



Miranda

issues from the country
with Genevieve Barlow

Reap a creative dividend

In a nation that prides itself on work, profit and material gain, people can lose heart if they're not profit makers.

Let's face it, we all need a dollar to survive, but what's our worth when the dollars we acquire are few?

It's a big question for farming communities, after years of inadequate rain have cut their capacity to produce crops or livestock that once might have made them handsome or reasonable profits. What's next for them?

What might happen if they invested in imagination and creativity just as devoutly as they have invested in roads and cars and all the trappings of 21st-century living?

Might not they discover something just as worthy? A little soul? A lot of spirit perhaps?

If you think such concepts are too highfalutin and off-the-planet for farmers and country towns, then visit Moulamein.

Once the centre of rice growing and large pastoral holdings, the town of 500, 70km north of Swan Hill and at the cross roads to Barham, Deniliquin, Hay and Balranald, has sprouted an art group in its recent droughty bleakness.

Such is its appeal that an exhibition by that group filled the pub to overflowing with people about a year ago.

Farmers, their creative souls stirred, flocked like moths to a beacon.

One car load of travellers on their way to Mildura happened upon their art exhibition, pulled in, bought four



paintings and stayed the night.

All this so inspired its members that 12 months on, they've opened an art gallery, bought a coffee machine, run some barista courses alongside classes in life drawing, textural art, mosaics and cheese making.

Up the Hay road, farmer China Gibson, upon cleaning out his shed, caught the bug and made a sculpture at his front gate.

Barb Harris, 46, a sheep and cropping farmer and art group secretary, says people "just came out of the woodwork" when a few women — the group of 13 includes one bloke — decided 18 months ago to get together and sit on the left bank of the always flowing Edwards River and paint.

Most had no idea how but their need for something beyond the straitened circumstances of their lives was a force

too great to suppress.

"The basic agenda," says Barb, "is to lift people's spirits in the drought and keep them going out and participating."

What Moulamein has done by force of circumstance, and with funds from a group called Your Community Cares and its local Wakool Shire, is to turn to creativity and imagination.

It is, says Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery director Ian Tully, discovering

No paint, no gain: Barb Harris, hanging a painting in the Moulamein Art Gallery, helped start up an art group in the Sunraysia town.

the richer-than-gold value of investing in those intangible qualities.

He says Australian farmers are facing enormous challenges brought about by the changing climate, reduced water availability and the closure of agencies and industries.

He says creative industries could help, and he so believes in this potential that he's bringing together creative entrepreneurs for a half-day seminar to share how the arts can inspire farming communities to promote health and well-being — and perhaps turn a few dollars — in difficult times.

Among the entrepreneurs are Dr Ian Hunter, head of Britain's Littoral Arts Trust, who works with small farming towns, South Australian farmer James Darling, Clunes book entrepreneur Tess Brady, filmmaker and artist Malcolm McKinnon, whose projects in Victorian rural communities are winning attention, lolly shop entrepreneur Tim Hayes and Moulamein's Barb Harris.

The half-day seminar on November 25 costs \$40.

Get along and stir your imagination. Details, ph: (03) 5036 2430.

Genevieve

No excuses for not keeping in touch

Dear Miranda,

Nowadays many people lead busy and insular lives, and it has meant the lack of contact between city and country cousins.

For me, a way of overcoming this has been to send regular emails of our rural happenings.

Our city cousins and friends seem to think our life interesting and different, and they contact me to be put on my email list.

We own a dairy farming enterprise, so of course there are always stories to tell of calves and cows and things that happen.

I try not to grizzle with what goes on, as so many people in society are far worse off.

But I find townsfolk wonder how we are coping with the 10-year drought,

water issues, milk prices, and whether rain has fallen. City cousins are also interested in our community involvement, and the projects and events that we help organise. They are amazed at the people we know, the contacts we have and the achievements our community groups make.

The emails I write often help me reflect on how lucky we are to live in a small rural community, how interesting and stimulating our choice of life has been, and how resilient we have become through difficult circumstances.

Family and friends are all important and whether they are next door, or away in the big smoke, nowadays there is no excuse for not keeping in contact and having an understanding of one another's lives. Communication

narrows the gulf between city and country.

Denise Morrison, Cohuna

Voting age

Dear Miranda,

It was with keen interest I read your column with regard to the lowering of the voting age in Australia, "Youth debate gets my vote", (WT, September 30).

As with any 'hot topic', there are of course, pros and cons.

Chronological age is possibly not the only yardstick that can be used.

No matter what age is selected, (sometimes it makes you wonder whether they pull it out of a hat!), you can have 20 people the same age with varying levels of maturity.

So how do we decide what is the

optimum age for anything?

Girls generally mature at an earlier age than boys, but this doesn't mean there aren't some boys more mature at the same age compared to some girls.

Parents are faced with the decision of when to send their children to school based on age.

At least in this instance, they can make an informed decision on whether their child is 'ready' or not.

Is this going to be the case if the voting age is lowered to 16?

We must question the reasoning, or is there a motive for even entertaining the thought of lowering the voting age?

We are told that boys' frontal lobes reach full maturity around the age of 25, marking the cognitive maturity associated with adulthood.

We must ask ourselves whether this

needs to be given consideration before any decision is made to lower the voting age.

Is this merely a ploy to coerce teenagers to vote for a particular party while they are young and impressionable and open to new ideas?

Or am I just being cynical?

Deirdre Collins, Mt Gambier, SA.

Country bliss

Dear Miranda,

I think how lucky we are that our kids can play out in the paddocks, walk down the road to grandma's alone or poke around the creek. If we were in the city, I think I would be scared to let them play in the front yard alone.

Sure we are doing it tough, but country life has so many advantages.

Deborah Moor, Barmah.

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Summer's all about the thrill of the grill



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The winner will be selected at HWT, 40 City Rd, Southbank and the name will be published on November 25.

Details: www.bunnings.com.au

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