

The power of pink

Western Australian farmers Jen and Rob Warburton turned their everlasting flower crop into a force for good with an inspirational fundraiser.

BY KIRSTY MCKENZIE, PHOTOGRAPHY DIC LIEW



THESE PAGES: Jen (pictured above right with husband Rob) insists he is the real hero of her fundraising story, which involved many volunteers.

The adage that when the going gets tough, the tough get going could have been coined for Western Australian sheep and grain farmers Jennifer (Jen) and Rob Warburton. As newlyweds in 2000 they were challenged by a double whammy of Jen’s diagnosis and setbacks with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and Rob’s diagnosis and treatment for Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

While both could have been forgiven for crawling under the doona and remaining there forever, they took it in their stride, enduring treatments, which involved arduous 600-kilometre round trips to Perth from their farm near Kojonup in WA’s Great Southern region. Family rallied and helped with seeding while Rob underwent chemotherapy and he was lucky to emerge from a tough six months of treatment with his health regained. Then the couple faced another set of challenges as they faced the rigours of IVF and finally welcomed daughters Lucinda, who is now 19 and Zara, 15, into the world. As if that weren’t enough to deal with, last year Jen was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer and underwent surgery and chemo, which only ended in February this year. In the middle of all this, Jen still deals with MS with regular medical and physiotherapy appointments, and a gradual decline in her mobility, which means that she now needs a Zimmer frame to walk and relies on Rob’s constant presence if she has to walk unaided.

Jen and Rob live on Korellup, where they run sheep and grow wheat, barley, canola and, since 2011, have incorporated everlastings into their wheat crop rotation as part of a Land Care strategy. While Jen dismisses the diversification as something to keep her busy because she isn’t fond of housework, the fact is that the flower seed business has become a welcome adjunct to their business, supplementing cash flow between the main earnings from shearing and harvest.

Jen grew up on a sheep and wheat property at Broomehill, studied ag science in Perth and worked for the Department of Agriculture in Katanning after graduating. She moved to Kojonup and a job with Landcare Australia in 1998 and met Rob through polocrosse. “Everlastings are part of the Western Australian spring wildflower display and through my job I met a flower picker,” she explains. “He gave me a bag of raw seeds and suggested I try growing them. It turned out quite successfully, so Rob and I developed the idea of growing them for seed commercially. Now that I look back on it, I was pretty naïve as I just thought the tiny packets you buy in shops weren’t enough for a proper display, so we’d sell 10-gram packs.”





THESE PAGES: Catering for the event, which was held in the Warburtons' shearing shed, involved camp ovens and Perth caterer Sophie Budd.



So Lucinda's Everlastings was launched using supermarket-sourced, zip-lock bags with homemade stickers for labels and kitty litter to make the seeds easier to spread. "Amazingly enough, it was a success, so we decided to expand a bit," Jen recalls. "Because of the MS, I can't walk too much, so by the time we reached a hectare, everything had to become mechanical. Rob found an old seeder in a shed and fixed it up so I use it for planting. They're not hard to grow, provided you get on top of the weeds before you sow them."

These days, Jen and Rob have five hectares planted to the prolific pink-blooming plants and their business is mainly skewed towards growing for seed. "Cut flowers are a lot of work," Jen explains. "And I've had to face the fact that I am not up to it physically anymore. I'm happy if florists want to come down and pick themselves, but I've scaled back my involvement in the flower side of the business."

Meanwhile, Jen added education qualifications to her CV and enjoyed a decade as a relief teacher, until she reluctantly had to concede the job involved too much standing and walking

and gave up her registration this year. But that doesn't mean she's taking a well-earned break, as this spring, Jen hit on the idea of holding a long-table lunch in the farm's shearing shed to raise funds for Breast Cancer Care WA.

"I'd held a fundraiser in the shed to raise money for MS research a few years ago," Jen explains. "So I thought it would be a good opportunity to use the paddocks full of pink as an excuse for another lunch. I really should have asked my family before I went ahead and announced I was doing this, as it turns out that a lot of the work fell to them. My parents and brother came and helped out before and after, and I had about 20 volunteers on the day, serving a preparing the lunch and drinks. Susan Walsh, a friend from Perth also jumped on board and it was amazing how many local people and businesses offered support in the form of prizes for the raffles and auction."

Jen had used Perth caterer Sophie Budd for the previous fundraiser and she stepped up once again, providing her services at low cost. She also persuaded two other chef friends to help out on the day and collectively they prepared a sit-down





THESE PAGES: The main course of beef brisket was cooked in a drum smoker modified by Rob for the event.

lunch for 150 paying guests. Rob changed into his action man mode and converted a drum into a smoker for the beef brisket, incorporating a pot-belly stove to keep the temperature constant. Various family members stepped in helping with everything from flower arrangement, and planter boxes and a hanging framework to create a ceiling of everlastings from timber pallets. Rob worked tirelessly making the shearing shed safe as a venue, even installing new steps the day before the event. There's always a hitch and the Warburtons hit theirs with a day-long power outage, but generators saved the day in the kitchen, and candles made up for the lack of electric light.

None of this was apparent to the guests, who enthusiastically turned up, lined up to have their photos taken in an Insta-worthy setting of a pink lounge in the middle of the pink paddock, and supported the day's extra fundraising activities with enthusiasm. At day's end, Jen had raised a truly astonishing figure of more than \$30,000, though she is quick to deflect any praise for her efforts.

"Rob's the hero of this story," she says. "He's the one who supports me every step of the way. He's the one who remodelled the shearing shed and modified the smoker to maintain an even temperature. He's the one who rallied all the family to help us out. I may have had the bright idea, but he's the one who made it happen. Like everything in my life, I couldn't do it without him." AC

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