

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE4639

Tredwell, Robyn

(1950 - 2012)

Born 1 January, 1950, Muwillumbah New South Wales Australia

Died 26 September, 2012, Derby Western Australia Australia

Occupation Environmentalist, Farmer, Nurse

Summary

Robyn Tredwell was winner of the ABC Australian Rural Women of the Year Award in 1995.

Details

Robyn Tredwell, the 1995 winner of the ABC Australian Rural Woman of the year Award, is New South Wales born, Queensland farm-raised, a trained nurse, well travelled and very, very patient. She says that the profit imperative has never driven her as a farmer, which is probably just as well given the state of the property she manages just outside Derby, Western Australia, *Birdwood Downs*, when she took on the job in the early 1980s. Whatever the property needed at that time, it was not someone in a hurry with an eye for a quick dollar!

Born in 1950 in the northern rivers district of New South Wales, Robyn's journey to *Birdwood Downs* was a circuitous one that went via Brisbane, Great Britain, Saudi Arabia, Tibet and the Amazon River. A nurse who grew up around farms and farming people in south eastern Queensland, Robyn was always interested in the stories of the world beyond Nambour. She took her nursing training with her overseas and, through the course of two decades, developed an interest in population health, well before it became an academic discipline. With an interest in prevention rather than cure, she has worked to reduce the impact of cultural stress on the health of individuals and has spent a lifetime gathering knowledge about holistic healing. An interest in ethnobotany led her to the view that approaches to land care needed to be similarly holistic.

By the time she got to *Birdwood Downs* the land had been managed on environmentally sustainable principals for five years. The station was land especially excised by the Western Australian Lands department for the purposes of encouraging experimental work in pasture regenerations and land care protection in the Kimberley region. Special conditions over the lease to the property offered willing investors the opportunity of a freehold title if half the property could be planted with improved pasture grasses and legumes and boundary fenced within a certain time period. The Institute of Ecotechnics, with whom Robyn had been involved for some time, decided to invest in the project in 1978. She arrived in 1984 and has been there ever since.

What she and her staff and predecessors on the property have achieved is truly remarkable. The 1900 hectare station located in the coastal ecosystem of the Kimberley region where the soils are very low in nutrients. Overgrazing with sheep and cattle and over burning made top soil vulnerable to erosion. The land was degraded to such an extent it could no longer be profitably farmed. Over the years Robyn has pioneered techniques that have seen the land successfully regenerated. Ecological methods of improving degraded lands using stock management, weed control and planting improved grasses have turned dead land into beautiful paddocks with groves of native trees, spectacular boab and eucalyptus that supports both horses and cattle. *Birdwood Downs* serves as a model for sustainable management of the tropical savannah.

There is hard science behind the land care program that the team at Birdwood Downs have implemented, which includes a commitment to experimentation and asking 'what if?' Patience and persistence with intensive programs of land clearance, replanting, maintenance and the ecological management of horses and cattle have seen results that the staff now pass on as training programs for students at Derby Institute of TAFE.

However, what Robyn brings to the program that sets it apart is her belief that sustainable properties can only be created in partnership with sustainable communities. On remote properties, maintaining this sense of community can be as challenging as maintaining the land. 'On this property,' she says, 'we use management, science and artistic expression to create sustainability'. She has worked very hard to create a space where cultural and cross-cultural communication can take place. A shady grove of mahogany trees creates a natural outdoor meeting place while a huge purpose built shed creates theatrical opportunities. Robyn has run arts workshop programs with indigenous and overseas artists, and has hosted many conferences and land council meetings. The *Crow and Cockatoo Theatre Company* has been running from the property for over thirty years making it, quite possibly, the oldest theatre company in the Kimberley.

Robyn was surprised to discover she had been nominated for the ABC Radio Rural Woman of the Year Award, and was even more surprised when she won the national award in 1995. She has always believed the award to be special to the region, not just to the women who lived there. 'The early 1990s were such hard times,' she said, 'it was so important for the Kimberley region to get some focus.' She was still in a frame of mind which made it difficult for her to understand 'women's issues' as something separate from rural and regional issues. Nevertheless, she believed the award to be very important as a mechanism for encouraging women to step forward, thus creating better balance in decision making. It was particularly important for Aboriginal women to see their own leadership potential.

Like all other award winners, Robyn enjoyed the 'Canberra Experience' enormously. Luxury in a five star hotel came as a pleasant change from the life she normally lived, but it was enjoying the company of other women that she appreciated the most. She came to understand that winning the award wasn't the point of the award, admiring the achievements of *all* rural and regional women was. The ABC Radio Australian Rural Woman of the year was there to represent the diversity of Australian rural women, 'an idea of rural womanhood.' She was happy to be that representative.

In 2011, Robyn Tredwell is Project Director of the *Birdwood Downs* Institute of Ecotechnics Tropical Savannah project. She is still out there, demonstrating how even the most degraded properties can be brought back to life through the investment of time and a commitment to living in balance with the environment. 'To create successful communities', she says, we need to care for people and the environment, and create good management structures.' Everything else worth waiting for will follow.

Robyn Tredwell passed away in September 2012 following a battle with Brain cancer. She is survived by a son and her husband.

Events

1995 - 1995

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Website of the Birdwood Downs Company, 2011,

<http://www.birdwooddowns.com/>

Article

Robyn Tredwell, Hutchens, Brendan, 2004,

<http://www.abc.net.au/gnt/people/Transcripts/s1204476.htm>

Waste Not, Want Not, Franklyn, Patrick, 2006,

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/home-lifestyle/waste-not-want-not/2006/06/08/1149359875025.html>

Conference Paper

International Indicators of Good Health Practice for Remote Areas, Tredwell, Robyn, 1997,

http://nrha.ruralhealth.org.au/conferences/docs/PAPERS/4_ROBTRE.pdf

Resource Section

1995 National Winner, ABC Radio, 1997,

<http://www.abc.net.au/rural/rwoty/previous95.htm>

Site Exhibition

Brilliant Ideas and Huge Visions: ABC Radio Australian Rural Women of the Year - 1994-1997, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2011,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/rwya/rwya-home.html>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Robyn Tredwell interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Rural Women of the Year Award oral history project \[sound recording\]](#)

Author Details

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