

Small Town Reinvention Conference

A Donnybrook Balingup Community Radio Special program



Positive Pathways

TO LOCAL RURAL PROSPERITY

17 to 20
September
2024
Pickering Brook
WA

Inaugural national small-town reinvention CONFERENCE

This Conference seeks to provide an opportunity for those who care passionately about the future of small-town Australia.

 *There is nothing more powerful than a community discovering what it cares about.* MARGARET WHEATLEY

Listen to the program [online](#) . Program broadcast on [DBCR](#) on 14th October 2024. It included segments of interviews recorded at the conference for [Western Tourist Radio](#) for use on the [Radio WA Podcast](#). A playlist of the full interviews is at [Small Town Reinvention Conference](#).

Barry Green: This is a Small-Town Reinvention special , it came about after I attended the Peter Kenyon's [Bank of Ideas](#) Positive Pathways, the inaugural National Small Town Reinvention

conference held in Pickering Brook a few weeks ago. At that, I recorded a number of conversations and online I have Peter Kenyon himself, G'day Peter.

Peter Kenyon: Good morning, Barry.

Barry Green: And in the studio, I have Wendy Troy. G'day, Wendy.

Wendy Trow: And good day to you.

Barry Green: Wendy was one of the presenters at the conference, Wendy from the Balingup Progress Association, and that's what she was speaking on. Peter's got a few things to go. Before you head off to things you've got to do. Peter, do you want to set the set the background for the conference for our listeners?

Peter Kenyon: Well, Barry, there's just over 1700 small towns officially in Australia that are under 10,000 and of them, 11, almost 1100 are actually under 1000 people in size, and I think they tend to be ignored. We tend to be preoccupied often with super towns or regional centres, or we talk about regional development, but primarily we're talking about big rural kind of like centres. And I think this mosaic of incredible small towns, which, you know, 70% of our farmers, and particularly our community farmers are attached to a small town, not a regional centre. And the life that goes on there, both commercially and socially, is pretty important in terms of keeping those critical industries, like farming going. If you suddenly lose your pub, if you suddenly lose your hardware store, if you lose your bank. All these things have real implications in terms of productivity on the farm, succession on the farm, no longer a footy club, you know, for your kids to be part of or whatever. All of these issues. So I suppose this was an opportunity to come together and talk about what are those challenges small towns face and what are the opportunities? And what about those towns like the baling ups and the coolants? And there's a whole host of Gnowangerup who have really put in place over the last 30 years, amazing initiatives that have seen those towns not just kind of like stabilize their population, but actually grow and create meaningful life and energy and new entrepreneurial opportunities and whatever. And I suppose it was about, let's hear from these towns, let's hear their story, let's hear what they've done. And in the process, hopefully that acts as a catalyst. And other towns could actually leapfrog on. And the result being we had about 140 people came through over the four days. We had between 80 and 90 each day, but we had 50 small towns across Australia that were actually represented. And so it's the first, the next 1 in 12 months time is in the Barossa Valley in South Australia. And we just hope just in a small way just allows a bit of a focus on this, this important thing called these small rural towns. And it also creates an opportunity for them to kind of like share experiences and ideas and, and create a bit of a network. And so that's what was behind it. Barry.

Barry Green: And it was very successful. Peter. I certainly found it uplifting and met some great people. And one of the presenters was Wendy Trow from Balingup and she's in the studio. So, I'll, we'll talk to Wendy about her presentation, Peter, and maybe call you back a bit later.

Peter Kenyon: Yep. Sounds good. Barry. Thanks, mate. Wendy, thank you again for your incredible contribution to the conference. Wendy. You're always inspiring. And the story of Balingup is just legendary. It's just an encouragement to all of us. Go. Well, cheers.

Barry Green: Thanks, Peter. So now, Wendy, your presentation. Can you give us a summary?

Wendy Trow: Oh, that's not so easy. Okay, well, I outlined, , Balingup's history. And in terms of, you know, as Peter was saying, we were a community of around about 200 people over 30 years ago, and we're now nearly 600. And, progress Association, evolved out of the, European Common Market when Britain went into the Common Market and all the agriculture here, just the farmers had nowhere to send their produce, and they wanted to put pine plantations right next to Balingup. And the people formed Balingup Progress Association and objected to it. And in that way we managed to get Golden Valley Tree Park. They preserved that and Balingup Progress Association and really, the sort of hippies that might have come into town mixed well with the farmers, and it's just gone from strength to strength. We've had so many outstanding leaders in the community that have led us along the way. So I was talking about that, and then that led me on to things like insurance and stuff, the things that are standing in the way of volunteerism now. So it was quite a wide ranging conversation. Yeah.

Barry Green: And as Peter says, that this problem has got to be solved from within. We can't look to government because in many respects, government is a problem and the rules and regulations and there is a place for rules, but it's gone completely overboard. I don't know what the answer is there, but I guess talking about it at the beginning of this. It all starts with a conversation.

Wendy Trow: That's true. And in fact, it's interesting. Insurance is a really good example of just keep nagging. I did a huge amount of research into the Progress Association insurance to show how it had gone up exponentially. It's crazy. I put presentation together, I talked to members of Parliament, talked to all these various people. got absolutely nowhere. And then, Peter invited me to go to this talk, so I'd pretty much decided to give up on it. In fact, at the talk, I said, I've given up on it now. It's too hard, you know, I can't fix it. And, one of the Rural Aid people said, oh, the CEO of the Insurance Council of Australia is on my board. Give me the information. So it's now with them. So who knows? You know, you've just got to keep going on about it. It's awful.

Barry Green: That's so significant because you know, the situation you could describe as a market failure. And if the market fails, maybe there's a place for government. But if government gets involved, it gets pretty messy as well. So surely you know the market. If we believe in the free market economy,

which I think we do, then you know this, this needs to work differently. And you say the insurance that you pay. But in all the years that Balingup Progress has been going, how much have you ever claimed? None.

Wendy Trow: Absolutely zero. And in fact, as part of my research and we're talking, well, a few years ago now, maybe 4 or 5, I looked up a very old ACCC report, and they said that in Western Australia, the average public liability claim was \$16,000. That's one over six. So we're all paying very high public liability. More importantly, it's not even that groups aren't running things because of the fear of public liability that somebody's going to sue them. and so, you know, you get events that are just not happening because insurance is too expensive and people perceive it as being a very high risk as a volunteer.

Barry Green: Yep. And then on top of that, at the moment you've got this new tax requirement that the federal government, which is meaning volunteers who give our time are spending hours doing compliance with paid bureaucrats. It doesn't compute.

Wendy Trow: Yes, I actually Don Punch was at the conference, and I gave him a copy of a letter that we'd received from a government department. And I said, you know, take this with you. Have a look at it. As a volunteer, we should not be receiving letters like this. You know, we should have got a nice little email saying, oh, um, can you send this in, please? And then we'd have done it. We didn't even know we were supposed to do it.

Barry Green: There's this notion that because you're running a volunteer organization, you've got the same compliance as some corporation, and it's crazy.

Wendy Trow: And in fact, again, you know, vintage cottages in Balingup that's run by an incorporated group. So all volunteers and they have to comply with the same rules and regulations as these big retirement villages, they're not making any money out of it. And some of the volunteers are as old as the people that are living in the cottages.

Barry Green: Yeah. So these regulations actually become a regressive tax on community.

Wendy Trow: . Yeah. And it's all seems a little bit too hard to it's the problem seems to be so big that we can't find a way through it.

Barry Green: These things, build up to a tipping point. And maybe we're approaching that tipping point, Wendy. And hopefully there'll be a positive outcome. But community radio, we we're not funded by government. We're funded by our sponsors. So we'll run a few sponsor messages and play a song, and then we'll come back and play an interview that I recorded with Jeff Yost, as in toast,

from the Nebraska Foundation. He's one of the keynote speakers at the conference. So we'll we'll play that After this sponsor message.

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Barry Green: The small town reinvention special, and that was Cliff Richard. We Don't Talk Anymore seems to be a good theme there. Wendy Trow.

Wendy Trow: Yes, you're a bit right. I think people are more likely, including me, to send an email or text now.

Barry Green: Or shout at each other on what's its face.

Wendy Trow: That's even worse. I've actually pulled right back from Facebook.

Barry Green: We're supposed to talk. And the thing is that communications experts say that communication is made to the word, the voice and the body language. The words convey 7% of the message, the voice 38%, and the body language 55. When you can communicate by text, it's an appalling communication tool. You can put the comma in the wrong place, and it means something entirely different and somebody goes off in a huff. We've got to get back to talking to each other more. Wendy,

Wendy Trow: I Couldn't agree more. That's why I'm sitting here. Barry.

Barry Green: That's right. Thanks for that. Well, at the conference, a keynote speaker was Jeff Yost from the Nebraska. Nebraska Community Foundation. And he spoke about Community Foundation. So this is an edited version of the conversation I recorded with Jeff, and we'll play that now. One of the guest speakers was Jeff Yost, the CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation. G'day Jeff G'day.

Jeff Yost: G'day Barry.

