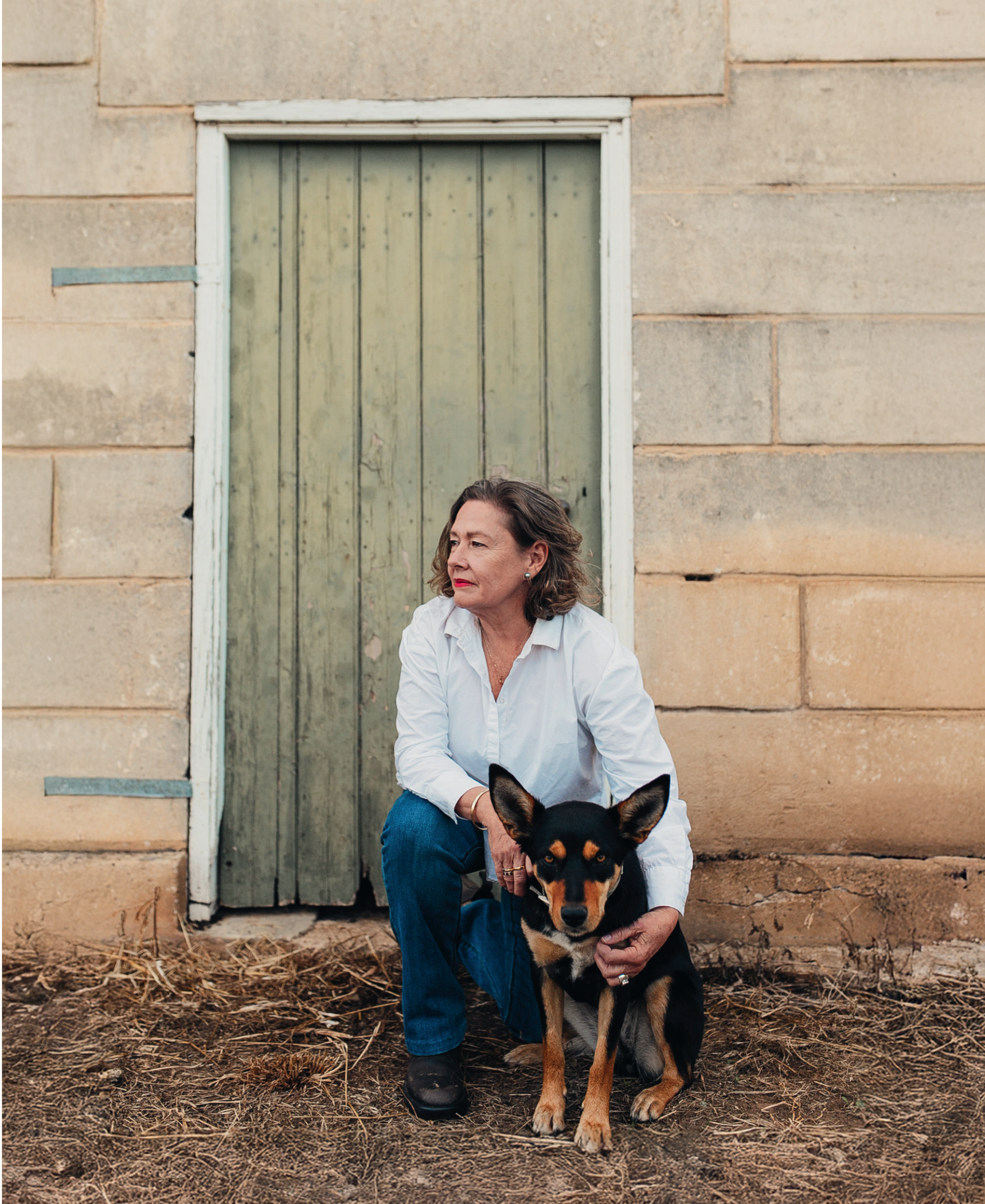
Gone: Craig Hole; opposite, his widow Tracey

