

Shear strength

Sharon Jones, 48, is the Northern project officer for Tasmania's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex Suicide Prevention Program. She found support during her own struggle when she became Australia's first female shearer

interview **GABRIELLE RISH** photography **CHRIS KIDD**

I grew up near Boulia, in outback Queensland, about 200km south of Mt Isa. Dad managed six stations before he and Mum bought their own.

I was fascinated watching the shearing when I was a little kid and I begged Dad to teach me. He said, "Girls don't shear". He taught my brother Trevor, who was 18 months older than me.

Eventually, when I was nine, Dad gave in to my pestering. He gave me a handpiece and walked away. I said, "Aren't you going to show me how to do it?", but he wouldn't. Sheer determination got the wool off that first sheep.

IT'S NOT THEIR SEXUALITY OR GENDER IDENTITY THAT DRIVES PEOPLE TO SUICIDE, IT'S THE DISCRIMINATION

From a young age I felt more like a boy than a girl. I really thought I was going to grow up to be a boy like Trev, that I was just a slow developer. The confusion going through puberty was terrible. My dad was a hard man and he thought he could beat the difference out of me. He used to say, "There's something wrong with that kid's head". My mother was disappointed and ashamed of me. She wanted a boy and a girlie girl. I wasn't what she wanted so she rejected me.

I was suicidal from 12. I felt like I came from Mars, a weird person like no one else.

The only reason I didn't take my life was because I thought my dog deserved to live and if I died I knew Dad would shoot my dog.

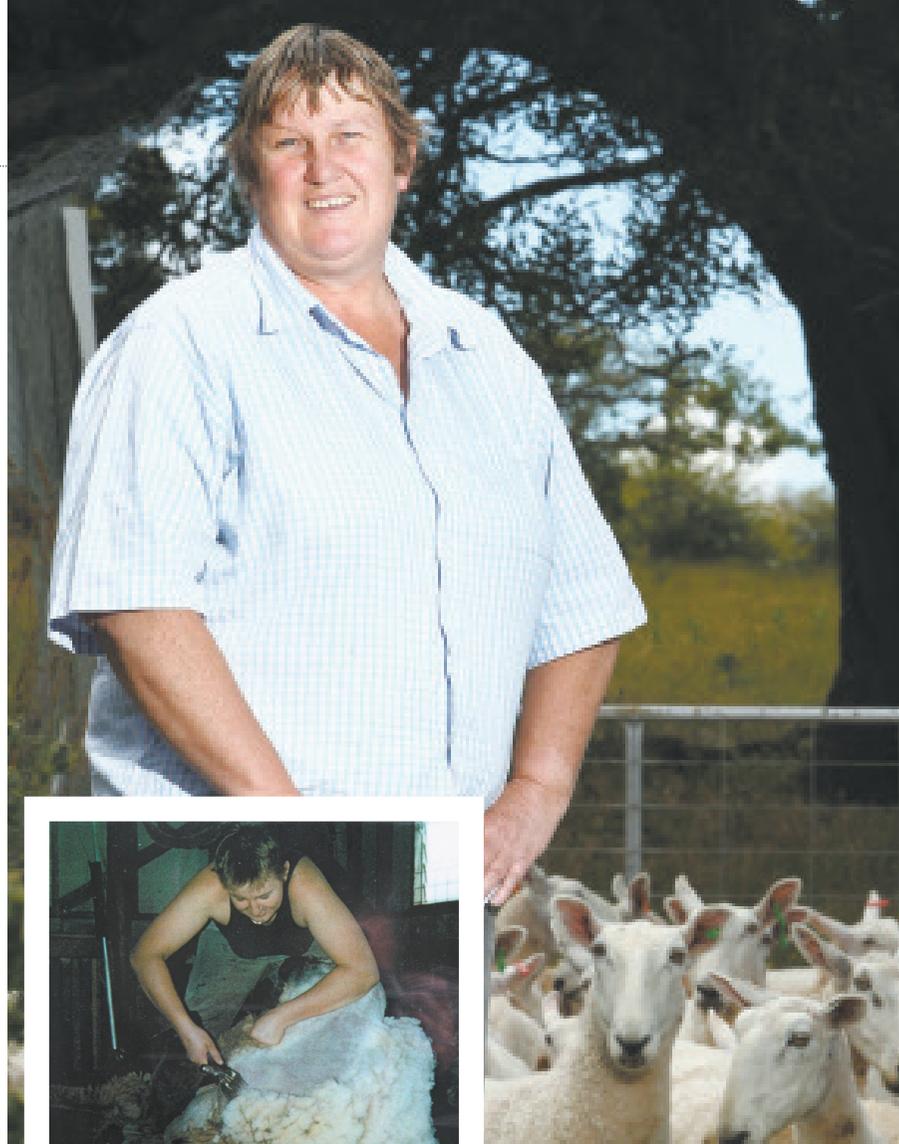
I left home when I was 15 and worked in the Boulia shop. There were no women in shearing sheds at that time, except the cooks. Then a woman from New Zealand came out to Australia to work as a rouseabout. I thought, "If she can rouseabout, I can shear".