Barry Green: Community Foundation. Tell our listeners, what's that about?

Jeff Yost: Community Foundation is a tool that communities can use to really help ensure their future. It's a way that people can give charitably to the future of their place and begin to build up a community savings account, which is typically referred to as an endowment. So it becomes a permanent financial resource that the community could use every year to create change that otherwise may not occur.

Barry Green: So this is making communities independent of government funding.

Jeff Yost: I think I think of it more as above and beyond. We need government to help us with all the basics. But in today, in 2024, we can really live and work wherever we want to live and work. So the community economic development question today isn't one of jobs. It's really one of place. Why do I want to live and work and raise my family here? So if you think about in a community foundation and a community endowment in that frame, how might you use the community endowment to create a margin of excellence to help your community be a place that's attracting young families, because this is where they want to live, work, and raise their family.

Barry Green: And in your presentation, you talked about imagination, innovation and invitation. Can you expand on that? Sure.

Jeff Yost: So the first thing we have to do in our rural places and actually in all of our places, is not just reference the past as it relates to where we're going. We really have to look at the future. Change is happening as fast as any of us have ever seen, probably as fast as it's ever happened in human history. So we're going to have to keep evolving our thinking and our patterns and all the ways that we go about building our places. So that's why imagination is so important. Innovation, of course, we see it in technology all the time, but we want to keep innovating all of our human systems. So what are all the things that we've learned and how can we take that? Learning to make things better, to work better for people. And finally, invitation is essential for community. We do things typically because someone invites us to do that, and especially within community building and helping to raise money for something like a community endowment, people will do so because someone they know and trust invites them and asks them to be a part of the future.

Barry Green: And this is very much involved in philanthropy, and I suspect Americans are better at philanthropy than Australians are. Unfortunately, this involves people giving some thought to to their their will. And you have what you call the the five to thrive concept. Can you expand on that?

Jeff Yost: So throughout the Western world, so the United States, Western Europe, Australia and many, many other places, we have this massive transfer of wealth occurring and a transfer of wealth occurs when the parents pass away and then the children inherit whatever the parents have made and accumulated. So this has always happened throughout human history. The big deal now is there's lots and lots of people that grew up in rural places that no longer live in rural places, so their parents may pass away in their hometown, but those children may not live in their hometown. So the important element here is, might that family be inclined to give back some of what they've made and accumulated during their lifetime to the hometown that they love. So in the United States and in Nebraska in particular, Nebraska is about 1.9 million people. We estimate that in the next ten years, some 100 billion U.S. will transfer from one generation to the next. What happens if just 5% of that is given back to the places where that was made and accumulated? Well, that's \$5 billion. Nebraska has about 1.9 million people in it. So these are massive sums of money that can really, again, help us adapt to the future. When we talk about these community endowments, we talk about these community endowments having three core purposes. They can be used to start something new, save something important or adapt to the future. And in 2024, government isn't going to be able to help us do all of those things. Government is going to need to help us take care of social care and infrastructure and all these important things. But from a community building standpoint, we need to go above and beyond what government is able to do. So philanthropy can be a partner in helping us to create more public good in our hometowns.

Barry Green: That's great. And within Australia, the country towns have, there is or has been a strong sense of community because of the local ownership. You've had multiple farmers and and and that's what's driven the community. And people have invested in their own community because they have a vested interest. They do it for themselves, they do it for their kids. And in this philanthropy thing, you talked about encouraging people to think of their town as another child. So when they come to writing their will, think of it not as one or the other, but as a, as a contributing something to their child. And when in actual fact, in many cases, by giving to the community, if their family is still there, then that's actually a way to give back to their kids and their grandkids anyway.

Jeff Yost: Absolutely. I think one of the things we all know is it takes a village to raise a child. Um, I'm one of six children, so certainly it took more than just my mom and dad to help raise all of us. And to me, then, this is an opportunity to pay it forward to other families. You know, one of the things I always experienced in my hometown, and one of the things I've always been focused on with my own children is children do best when lots and lots and lots of people love them. And that's the essence of our communities, right? It's the next generation doing better than the last one did. And this is one more way for us to help the next generation do better than the last one did. That's the mark of a society is how it treats its children, how it how it really helps the next generation be better than the

last. So I believe that philanthropy is one more tool that communities can use to help the next generation be better than the last.

Barry Green: You also talked yesterday about the commoditization of everything and commodity is all about price and so much food. Commodity food. It's you know, then you're into the corporate domain. But there's a growing understanding in regenerative agriculture and the and the biology and the biology of the soil and the biology of the human biome and the bugs in our gut. They're what make us healthy. So we've got this conundrum between the the economies of scale of industrial agriculture and the the growing scientific understanding of biology and the importance of biology for fresh food, locally grown food, fresh fruit and vegetables and horticultural product in a healthy human condition. So it's what they call a wicked system. It's incredibly complex, isn't it? So how do you see that unfolding? The thing between the commoditization of food that can be tracked all around the world versus fresh horticultural produce that's really only fresh if it's produced close to where it's consumed.

Jeff Yost: Absolutely. It's a great question, and it really is a tremendous conundrum in the 21st century. The first thing I think we should ask our leaders to do, and that includes all of us. It's not just elected officials. We should all think of ourselves as leaders, and these things aren't being done to us. We need to be intimately involved in the process. The first thing I think we need to do is differentiate between efficiency and effectiveness. So in the 20th century, the world had an enormous calorie deficit. So we wanted to grow as much food as we possibly could because there were enormous numbers of starving people all around the world. In the 21st century, that is still true to some extent, but not nearly as dramatic as it once was, and today's deficit is probably more of a protein deficit than it is a calorie deficit. So how do we begin to think about the effectiveness? And again, we have to. One of the things we can do in economics is called um, externalities. We can we can work out the full cost of something. So the full cost of something just shouldn't be what we pay at the grocery store. It's like, what's the carbon footprint associated with that particular piece of fruit from this far off island?

Barry Green: I saw recently a doctor, John Campbell, who's a UK health broadcaster, put out a broadcast called Toxic Food and it had Robert Kennedy Jr talking with Donald Trump. Now, without getting involved in politics, which it's a bit hard when you're talking about those two characters. But what Robert Kennedy is saying is that in America, the the Food and Drug Administration has allowed so many food products onto the market that arguably aren't fit for human consumption, specifically the seed oils. Because the early early 1900s, there was almost no seed oils in the human diet. Now there's something like 80g a day, and they seem to be linked to diabetes and obesity. And what Kennedy Jr. Is saying. Robert Kennedy Jr and I can only take his word for it. He may or may not be right. But he's saying in America is now spending five times as much on chronic disease is as they do on the military. Now we've got a modern food system, but if it's not fit for the because human beings haven't evolved. So if that food system isn't fit for the human condition. Houston, we have a problem.

Jeff Yost: Houston, we do have a problem. Um, all I can say to that one is when we when we know more, we do better. And that's what I mean when I talk about effectiveness instead of efficiency. See, in the 20th century, someone figured out that things like peanut oil were cheap and effective. Great. But now we have a whole generation of children who have peanut allergies when the prior generation didn't. None of this is simple. None of this is easy. And and we shouldn't immediately ascribe blame. We should continue to learn. We should continue to make our decisions based in science and good science, rigorous science, so we can continue to do better. And that's the that is the human condition. But it's also our evolutionary path is we have to keep learning, and then we have to take what we've learned and apply it. And in many, many cases we have irrefutable science. But for one reason or another, public policy hasn't been willing to adopt that. Now, philanthropy can be a tool to help communities experiment with how we can do better. So I really think of philanthropy as a research and development tool for communities. And communities really haven't ever had R&D money. And in the 21st century, we need to have R&D money for communities, just like we have research and development money for just about any other enterprise.

Barry Green: So what do you make of that, Wendy Trow?

Wendy Trow: I'm hanging off every word. He just makes so much sense. I love listening to him. It's just a pleasure to listen to him again. And I think the idea of a community foundation, we tried to get one up in West Australia about 20 odd years ago and it folded, which is very unfortunate. But I really think that this idea of paying it forward and thinking about the future and not the past, and, you know, this is almost heresy, but, you know, you can have your big events and those are the passion of the people who created them 20, 30 years ago, and it's unrealistic to expect those events to keep going forever. What you need to be doing is developing ideas that's going to that young people are passionate about, that they want to do. And sure, your event. I mean, I certainly hope the carnival and the field day carry on forever, but it's unlikely, and I think we need to be a bit more realistic about this. And we need to be developing future leaders and supporting them financially, whatever, whatever we can do.

Barry Green: I think the leader thing is really important. You know, we used to have rural youth and apex and Rotary and and they provided leadership training. But that's we don't seem to be doing that anymore.

Wendy Trow: No, it seems to have died off a bit. And I think a lot of it is because the young people are to see themselves as being too busy. Yeah. Uh, yeah. They're they're just flat out families, kids. A lot of home schooling now. Yeah.

Barry Green: So that's that's showing a lack of trust in the schooling system isn't it.

Wendy Trow: So we could go on forever about this couldn't we?