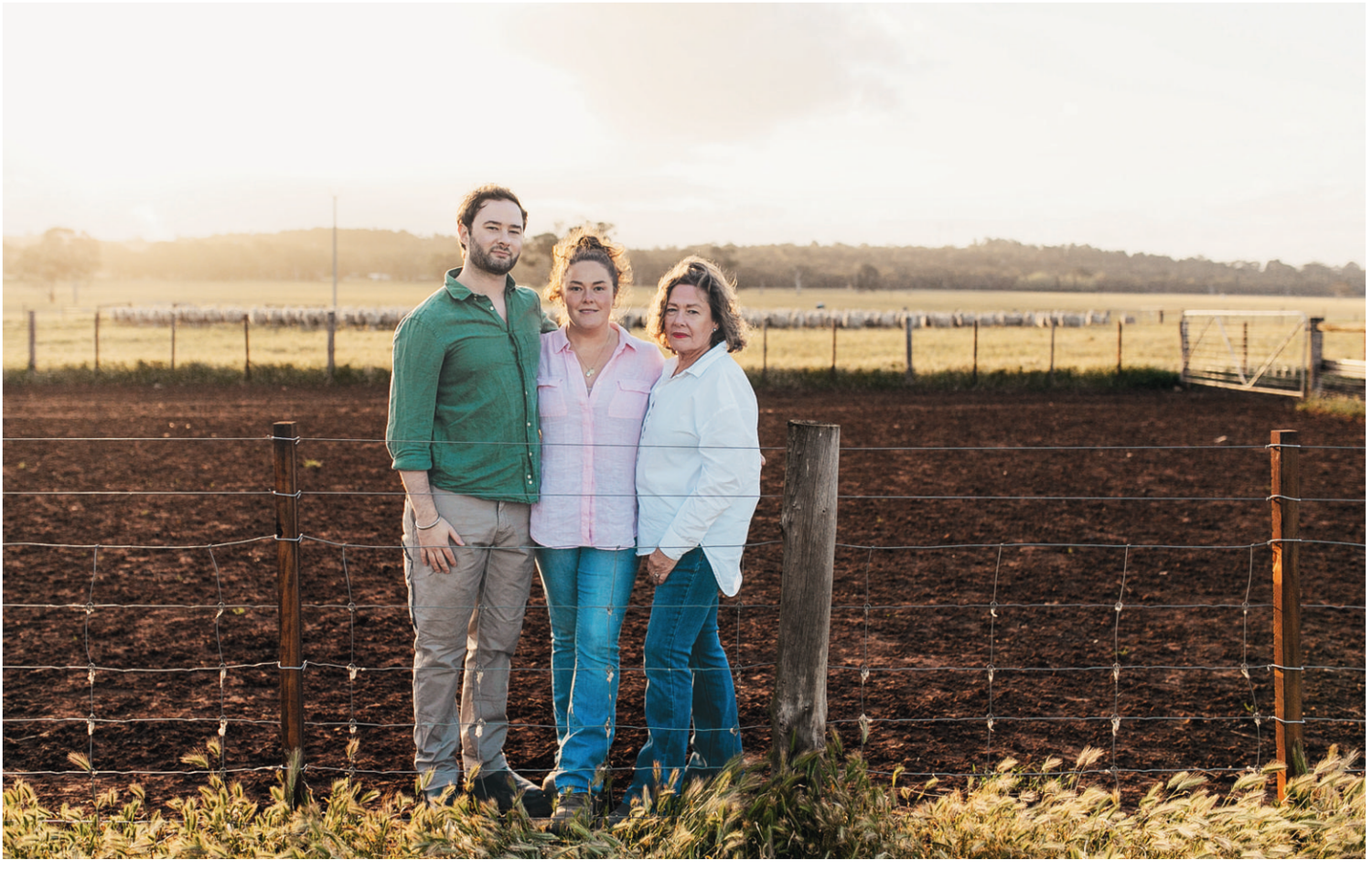
Losing Craig

The extraordinary life and devastating death of farmer Craig Hole

Story by Sarah Hender Photography by Emma Mehlhopt

In May, farmers Tracey and Craig Hole, of Naracoorte in South Australia's south-east, sat down for their annual meeting with their accountant and farm adviser. The pair had just lived through two seasons of drought, and Craig forewarned Tracey that it was likely they'd have to sell off part of the farm. She was shocked; she knew how much he loved that land. But the meeting delivered unexpectedly good news. Their accountant told them their financial position was sound, and their farm adviser thought the Holes were well prepared, even if they were headed for another season of drought. The farm was safe for now. Tracey could see the relief pass over Craig's face. She, too, felt lighter. Craig thanked his ad-





