

Sobering truth

Shanna Whan is helping the bush wake up to a drinking problem that has long been ignored.

STORY VIRGINIA TAPSCOTT PHOTOS TIM WHAN

“Shan, it’s Mick here ... I thought I was going to die last night.” It’s early in the morning but Shanna Whan has flung a hand out of bed and picked up her smartphone on the bedside table. There are a few names she will answer a call from at any hour and Mick is one of them. She knows it’s day five off the grog for Mick and that he’s probably just come through the worst of his withdrawals. He tells her that during the night his kidneys felt like they were about to pack it in. The cramps were paralysing. Shanna understands because she has been in that very place. What follows is one of many conversations Mick will have with Shanna that will help him stay sober.

Shanna radiates good health and doesn’t look like someone who was once an alcoholic. An energetic blonde in her mid-40s, she volunteers most of her time fearlessly addressing a problem that very few people want to talk about publicly – alcoholism. Both as a guest speaker and from the quiet of her home office in Narrabri, in north-western New South Wales, Shanna is helping hundreds of people get and stay sober through a unique online support network she created in 2018 called Sober in the Country (SITC). The Facebook page has thousands of followers. “When I first got sober I knew that in time I’d want to help other people; I knew that without a doubt,” Shanna says. “So I started by running an anonymous support meeting in Narrabri, but the whole premise of such a group is anonymity, so that people feel safe to talk. You bring what was originally a city-based model to the country, where by design we don’t have anonymity, and it just doesn’t work as well. So Sober in the Country was my way of thinking outside the square and using technology to reach rural peers to achieve the same thing.”

In less than six months, nearly 200 rural people have requested access to her private support group. They are from a diverse range of rural and agricultural backgrounds but are united by a common need for a safe place to converse and connect with others who are struggling with their relationship with alcohol. Members use their shared experience to help each other while Shanna moderates the page and introduces newcomers. On the public SITC page Shanna uses her journalism and photography skills to share powerful images and inspirational stories from others who are sober. “A lot of people come looking for a way to cut back and moderate; most of them stay and realise they want

to stop drinking completely,” she says. “The people best equipped to help other people are those who have lived it.”

Shanna’s alcohol abuse began as a coping mechanism following traumatic events in her teenage years. Her unhealthy drinking patterns escalated, and after struggling with infertility she reached a point of despair in 2014. “I ended up in emergency. I think I had fallen down some stairs during a blackout,” she says. “When I woke up, the final straw was hearing my husband say to me that he had gone from dreading the phone call from the police or ambulance to say that I was dead, to wondering if that was the only way out. He had never seen a person in so much pain. And I’d never seen the man I love in so much pain. A week later, I got in my car and made a six-hour round trip to meet with a recovered alcoholic and it was the simple process of connecting and identifying with somebody else that changed my life. This would become the foundation upon which SITC was established.”

With sunlight spilling across her desk and lush green leaves crowding out the windows of the home she shares with her husband, Tim, and blue cattle dog Fleabag, it’s hard to imagine the darkness of a few years earlier. Shanna wants as many people as possible to know that there is another way to live that doesn’t involve alcohol. Her efforts saw her become a finalist in the New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory AgriFutures Rural Woman of the Year in 2018 and she’s also now the rural ambassador for national alcohol awareness charity Hello Sunday Morning. “The sad thing is there is nothing special about me. My story is actually very common; it’s just not talked about,” she says.

Stigma and stereotypes prevent important conversations for high-functioning alcoholics and what Shanna calls “casual alcoholism”. She finds her work is often met with resistance and, at times, discomfort. “We are dismissed by society and even by health professionals as having a problem, because most people are immersed in the drinking culture themselves,” Shanna says. “Superficially our lives might look fine but we’re actually maintaining a chronic, habitual abuse of alcohol in the background. If it’s affecting relationships, finances, work, health, productivity or parenting, and if you can’t cut back, well, then it’s a problem. You can still be an alcoholic and be high-functioning and educated. It doesn’t necessarily mean you’re a homeless bloke in the gutter.”

>

Founder of Sober in the Country, Shanna Whan, from Narrabri, NSW.



Shanna's mission has been fuelled by some alarming statistics. Clare Ross from the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) points out that people in rural areas are more likely to be heavier drinkers. "We know that the risk of harm increases linearly with remoteness – therefore regional, rural and remote communities experience disproportionate levels of alcohol harm," she says. "Young people are drinking less alcohol than generations before them, yet they are still drinking at exceptionally risky levels. Young people in rural Australia are also more likely to drink at riskier levels than their city counterparts." FARE suggests there is no safe level of alcohol consumption because it is a group 1 carcinogen.

Mick, a farmer from Bellata in north-western New South Wales, has been sober for 18 months. He has become part of a classic ripple effect and is now receiving calls from mates and acquaintances who want to talk about cutting back. If it weren't for Shanna, he's not sure where he would be today. "I come from a long line of drinkers and a couple of beers after work gradually turned into 10 beers and half a bottle of rum every day," Mick says. "It took my wife putting the kids in the car and leaving to make me realise that I had to stop. And as I watched the car disappear down the driveway I didn't know of anyone else to ring but Shan. I can't speak highly enough of her."

The transformation Mick has undergone in both his physical and mental health is astounding. "Mentally, I'm in a much better spot," he says. "And when I get home from work now it's nothing to go for a bike ride with the kids, play cricket or kick the footy." He no longer suffers from internal pains and poor circulation.

The challenges for Mick in quitting were as much social as they were physical. Becoming a non-drinker had a distinct isolating effect. "People find it confronting," Mick says. "I stopped getting invited to barbecues and people would cross to the other side of the street if they saw me. I've found out who my real mates are – they'll buy me a soda water in a shout or have a soft drink in the esky for me after footy training."

Shanna recently marked four years of sobriety. Since her turning point in early 2015 she hasn't had the desire or need for alcohol. To celebrate a day she never thought she'd see, she invited some of her sober mates, including Mick, to go hiking in a nearby national park.

"People are so ready for this," she says. "This conversation is desperately overdue. So I decided to be the one to take it from the shadows and into the light."

Sober in the Country 0487 685 475
www.soberinthecountry.com.au



Shanna with Ugly Betty on a friend's property between Narrabri and Wee Waa.

Field proven
irrigation power



John Deere irrigation engines know their way around a field. With more than 80 years of proven performance under our belt, you can depend on a John Deere for uninterrupted performance, legendary durability and unbeatable fuel economy. For an engine that's not afraid of a hard day's work, make your next engine a John Deere.



For more information contact
Power Equipment Pty Ltd
email: info@powerequipment.com.au
web: www.powerequipment.com.au
phone: 1800 069 469

There's nothing tougher.

As America's best-selling truck for 42 years, Ford F-Series helps you finish jobs others won't even start. From F-150 to F-450, with best-in-class towing capability and combined with the most advanced safety features, the 2019 F-Series toughness is legendary.



BOOK YOUR
TEST DRIVE
TODAY

1800 737 367
performax.com.au

Australia's American Truck Specialist

Ford F-SERIES	Nissan TITAN	Toyota TUNDRA	GMC SIERRA	Chevrolet SILVERADO
------------------	-----------------	------------------	---------------	------------------------

There's a Performax Dealer near you > QLD • NSW • VIC • WA • TAS