Barry Green: We could. But in the meantime we have to pay our bills. So we run a few sponsor messages and then we'll after that, play an interview I recorded with Trevor Whittington from WA farmers.

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Barry Green: It's 1034 on DBCR. This is a small town reinvention special. Came out of the conference in Pickering Brook a few weeks ago, and one of the interviews I recorded there with, with Trevor Whittington from WA farmers. So I'll play that . I recently attended a conference about small towns, and one of the keynote presenters was Trevor Whittington, the CEO of [WA Farmers](#). G'day, Trevor.

Trevor Whittington: Hi, Barry. How are you.

Barry Green: Going? I'm well. Thanks. Now WA Farmers, for our listeners who don't know what is WA Farmers?

Trevor Whittington: Well, WA Farmers is the peak body for the Broadacre farming community. it's been going about 120 years. we're part of the National Farmers Federation sort of umbrella group, and we represent, you know, the Wheatbelt, Great Southern and down where you are sort of the dairy farmers in the livestock sector. So just think wheat cattle and sheep.

Barry Green: And how many members do you have.

Trevor Whittington: Uh, we've got about a third of the total number of producers, which is we're actually only down to probably around 3000 broadacre farmers left in the state. A fraction of where we were and what I was talking about in the conference we were going to talk about, which was when I was a kid back in the 70s, there was a lot more farmers than there is today.

Barry Green: That is a serious development. Your talk was titled Small Town Reinvention. Why so important? Why so important?

Trevor Whittington: Well let's see. Yeah, I had a long roundabout way to go when I spoke for about three quarters of an hour until I got to the end of the presentation. And why is it important is because without those small country towns, the 40 or 50 towns of between, you know, 200 and a thousand people, a few big ones, bigger ones out there, the meridians and the Meridians and the Northerms, but the smaller ones further out are you lose the basis of the family farm and you open the door for the big corporates to come in. And we're already seeing that in the eastern wheat belt. So it's a it's the last ditch effort, the last bastion to keep those communities going. Without those communities you can kiss goodbye to, family farms.

Barry Green: So I guess people in those areas must be feeling a bit like the Aboriginal people felt when the original Colonials came to her. It's sort of a colonial thing that's happening almost, isn't it?

Trevor Whittington: Yeah. It's corporate. The corporate world, it's almost another universe has arrived when the big corporates come to town. Well, they don't come to town, you know. They are operated out of Sydney or Melbourne. They're often found in, you know, Saudi Arabia or the US ,in China. And, they've got some people in suits in offices, usually over east. And the instructions come down the line. they buy big new gear. they employ backpackers, they have few full time workers. And, they are not engaged in the community. So it's almost like a, you know, drive in, drive out mining operation.

Barry Green: So I grew up in Donnybrook in the 60s and in the 60s and 70s the talk was all get big and get out, which sort of seemed to make sense at the time. But looking back, it just seems to have been part of a global corporate control of food. And I don't think it's going to end well because these companies only exist for one reason family farmers have stuck around because it's it's it's in their it's in their DNA to produce food.

Trevor Whittington: Well, what we're seeing now is the big corporates are the mining and petroleum companies. The Woodside's, the South 32's,Santos, the others. They're actually out there buying farmland to plant trees as a carbon offset. And you know, we've got no problem with tree plantations. You, know, harvest the trees and you plant some more and you harvest them over a cycle. but they're planting trees and not on the really marginal salty country, which probably needs a whole bunch of trees, but on good farm land, which will take it out of food production so that they can solve their, their problem, which is producing, you know, carbon dioxide and, and emissions. so they've got no interest in country towns, no interest in food production, no interest in renewable primary industry, which they're not.

Barry Green: So the whole regenerative agriculture movement is going from strength to strength. Former [Governor General Michael Jeffery](#) created an organisation, [Soils for Life](#) and Regenerative Agriculture is about working with Mother Nature, building the soil biology and there's a growing scientific understanding of the importance of soil biology and the biology in our guts for health. So this big industrial agriculture is so dependent on imported fertilizers and fuel, is it going to be sustainable in the long term?

Trevor Whittington: Well, you missed the last one, which is chemicals as well. They're all imported, predominantly, almost exclusively and including the machinery. So yeah. Look, you know, when you're running a Monoculture, large amounts of one type of cereal crop, then you become even more reliant if you're not putting legumes into the soil, if you're losing your livestock and the natural having the legumes as part of that rotation, then you have to replace that nitrogen with artificial nitrogen. And if you're totally focused on the on the bottom line, which the big corporates are, rather than intergenerational farming being there for the next 100 years, you know, a lot of those farmers out there have been there 100 years, you know, fifth generation, sixth in some cases. Then they can take a long term view. But corporates can't take a long term view because they got management structures and shareholders and, and profits and nothing wrong with profits. All family farms need to make profits. But you know it's at what cost.

Barry Green: You know we live in a free market society. We still have a nominally democratic government, although with the misinformation bill, I'm starting to wonder about that. What can government do? Surely the Australian government is elected to represent the interests of the Australian people. If these foreign corporations are taking actions that don't represent the interests of the Australian people, what can be done about it?

Trevor Whittington: That's a good question. Australia is one of the, small number of countries where you can buy freehold land, and in fact, anyone can buy freehold land. Doesn't matter where you're from. Good luck trying to buy freehold land in, Saudi Arabia or across the Middle East or Indonesia. In fact, a lot of countries around the world. So that's a debate, you know, that seems to come and go. Occasionally governments from both persuasions seem to dismiss it. But, you know, at what level would the community be happy with foreign ownership of the vast majority of of Australia's agricultural, freehold and pastoral land? It's currently sitting at 10%. It's 20%. Okay. 30, 40, 50. I suspect there is a threshold where the community would say enough's enough. and then on on the other side and you ask about what powers government has. Well, they've got, you know, there's powers on landcare and soils, but you rarely see government step in to utilise those powers. Often there's a lot of wishful thinking and some glib statements and, you don't see a lot of investment. Certainly not this state government or the previous one in terms of the Department of Agriculture, in the sort of R&D around regenerative agriculture or any anything else. You know, it's very limited

amounts of money. Most of it comes out of GRDC or MLA out of Canberra. So if the state government's not interested, then we're on an interesting slippery slope.

Barry Green: So you're right. We've recently had the referendum on the vote for Aboriginal voice to Parliament. I never understood why we'd need to change the constitution to give Aboriginal people a voice. I think we should absolutely listen to the Aboriginal people. They've run the Australian landscape for tens of thousands of years, but they have a saying that country needs people. And, you know, that's the case, isn't it? You know, if you depopulate and then have a bushfire, who's going to put the damn things out?

Trevor Whittington: It's interesting. Look at the big corporates. They tend to ban their workers from being volunteer firefighters fighting fires on neighbouring properties because of the health and safety. They're not good community citizens. So I think that's the word because they don't get engaged. And also, you know, people don't invest in the community. They might send the local footy club if there's still one left in these small country towns and eastern Wheatbelt, you know, a cheque for \$10,000. But the footy club doesn't want cheques for \$10,000. They want people and people will stay and get involved and do all the volunteering stuff, if they're usually family farms or the service people, you know, driving trucks and all the rest of it. And, that's, you know, you can see we've lost it already in the eastern wheatbelt. 25% of those farms have been aggregated up and corporatized. And, there's no more thriving little communities out there. So the march is coming back closer to us. But you're right about, you know, indigenous people. I ran an Aboriginal corporation for a while up in the Kimberley, and they were varying, engaged and staying on country and being engaged. But again, it's part of the problem with the indigenous communities. There's a lack of jobs and the big corporate mining, they pay, you know, lip service to employing indigenous. But again, the lawyers run there, the ruler over it and said, oh, well, health and safety, minimum standards. And you see, there's still a high level of unemployment in those communities. And a lot of these guys don't want to work on mining. They prefer to be on a horse and or working in the stockyards. And, you know, that's another part of the small community, discussion that we all should be having when our political parties should be having, which unfortunately, they're not.

Barry Green: Well, it's the livestock aspect. you know, when you take livestock out, then you get the mice plagues because the sheep aren't they're eating the grain. So this is this is a wicked complex system. Animals need to be part of it. And there's a bit of this thing about the vegan agenda. But if we all ate mung beans, that's not that's not going to solve the problem. The animals are an integral part of the biological system, so we've got to find a way to do that and ran properly, not necessarily feedlots, but run properly and regenerative agricultural practices. That's what built the soils of the deep, the deep soils of the plains of Africa and America.

Trevor Whittington: That's right. Talking about mice, one of the things that stops mice plagues is actually sheep running around, stomping on top of their little holes. They dig. But you're right. We think that the balance of 50% livestock, you know, predominantly sheep and the wheat belt and 50% cropping reduces the risk, for family farms, it's great for, you know, some soils that should never be cropped because they can't handle it. you've still got the incentive to leave patches of bush throughout the paddocks instead of squaring off the paddocks, which they're now doing. And of course, once the paddocks get long and skinny, you push out the fences and then it's easy to bring in the plains to do, you know, a lot more spraying and, and when you're spraying you're running over native vegetation with the, with the crop dusters. So you're losing jobs out of communities when you don't have those, you know, livestock linked jobs to shearing and stockings. And of course, not everyone wants to sit on a big John Deere tractor or sit on a boom spray. And a lot of people just, you know, diametrically opposed. And they like to be outdoors, working, working livestock, working the land. And there's lots more jobs, particularly for the, you know, for the girls and the women, because not all of them want to be grovelling underneath a tractor fixing it. So once you swing too far one way, it's almost impossible to swing back. So it's our last chance to, you know, in the next 20 years or so to keep these communities going and keep, you know, keep the livestock as part of the system and focus on, you know, reducing risks so you can, you know, run a more balanced farm.

