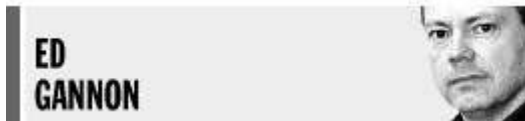




Herald Sun
 Wednesday 27/10/2010
 Page: 33
 Section: General News
 Region: Melbourne
 Circulation: 514,000
 Type: News Item
 Size: 167.89 sq.cms.
 Published: MTWTFSS-

Brief: AWARD_VIC
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Bush spirit is proof of noble hope



YOU'D think, what with drought, floods and government plans to send communities broke, that not much good happens in the country.

Well, you should have been in Ballarat on Saturday night.

It was there the annual Regional Achievement and Community Awards were announced and presented.

These are the "Australian of the Year" awards for country Victoria, with everyone from individuals to community groups and businesses honoured.

Story after story rolled out of amazing achievements and selfless acts.

Of people such as Michael Stott, of Kinglake West, a year 12 student who has single-handedly revived tennis in the fire-devastated district.

Or Mirboo North's Mark Uren, who gave up his job to co-ordinate the bushfire recovery in Gippsland after Black Saturday.

And Regional Achiever Award winner Doris Paton, of Morwell, who is doing everything she possibly can to improve opportunities for indigenous people through education.

Then there were the groups.

The Kyabram Ambulance Auxiliary which, after years of fund-raising and arm twisting, finally saw the town's new ambulance station opened this year.

The Awakenings Festival in Horsham, Australia's only regional disability arts festival. In 14 years it has grown to a five-day annual festival with 840 performers in 50 events attracting 10,500 visitors.

But the great story of the night was the Community Group of the Year, Wycheproof Vision.

Wycheproof is home to 700 people, 280km northwest of Melbourne, smack bang in the middle of grain country.

It is home to the world's smallest mountain, Mt Wycheproof, which towers a staggering 43m above the surrounding plains.

Until recently it had also been home

had also been home to a dwindling population and not much else.

That's when Wycheproof Vision, an all-encompassing community group, stepped in.

In the past few years it has launched the Rent-a-Farmhouse and Rent-a-Shop for a Dollar programs, which have seen about 30 new households attracted to the town.

And they have started the Great Grain Festival, reviving the King of the Mountain race.

Then came the Music on the Mount festival and the Mt Wycheproof Cup (which is on this Saturday).

This is a little town with a big heart.

The elation when they won the award was palpable. Those there from Wycheproof could barely contain their excitement.

But that was just a taste of things to come.

Getting home to Wycheproof at 2am, they hit the phones at 6am on Sunday to muster a crowd for a group photograph.

By 2pm nearly 200 residents had gathered for the picture that appears on the front of *The Weekly Times* today.

That's 200 people out of a population of 700 on a few hours' notice.

Proportionately, if you took that picture in Melbourne, more than a million people would have to turn up.

That single act, where a sizeable chunk of the town will move heaven and earth to mark the win, where they all feel part of the community, is what makes regional communities so special.

Ed Gannon is editor of *The Weekly Times* and a judge of the Regional Achievement and Community Awards



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