

Lifelong learning approach drives economic development in Gwydir Shire.

Written by Leone Wheeler



Recently I visited Gwydir Shire and was hosted by Max Eastcott, CEO of Gwydir Shire, which enabled me to get a first-hand experience of a rural learning region in action.

One of the first questions Max Eastcott, the CEO of Gwydir Shire, thinks about is:

What makes an attractive community so that people want to come, live, and raise their families in the Shire?

The answer to this question for Max influences the role of the Council that he leads and means that the focus is on more than the traditional roles of 'roads, rates, and rubbish'. In fact, every aspect of economic development in the Shire is viewed through the lens of learning. This is one of the factors that led to the creation of the Gwydir Learning Region in 2003 (see Mitchell, 2006). Rick Hutton, CEO of Gwydir Learning Region reinforced that the point of difference between Gwydir and other local councils is this lifelong learning approach.

Sport

Sport has always played a vital role in making social connections and providing inclusion in rural communities. My visit coincided with a visit by the Australian Women's 7 Rugby Union team! The women stayed at the Living Classroom in Bingara, also visiting Warialda and Moree as part of their training leading up to the Tokyo Olympics, set to start this July.

The team very generously visited and inspired local school children and trained with local teams. I enjoyed watching the Women's 7 Team train with local women at the Gwydir Oval and the country hospitality. (Read more at <https://www.bingara.com.au/australian-womens-7s-rugby-union-visit/>).



Leone and Max enjoying country hospitality at a rugby training session.

The Living Classroom



Agriculture is a primary driver of the Gwydir economy and so it is appropriate that an agricultural trade training centre, The Living Classroom, has also been established and is going from strength to strength. I really enjoyed visiting this centre. The Centre includes a hostel so students from the urban areas can visit and learn about agriculture. I learnt that the olive grove that you see as you drive in was rescued and the olives will be used to teach people how to press olives; a

horticulture centre propagating native plants; a cattle club to teach young people how to care for their animals, and a community kitchen garden. I was most interested in the [Carbon Farm](#), a collaborative venture between the Shire and local farmers, and tests different ideas to capture carbon. In the future there will be experiments in growing indigenous grasses and it is hoped to add this to local wheat production. The Centre is testing different ideas to do with what is termed 'The Circular Economy' and thus contributing to a sustainable economic future for the Shire.

Automotive Trade Training Centre -

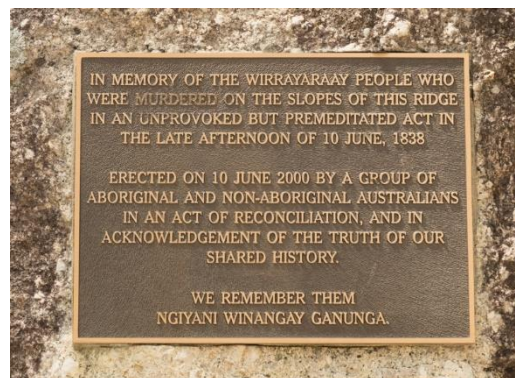
The Peter Cuskelly Centre is the Automotive Trade Training Centre, one of three trade training centres funded in 2009, is attached to Warialda High School. Courses include welding, automotive and a driver training course. Students can work towards units of competency in a Certificate II in Engineering. The welding equipment is very impressive!



Max Eastcott and TAFE Teacher – Kingsley Grills at the Automotive Centre

The Myall Creek Memorial

A visit to a memorial of a site of the murder of 28 unarmed Aboriginal men, women and children on June 10, 1838 at Myall Creek Station was very moving. A court case followed, and it was the first time in Australian history that white men were tried for crimes against Aborigines. Seven men were hanged for their part in the crime. Friends of Myall Creek, the Shire Council and local indigenous communities cooperated to build this monument [Read more.](#)



Recognition of the Role of Country Women

100 years of the Country Women's Association (CWA) in New South Wales (NSW) was celebrated in Bingara early in January 2021. It is with pride that Grace Emily Munro, the founder, and the first president of the CWA in 1922 came from Bingara. The CWA advances the rights and equity of women, families, and communities, through advocacy and empowerment, especially for those living in regional, rural, and remote Australia. [Read more.](#)



The Arts

The Roxy Theatre continues to be amazing and the story worth repeating. Three migrants of Greek heritage developed the theatre in 1936 and it provided a range of entertainment for the locals until it went out of business in 1958. For the next 40 years, apart from the occasional film screening and other events, it lay dormant. The Council bought the facility in 1999, and with the help of partners, including a TAFE College set about restoring the beautiful Art Deco theatre. The young people who worked on that restoration all found employment and some of these young people set up their own businesses and stayed on in the Shire. A hospitality trade training centre was also established but lately has been affected by COVID which has meant currently the facility is closed. However, not for long as plans are afoot to open again [Read more.](#)

You can discover the stories, culture, history, and heritage of three locations within the Gwydir Shire – the towns of Warialda and Bingara and information about Myall Creek through soundtrails (for more information visit soundtrails.com.au).

There is much more I could write about, so I am pleased that ALCN through PASCAL's Rural and Urban Learning Initiative (a PASCAL Learning City Network (LCN)) you are able to hear more about Gwydir and other international rural communities. If you are interested in joining this network please email Leone Wheeler at alcn@bigpond.com.

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