department of Communities and Justice restructured existing early intervention programs to deliver a more integrated service.

Program eligibility will be less restrictive, with all CareSouth caseworkers supporting children and young people aged 0-18, double the previous limit of ages 0-9.

The benefits to families include greater access to case management and supports proven to reduce the risks of abuse and neglect. The new Family Preservation program will also prioritise the needs of Aboriginal families.

Caseworker named Illawarra Young Volunteer of the Year

Huge congratulations go to CareSouth's Family Preservation caseworker Abigail Bowes who won the 2022 Illawarra Young Volunteer of the Year Award.

Abigail has completed almost 700 hours of volunteer work with the University of Wollongong over the last four years while also studying for her social work degree and working full-time supporting CareSouth's Brighter Futures (now Family Preservation) families. As a volunteer for UOW Pulse, she helped create the community garden, hosted weekly trivia and other events, including Oktoberfest and Yours and Owls, O-week, Clubs Day, Wellness Wednesdays and organised campus buddies for international students.

"I really enjoyed the opportunities I got to work on and connecting with people to expand my networks," says Abigail. "Being able to work with such a diverse range of individuals is a real highlight for me."

"I did a lot of afternoon, evening, night time, and weekend shifts to juggle working full-time, studying full time and volunteering. Doing all this has definitely helped me learn efficient time management! I appreciate this recognition and am keen to see what's next in my volunteering journey."

As a regional finalist, Abigail attended a gala ceremony announcing the NSW Volunteer of the Year 2022. While she didn't win, she was highly commended and honoured to be in the running for such a prestigious award.



Our Programs

PRACTICE IMPROVEMENT & QUALITY (PIQ)



PSP team to take part in restoration pilot program

CareSouth's Practice Improvement & Quality (PIQ) team and the Permanency Support Program (PSP) team have spent the past few years co-designing a Permanency Practice Framework. The Framework is a guide to help caseworkers support children, young people, families and carers taking part in restorations – when a child in foster care safely returns to live with their family.

PIQ Manager Dr Kylie Evans-Locke said four Illawarra PSP caseworkers, two team leaders and a coach would work to implement the Permanency Practice Framework guidelines as part of a pilot program that launched in September.

The Permanency Practice Framework pilot is a partnership with the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), the Parenting Research Centre, Wandiyali, The Benevolent Society and the Research Centre for Children and Families at the University of Sydney.

The pilot team will undergo intensive training to work with families working towards restorations and regularly report their findings to the Research Centre to evaluate the processes and progress of the project. Their findings will help the sector better understand the needs and intricacies of restoration from the viewpoint of the caseworker, the carer and the family.

CareSouth is one of three local agencies taking part in this project – The Benevolent Society will focus on guardianship and adoption, and CareSouth and Wandiyali will focus on restoration.

The Practice Framework takes a step-by-step approach and focuses on strategies for caseworkers to use when supporting parents and carers work towards children and young people safely going home to their families.

CareSouth Practice Lead Lauren Pengelly will coach caseworkers through the modules of the Framework so they can support parents and carers to solve problems related to caring for children who have experienced trauma, reach their parenting or caregiving goals, make changes in their life that benefit children and embed new parenting, caregiving and relationships skills.

"The Practice Framework is based on the idea that from the time kids come into care, we are working with their parents, getting to know them, engaging with them," said Kylie. "It is a flexible and adaptive approach for each family because every family is different."

CareSouth carers will begin trialling the Framework with their caseworkers' support once they have completed their training.

"Carers will take part in coaching sessions facilitated by our caseworkers tailored to the individual placements," said Kylie.

"The Practice Framework gives caseworkers structure as each restoration process and timeline is different. For example, a carer might be at a different phase in the Framework than a parent, so caseworkers can use the Framework to determine what support is needed.

"As always, our work focuses on the best interests of the children and young people we work with. The Framework is designed to equip carers on some key issues relating to restoration cases which will improve the experience for the children and young people involved."



Communities support Giving Tree

Last Christmas, CareSouth launched its inaugural Virtual Giving Tree, an initiative to spread peace, love and joy to the children, young people, families and communities we help.

With generous donations from our many supporters, CareSouth was able to gift every child in our Foster Care program a present from their local community.

One of the campaign's biggest supporters is Objective, a software company with an office at the University of Wollongong's Innovation Campus. Last year and again this year, Objective chose CareSouth's Virtual Giving Tree for its national Christmas appeal. We are beyond grateful for the support from Objective, whose staff also donate their time as volunteers for CareSouth events.

Nowra's HMAS Albatross 723 Helicopter Training Squadron is another generous supporter of the Virtual Giving Tree and has been a long-time partner of CareSouth. The Squadron's assistance doesn't just stop at fundraising; they have mentored young drivers at our Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS) for the past five years.

Other community partnerships include Bunnings Kembla Grange and Griffith, Baiada and Big W Griffith, Professionals Nowra, St George's Basin Country Club Nowra, Ray White Goulburn, Hope in a Suitcase, Paul Mannion Lawyers, Integrity Pumps, Nowra Community Food Store, Anglicare and Variety.