viser, shared a joke, and laughed. The next day, on Tuesday, May 6, just days before his 59th birthday, Craig "Holey" Hole took his own life.

Craig Hole was more than a farmer. He was a kind of glue in his community. A friendly face. The life of any party. Loved. His work as an agronomist in one of the state's most reliably productive agricultural areas meant he travelled the length and breadth of the Limestone Coast, giving advice and sharing a laugh with clients and friends. He ran his own property simultaneously – an 800ha mixed cropping and sheep farm – and he was proud of the place. He ensured the crops that bordered the road looked perfect for passers-by to admire. He adored Tracey and their 31-year-old twins, Henry and Imogen, and he thrived on helping people; he was an active member of the wider community and took on voluntary roles. He sat on committees for his children's schools and the local nursing home. His biggest strength, according to one of the many affected people I spoke with while working on this story, was that he could connect with anybody – from a forklift driver to a company CEO.

"Craig drew people to him like a magnet," Tracey tells me. We are drinking tea in the kitchen of the family's farmhouse. I've asked Tracey to describe the man she shared a life with. A man who, less than a year ago, would be found comfortably reclined on the red sofa in the living room, barefoot, with his faithful sheepdog Betty Spaghetti lying beside him. "If someone asked him how he was, his favourite response would be 'All the better for seeing you'," says Tracey.

Craig was an expert on soil and plant health. Early in his career, he used to lecture on the subject, and after almost four decades in the field he was sought after for his straight-talking and practical advice. Craig Hole was a farmer's farmer with a scientist's brain and a big, fun personality. For his entire life, he had been an expert at making people feel good. It was just the way he was. When he died, more than 3000 people filled the Naracoorte Showgrounds. The place was a sea of four-wheel drives.

"If a prime minister died today, they would struggle to get a bigger funeral," says John Ferguson, a long-time journalist with *The Australian* and one of Craig's oldest friends.

Craig's death stunned everyone who knew him. It especially rattled his best mate, Todd Woodard, and his wife Anne. Cows line the length of the driveway when I drop into their property, 10 minutes along the road from the Holes' farm. Todd tells me, with a catch in his voice, that Craig was as close to him as a brother. He thought he knew everything about him.

The disbelief over Craig's death was also shared by his boss Craig Tapfield, his neighbour Bruce Schultz, and fellow Naracoorte farmer and accountant Abby Miller. Suicide? Really? It was such an incongruous end for the "bright, fun and entertaining" Holey – a man who lit up a room with his "energy and laughter", a "ratbag" with "a million friends", a man who was

"extremely smart" and "a brilliant communicator". But the shock of his friends and family belies a tragic reality. There is a well known but often forgotten vulnerability inherent in Australia's farmers. And the stats are shocking even to those familiar with the extent of the problem. In this country, one farmer dies by suicide every 10 days. Farmers are twice as likely to intentionally end their lives as their fellow citizens.