Barry Green: Well, our company, Western Tourist Radio, operates tourist radio stations in the South West. And we sort of see agri tourism is important because there's been this breakdown between the city and the bush and communications. But if agri tourism gets people out in the bush and talking to farmers again, any stable seed system needs a feedback loop. And the feedback loop between producers or farmers and eaters is pretty much been broken by the commoditization of food.

Trevor Whittington: Yeah. That's right. As farmers have got, we've got more people coming into Australia at 7 or 8 million people in the last 20 years, a million in the last 18 months. None of them have got very few of them got relatives out in country towns and farming communities. And so there's literally, you know, a third of Australia who has no links, no incentive to cross the Blue Mountains or get out of Melbourne, leave Perth. and so, agri tourism is an incredibly important, way to facilitate, you know, affordable holidays, keeps dollars flowing into country towns and, you know, it gives the chance for kids to get out and about and get dirty and see some sheep and sheep yards.

Barry Green: So people listening to this, Trevor, what can they do? I guess the really it comes down to a political decision. Have we got to get them banging on the doors of the politicians?

Trevor Whittington: Well, I think just being aware that we're losing, you know, the Australia, the older ones that you know, grew up with and the younger ones, you know, do they really want to end up living in a completely urbanized environment. And so, you know, a self-awareness is always a good start. And then just run a critical eye over whoever you're going to, you know, when you front up

federal election due in the next six months and state election also, you know, think wisely before you vote. That at least sends signals to political parties and individuals, you know what's important and what's not.

Barry Green: It's an interesting development in America with the Robert Kennedy Jr, former Democrat, standing up alongside Donald Trump. And Kennedy is talking about the problems of the food supply in America. They're now spending five times as much on chronic disease as they are on the military. And he asserts that back to a lot of the oil seeds and getting away from the foods that our grandparents grew up with. So if they can talk about that in America, maybe we need to talk about that here. And then again, it gets back to eating foods produced by local farmers, whether it's fruit, vegetables or meat and some grains, rather than all these ultra processed food like materials that these corporations are producing.

Trevor Whittington: Yeah, I find it staggering that people, in Australia, spend most of their time shopping in a couple of big supermarket chains, which have got, you know, canned and packaged, fruit and highly processed vegetables and foodstuffs. when you've got, you know, fresh produce, which you can't imagine, particularly in North America and in Europe, in parts of North America, they, you know, they I just we, we have got from the subtropics and the northern part of Australia, particularly Western Australia, right down to the cool temperate down in your part of the world where you are now and further south and where your radio network covers. And, you know, we can grow anything and you can get it fresh and, you know, with no plastic around it and you get the thrills of actually watching your, you know, TV show, cooking show and, you know, following the recipe and turning it into a fabulous meal. So I think we've lost that. We know the focus on cooking shows is great, but where's the focus on how lucky we are and what a lot of other parts of the world would do to have access to the to the to the fresh produce we've got. And you know, it produce doesn't have to be perfect, you know. In fact, let it be real. Let the carrots be bent. That just means it's a bit more authentic.

Barry Green: Yeah, absolutely. And that we're spending billions of dollars on imported defence hardware. But of course, the ability to feed a country is fundamental to security.

Trevor Whittington: Well, it's interesting that we talk about food security, but, you know, What's the point on selling, um, your farmland to foreign investors if that doesn't mean it's going to put at risk your, you know, national security if you don't have enough access to, fuel and energy to, to run the country. if you happen to get, isolated from the rest of the world. So you need to produce biofuels, which agriculture obviously does. you need to be able to produce energy, which obviously, you know, wind and solar can do. And you need a good, good comprehensive mix. And you don't see this. I suspect this is not part of our Defence thinking, and certainly not to the level it should be.

Barry Green: Well, thanks for the thought provoking ideas there, Trevor. Is there any parting message to listeners of what they can do about this?

Trevor Whittington: Well, I just I think that the parting message would be for those who are listening in, a we need more people who are in your part of the world, living and traveling and stopping at farms and staying on farm stays. And they should be encouraging others, whether it's, you know, their grey nomads or they've got family or they're heading down and thinking that they're at the school holidays, or appreciate what we've got and appreciate our small country towns.

Barry Green: I've been talking to Trevor Whittington from WA farmers. Thanks for your time, Trevor.

Trevor Whittington: Oh, that was good to have your interest in it. So thank you.

Barry Green: You've been listening to conversations on the Radio WA podcast as we tell the stories of people and places in Western Australia. And as I said, that was recorded at the Small Town Reinvention Conference. And I think it's appropriate at this point that we play a song from ABC's Australia All Over album from the early 2000's. The song is called You Better Thank a Farmer and this is Dermot Dorgan.

Dermot Dorgan Song: I was watching television one chilly winter's night in the street. A heavy rain was coming down. And they showed a documentary about farmers and their plight. And the dying of a little country town. Now I am not a country boy. I'm city born and bred. I can hardly tell a heifer from a horse. If you ask me where my food came from, I'd probably scratch my head and say from Lockhart market town, of course. So if you're the sort of person who likes your daily bread, if you've got shoes upon your feet and blankets on your bed, if the buttons on your blazer are sewn on with cotton thread, then you'd better.

Thank a farmer while you can.

Dermot Dorgan Song: Well, this television programme showed the problems of the drought, and it showed the farmers forced to leave their land and the people of the township slowly moving down and out. And I gradually began to understand, because down at Lockhart Market Town, the price of food is the same. There isn't any scarcity at all. And I realized that drought is not the only thing to blame when it comes to sending farmers to the wall. So if you're the sort of person who likes a Sunday roast, who wears woolly winter jumpers and has butter on your toast, if you find that mashed potatoes are the things you like the most.

Then you'd better thank a farmer while you can.

Dermot Dorgan Song: But I still have lots of questions unanswered in my head, and a lot of times I don't know what to say. I don't know if it's true to say the family farm is dead, but it seems like super farms are here to stay. Sure, it's cheaper if you grow your crops on paddocks long and wide, and technology is a thing you can't ignore. But who pays for the funeral when a rural town has died? Because there's nothing there for people anymore? If you're the sort of person who wears blue denim jeans, if you like pumpkin, sweet potatoes, carrots, peas and beans, if you drive your children crazy trying to make them eat their greens. Then you'd better thank a farmer while you can. And I hear of massive Companies with massive clientele prepared to meet the farmer's every need. They'll contract to buy your produce and to market it as well. If you buy their tractors, pesticides and seed. And there's folks who say that's progress and it's profitable too. And who am I to say that isn't so? But if they control your livelihood and tell you what to do, Where's the freedom that the farmer used to know? Now, if you're the sort of person who thinks it's very nice to get a Chinese takeaway at a reasonable price, and with your meal of Peking duck, you're eating Aussie rice. Then you'd better thank a farmer while you can. Now we're growing grain for half the World, and people have to eat. And our farms are getting bigger every day. But is it really progress if for every tonne of wheat you lose five tonnes of topsoil blown away? And the ranks of corporate farmers continue to expand and these companies bring investment I agree, but have they got the family farms commitment to the land and to all the generations yet to be. If you're the sort of person who likes a glass of wine and linen napkins on your plate when you go out to dine, if the stuff that makes your roses grow is well, never mind. Then you'd better thank a farmer. Your night in battered armour. Yes, you'd better. Thank a farmer while you can.

Barry Green: Donnybrook-Balingup Community Radio. This is a small town reinvention special. My guest in the studio is Wendy Trow, a small town reinventor herself. So, what did you think of that Dermot Dorgan song, Wendy?

Wendy Trow: Well, you know, it sort of sums up exactly the situation, the scary things as well. The news is on, I said. How old is that song? And you said early 2000. So we've known this stuff's been happening and somehow we've been unable to stop it. And from what Trevor Whittington was saying, people, you know, this amalgamating small farms and it all being run by corporates, it's it's a scary thought and it's not going to get any better unless people actually start to talk about it and start to resist it.

Barry Green: I see it's not unlike, you know, the difference between capitalism and communism. It's getting really hard to pick. You know, both are big heap of unelected individuals telling everybody else what to do. And these big corporate farms aren't all that different to the big corporate farms of Russia that crash their food supply. So there's a point to ponder. But on the positive side, one of the people I spoke to at the conference was Desiree Waters from the Shire of Kondinin, And I talked to her about, about young people and getting young people back into regional communities. So we'll play that

interview. And one of the participants in the conference was Desiree Waters, who's a young lady who's working with the Shire of Kondinin G'day. Desiree.

