

# THE MAGIC *of* REVISE

Lara Jensen Meekatharra Air

**I consider myself the beneficiary of some fantastic pearls of bush wisdom in my forty plus years of life but there is one that I'll always hold particularly dear. A close family friend and seasoned old bushman said to me after my husband Jason, and I settled on Wondinong Station in 2013 that the bush life I had chosen was in his own words 'a hard, but a good life.'**

Fortunately, I was prepared for many of the hardships my old friend alluded to having grown up on Yoweragabbie station southwest of Mount Magnet with my four siblings who were all educated through Meekatharra School of the Air.

I remember the hot summer nights fighting off mosquitos and flies in our rickety folder beds under a canopy of stars and huddling around our kerosene heater in our corrugated iron schoolroom on freezing Winter days. I remember the long dry times, with the worry etched into my father's face and the looming reality of boarding school to pursue a secondary education in Perth which meant leaving my family behind.

It wasn't until my own children became school age though that I faced what I believe is arguably the greatest challenge for all families in the bush – the education of our children.

I was incredibly fortunate to have had parents that believed in the power of quality education and the places it can take you. I worked as a photojournalist for many years and travelled much of Australia before venturing overseas. I was anything but a trained teacher though (a profession I would honestly have never chosen) and I can distinctly recall opening the dispatch boxes neatly packed with school resources from Kalgoorlie School of the Air a few years ago thinking 'how in the hell am I going to do this?'

But I pulled myself together and resigned myself to the fact this was going to be a massive work in progress and the steepest learning kerb of my life. In the early days it felt like an uphill battle, so I was always completely grateful for the advice on the end of the phone from our teachers in Kalgoorlie when I was stuck with a numeracy or literacy query or help with strategies to keep my adventurous pre-primary son in the school room when he would prefer chasing pigeons or playing with his dogs. It is a struggle that continues to this day.

The other challenge that I still face daily is that being a teacher is just one of the many

hats that I wear. My husband Jason and I are active community members who sit on several committees, and we volunteer to help in our community of Mount Magnet and in our school community wherever and whenever we can. I am also a passionate rail safety advocate because of a completely preventable tragic triple fatality that claimed the life of my brother and his two friends at an unlit crossing near Jennacubbine in the WA Wheatbelt in 2000. I take the responsibility of being nominated spokesperson for 12 other beautiful Australian families who have lost loved ones in rail crashes extremely seriously. At times this campaign has been a job on its own though, with a heavy emotional toll.

I remain steadfast though about the importance of giving back to community at a time when I believe the age of the volunteer appears to be fast becoming a thing of the past. I want my children to understand that strong remote communities don't just happen. If you want to live in a dynamic and vibrant community, you will have to put your hand up to help make it happen – it's as simple as that. So, our children accompany us everywhere, not only to the local community events like races and gymkhanas we help to organize, but also to the busy bees that ensure these events can happen in the first place. They are expected to pick up a broom, rake or a cloth and help because of what we believe it teaches them – that nothing special happens without great effort, work, and commitment.

But in addition to teaching school, the other work doesn't go away – the books, keeping a house and garden, putting food on the table, and checking the windmills. The 'keeping the show going' as I put it when my husband works away off station on our heavy machinery – a predicament so many bush women find themselves in on places where off-station income is critical to the survival of the pastoral business.

It wasn't until the birth of my fourth child was imminent – a late, unexpected, and precious gift to our family that I contacted REVISE – an organization geared at providing support from qualified retired schoolteachers.

I knew the story of REVISE because I'd heard countless bush mums and home tutors speak about it with a combination of the greatest respect and the most genuine relief.

I also remember the wonderful lady, Mrs Di Forsyth who was responsible for the establishment of the REVISE WA scheme because she was a wonderful Meekatharra School of the Air mum whose three sons went through their primary school education at the same time as me and my siblings.

Mrs Forsyth (a hardworking and passionate member of the Meekatharra ICPA Air Branch) was approached by ICPA (WA) in 1991 to set up the REVISE WA Scheme so that SOTA parents, mostly mothers could access some relief from the stresses and workload associated with educating their own children in addition to running busy pastoral operations. REVISE WA was officially launched in March 1992 at a function hosted by the WA Farmers Federation. Mrs Forsyth sadly passed away in 2011 but she has left behind her an incredibly important and critical supporting organization in REVISE WA for countless bush families. I will personally be eternally grateful for all her hard work and tenacity establishing REVISE WA because I can say in all honesty, I don't know how I would have coped this year without it.

