

The Secret of My Success:

by

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Honored Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, and WLN Members

I am delighted to be in Brunei Darussalam, one of Australia's fascinating and exotic neighbors, and I hope to learn more about its people and culture while I am here.

I left home on June 1st to attend the UN General Assembly Special Session "Women 2000 - Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century" - better known as Beijing +5, following the last review at Beijing five years ago. I spent a few days with family in South Carolina before continuing my trip around the world to Brunei. This is definitely the trip and experience of a lifetime for me!

As you can see, my qualifications are a bit different to my fellow speakers. I am not an academic, politician or big business woman. I'm a farmer. Or to use the Australian term: "Grazier". My vocation is producing fine wool. My avocation is trying to help the people and communities of rural Australia - also known as "the Bush" or "the Outback". Unfortunately, we've got our fair share of challenges, as well as opportunities, as I'll explain. As for my "success", I'll let you decide.

But, this talk, is not really about "my" success, it's about "our" success, because when you live on the land most of the things you do are a team effort. And, it's about the effect that OUTBACK AUSTRALIA and its unique, rural communities have had on our lives.

And, the story is, of course, still unfolding. Even as I speak, we are again in doubt, with hail and snow storms thrown in for good measure and Bob could easily ring me this evening and say that we have just lost 2,000 sheep. It happens. I think that's why farmers are so conservative - they know another disaster might be just around the corner!

But I'll have to backtrack a bit because this odyssey started before we arrived in Australia - and it's the total of all these experiences that has shaped our lives and successes.

I'm in Brunei to represent Rural Australia. But, obviously I didn't start out a rural Australian - I spent my first 25 years as an urban American. That fairly dramatic change is what is this story of "our success" - is about.

Living on and from the Land is very different from a city existence.

Cormac McCarthy says it so well in his book "All the Pretty Horses". I'll quote:

“They said that it was no accident of circumstance that a man be born in a certain country and not some other and they said that the weathers and seasons that form a land form also the inner fortunes of men in their generations and are passed on to their children and are not so easily come by otherwise.”

I'm part of an email discussion group and we were discussing the term “The Outback” and I contributed that quote. A few days later I received this response from a friend”
“I think that paragraph is wonderful - really hits on the head what I have tried to articulate for a long time. My husband is so in tune and a part of this land. My children are going to be children of red earth and eucalypt, whilst I was a part of the tidal flats and the sea. I feel sad sometimes that they will never know that connection I feel, and even now the strong pull to the sea and shore, but understand that ghost gums and the western sun will hold the same invisible link for them.”

My version, the least literary and a bit more round about, goes like this:

It all started when I met my husband-to-be who was a young naval officer. In the States, Navy recruitment posters say, “join the Navy and see the world”. And, that's exactly what he did - he was a navigator on transport planes that flew men and supplies around the world.

His interest in Africa started when he navigated the first flight from Africa to the Antarctic - which led to us reading every book that we could get our hands on about Africa. One of the reasons I married him was because he said he would take me there. And he did.

When Bob left the Navy, he got an MBA and joined Citibank in New York. We didn't like the big city and were overjoyed when we learned that we were being assigned to Port Elizabeth, South Africa - the adventure had begun - sort of! After a year, we transferred to Johannesburg, where our son, Matt, was born.

We managed to see quite a bit of Southern Africa, which we loved, but the banking was getting in the way of the adventure. We wanted something really exciting: so we quit the bank and got a job in the safari business in Kenya. Now, how exotic is that?!

Well, it wasn't to be. The political situation got very messy in Kenya and we found ourselves back on a plane to the U.S. Bob easily got another job, this time in the stock broking business and we tried to settle down - like normal people.

But, that didn't last long, either. We took off for Africa, again - this time with two children - our daughter, Kirsten, who was 9 months old and our son, Matt, 3 1/2. Now, some people might think that was a bit irresponsible - and, I suppose, it was. But we were determined to give Africa one more go. This time we went to Namibia, Botswana and finally settled in Zimbabwe for a year. It was a great experience and I wouldn't have changed it, but we were slowly coming to the realization that Africa was not going to be our home.

But, where could we go? We still wanted a life on the land and an adventure. Bob had been based in Christchurch, New Zealand when he was making his Antarctic flights. So

we discussed the possibility of New Zealand or Australia becoming our home. We chose Australia - and our lives changed, once again.

One of the Secrets of our Success is not being afraid to take that first step into a new adventure. But that, of course, is the easy part! The hard part is living with the results of those first steps! And, the steep learning curve started shortly after we bought our first farm.

“Wendouree”, in New South Wales, was the name of our first property. 1,800 acres of sheep, cattle and cropping. We were, once you drove through the creek, only 15 minutes from town. Of course, you could only drive through the creek when it wasn't flooded, but someone forgot to mention that to us. With only 1,500 people in the district, Bingara was pretty small by American standards, but we came to love it and its rural community! We lived there for 6 years - the longest Bob and I had stayed anywhere! It was a marvelous experience - we saw our children grow and thrive in a rural community - everyone being a part of everything - and that is one of the things I love most about rural Australia.