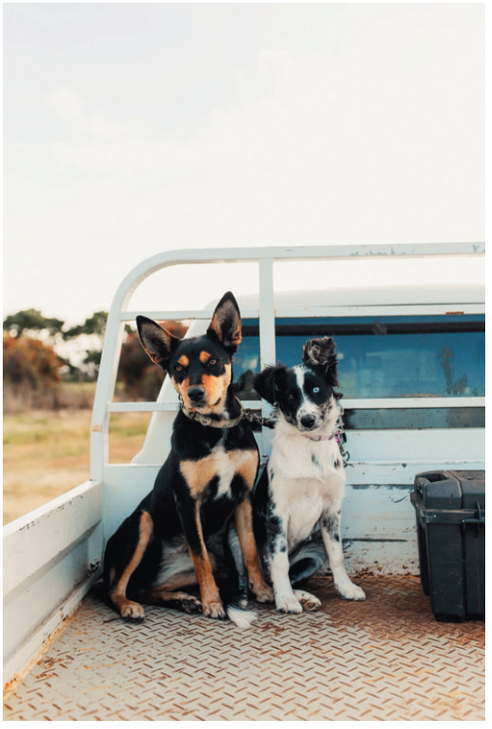
Craig had been managing to juggle myriad roles – as a farmer, a full-time agronomist, a husband, father and community figure – right up until South Australia was plunged into an extended period of severe drought two years ago. Then last year his father Joe, with whom he worked closely on the farm and on whom he regularly relied for advice, died of pancreatic cancer. The burden of loss was enormous for Craig, and it was made worse by the drought.

"When Joe died, Craig had one less person to help him and provide that support. He just couldn't get away from the farm," says Tracey. Craig chose to end his own life almost a year to the day after his father had died. "In the end, it was too much," she says.

As the drought began to inflict its worst effects, Craig was working longer and longer hours, and he was doing less and less of the fun things he loved to do with his family. Tracey noticed that when they went to friends' houses for dinner, he was withdrawn. The big belly laugh he was known for had fallen silent.

His daughter Imogen could also see the change in him. "He was having to put down a lot of sheep, up to eight in a day. Every time he had to put an animal down, I noticed how quiet he'd get," she says.

While drought conditions are shared across entire communities, most farmers remain singularly focused on their own land, their own balance sheets, and their own animals. Abby Miller says Craig's mental state would have been compounded because his work took him to the front lines, helping other distressed farmers try to deal with the drought conditions. "Craig would be in a paddock with a client, looking out at what is basically dirt and trying to come up with a magical solution," says Miller. His empathy for their plight would have taken its toll. "It would be bloody hard to go through that day after day," she adds.



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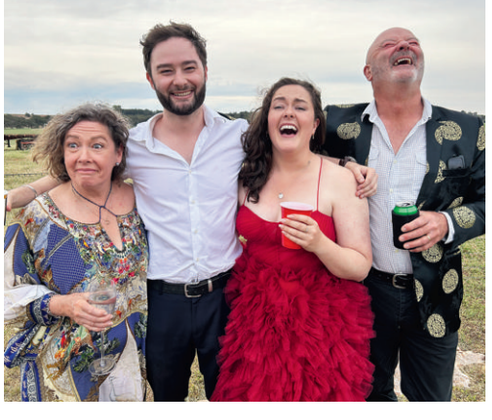
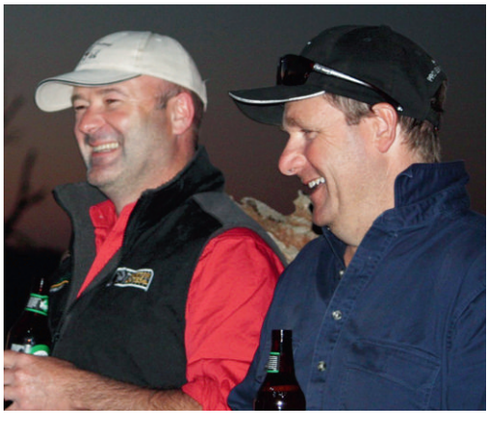
Off to a party: Craig, Tracey and their kids in happy times; the family's dogs; Craig with Todd Woodard. Opposite, Tracey with Henry and Imogen





Craig's death spurred Miller to write a letter to South Australian Premier Peter Malinauskas. She wanted to explain to people outside her community, in the cities and big towns, that out in the country farmers were suffering. The letter was read out in state parliament by Liberal Upper House leader Nicola Centofanti a week later. It reads in part:

"I'm not writing to ask for a handout. I'm writing to ask for something far more important – acknowledgment. We are in a drought. A real, painful, exhausting drought. And while the land is dry, it's the emotional toll that's breaking people. This week, we lost a dear friend to suicide. He wasn't just a farmer; he was one of Australia's finest agronomists. He had off-farm income, yes, but that didn't shield him from the weight of farming life. It's a pressure that's invisible to most, but unbearable for many."