I have never been good at asking for help or even admitting that I need it, but for the first time I could see that my workload in the school room and beyond in addition to a newborn baby would most certainly lead to the education of my other three children suffering. So, I put in the online application and was promptly contacted by the extremely efficient REVISE coordinator Sue Potter and as they say, the rest is history.

This year our family had the benefit of two wonderful REVISE teachers. Michelle Burrows and her husband Bill joined us only a week after my youngest daughter Polly was born at the end of May and in mid second term and in third term, we welcomed the wonderful Chris Cairns into our lives.

Michelle and Bill landed at a busy and sleep-deprived time for our young family, and they literally hit the ground running. Michelle, a primary school teacher with 25 years under her belt had my three children in lower primary, Gordon (Yr2), Alice (Yr1) and Matilda (Kindy) in a fantastic and organized schoolroom routine in no time. Bill, a retired diesel mechanic, was quick to turn his hand to absolutely anything and helped my husband Jason wherever it was needed, from fixing solar pumps and windmills to relocating graders and pumping water during a wind drought. We thoroughly enjoyed the mealtime conversations with Michelle and Bill and their can-do attitude to everything. My children also benefited hugely from an extremely capable and firm but fair approach from Michelle in the school room. It allowed me the time to bond with my new baby without being stretched in multiple directions and I am forever grateful for the welcome respite during such a precious time. After school the kids would take Michelle for walks around the station, and they still enthusiastically impart the immense knowledge she shared with them of the natural world months after her placement.

In third term Chris Cairns arrived with her signature brand of enthusiasm and her little dog Ruby.

Within the first couple of days Chris, a primary teacher with 31 years' experience had whipped up a timetable to help me better manage our schoolroom routine and structure geared at teaching three in lower primary, all with differing requirements. Chris with her creative flair certainly rubbed off on the art and craft in the children and they produced some beautiful artwork under her stewardship. Their handwriting and sentence structure also improved considerably. Michelle and Chris were both so thoughtful, and I'd often come home from a mill run to washing taken off the clothesline, carefully folded in the laundry and my kitchen table wiped, all well beyond the call of duty but appreciated immeasurably.

I was struck after both REVISE placements (Michelle and Chris) by just how much my children benefited from the REVISE experience, with letters and sounds problem solving strategies, improvements in their maths and tips they'd learnt to help them gain confidence in reading. I also believe it is incredibly valuable for station children to have other wonderful adults reinforcing school room rules, learning strategies and good manners. For the station mum it is very easy to feel like the proverbial broken record – for me that is most certainly the case. Raising and teaching my children concurrently is without a doubt the most concentrated but rewarding thing I have ever done.

Today the REVISE group consists of 35 retired teachers willing to help families throughout WA's outback with the supervision of their children's education through the School of Isolated Distance Education (SIDE) and regional Schools of the Air. Tutors are unpaid volunteers. REVISE WA organizes and pays for tutors' transport to and from the properties. The scheme is reliant upon funding from station contributions, organization donations, government grants and individual donations.

So, in its 31st year I can personally and wholeheartedly vouch for the fantastic work REVISE WA does. Our REVISE tutors and their partners have brought with them great joy, insight, knowledge, support and friendship to our remote school rooms, our noisy kitchen tables, and our busy outback lives. REVISE WA is an invaluable part of the outback landscape now and it plays a critical role in restoring what is a fragile balance for many remote families that are often stretched far too thin between the conflicting demands of running businesses and community commitments along with educating their children all at the same time. Long may this vital organization continue!

*I would strongly encourage anyone who is struggling with educating their children or who simply needs a well-earned break from the school room to contact REVISE coordinators Sue and Alan Potter regarding a placement on 0427 931 077 or via email: [revisewa@gmail.com](mailto:revisewa@gmail.com). You can also visit the REVISE website at [revisewa.com.au](http://revisewa.com.au)*

**Photos: Top** - REVISE teacher Chris Cairns holding Polly Homewood (3 months, and sitting alongside Matilda Homewood, 4yrs, Alice Homewood, 6 yrs, and Gordon Homewood Ruby on Wondinong Station.

**Middle left** - REVISE teacher Chris Cairns in the Wondinong schoolroom with Alice Homewood, Matilda Homewood, Gordon Homewood and Polly Homewood.

**Middle right** - Michelle and Bill Burrows.

**Bottom** - Alice Homewood, 6yrs, Gordon Homewood, 7yrs, holding Polly Homewood, 1 month, and REVISE tutor Michelle Burrows holding Matilda Homewood, 4yrs, at Wondinong Station.