Generous community members also donated hundreds of presents to our regional offices, including youngsters Reuben and Eli Francis. Their proud mum, Sam, put a shout out for

donations on social media and was overwhelmed by the generosity of Illawarra residents, who dropped off hundreds of toys, filling 36 boxes and Sam's garage.

Reuben, 4 and Eli, 2, not only helped to box up the toys but also used the money they had saved collecting cans to buy gifts for children and young people in CareSouth's programs. Sam took the boys to Kmart, where they spent three hours carefully choosing gifts to donate.

"I picked a transformer dinosaur and LEGO, and Eli picked a Paw Patrol car and ball magnets," said Reuben. "It was so beautiful to see them thinking about what other kids might want," said Sam. "I want to teach them that giving is so much better than receiving; you just get so much joy from it."

Sam came up with the idea for the toy drive after volunteering with Hope in A Suitcase last Christmas. It was there that she heard about foster carer Bec Kennedy and her husband, carers with CareSouth for the past six years. This year, as well as volunteering for Hope in A Suitcase, the family fundraised to buy gifts for young people in CareSouth's Supported Independent Living and Interim Care Model Homes after taking in a teenager for emergency care recently.

"My husband works at Wollongong City Council and had a really long, white beard," said Bec. "He decided to shave it off for donations and raised around \$1800. Our family donated the rest to make it an even \$2000 to buy gifts for the 18 young people who live in CareSouth's houses."

CareSouth could not do our work without our community, our partners and our supporters.

Data system overhaul helps staff work smarter

This year, CareSouth launched one of its most ambitious projects; an overhaul of the organisation's data management system, partnering with software company Objective.

For the past two years, CareSouth's IT team has been working closely with Objective to rebuild our data management system so we can keep up with the ever-increasing demand for our services and ensure we're future-ready as the organisation continues to grow. The partnership has resulted in the new RegWorks platform, launched in August, and known affectionately as Reggie.

"The system is more intuitive and inclusive in the information it stores," said CareSouth IT Manager Danny Bosevski. "Reggie's greater capabilities alleviate much of the admin-heavy requirements, giving caseworkers and support workers more time to focus on vital frontline work with individuals and families."

Providing the highest level of administrative and face-to-face support is key to CareSouth's vision to build better and stronger futures for individuals.

"Everyone needs secure, quick and intuitive access to information to do their jobs well," said Objective Global VP, RegTech, Ben Hobby. "Using our software allows CareSouth to develop policies with impact, accelerate processes and deliver innovative services. But most importantly, it enables staff to work in a way that is much more streamlined, which will ultimately improve the outcomes we are all striving for in our communities."

CareSouth's new data management system complements its capacity-building programs so that caseworkers can focus on building relationships, independence and connections for those we support.



Reggie is here!



CareSouth partners with NSW Health to help communities

CareSouth supports society's most vulnerable people, many who have already faced significant trauma in their lives. The past few years have been particularly challenging due to COVID-19 and the pressure the pandemic placed on already vulnerable communities.

One of the many ways CareSouth provided further community support was a free community vaccination program in partnership with COORDINAIRE – the South-Eastern NSW Primary Health Network.

CareSouth partnered with NSW Health Community nurses who visited our Berkeley Community Hub, the Jim McEwan Community Hub in Nowra, and the Batemans Bay office. They provided free flu and COVID-19 vaccinations to more than 200 CareSouth staff, carers, young people, disability participants and vulnerable community members.

Vaccinations were also offered to Southern Cross Community Housing tenants and clients of the Berkeley Life Centre and Berkeley Community Centre.

Staff also developed alternative support opportunities to ensure those in our programs remained safe and engaged with school and community networks as much as possible. Additionally, caseworkers and clinicians supported clients online via virtual check-ins and Telehealth and held face-to-face meetings where feasible.

CareSouth also supports a number of children and young people in Interim Care Model houses and alternate care accommodation to provide 24/7 care for those who cannot live safely at home and who are unable to be placed in foster care.

During the pandemic, support staff who worked with young people and those who worked around the clock with our NDIS participants were on high alert daily, ready to contain and isolate any COVID-19 outbreaks that occurred.

This required staff who agreed to work with the young people to kit up in full personal protective equipment during their shifts. When not working, staff had to remain isolated in a hotel room.

Such was the case when support workers at two Goulburn homes were flagged as close contacts of a COVID-19 case, giving team leaders just hours to create an "isolation roster". This required staff who agreed to work with the young people to kit up in full personal protective equipment during their shifts. When not working, staff had to remain isolated in a hotel room.

Similarly, team leaders moved quickly to find two staff willing to provide round-the-clock care to a young boy living in one of the Goulburn homes. Consistency of care was paramount for the child, who had challenging behaviours. It was imperative he felt comfortable and safe with his support workers. Our amazing staff agreed to isolate from friends and family for 14 days while working in three-day blocks to cover the isolation shifts.