Desiree Waters: Hello. How are you?

Barry Green: Good, thanks. Now, as Peter says, this is all about conversations, and it's all about engaging young people. So tell us how how did you get involved? And it's about your job that you're involved with with the Shire of Kondinin.

Desiree Waters: I started my job at the end of February this year, so I've only been there for about six months, and my job is a community development officer. So it's tourism and planning the events in the town and just getting people involved. And I've been I've been there for our few big events so far, like Anzac Day, and we have a dinner for 120 people with a chef from Perth, and we've also got a few more coming up as well, like the Twilight markets. And it's it's been good. And in our Shire also, we also have Wave Rock and we get a lot of tourism for that as well.

Barry Green: So you've grown up in country towns, so you sort of got a bit of an idea of what they're about.

Desiree Waters: Yes. I lived in York, Western Australia for 17 years, and I was involved in the community there, community sports and everything and all the events as well.

Barry Green: So regional towns, it's been difficult in recent years. But do you sense that there's a change happening and getting more young people involved with the. It's the fact that people are able to work more remotely than they have in the past.

Desiree Waters: Yeah. So it is a bit tough getting a few of the younger people involved. Like we don't really have too many where we live And there there are a few more coming through, but they're only there for a short while. But they also get involved in the community when they can and do everything that they can do.

Barry Green: So these things can spiral up or spiral down, can't they? So I guess having someone like yourself in that position, it creates more opportunities and inclinations for other young people to get involved.

Desiree Waters: Yeah I agree. Yeah, definitely. when I was, I first started, there wasn't very many, like, younger people, like helping out around my age. But there's been a few more and I've convinced them to come and help.

Barry Green: Well that's great. So is there any any sort of messages you have for other young people looking for something to do in regional Western Australia?

Desiree Waters: I think my message for young people is just go, go out to the regional towns, just experience them and you will enjoy them and then hopefully fall in love with the town like I did and move. Move out there and start a life as well.

Barry Green: Very good. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us today, Desiree.

Desiree Waters: Thank you. Barry.

Barry Green: Yeah, getting young people involved, that's the key to these things. Wendy.

Wendy Trow: Yeah, interestingly, I did quite a bit of research into our demographics in Balingup just to see where we stood on that. And only 17% of the population is aged between 20 and 44, so that's less than 100 people. We have a very old population in Balingup. Median age is 58. So how do you engage those people? And a lot of older people say, oh, you know, young people, they're not volunteering. They're just not joining them in their activities. And that's what I was saying earlier. You've got to allow them to take on things that they want to do. And in this case, well, there's two things. You've got Blackwood United Soccer Club, which has about 200 kids. 30 volunteers. And it's massive for a little tiny town like ours. You've got Balingup Art and Cultural Hub BARCH which is basically we took over the town hall. This is another subcommittee of Progress Association. and it was they were mentored by an older guy, but now he's pretty much handing over to the younger people. So it's being run by people in their 30s and 40s, and they are doing some amazing things. And the first weekend in November, there's a wedding expo happening in town. Businesses are working with the BARCH group, to, to actually develop work for young people because we've got some very artistic young people who do amazing decorations. They've completely revamped the hall. It's just you'd never believe it was a badminton court, to be honest. So and the other big thing is that our Progress Association president, Jodie Hornum is in her 40s. so that is really important. And she has stepped into the role brilliantly. No problem.

Barry Green: I think we've got so much to learn from Aboriginal people, because they value their elders and pass knowledge from generation to generation, and we're living this fast speed. And they say, oh, young people know the world, but the fundamentals of the human condition haven't changed, have they? So we've got to pass knowledge from generation to generation. The Aboriginal people have haven't had a written language, so they've passed their knowledge through storytelling and song. and that went for thousands of years. We've got to sort of reinvent that.

Wendy Trow: Yeah. And in fact, Peter Kenyon asked me to put together, in fact, it was originally started as a booklet about Balingup and Progress Association and how we encourage people to get involved because 40% of people in Balingup say they volunteer. That's four zero, which is again, very high and so I'm actually putting together a bit of a video instead, because I think it'll get easier to distribute. And it's, talking about, all the issues that are against work, work against small communities. And it's getting that message out there to a lot more places than if I just keep going and doing talks. you know.

Barry Green: And this is what in the Region Ag space, Charles Massy, the author of "[Call of the Reed-warbler A New Agriculture, New Earth](#)" , says. Change has got to come from the bottom up. We can't expect it to come from the top down, because the people at the top have fought to get there, and they like it the way it is. And there's got to be what Charlie calls comparing it to the soil. He calls it the underground revolution.

Wendy Trow: And you let people, we had a health and wellbeing group formed, all young people. into alternative therapies. they only held one event. Okay? But they were doing something. They did it really well. you know, they've got the skills to be able to do it. If they're interested in that subject, it'll happen.

Barry Green: And they've got to be allowed to make mistakes too. We've got a system that, you know, in the bureaucratic system is so, so paranoid about doing anything wrong. It's almost, bureaucratic paralysis. You don't do things because it mightn't work. Well, that's not going to get you anywhere, is it?

Wendy Trow: They also need somebody to, help them through things like the event planning, because there's a lot of paperwork and people think it's all, oh, it's the Shire that brings this. But all the Shire is doing, in fact, is implementing legislation that's come from straight up, higher up. And so. And yet it's the volunteers on the ground who don't get paid anything are having to spend hours doing risk management plans and event management plans. And it's, you know, while they're doing that, they haven't got time to be organising the event And you wonder why they don't get run a second time.

Barry Green: Yep. Okay, well, we'll pay a few bills, Wendy, and we'll come back after that.

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Barry Green: This is a small town reinvention special and one of the people I met at the Small Town Reinvention Conference in Pickering Brook was Charles Alder, who was a co-founder of an organisation called [Rural Aid](#). I'm talking to him now. G'day Charles.

Charles Alder: G'day Barry. Thanks for having me.

Barry Green: You're welcome. Rural aid, tell us why it was created and what it's doing now.

Charles Alder: So the charity was formed in 2015 on the back of a very successful fundraising campaign. We called Buy a Bale. It was a campaign that asked Australians to donate money. We would buy the hay from a hay farmer, put it on a truck and deliver it to farmers in drought, predominantly in New South Wales and Queensland at the time and between 2013 and 2020. With the big drought that came through in 18, 19, 20 particularly, and the bushfires in New South Wales and the floods in North Queensland. We were gracious to receive over \$100 million from Australian individuals and corporates, and the charity continues today. There's a new board and new management in place, and Tracey and I have moved on to new ventures since then.

Barry Green: To do something like that. You must have had some previous life experience that equipped you to do that. Tell us about that.

Charles Alder: Well, in agriculture Barry it was my only experience, was previously doing some fencing on a farm in Penola in South Australia during my schooling years. But I really, I'm in the business of helping people, and I saw an opportunity with this article that I read in the Australian of a farmer in Queensland who was going to shoot his cattle if he couldn't feed them, and I thought that that was a time that I could maybe put my skills of marketing and digital media and loyalty marketing particularly into place to try and help farmers out. So that's why we formed particularly the By a Bail program then. and then 2015, we moved into Rural Aid. We formed a charity in its own right, and it's done a number of initiatives since then. We had, the Gift of Music, which was where we took musical instruments to rural schools. We partnered with orchestras who would come out to those schools and teach the kids music. we had a mental health counselling program, which was the only on farm counselling program in the whole of Australia. We're in a partnership with Toyota. We branded vehicles and our counsellors went farm to farm, door to door, meeting farmers in their own homes and ascertaining where they were in terms of their own mental capacity. We had a program called the Farm Army, which is our volunteer program and still continues today. And there are over 14 15,000

volunteers registered back in 2020 with that program. And then we had a program called Ten Towns, which was it really spawned out of a the TV show Renovation Rescue. We called our program Farm Rescue, and it really moved or morphed into being a program that supported the reinvention of country towns, which is why we're here with Peter and the rest of the attendees this week. And it really it's not only just farmers who face these challenges through droughts, floods and fires and mice, plagues and whatever else. But it's the whole community and the fabric of the community in which they live that really needs that support. And in many cases, farmers get assistance, but little assistance is given to those rural communities. So that's why we formed a charity.

Barry Green: And I guess that sort of the theme of the conference and the future fund that Jeff was talking about from Nebraska and I guess it's the difference between something that's community, privately driven. There is a place for government, but they tend to overcomplicate things. And I guess it's the accountability required by government that they just don't. They're just not nimble enough to really address the causes.

