

Suncorp's Susie loves the land

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WHILE some bankers may blanch at the idea of an expensive shoe sliding into wet cultivation or even a fresh cowpat, such close encounters hold no fears for Dalby based Suncorp Agribusiness Manager Susan Sullivan.

A country girl through and through, Susan - better known to most people as Susie - insists the ideal place to meet country clients and learn about their needs is on their home properties, and if that involves the odd shoe soiling accident, so much the better.

Although having worked for Suncorp for five years, and two years before that in the graduate program of Grainco, Susie's skills and experience go far beyond the office trappings of a computer and telephone. As the fourth generation of the noted McConnel grazing family of Mt Brisbane Station, Esk, Susie has the DNA of her forebears that copes easily with most of the perils that life on the land can throw at her - and the clients she cherishes and helps.

The only girl in a family that also includes four brothers, Rob, Don, Ian and Bruce, plus her parents John and Carli, Susie adapted to practical rural skills and livestock handling at an early age and still remains closely involved with the family's Mt Brisbane Droughtmaster stud on the 4,500 hectare home property not far from Somerset Dam. It is this thorough bush backgrounding that has equipped Susie well for her other life as a cattle judge, frequent guest speaker and



A successful and dynamic agribusiness manager for Suncorp, Susie Sullivan likes to keep close links with her bush origins by visiting some of her Droughtmaster friends on the Mt Brisbane stud of her parents John and Carli McConnel at Esk.

demonstrator at youth camps and training courses conducted by various beef cattle breed societies and industry groups speaking on a range of topics from beef cattle selection through to obtaining finance.

After early primary education at Somerset Dam state school to grade 5, Susie went to Toowoomba Prep for two years before her high school years at Glennie in Toowoomba.

After a fleeting attempt at a science course which didn't suit her, Susie contracted glandular fever and spent a year at home recuperating and joining in the practical work around the station.

She then completed a Bachelor of Business Agribusiness at the University of Queensland Gatton Campus and is currently undertaking a graduate diploma course in applied finance and investment.

Highlights of her University years include being awarded a SE Qld UGA Bursary, winning an industry sponsored grain trading competition and during these years being named Queensland Simmental Young Ambassador which involved undertaking a beef study tour of New Zealand.

Other overseas travel in these years included a final year research trip to Shanghai, China to undertake research into the importing of Canola on behalf of Grainco.

Susie was a comparatively late starter in cattle young judging, only joining the show circuit at 16. Always being keen on stud cattle she plucked up the courage to break in one stud bull and 4 led steers which she proudly showed on the local show circuit.

Support from her parents, particularly John, increased as the small showing increased their haul of ribbons.

She was soon well and truly infected with the showing and judging bug, and has since been invited to judge most regional shows in SE Queensland as far afield as Jandowae, Maryborough and Stanthorpe. She has judged at Toowoomba Royal Show and judged the Piedmontese breed at Brisbane Royal three years ago. She remains the youngest person to be appointed to the senior judging panel of the Droughtmaster breed.

Her speaking engagements have included an "Applying for Finance" presentation at the first Roma Young Beef Producers Forum in 2005 and the Droughtmaster Youth Leadership & Development Course in Emerald in June this year. She continues to get invitations to judge at regional shows and to speak on judging skills and cattle preparation at

beef cattle youth camps.

Backed by this instinctive and acquired nous about needs of rural people and circumstances, Susie considers the first essential in servicing a client is to visit them on the home property and walk around a bit. With a client spread covering most of the local Dalby area out to Taroom and Meandarra, Susie's principal clients are grain and cotton producers plus a sprinkling of livestock producers.

"People are far more open in their communication when you stand with them on their own soil and are more ready to tell you what they want and need," Susie said. "We can best help people if they have a clear understanding of what they want to do in a business and if they continue to keep communication channels open through the whole process, not

just until finance is approved." In her own client area, Susie is sharing the enthusiasm of the best winter in the seven years she has been with Suncorp and Grainco, so things look bright for that segment of farming.

A familiar figure around country events, the brown haired, green eyed 28-year-old of medium slender stature gives great credit to her parents John and Carli for encouraging her and her brothers to achieve, but without pushing them in any particular direction.

"We were all taught to seek guidance when necessary but essentially to make our own decisions," she said.

In May this year Susie married Luke Sullivan, an agronomist with Dalby Rural Supplies, further cementing her close links with the land and its people.

Family has home turf at heart

JUSTIFIABLY proud of her historic links with one of the oldest settled properties in the Brisbane Valley, Susie Sullivan has the ability to blend that heartfelt land attachment with a restless and probing quest for innovation and improvement.

That's why she puts such priority on face to face communication with clients on their home turf, a business approach her own family has always favoured.

Even a brief visit to Mt Brisbane becomes an earthy introduction to the practical side of life on the land. A stocky bearded figure with a no nonsense way of putting things, John McConnel has hidden side of intellect and science when it comes to cattle productivity.

By his own admission he is a "carcase contest junkie" a comment linked to the family's numerous major wins in prime steer and carcase competitions.

His wife Carli is cast in the same 'science with practice' mould, an organisational dynamo and director of the Droughtmaster Breeders Society, she can call a spade a spade when necessary,

yet blends easily into the cocktail set when the occasion arises.

First introduction to Mt Brisbane may be the drumming throat sound and pecking beak of a pet emu. The station's rambling wooden homestead and numerous out buildings are reminders of the days when many more people were employed on local cattle stations, when four wheel drives were unknown and horses reigned supreme.

Mt Brisbane originally was settled by the Bigge brothers in 1842. In 1893 the McConnel family, headed by Susie's great grandfather, were appointed managers and later partners and finally bought the property in 1910.

John and Carli McConnel founded their Droughtmaster stud in the 1970s by selecting quality stud females with good quality bull calves at foot. With the dispersal of Kengoon stud at Kalbar they bought a double deck of females to kick start the stud program.

The Droughtmaster stud and commercial cattle on Mt Brisbane have been so successful that none have had to be dipped for 30 years and are naturally resistant to ticks and buffalo fly.