Todd Woodard knows what it's like to be in the middle of a prolonged dry spell, just trying to find a way to survive. "Drought forces people to reckon with making tough decisions," he tells me. "You don't know whether you should be selling livestock. You constantly worry about whether it will rain and what will happen if it doesn't. There are a lot of voices in your head, and it can paralyse you. The easiest thing is not to make a decision, but that makes it worse." He believes now that it was these feelings of paralysis and hopelessness that were affecting Craig in those final months, applying ever-increasing pressure and anxiety, turning the screws.

Miller's husband Richard remembers a passing chat he had with Craig at the local service station barely a week before he died. Richard asked how the season was going for Craig. He answered, uncharacteristically, "It's all f..ked."

It was a moment of transparency, but as Miller says, "When everyone is struggling, it was really easy to miss what may have been a cry for help."

FAMILY PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRACEY HOLE AND TODD WOODWARD.

Some months before he died, Craig began to experience health issues, including a persistent pain in his stomach. As the pain got worse, he told Tracey he was concerned he had a tumour like his father's. He worried he was dying. His GP organised scans for him. While he waited for the results, Craig's mates noticed he was disengaged at social events and asked if he was OK. He told them he had a physical problem, but it was being investigated.

Then, just weeks before his death, the doctor told Craig he believed the physical symptoms weren't due to a tumour at all. The scans were back, and there was nothing there. Instead, the doctor said he thought the pain Craig was describing was from severe anxiety, and he suggested medication to relieve it. Tracey encouraged her husband to take the doctor's advice, but he rejected the offer of a prescription. Instead, he decided to stop drinking alcohol and coffee, which he hoped would improve his general health. It didn't. "What Craig was missing was a clear mind," Tracey tells me.

Bruce Schultz lived next door to Craig all his life. He tells me simply, "Craig wasn't Craig when he did what he did." Bruce would know, because he has experience with these kinds of things; a previous drought triggered his own mental health struggles.

"I couldn't get to sleep at night because I was constantly thinking about the rain," he recalls. He was haemorrhaging money, with "no end in sight". The stress led him to see his GP, who prescribed medication and recommended he undertake counselling. Schultz says he went to a very low point, a very tough place, before he got better. "I think Craig had got himself to a stage where he didn't recognise that his brain was doing things that were not reflecting who he really was," he says.

Tracey agrees with Bruce that by April, Craig was not himself. She says that if a doctor tells a person they are displaying signs of anxiety or depression and recommends they take medication for it, they shouldn't hesitate to take that advice. "It's like putting your glasses on to read something," she says. "You just have a better chance of being able to read it clearly." But something stopped Craig from helping himself. Was it stigma? Embarrassment? Shame?

On the Sunday night before he died, Craig again experienced a terrible pain in his stomach, and he was scared. Tracey took him to the hospital, but there was no doctor on duty. Given that the scans he'd already undertaken had returned clear results, the nurse on duty said there was nothing she could do for him. Two days later, Craig was dead.

Farmers are typically a resilient lot, spending much of their lives dealing with events outside of their control. Prevailing weather conditions, commodity prices and government regulation, to name but a few. They understand it's the price you pay for what can be a wonderful lifestyle – that is, of course, until it isn't. So, how is it that farmers are more susceptible to suicide than the rest of us?

