



LOVING LIFE: Deb Whitecross' move from Sydney to Buninyong has been a boon for disability services in Ballarat.
Picture: **Jeremy Bannister**

Move helps Deb to find her true calling

When Deb Whitecross decided she needed a tree change, it was Sydney's loss and Ballarat's gain, particularly for those in the community with a disability. Deb speaks to KAREN KEAST about her amazing life.

IT WAS a tree change that also prompted Deb Whitecross to change her career path.

Fifteen years ago, the single parent moved from Sydney to Buninyong, where her brother lived, to raise her three children.

With a background in running her own catering business and also in drafting, Deb was holding down three part-time jobs in Sydney to support her family when she decided to change direction and focus.

"I needed to make a better future for my family," she said.

"When I moved to Buninyong I met a lot of people in the health, welfare, disability and counselling area and they kept saying to me 'you should go and be a

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counsellor or be in social welfare'.

"At the time I didn't even know what that meant, because I had been in a different world."

At the age of 42, Deb decided to go back to university and study social welfare.

Leaving university at the age of 44, Deb's first job was as a case manager with Pinarc, looking after the needs of families affected by disability.

"I didn't know much about disabilities and it seemed like a fantastic opportunity; and it was," she said.

"It set my course for wanting to always work in this industry."

Deb then moved to the City of Ballarat, where she worked as a rural access worker for more than eight years.

Deb was initially one of four people working throughout the Grampians region as part of a pilot project and when it proved a success, more than 20 new

rural access workers were employed across the state.

Deb wrote two disability action plans for the City of Ballarat, worked with the community and disability service providers and, on a broader level, worked to improve state and federal legislation as the chair of an employment group.

It also took Deb six years to forge Australia's only council disability access directory for the City of Ballarat's website.

Born in Zambia, Deb moved to Australia with her parents when she was 18.

Her English parents had moved to Zambia so Deb's dad could pursue work as a mining engineer. He was later transferred to Melbourne.

Deb, who has also lived in France and New Guinea, now calls Australia and especially Ballarat home.

It's where she's raised her children, Sean, now 25, Carl, 22, and Isabella, 21, where her parents now live and where she met her husband, Greg, whom she married 10 years ago.

Deb recently launched her own consulting business, Deb Whitecross Enterprises, which specialises in helping organisations meet disability requirements and lead innovative change.

"The whole thing is about change management and about creating things that make for a much more inclusive community," she said.

Deb said there's lots of little things people can do to make life easier for people with disabilities, from restaurants featuring menus with large text to cater to those with visual impairments, to having some movies with captions at the cinema for those who are deaf.

Deb knows she's found her calling.

"I think fate just threw me this job. My birthday is actually the International Day of People with a Disability," she said.

"I think if people's attitudes changed in the whole community that everything would be so much easier for people with disabilities.

"They have got a tough gig," she said.

"Their whole life is a struggle and a fight to get what's rightfully theirs and it's something we all take for granted."