This was just one of many examples where team members went above and beyond to maintain consistent care for participants already unsettled by restrictions placed on communities during the height of COVID-19.

And the care is ongoing. Staff at Shoalhaven's Supported Independent Living homes for disability clients set up extra one-on-one support for residents during lockdowns. They've continued these, despite restrictions easing, as participants clearly benefited from the additional support.



Little girl with big heart raises funds for SYSS

While most 10-year-olds are busy playing sport or hanging out with their friends after school, one South Coast youngster recently spent all her spare time sewing scrunchies.

Avana is a little girl with a big heart and big dreams to make the world a better place. A few years earlier, while visiting her grandmother at a Sydney hospital, she spotted a homeless man sleeping under a bench in a Kings Cross park.

"I asked Mum what he was doing there asleep, and she told me he was homeless, and that was where he probably slept for the night," recalls Avana. "It made me sad because he didn't have a home. I asked Mum and Dad a lot more questions when we got home."

The memory of the man sleeping rough stayed with Avana, and she soon decided she needed to do something to help. Since that day, she has donated any money she's received for birthdays and Christmas to two great charities, Hoodies for the Homeless and Street Swags.

But this year, after bushfires, floods and escalating rental prices due to COVID-19 left many South Coast people homeless, Avana focused on helping people closer to home.

Avana's mum told her about a family friend who works with young homeless people through CareSouth's Shoalhaven Youth Support Service (SYSS). She described the struggles they face trying to find affordable housing in a difficult market.

When Avana heard about the difficulties for these young people – not much older than her – she immediately started brainstorming ways to raise even more money.

Avana and her mum came up with a business idea to make scrunchies and sell them on social media.

"Mum and I talked about what we could do to raise money for a present that someone would like to buy," said Avana. "Scrunchies were easy to make, and we had a lot of material that could be used."

"I got bits of fabric and Mum helped me cut the right size. I sewed it on the machine and had to turn it in the right way and then thread the elastic through it. Mum tied a knot in the elastic and then sewed it on the machine. It took a while to make them, but it was good to be with Mum."

People from all over Australia responded to Avana's social media posts, purchasing her handmade scrunchies for \$2 each and supporting a great cause.

"I raised \$230," reports Avana proudly. "I was happy and excited that I could help someone, maybe even a couple of people."

Tony Briggs, team leader at SYSS, said the money was used to buy an outdoor swing chair, two native plants and BBQ utensils.

"Bunnings were so impressed with Avana's efforts to raise money for homeless young people that they offered to throw in a brand-new BBQ," says Tony.

"A young person staying at SYSS put together the swing, and when Avana was invited to the SYSS service to see the chair and BBQ all set up, he thanked her and said he would definitely be using it. The SYSS team is very grateful to Avana for her outstanding fundraising efforts."

*Images published with permission

I was happy and excited that I could help someone, maybe even a couple of people.

Lawn mower racing helps participants find their freedom



Racing ride-on lawn mowers is one of the favourite activities of participants in CareSouth's Shoalhaven NDIS program.

This year, the crew was able to show off its racing skills to the public when CareSouth held its first Ride-On Racers event to celebrate International Day of People with Disability in early December.

Ride-on lawn mower racing for NDIS participants was the brainchild of CareSouth's Disability Supported Independent Living Operations Manager, Peter Johnston.

Peter developed a program for participants of all abilities to experience driving a modified ride-on mower (the blades have been removed) after seeing the joy it brought to people of all ages when he joined ShowMow, a NSW lawn mower racing club.

"I thought modified lawn mower racing would be something we could translate to the disability space," said Peter.

So, for the past five years, Peter has been helping CareSouth participants find their inner Fangio in a safe, controlled environment.

"A lot of people in the NDIS space can't get a driver's licence and don't have access to anything like this," says Peter. "We want to give everyone the opportunity to experience the freedom of driving and feel the sensory experience of the sound, vibration and bumps that come with lawn mower racing. The experience is tailored to the participant's disability and is delivered in a safe, friendly environment where participation and fun are the key outcomes, not speed or competition."



The event was possible thanks to a generous grant from Shoalhaven City Council. Hotondo Homes and Druce DP/Tovedale also supplied two new lawn mowers for the event. These donations allowed more participants of all abilities to test their mettle on and off the track, with many carving out their own path through the grass.

"Through events like this, we are trying to give participants something they wouldn't be able to do anywhere else," says Peter. "Hosting a community fun day, with a unique event like lawn mower racing, also helps increase community and participant knowledge around NDIS and the support available."

For more information about the NDIS support services offered by CareSouth, contact our call centre on **1300 554 260** or visit our website at **www.caresouth.org.au**.



Your independence starts with CareSouth

CareSouth provides people with choice and control over their NDIS supports. We lead from the heart and take an individualised care approach to ensure we're supporting people to build a better future.