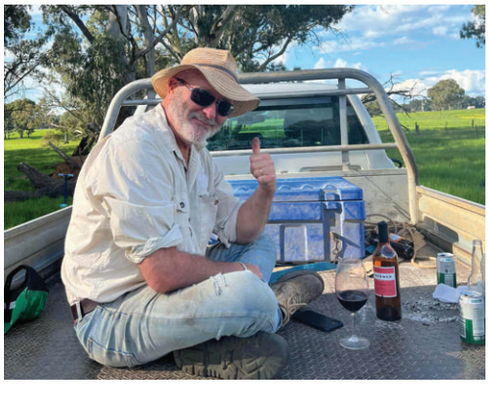
"Stoicism and self-reliance are part of the problem," says Associate Professor Kate Gunn, a clinical psychologist with the University of South Australia and an expert in farmers' mental health. "Farmers are very good practical problem solvers. Where they need help is recognising when they can't fix something themselves." Gunn says other influences that contribute to high rates of suicide are the hours that farmers spend working in isolation, as well as their easy access to firearms and other objects that can cause them fatal harm. Gunn also believes a sense of fatalism comes with the job. Death is not a foreign concept to farmers, and the life cycle of their animals is a constant reminder of their own mortality.

In the event a farmer does reach out for help, finding it is a lot harder in the country. Mental health specialists are thin on the ground, so GPs are usually the most accessible option for a face-to-face consultation. But there is a long wait period for many GPs, and in order to gain the trust of their patients they require some knowledge of the stresses of farming life.

"Many farmers are sceptical of outsiders," Gunn says. "They often have this strong belief that unless you understand a farmer's way of life, there is no way you could help them with their health or mental health."

Gunn has founded ifarmwell, an online self-guided mental health website developed by farmers, for farmers. It provides tools to help them cope with life's challenges from a farmer's perspective. Several other regional and national online support services have popped up to support farmers feeling the pinch. Nationally, Farm Angels and Rural Aid offer free assistance to farmers and their families, including phone support and on-farm visits by professionals who themselves have lived rural experience, and the new Medicare Mental Health phone line can help link people into their local mental health services without the need for a referral.

But all rural health services suffer from the



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Battle: from left, Craig; Tracey with Henry; Tracey with Imogen and Henry

same problem – that is, a farmer needs to recognise they need help before they'll reach out. In the event a farmer does reach out for professional help, it is most likely to be recommended to them by someone they trust, such as a rural financial counsellor or farm adviser they are already getting help from.

"Their whole life is embedded in that farm," explains Dr Alison Kennedy, director of the National Centre for Farmer Health in Victoria. She says suicide is never about one single event. Extreme climatic events such as drought, fire or floods usually add to the pressures that farmers are already under.

"It's when farmers are exposed to cumulative pressures that their wellbeing really suffers," she says. "And when people's mental health is poor, they really struggle to make decisions."

On the four-hour drive from Adelaide to Naracoorte I pass hundreds of rural properties, including dairy and beef cattle stations, vineyards, orchards, farms running sheep or grain, and the striking lurid yellow of vast canola fields. Many of these places are family-run, propped up by hardworking farmers just like Craig and Tracey, like Bruce, Abby and Richard, Todd and Ann. Each is as potentially vulnerable as the next to unpredictable weather patterns or any other variety of malady, perhaps crop disease or pests. It's part of life in the country. The way of the land.

Naracoorte, population 5000, is a small country town where people talk. And, no doubt, in our society, there is still a stigma that surrounds mental health issues, especially in the country. A man like Craig, relied upon by many in his community for his leadership, would have had a hard time acknowledging to anyone that he was struggling. He clearly wanted to be the person supporting others, not the other way round. It's possible, too, that Craig himself didn't recognise he had a mental health problem, even when pointed out to him by the doctor. It was easier to focus on what he could understand – a tumour maybe, or something else malignant inside his body.

"A physical symptom is something tangible. It is so much easier to grab onto something like that than poor mental health, which can sometimes sneak up on us," says Kennedy.

