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HOW KARITANE IS CHANGING LIVES FOR FIRST NATIONS PARENTS IN THE MANNING VALLEY

As the nation celebrates NAIDOC Week, the Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation and Karitane wanted to share the story of how the Volunteer Family Connect (VFC) program helped one local Indigenous parent, and how you too can contact them for help – or to become a volunteer.

It was shortly after the birth of her second child that Sally* was approached by an old friend with a simple yet critical question:

How are you?

It had certainly been an eventful few years for Sally.

She had left her corporate job to live her and her husband's long-held dream of working full-time on their farm and starting a family, with their first-born due in February 2020.

Sally was well advanced in her pregnancy when the fires came raging through the Manning Valley in November 2019, their home and animals surviving the blaze, but still devastating the property. Three months later, Sally's baby was due and the floods came, with water levels rising to the point she was cut off from any hope of medical assistance. Fortunately her daughter arrived late but the stress had left its mark.

A little over a year later, in March 2021, what Sally calls "the big floods" came – and this time, Sally not only had a one-year-old daughter and a property to worry about, she was eight months pregnant.

All this while dealing with the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic – oh, and a mouse plague thrown in for good measure.

So. How are you?

"I was struggling but I didn't want to admit I was struggling," Sally said.

"There's people that need more help than me."

Thankfully, the friend who asked just happened to be Sue Martin, Karitane's VFC coordinator.

"For parents of young children who are feeling overwhelmed or isolated, VFC provides a community-driven, research-based home-visiting program that mobilises volunteers to offer support," explained Jennifer Leslie, Chair of the Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation.

"In the Manning area, Karitane's VFC is dedicated to supporting First Nations parents."

Parents like Sally.

"I didn't know what I was going to do, we were trying to rebuild our property," Sally said.

“I felt so alone trying to get the kids into town to do the shopping, see the doctors.

Soon after Sally confided in Sue, she was matched with a volunteer named Ann*.

“Ann was fantastic. She’s Indigenous too, so that’s great,” Sally said.

“She helped my daughter to connect with her culture. It was so wonderful, Ann brought native fruit and introduced my daughter to lilly pillies as bush tucker – now my daughter recognises them and we go out together to pick them and make jam.”

But what Sally perhaps found most invaluable were the everyday things.

“Before Ann came along, I had bad anxiety, I wasn’t going into town. But the program made me feel stronger as a new mum – more independent.

“And it helped not just myself but my family. It let my husband get out and do the farming when he had previously been helping me.

“It was immeasurable assistance.”

Ms Leslie said that stories like Sally’s were exactly why the Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation had funded Karitane’s VFC in the Manning Valley.

“I know first-hand that parenting is one of the most rewarding and amazing experiences a person can have, but it can also be lonely and overwhelming, especially for people in regional and rural settings,” Ms Leslie said.

“Karitane’s evidence-based approach and their genuine care and commitment to the Manning Valley community made it an easy decision to grant \$112,000 in December 2021 to help them set up to do this vital work in the area, helping people like Sally.

“We love to hear good news stories like Sally’s – this is exactly why the Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation was established and why we’re so proud to partner with Karitane.”

Sally was so grateful for the help and support she received she has found herself spreading the word.

“Last week we went to the beach and I could hear an Indigenous mum talking to another lady and she was struggling to find time for herself,” she said.

“So I told her about the program.

“There are probably a lot of people out there that don’t know about it and it’s such a wonderful service. If people are struggling, thinking they have to do it themselves – especially if they don’t have the family support – they really should reach out, people want to help.”

With the service having trained 12 volunteers to date, Karitane are in the process of taking on more volunteers and are encouraging people who live locally to get in contact. Training and ongoing support for VFC volunteers is provided to ensure they are appropriately skilled, trained, caring, experienced, respectful and maintain confidentiality.

Ms Martin said, “The support provided by our wonderful VFC volunteers is invaluable in helping parents adjust to a new baby, cope with multiple children, overcome feelings of isolation and frustration, or help with other factors that can overwhelm mums, dads and carers.”

To become a VFC volunteer or to receive free support with children from birth to five years, please contact Sue Martin (Volunteer Family Connect Coordinator) on sue.martin1@health.nsw.gov.au or 0438 576 385.

*Sally and Ann’s names have been changed for anonymity