Charles Alder: I think the challenge for government is that there are too many keyboard punches or tire kickers or people with opinions who really influence government in a way where government really should be more flexible in looking at the outcomes that they're trying to achieve. And this conference is really about empowering communities to be their own leaders, their own visionaries. sure, there'll be some entrepreneurial people in these rural communities who may make a mistake with an initiative, but the next one will be a success. or luckily enough, like ours with buyer bail. And it was almost an instant success. There'll be some communities who will come up with great ideas. Kulin. One town, for example, has come up with some fabulous ideas and the Kulin bush races. And so there really is an empowerment opportunity. I know back at Rural Aid we never asked government for money, and we felt that if we did that, we would be restricted to what government wanted us to do. By being independent, we were able to achieve massive outcomes. For example, we had there were some floods in North Queensland. A lot of cattle were washed away. And literally at 8 a.m. one morning, we decided to divert hay from New South Wales to Winton and we trucked it up there. We contracted two helicopters, one to spot, one to carry and over the next ten days we delivered. I think it was something like 14 or 15 road trains of hay. We were in daily communication with the Queensland Department of AG and we just got the job done. And now if we'd had to wait for government, in fact, even the Ag Minister, David Littleproud at the time wanted to buy the hay, in fact, which we already owned, He wanted to fly it in Hercules aircraft, which wouldn't have worked because he'd have had to clean out the Herc, and that would have cost more than carrying the hay. But as an organization, we were nimble enough at 8 a.m. that morning to make the call and make the change. And that's what you get when you are independently in charge of your future. And I think that that's the real opportunity here for country towns with these community foundation ideas.

Barry Green: Another speaker this morning was Trevor Withington the CEO of WA farmers. He gave a fairly blunt description of what's happening and where we've got corporate takeover of, of massive farms and that sort of undermining the sense of community. How do you think we're going to handle that into the future, Charles?

Charles Alder: Well I think the challenge is that, as Trevor noticed, the bigger farmers, they don't require as many families, they don't require as many workers. We're looking at massive tractors, massive sprays now that can do the job in half the time they used to. And, you know, if we lose a few kids, we might lose a teacher because governments have, you know, ratios of teachers to students. We lose the doctor or we lose the dentist who no longer have a viable number of patients. And that begins the breakdown of the fabric of these rural communities. And I think the vast majority of Australians actually want to have today, particularly post-Covid, a far more comfortable, far more relaxed lifestyle. And they'd like to do that in Perth, or they'd like to do that in Brisbane or Melbourne. But they're such fast paced communities and I think the benefit of living in the bush or even just small country towns, even where we are just on the outskirts of Perth, is it's just immense. It's the, the wake up and the fresh air and the birds and, and the ability for kids to walk to and from school instead of having to be driven from school. and just the sense of community, the local football club, the local RSL or the pub, whatever. Those things get lost when big corporations take over large tracts of land. Now, it may not be the case that we see continued consolidation, but Trevor is right. The cost of farming is becoming a very big business. It's very marginal. You only need one bad season. And this is one of the challenges, mind you, for the big corporates, is that they might own 20 or 30,000 acres, but if they don't get that wheat crop off, they might lose 50 or 100, \$200 million. And so the bigger you are, the bigger you can fall. And so while it's a concern, there's nature has its way of levelling things out. And while I don't want any ill will to anyone, big business can face just as many challenges as small business. and the other thing, too, is that you lose when you lose the local farmer and the husband and the wife and the kids and whatever. you lose people who've lived in that community for maybe 50, 100, 200 years or generations of. And that's really what you lose. It's the history. It's knowing you Barry as a local, you know, being down the pub had a few drinks with you over the years, but now you're no longer in town because you can't be on the farm and you've had to go somewhere else to get a job or whatever. We miss that camaraderie between you and I and that happens within these communities. And that's the real loss. the real loss of friendships and collaboration and mateship, which is what Australia was built on.

Barry Green: Absolutely. And that's the theme of the conference. It's about the conversations and the can-do attitude. And we talk about regen ag and regenerative agriculture. And a key concept of regen ag comes from permaculture. And the key concept of permaculture is stability through diversity. And my sense is we got competing ideologies between economies of scale and stability through diversity. And that's what's happened, which, you know, it's all very well while things are going well. But the downside of it is things turn to manure. You know, if you lose, if you've got a handful of

farmers and you lose 2 or 3, that's serious. If you've got thousands of them, you know, the weaker one dies out. That's part of the private enterprise system. So in many respects, we're losing the private enterprise free market system and going to an extreme sort of capitalism, which isn't all that different to communism.

Charles Alder: Yeah, I'm not sure I want to live in a communist country, so I think I'll stick with the capitalism.

Barry Green: But what I'm saying is, I'm finding it harder and harder to pick a difference between the two. As, as capitalism gets bigger. So you end up with unelected individuals running huge organisations, making decisions affecting thousands of people. There isn't that feedback that you get in a true private enterprise free market system?

Charles Alder: Yeah. True. Yeah. The bigger the business, the bigger the PR department, the bigger the control of the message and the spin. and I think that's one of the virtues of small business. small farms and, yes, the collective 1000 farmers, is a far better scenario than having 1 or 2 big farms. And I think we've seen that in various different parts of Ag, whether it be chemical Ag or whether it's, the poisoning of our water systems by numerous companies around the world. Just understanding nature, working with the land, our farmers can be very productive with adoption of regenerative ag. No chemical farming, you know, multi-species cover cropping, rotational grazing, all those sorts of aspects of regenerative agriculture which Barry they were what we did 100 years ago when it was farming. And then we went into chemical farming because we thought it would be great and we could save some money, But you know, again, if you come back to these 20 and 30,000 big corporate farms, those guys are spending a lot of money on fertilizer to grow those crops. Whereas you could have the thousand farmers who are adopting regenerative ag, not putting any chemicals on their land and generating just as much income in a far more sustainable, healthy way. So I think we've got to get more people to understand nature for what it is, work with it, not work against it, and just stop polluting it. Really.

Barry Green: I absolutely agree, Charles. And, you know, we talk about regenerative agriculture. I'm also involved in community radio in Donnybrook, and I see community radio and tourist radio and the new media like [The Light Australian](#) newspaper is regenerative media, and we're providing a voice for community and small business where as the mainstream media, sadly, is owned by the same corporations that own the pharmaceutical companies, the ag chemical companies, big, food, big ag and that's sort of why we've almost had this failure of the media, because it's, it's owned by the same corporation selling all these products.

Charles Alder: I think in any industry where you get consolidation Barry, you get a controlling of the narrative, which really becomes the control of the individual or the or the small collective who want to

control it. You've just got to look at big tech. You know, in 2000 we had no big tech. well, maybe we had IBM and a few others, but they didn't control the world like they do today. You know, Facebook and Instagram and Google and a few others. And then we've got the consolidation of media, whether it be Murdoch or whether it be others, they're really controlling the message now. And the importance of community radio, the importance of community connection, the importance of communities in general. You know, come down here to the pub, have a conversation, really get the gossip, and get the, you know, what's really happening in our community. It comes back to humans wanting to connect. And that's not digital connection. I think more and more people are looking for human connection and human relationships. And if we can make that a part of our day to day conversation, pick up the phone, talk to you, see how you are, how the family are, you know, shoot the breeze for 5 or 10 minutes. If more people can do that, then we'll be able to control in our own way. We'll be able to get a better control of the message that's being dealt to us. And I think that that's fundamentally important for the future of democracy.

Barry Green: So that was Charles Alder, who's one of the founders of Rural Aid. He wasn't a speaker, but he was somebody both Wendy and I met at the Small Town Reinvention Conference. And that had a positive outcome for you in an event, something you're involved in, Wendy?

Wendy Trow: It certainly did. Rural Aid have seen our resilience project that we've got in, in Balingup and essentially it started around about four years ago when I went to a DFES workshop and they said, the communities have got to expect the unexpected to happen more often and that they can't expect government to be there to save them. And so I went away from that. And then soon after, we lost all our mobile phone coverage during a bushfire. And of course, nowadays they send out all their alerts by mobile phone, which isn't very handy. and cut a long story short, we set up a group in Balingup. It's called the Community Information Social Centre. It's a reason for that, but I won't go into it. and it's what I call CWA on steroids. It's, you know, in the old days, people used to. There'd be a fire, the guys would go out and fight the fire, the CWA, they'd make their sandwiches. The guys would send somebody in and tell them what was going on, and then those women would tell the rest of the community and the level of stress in the community. I imagine it was pretty high, but not as high as it is nowadays, because people have got no idea. All you can see is a smoke plume.

Barry Green: And People are worried about whether they're complying with the regulation, whereas, you know, the CWA used to make the sandwiches and now you've got to have food safety accreditation. It's all bollocks, Wendy!

Wendy Trow: Fair enough. Your words, not mine. But anyway, so we've set this group up in Balingup and we've got the bushfire brigades involved. Bushfire read, It's really a combination of everybody. And again, it's another Progress Association subcommittee. And so anyway, we've um I talked a bit about it at the conference, and Rural Aid had already given me a little bit of money, and I'm talking a

very small amount of money, but I've, I've rolled our template, the Balingup template, out in four other communities now just finished going to a workshop, run two workshops in Walpole and Nornalup this weekend and I get that conversation going with them. You get them sitting around the table.

Barry Green: It all starts with a conversation.