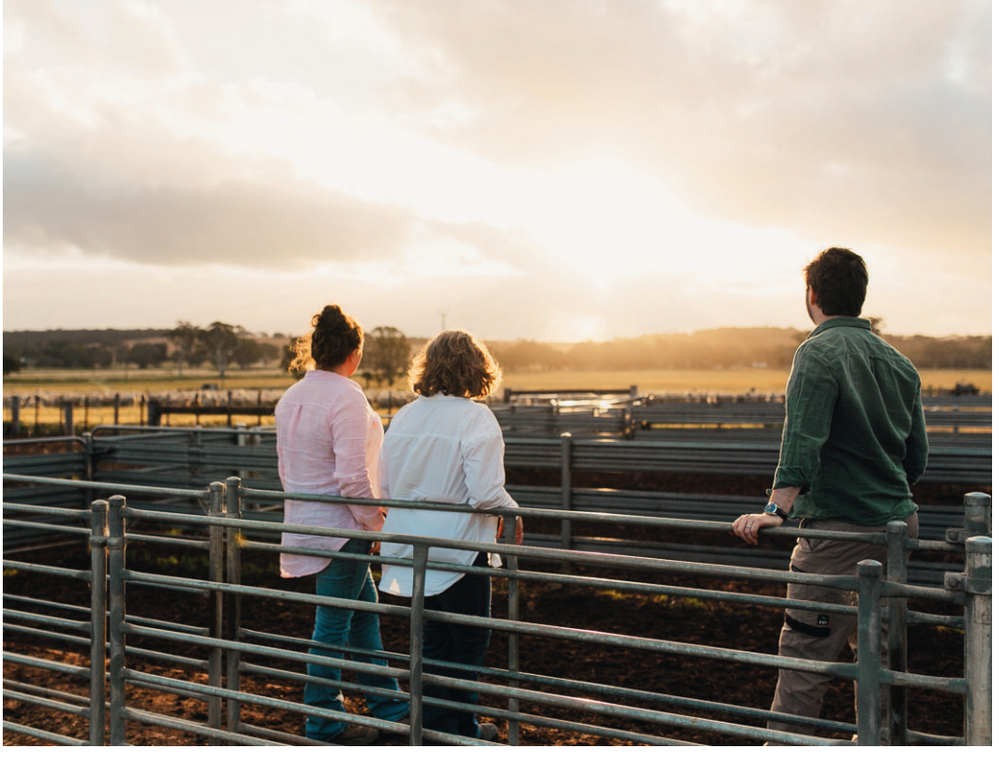
Tracey wants Craig's death to be a marker for change. She wants to send a message to her community: *Make mental health a normal part of conversation.* She wants to encourage others to open up and get the support they need.

Tracey chose the ifarmwell program to help her deliver her message to the community. She arranged for information about the website to be distributed to attendees of Craig's funeral, and sought donations to support the program in her husband's memory. She raised more than $23,000. Recently, ifarmwell launched a new education campaign, "Weather It Together". Aided by the State Government's $73 million Drought Support Package, it implores farmers to take care of themselves as a collective during challenging seasons.

"This campaign is about focusing on what you can control, getting active, lifting each other, and sharing the load. All things we know that help farmers maintain good mental health," says Gunn. It's a terrific step for South Australians, but Gunn knows more needs to be done on a national level. ifarmwell is one of 50 organisations now advocating for a national farmer-friendly helpline and mental health education campaign. They're also focused on cultural change to encourage farmers to be less demanding of themselves, to take breaks, and to curb the long hours they spend on the tools.

Tracey believes two things might have saved Craig. The first would have been to reduce the hours he felt he needed to work to keep up with the demands of the farm; the second would have been to recognise that the symptoms he was experiencing were caused by anxiety and depression. Both require an awareness of the importance of caring for your mental health.

Locals in Naracoorte had always asked each other how they were coping during the drought, "but the language is different now", says Todd. He says his golf group, which Craig was once an active member of, now has an honesty system. "Before we start chatting, we ask each other: 'OK, give me a score, how are you feeling out of 10?' and we don't leave it there, you have to justify your score," he says.



They are doing it for Holey. They, like Tracey, want to see a change in their community because losing a man like him has left a void. Craig Hole was a man who lived to make everyone around him happy. And almost as if he had organised one more thing for those he left behind, the skies delivered.

The day after Holey died, the rain started falling. ●

Lifeline 13 11 14; Beyond Blue 1300 224 636; ifarmwell.com.au; farmerhealth.org.au