We all enjoyed mustering the sheep and cattle on horseback, and going around the lambing ewes in the spring was a highlight of the year. We joined the local organizations: Pony Club becoming a major part of our lives for the 6 years we were there, plus swimming, tennis, cubs, brownies, etc. - the idyllic rural lifestyle.

But with that also came the difficulties of life on the land - drought, fire, locusts, flooded creeks, low commodity prices, and we couldn't just pack our bags and leave - we had to stay. And, that's when our real education started.

During those 6 years, I became more and more aware of what a vital role volunteers had in the community. In remote rural areas, you have to be self-reliant; if you want something done, you have to do it yourself. And, each generation takes their turn at keeping the community growing and prospering.

But, all that is under threat now. Rural communities around the world are dying. Since we arrived in Australia in 1974, 50% of the farmers have left the land. Sons and daughters, having seen the endless work for little or no profit, have fled to the cities. The banks close and the teachers leave, most government offices close, small communities can't get doctors to stay, the hospitals have difficulty keeping staff and the pharmacies close. It's not a pretty picture, but it is continuing to happen. And it is the volunteers who are vital in trying to keep everything going - but we are getting older and the young ones have left. Which, in a nutshell, is the problem I'm trying to address.

I love the rural lifestyle and I will be forever grateful for the wonderful start in life it gave our children. I want other families to have the same opportunities and am willing to spend the time and effort on Committees and going to seminars if I can help.

Much of this effort takes the form of lobbying the Governments, at all levels. And, since many of the things we need cost money, that can be a major problem. Or the challenge can be to make governments see the political benefits in helping what has

become a very small sector of the population. Not to suggest that all of our problems are the fault of the government.

Low international commodity prices are really at the heart of the matter. Self-help groups are one of the many solutions to the problem. They can be very effective and cost the government little or nothing. And, as always, a lot of voluntary time and effort is involved.

A United Nations article that I read recently said that the Global GDP would double if the work of volunteers and carers were taken into account. As more women and girls are educated and become part of the work force, the governments and communities, worldwide, will have to incorporate the cost of these, so far, voluntary duties into their budgets.

But, back to the story,

After 6 years, Bob added another "hate" to his list: he hated machinery, so we headed to the real Outback to concentrate on sheep grazing and left the machinery behind.

Our second property was "Hilltop Station", 26,000 acres of undulating grasslands. We had started another, even more challenging, adventure. This time, we were nearly an hour from town, and the district (an area a bit larger than Belgium), had just 800 people. We wondered what life would be like in such a small community. But, it didn't take us long to be accepted - in the Bush, every person is needed and is expected to share in the life of the community and take on some of the responsibilities.

The next 10 years were the most defining for us. Life in the Outback is very challenging.

We learned, for example, that in the Outback, nothing is more important than rain. Every conversation started with a few sentences on the weather; all conversation stopped when the weather report came on radio or TV; just the smell of rain would wake you from a deep sleep; and, the sound of a storm hawk (which was supposed to herald rain) absolutely made your day. We would sit on the verandah and watch the clouds building and WILL it to rain. Most of the time, it didn't work. Our average rainfall was 17 inches and most of that was supposed to fall during the monsoon season in January and February. If it didn't rain in those two months, you were out of luck.

We, also, had to contend with boarding school - the children left home at age 13 to board in a town 4 hours away. And, I joined a new organization called the Isolated Children's Parents' Association. Once again, a voluntary organization, with branches across Australia, that works tirelessly lobbying State and Federal Governments for equal access to education for isolated children. In the 80's, when our children were going to high school and University, the average cost for rural and remote families was \$10,000 per child per year. And, with the children leaving home at 13, you can see that the expenses quickly add up.

Then in 1987, 1988 and 1989 we had to contend with a particularly serious drought. The options were selling the sheep, but we were so far from markets that it really

wasn't cost effective; shooting the sheep; giving them away; or watching them die. And, at various times, we did all of these.

Being the gypsies we are, after 10 years it was time to move on. The kids had graduated from university and were not coming back to the property - like so many others. And, 26,000 acres seemed to be getting bigger and bigger. We were on the way to town one day, at the end of our best season and were remarking on how great the place looked. Almost simultaneously, we turned to each other and said, "We better get out of here!!" So, we sold and headed south to more reliable rain. And ended up in Victoria - from the virtual top of Australia to the bottom.

"Talgarno Park" became our new home. 1,800 acres of some of the best wool growing country in the world ... which is to say, country not much good for anything else. Australia, as I said before, not only has the least water of any inhabited continent, it also has by far the worst soil ... mainly because of its great age. But, we are right at the base of the Grampians Mountains in what is known as River Red Gum Country. A very beautiful location.