The old man wasn't going to let me anywhere near a shearing shed professionally. He said, "I don't even like shearers". Well, I said, "You don't like me - what's the difference?" So I rang up a guy, a bit timid and shy - I was only 17 - and I said to him, "I know someone who can shear but never had a [shearing] pen." He said, "Who is it?" I said, "Me". He had some big wethers that needed crutching and he said, "Come and have a go". On my first day I proved myself by crutching 127 and the contractor gave me a pen.

The reality for shearers is if you can get in there and work alongside them, you get respect. It was the first time in my life I was supported. If anyone had a go at me, they'd say, "Sharon's got balls, leave her alone".

I was shearing with a guy from Tasmania and he said, "Come back to Tassie for a look", so I did. That was 30 years ago. And I kept coming. I used to shear in Queensland in winter and Tasmania in summer. I did that for three years then, when I was 21, I decided to move here. I just loved Tasmania from the very beginning. I'd always wanted to live somewhere that was green and had mountains so when I came here it was like heaven.

I first went to a counsellor when I was in my early 30s, not because of my gender queerness but because of the physical and



BRAVE: Sharon Jones, who identifies as gender queer - a bit of both sexes, with Border Leicester sheep at her 79-acre (32ha) farm at Mole Creek; and inset, in her shearing days.

mental abuse I'd suffered as a child. She was a great counsellor and it felt like the first time someone cared if I lived or died.

I realised that I'd denied a lot of my feminine side and I started trying to get in touch with it. I got involved with the gay community around that time.

About nine years ago I went to the funerals of a couple of lesbian friends who had suicided and I thought, "How many people do we have to bury?" They had basically died of loneliness.

Social inclusion is the answer. I started Connect 4 Life, which stages two big Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGBTI) social functions a year at Mole Creek - Christmas in July and Music on the Green. We also hold regular lunches.

I worked as an educator/counsellor for the LGBTI support organisation Working It Out for six years. A few years ago I began helping to develop the Tasmanian Community Action Plan for suicide prevention in

LGBTI communities, in partnership with Relationships Australia Tasmania.

LGBTI people attempt suicide at rates of between 3.5 and 14 times their heterosexual counterparts (the rate varies depending on age group and gender identity).

LGBTI people have the highest rate of suicide of any group in Australia with transgender being the highest subgroup.

It's not their sexuality or gender identity that drives people to suicide, it's the discrimination.

In the same way we don't tolerate racism or sexism, when people hear someone making homophobic comments, they need to say, "Excuse me, we don't tolerate homophobia, racism or sexism here".

For 24/7 crisis support, contact Lifeline on 131 114 or Kids Helpline 1800 551 800. Specific support for LGBTI people is available at QLife Australia on 1800 184 527 or [www.qlife.org.au](http://www qlife.org.au)

GO OUT



TASMANIAN FRUIT WINE FESTIVAL

Bellerive Boardwalk, tomorrow noon-5pm

Fruit wines, liqueurs, ciders, meads and fortified wines from around Australia will be showcased at this Eastern Shore festival. Entry to the festival is a gold coin. Buy a \$10 glass from the Rotary Club of Sorell for unlimited wine tastings, with funds raised going to charity. Expect food stalls and live entertainment by the river.

MYSTATE AUSTRALIAN WOODEN BOAT FESTIVAL

Hobart waterfront, Friday to Monday, February 9

This free maritime festival, left, features the biggest collection of wooden boats in the southern hemisphere. Hundreds of tall ships, sailboats, wooden dinghies, boats and models will be on show. Visit australianwoodenboatfestival.com.au for more details.

TRIAL BY JURY

Old Penitentiary Courts, today, Friday and next Saturday, 6.30pm and 7.30pm sessions

John X presents Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operetta at the Old Penitentiary Courts. It's one of the longest-running productions in Hobart but this time takes on a tropical twist. Justice is served - Victorian-style - in this story of a groom sued by his jilted bride. Adults \$25, concession \$22. Bookings www.centertainment.com.au

WORLD WETLANDS DAY CELEBRATION

Lauderdale Football Club, 10 Dona Rd, Lauderdale, today, 10am-3pm

Enjoy saltmarsh walks, birdwatching, live music and talks from guest speakers, as well as drawing workshops for the kids. The new book *A Guide to the Plants of Tasmanian Saltmarsh Wetlands*, edited by Vishnu Prahalad, will also be launched at the event. Phone 6245 8775 for details.