Wendy Trow: And we talk about what the problems are and we talk about how to fix them. And so they are coming up with what I call my noddy's guide. You know, this is the decision-making process. Here are the contact numbers. So it gives you all the details and Rural Aid want that to go out nationally now. So I'm now working with them talking to them about how we can possibly do that. And maybe I'll teach their facilitators how to do it so that they can combine it into their community builders' program that they already run. So again, it's that bottom the we saw a problem. We didn't ask the government to fix it. We just figured out our own way of fixing it. And we've just kept going at it. And in fact, we've got a meeting tomorrow and we meet once a year now it's short, maybe an hour. and that'll be it. Just to refresh everybody's memory. Everybody gets a copy. I don't have to be there, so it works. Well, we haven't had an emergency where we've had to use it, but I feel much more confident that our community, with all the skills and the smart people they've got, are going to be in a much better. Well, we've got a satellite phone, we've got Sky muster pop up internet and we've got a generator power at the recreation centre. It's taken a long time, but it's worth it.

Barry Green: And I'm keen for community radio to be become part of that. There's a communication channel. and I as I said before, I seem to see the community radio is very much a business community partnership. We need local business support us. We need our listeners to support local business. And the next sponsor message we got is a very nice little one that Neil's put together of a young couple setting up a business in Donnybrook.

Sponsor Message : Yep, that's good to go. Hi everyone. My name is Shaun Nelson from. S and D Nelson Automotive, your mobile mechanic servicing Donnybrook and surrounding areas. Having worked in Donnybrook as a mechanic for the last 19 years, I'm sure most of you already know who I am at S and D Nelson Automotive, we offer mobile vehicle servicing and repairs. Taking the stress out of getting your car to us because we come to you for logbook servicing and more. Call me Shaun for friendly, honest service with a smile. For your next automotive job, you can contact us via Facebook Messenger. Call or text on 0487 769 587. Station sponsor S and D Nelson Automotive.

Sponsor Message : You're listening to Donnybrook-Balingup Community Radio and we're proudly supported by Burnbrae Olive farm, MPM concreting, Donnybrook, IGA and the Fine Timber Company. DBCR are your community radio station.

Barry Green: It's the Lemonheads. Come into your arms. It's 1137 on this DBCR Small Town Reinvention special I'm Barry Green, and one of the presenters was Carole Redford from Astrotourism WA G'day Carol,

Carol Redford: Hello. Nice to be with you.

Barry Green: So tell us the story of Astrotourism in Western Australia.

Carol Redford: I know it's a developing sector, I guess, of all or part of our tourism industry. I think it's an asset that we've forgotten that is above our heads because most of us face it, we live in brightly lit cities and so we can't see the stars so well anymore. So I think our night sky is quite special. We have a vast area of darkness in Western Australia with beautiful stargazing opportunities. That Milky Way stretches from horizon to horizon, but it's just because most of us live in brightly lit cities that we've forgotten it's there, so it's a developing part of our tourism industry.

Barry Green: And those of us that do live in the regions become sort of shot blind to it as well, I guess.

Carol Redford: Absolutely. I think we take it for granted actually, when I first started talking about this in the regions, you know, and saying what a world class asset we have above our heads every night, and that people will pay money to come and stand and see everybody sort of around those tables was a bit sceptical and, you know, really are they really that interested? I said, yes, they are.

Barry Green: And you were also talking about the Aboriginal people and their cultural knowledge of astronomy.

Carol Redford: Yes, that's right. It's a very important part of astronomy. I think all indigenous astronomy around the world is quite important here in Western Australia, and particularly the Noongar nation and Noongar, Budja or Noongar country. There's some, Incredible. This incredible information and stories that really guide what's happening on the land and what's happening in the ocean, around our waterways and within culture as well. you know, there's tens of thousands of years of knowledge in those stars. And it really this it's and it's not just it's not just beautiful or stories. It's also very scientific. So it talks to environmental challenges and how to look after country and waterways and our own selves as well. It's quite incredible depth of information. And I think we could do to understand it a lot more often.

Barry Green: I think I'm sure you're right. And there is so much knowledge that the Aboriginal people have, and maybe they don't know they have. And we've, I guess, had this superiority complex

because we got stuff written down, but that they've kept their knowledge through storytelling. And very much the theme of this conference is the importance of storytelling.

Carol Redford: Isn't it just that's so true. And it's it always amazes me how those stories do travel from family to family, generation to generation. And it's really strong to that, that line of stories very, very strong, almost unbreakable. you know, it's only 2 to 300 short years ago that it was all still very much intact right across Australia. And yeah. Look. And it is it's really great to see that, level of interest and that rediscovery, especially of the night sky information I've found with working with a lot of Aboriginal men and women that, there's a lot of knowledge on the land and, on the land, but the not the knowledge. And that information from the sky is a bit disjointed, but I think over time that will come back, and those that stories and information will, will again be passed down from generation to generation.

Barry Green: In another life. I'm involved in organic or regenerative agriculture, and in that area, there's a growing realization of the Aboriginal understanding of the management of the Australian landscape. And so we've got so much to learn from them.

Carol Redford: We certainly do. And, you know, as our climate changes and as we grapple with the problems that we're facing, are that information and that knowledge is going to be critical, I think, to, you know, us looking after this land. I mean, let's face it, there was a group of people here for tens of thousands of years, you know, 50 to 60,000 years that knew how to manage this place and knew how to do it so well so that they could survive and, you know, live, live very happy, you know, artistic, creative, wonderful, soulful lives.

Barry Green: It's interesting at the moment because there's lots of talk about rewilding and sort of shutting up areas, but that's completely at odds with Aboriginal people. They talk of country needs people.

Carol Redford: That's right. And there's all, you know, cultural burning practices to so that they could get the grasses to grow so that the kangaroos would come in and there's, you know, the food source right there for you. That's right. It's about managing it environmentally so that you're still able to subsist and to survive and live, but you don't use it all up and you don't destroy, you know, groups of animals or groups of trees. It's about living with nature rather than, you know, using it to its full extent. So yeah, that beautiful harmony, I think, of living with nature. We tend to we tend to mould nature to what we want, rather than moulding ourselves to what's good for nature.

Barry Green: And I'm sure that in the tens of thousands of years Aboriginal people were here, there were certainly big fires, but I don't think they would have had anything like the massive fires we've had in recent years or even the dust storms.

Carol Redford: No, because the landscape was managed properly and, you know, it was managed well to stop those really extreme events happening.

Barry Green: And so I guess this is the strength of tourism. It gives an economic value to these sorts of these sort of values in terms of agri tourism and in terms of the, the astro tourism. How does that work? How do people get involved with what you're doing?

Carol Redford: I know it's interesting when you do have a visitor come out to a country area, sometimes they don't realise that they're in a dark sky place and that there's this beautiful asset at night that they can be enjoying. So anybody who lives regionally or who operates a tourism business, really great idea just to remind them, remind visitors to go outside just to look up, you know, take out a nice hot chocolate or your picnic rug, lie back and just gaze up and don't miss it. And then I'm hoping over time that we'll have people who want to take that one step further and maybe start to provide different types of experiences. I know that from the research, that tourism was been doing things like dining under the stars, spotting wildlife at night, even soaking in a hot tub under the stars. They're very popular activities and people want to do them.

Sponsor Message: Here at your Bendigo Bank Donnybrook, we know nothing about interpretive dance, but we do know banking. If you need help with any of your financial needs, come and meet the team from the community Bank Donnybrook. Want to buy or invest in property? We know how. Want to save for something special? We know how or just want to manage your money better. We know how, so meet the team at your community Bank Donnybrook for all of your banking needs. Find us on Facebook or Google Bendigo Community Bank Donnybrook to speak to your local banking specialists. Maybe just don't ask about interpretive dance.

Sponsor Message : DBCR thanks the following sponsors for their generous support. Donnybrook. Accident repair. Balingup Heights hilltop forest cottages. The village pedlars. Balingup and southwest fire mitigation service. DBCR your community station.

Barry Green: We are indeed. And this is a small town reinvention special. We've got Peter Kenyon back online. G'day, Peter.

Peter Kenyon: Hi, Barry.

Barry Green: . We've got Wendy Trow here. So the astrotourism thing. Wendy, what was your thoughts on all that.

Wendy Trow: Well, again, it was another story of how somebody just comes up with an idea then starts floating it around and suddenly people take took her up on it, and now she's running this quite large venture. And how people, there's money in Astrotourism. They, there are a lot of people who pay a lot of money to go and, spend a night under the stars. So, I've certainly distributed it in Balingup because we've got a lot of bed and breakfasts and, you know, maybe we could get some astrotourism going in. Balingup.

Barry Green: I think so many of us in living in the regions, we tend to take what's around us for granted. But people who don't live here, value it. It's almost a case of what they call shop blindness. You know, people don't see the things around them. What's your thoughts on that, Peter?