Hamilton, our town, was bigger than we were used to - 10,000 people - but it was very nice to have a supermarket that had fresh fruit and vegetables year round. Obviously, we were no longer in the Outback!! Although, we are now farther from town than ever: 65 kms ... and the trip has to be kept at a pretty sedate pace as it seems most of the kangaroos in Australia live between home and town - living in the middle of a National Park has many benefits, but a few drawbacks as well.

And so a new phase of our life started. With the kids out of the nest, I decided to redirect my voluntary efforts to organizations that were trying to get rural women more involved in the running of the businesses, onto Shire Councils, onto Boards and Committees and working towards improving the income and lifestyle of rural and remote families. And trying to lessen the harm that globalisation was having on their lives. And, ideally, to derive some positives from it. Like access to the Internet. We will have a chance to diversify and value add, and more efficiently market our wool, beef and crops, if we can access the same technology and services that our city cousins take for granted.

Shortly after we arrived in Victoria, I saw a brochure about government funding for telecentres. I knew nothing about computers or the Internet, but it was a free call number - so what the heck?? It was probably the most expensive free call I ever made.

A group of volunteers and I worked for two years on that project but we got our Telecentre. The first hurdle was the building. For a village of just 300 people, spare free buildings were hard to find. We eventually did, but it was in the wrong town. It was an old school house that we had to move, paint and prepare for its new life. And the men had a chance to volunteer this time. After two years of hard work, our telecentre was open for business. We employed a part-time Coordinator and, with the help of several women who donated their time, were able to keep the Centre open five days a week. We were all learning new skills. Several went onto permanent jobs on the basis of the work they had done for the Telecentre.

I attended the First International Conference for Women in Agriculture in Melbourne, Victoria in 1994. The Australian Women in Agriculture organization was an outcome of that Conference and a new group of dedicated women came together to donate their time to getting women more involved in the business side of the country life. Leadership programs were, and still are, very important. I don't know if it is the same in the cities - country women seem to be able to do anything, except believe in themselves as leaders - and I certainly count myself in that category!

In 1998, the United States hosted the 2nd International Conference for Women in Agriculture in Washington, D.C. I was very fortunate to be one of twenty women awarded travel bursaries by the Victorian-Government.

During conference, many countries had display stands to promote their best products. And, as a proud wool grower, I spent some of my time talking with and explaining the qualities of modern wool to the women as they passed. I was stunned to realize that most of these women had no idea of the wonderful qualities and versatility of wool. They had the 1950's image of wool as being prickly, bulky, expensive and difficult to clean. Modern, fine wool has none of these problems.

Upon returning home, a group of rural women created 'Wool Link Australia'. We wanted to take a trade mission back to the States to promote wool and explain its wonderful qualities. It has been difficult to get funding for this project because the industry has experienced abysmal prices over the past decade. And because, as usual, men in government still have a big problem with the idea that women, especially farm women, can accomplish anything in the business world. But, we are not giving up on the idea. Plus, it would be another way for rural women to diversify and value add. And, it could, just possibly, start new industries in areas that desperately need it.

I met Diana Abruzzi, the Australian WLN Focal Point, at a seminar in Melbourne and told her about our "Wool Link" project and our efforts to get rural women involved in the business world. She invited me to attend the APEC WLN meeting in Wellington, New Zealand last year. I did, and once again was the only Rural Representative from Australia.

In March, I attended the UN Commission on the Status of Women Preparatory Committee Meeting for Beijing +5 in New York. And, another dimension to the term "steep learning curve" was created!! I still haven't read through all the material ... a zillion pages, at least.

And, Beijing +5 has given me more information to ponder on, more projects to think about and more women throughout Australia to inform.

And, just a word on another new website and e-mail discussion group. As a result of the interest in Rural Issues at last year's WLN in New Zealand and the March and June Beijing +5 Special sessions, I submitted a proposal for funding for the "Asia Pacific Rural Women's Forum". I was awarded a small grant from our Federal Office of the Status of Women and the site will be launched in July. The address will be: <http://www.aprwf.org.au> I hope you will look it up and possibly have a chat.

I'll end here on a cautiously optimistic note. Enormous damage has been done to the

people, communities and environment of rural Australia (and from what I can gather, rural everywhere). Rural people must, in order to start to correct all this, see and understand the bigger picture and how they/we can successfully fit into it. And, rural women, especially, as a ridiculously underutilized resource, must seek and settle for nothing less than a far greater role in contributing to the best possible outcome. We simply must get citizens, governments and organizations like this one to recognize that non-metropolitan issues warrant a far higher priority in the future than they have in the past. It's starting to happen in Australia. I hope it will start to happen everywhere.

Thank you.

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