Peter Kenyon: Oh, definitely. Barry, I think our dark skies and just, you know, the world above us is just one of those incredible natural assets that we often just take for granted that it's when we're actually get exposed to it, when we have the opportunity, as we did on the conference, when the Perth Observatory people, the volunteers that run that now brought down their telescopes and people were able to see the rings around Saturn and see what the stars offered, it just mesmerized everyone. It was just an amazing experience. And to see now that collection, I think there's well over 20 towns now in WA that are actually taking initiatives to enhance that as a tourism option, whether it be creating the platform with the local telescope or running events around dark skies, or even doing things like trying to minimize, you know, the, the light pollution that can detract from that experience in terms of what they're installing in terms of street lighting and all that stuff. But it's just amazing that people have just suddenly seen, wow, this is something people are actually interested in. And I noticed that the state government here just announced that Nature Tourism is going to be a major plank of their new tourism strategy. So I think it all kind of like is one of those things that we have all had the opportunity, particularly those that are away from major regional centres and metropolitan areas, are able to really capitalize on. It's a low-cost thing, and it's one of those really soft tourism things. You know, people that are interested in that are people who are also going to stay overnight, going to invest in the local economy and be light on the environment. I think it's an amazing area to kind of like pursue for a small town.

Barry Green: The nature thing is so important, isn't it? Nature is part of the human condition. They talk about kids suffering from nature deficit disorder. You know, we've evolved with nature. And if tourism can reconnect people with nature and, and appreciate what we've got and maybe learn to not destroy everything in nature as we tend to be doing, especially in agriculture in some respects. Now, you know, there's it's great looking at the great things out there in the sky. But the foundation of our civilizations comes from the biology and the soil, which is Regen Ag so agri tourism and astro tourism, they all have a place to play in, in sort of raising awareness of the fundamentals of the planet that sustains us. Peter.

Peter Kenyon: Yeah, yeah. And look, one of the things I would have loved to have included in our conference, because it's a personal interest to me now, is the whole area. I don't know if you're aware of this concept called forest bathing, which I'm actually being trained in this, through the international group. And this is about basically leading facilitated walks into forests and begin to experience the value of spending several hours in a forest. And, and we know everyone says when they've walked through a forest, they always feel good for it. Well, people don't really know why. The reason is that these trees are kind of like covering us in all. They are covering us with all that stuff that they put out to protect themselves. And the group that discovered this in a huge way. The Japanese, who after the war and the country started to industrialize, they began to see people moving from rural areas to cities, developing whole pile of health issues that they never knew before. And part of it is that people were no longer being exposed to greenery and to forests and all that stuff, and the health department in Japan developed up this whole thing called forest bathing. There are now 65 centres around Japan where you can go and spend time just immersed amongst trees and forests, and we know the benefits of that. And so for me, I look at a place where we have the confidence, Pickering Brook, with all those amazing forests and jarrah trees whatever. And why aren't we starting to look at those type of tourism experiences? You know, the Japanese have discovered them. You wouldn't go now to a US town. A small town in America where there isn't someone trained in forest bathing who will offer us part of the tourism package, that opportunity to wander into a local forest and experience kind of like nature and the benefits that come from it. And again, I think these are the types of opportunities that our small towns need to start looking at.

Barry Green: Absolutely. And I think it maybe it's the answer to the human problem isn't another pill, Peter. It's a matter of getting out and appreciating this planet we're on and looking at it and treating each other with respect. Now, at the conference, one of the sponsors was the City of Kalamunda, and I recorded a piece with the Margaret Thomas, the Mayor of Kalamunda. So I think we'll play that. It'll be a good way to end this special. Peter. So we'll play what Margaret had to say and come back and talk to you after that.

Peter Kenyon: Thanks.

And one of the sponsors of the event was the City of Kalamunda, and I'm talking to the Mayor of Kalamunda, Margaret Thomas, G'day Margaret..

Margaret Thomas: Good morning. Barry.

Barry Green: So it's been a fantastic three and a half days. What's your take on the conference?

Margaret Thomas: So we all know in the state of Western Australia and Australia as a whole that our regional towns, our small towns which are so important are just getting less and less people. So the

conference idea was to bring everybody together and look at all the different ways we could stop that happening. And we are really happy that it was in the City of Kalamunda, because while we are a city, we're sort of a city of small villages. So you could, for instance, the conference is at Pickering Brook, which is one of our suburbs, but it's like a community on its own. So it fitted very well. And the conference gave us all such great ideas that we can all go back to our various places and put into practice.

Barry Green: And I come from a regional town as well, and I sort of sense in many respects the city can learn from the bush. The cities can't survive without economically and environmentally sustainable rural communities providing them with food.

Margaret Thomas: Absolutely. We can learn a lot and we in the city don't want the small towns to get any smaller. We want them to be thriving, and we want those communities to have a great life. And for a great life, we need people to live there.

Barry Green: Mary Nenge is a mover and shaker in regional Australia, and she talks about country towns needing to get away from the football club mentality. And there's nothing wrong with football clubs, and football clubs are really important, but that that tends to be a sort of a sense of competition between towns, whereas the future is collaboration.

Margaret Thomas: Absolutely. It is collaboration. And we as a city want to be careful that we don't only cater for that group of people. Football clubs. What about all the other people? The arts, all the older people who don't play sport, but certainly collaboration in a town between all the different parts of the community is important, and even collaboration between our towns, our cities, you know, we can all learn from each other. It'd be great if we did more things together.

Barry Green: And the collaboration between generations. And there's lots of talk about Aboriginal culture and learning from Aboriginal people. But in many respects, I think they've done it better than us in that while things are changing and we've got to respect what young people want from the future, old people still know stuff. So we do need to value our elders.

Margaret Thomas: We certainly do. And that whole idea of intergenerational people coming together from different generations is fantastic because some kids, for instance, don't have grandparents and they can learn so much. And of course, older people love being around younger people. So we as a city, and I'm sure most people do, and most towns do, we try to put things together. We put the men's shed down next to the T ball, and we hope they all, you know, mix and learn from each other and share.

Barry Green: Well, community is about collaboration. Margaret, thanks. Thanks for the City of Kalamunda for sponsoring this conference and your participation. It's been a fantastic three and a half days.

Margaret Thomas: It certainly has. And we are so glad that you chose to come to the City of Kalamunda and this little part of the city called Pickering Brook.

Barry Green: So that was the Mayor of Kalamunda, Margaret Thomas. Peter that was a pretty good wrap up of the conference. I thought.

Peter Kenyon: It was. And we really value Margaret. In fact, I was having a cup of coffee with her again out of Pickering Brook this morning. Her and her husband owned the old timber mill out there, and they've developed up some really neat kind of like workspaces there for different businesses. And she as you're aware, we had that amazing evening at their place on their horse stud property, where we did have the Astrotourism event. She's been a huge supporter and really appreciate. And I think what I think she's the first to say that the city, the staff and many of the councillors, it was great to have the conference because it reiterated they had this amazing gem, this collection of small towns Pickering, Brook, Bickley, Carmel, a collection, canning mills, amazing communities that are part of a city. And yet they present this amazing rural, exposure astrotourism the forests, the agritourism. And it's a mere 20 minutes from the international airport. You know, it just made them aware that they've got this asset that we can certainly develop up. And I noticed this week that the World Tourism Council were visiting the Swan Valley. And I thought, look, you know, why do you go to the Swan Valley when you've got something like the, the Kalamunda Hills and those towns to wander through? How do we achieve what the Swan Valley people have done in terms of how they've really marketed themselves and turned that into a very attractive kind of like tourism opportunity. And that's what I know, that the city and many of us are now very keen to actually do so. The conference is going to have an ongoing impact on those small towns like Pickering Brook.

Barry Green: Very good. Peter, thanks for your leadership with the Bank of Ideas. And Wendy Trow's sitting here with me, another mover and shaker in regional communities. Do you want a parting message, Wendy?

Wendy Trow: I love what you do, Peter. Keep going

Peter Kenyon: And you keep going. Wendy, I'm as it might be aware, but I had a long association with Balingup. I've had a property there for, you know, almost 30 years. Loved the place and so proud of what you and other community builders are doing in Balingup up. You're an inspiration, Wendy, and just a great story to be able to tell people across the globe.

Wendy Trow: Actual I was going to add that Jeff Yost, what he said was, you've got to talk up your community. If people, feel poor, if they if they if you're telling them, oh, you know, the community is dying, then they won't give back to the community because they think it's a lost cause.

Barry Green: It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Wendy Trow: It certainly does. You keep talking it up, keep talking it up. So keep you tell the mayor to keep talking it up. And she'll be the next destination for the International Tourism Council.

Barry Green: Okay. Well. Thanks, Peter.

Wendy Trow: Yep. Cheers. Peter.

Peter Kenyon: Thank you, Barry, and thank you for what you do. Barry. Your service and your commitment and getting the messages. And above all, the stories. You're great at capturing stories and getting those stories out, and. And what you're doing is so valuable to rural Australia. So thank you.

Barry Green: Well thanks, Peter. And I guess an inspiration to me has always been [Slim Dusty](#). He built a career out of telling Australian stories in song, and I guess the storytelling is so important that Aboriginal people pass their knowledge through storytelling, and that's what we can do. This program will be online later today. Well, maybe not later today at some point, and we'll generate a transcript. And if you find it interesting, welcome you to share that around. And this is this is the new regenerative media in action. You've been listening to a Small town Reinvention special on Donnybrook-Balingup Community Radio. I'm Barry Green. Thanks for your company.

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