

*Alex Thomas on
Coomunga Springs,
near Port Lincoln, SA.*

Safe, not sorry

Alex Thomas is planting the seed for social change when it comes to rural safety.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS ROBERT LANG

Sometimes it takes a single defining moment to plot a young person's career path. However, for Alex Thomas, it was the domino effect of drought at Parnaroo station in SA's north-east pastoral district that charted her future working in rural work health and safety (WHS).

You need swathes of saltbush flat to make a decent living north of Goyder's Line, and Alex's father, Chris, began mustering feral goats during the 1980s to boost income. But he hadn't banked on getting struck down by Q fever. The dominos kept falling the following decade – Ross River virus, type 2 diabetes, the breakdown of his marriage, kidney failure and then heart failure. In the midst of everything, the station was carved up and sold.

The eldest of three children, Alex watched the mess unfold from boarding school in Adelaide. "I was painfully homesick, but of course home was never the same after that," she says.

Witnessing the emotional fallout strengthened her resolve to fix things. "Even at 15, I felt this enormous sense of duty and it never occurred to me that it wasn't my responsibility," she says.

Former neighbour, Gen Sawers, from Pitcairn Station, wasn't surprised that Alex wanted to take charge. "All of our kids grew up together and they all have that love of family, but also that wonderful work ethic and sense of purpose," Gen says. "Determination is a big part of Alex's character."

After finishing school, Alex spent a year working as a jillaroo before joining the mining throng in 2006. "There were basically two entry-level jobs for women in mining back then: office administration or WHS, and after seeing Dad's health deteriorate, I chose safety," she says.

The job took her around the country, and as Alex, now 32, recounts a dizzy carousel of worksites, towns and temporary beds, she wonders if she was really just running away. "I desperately wanted to work in agriculture but I couldn't find my place, for there's a sense of displacement that comes when your family has to sell a property that you have lived and breathed," she says.

New foundations were laid when Chris was rendered permanently disabled at 56. Alex became his part-time carer, and started her own consultancy developing smart safety management plans for the agricultural and fishing industries at an individual, association and corporate level. "I don't think anyone falls out of bed one morning and decides they want to be a safety professional, but I genuinely care about people," she says. "I'm an eternal empath – you can't just walk past that stuff."

The nation's prawn fishers, lobster processors, agronomists and grain growers are among those to have taken Alex's training on board. Lauded for her relatable learning methods, she shakes up the traditional bureaucratic approach by shifting the focus from paperwork and box-ticking to ethics and empowerment. "I knew I had to realign the narrative around WHS to one of care rather than compliance, in order to facilitate change and stand a chance of making a difference, and then I thought, 'I need a bloody big platform to bring this message to life!'," she says.

That platform has become social media, steered by savvy rural women who are traditionally more risk averse and incredibly clever at planting a seed in the mind of blokes to "perhaps approach things a bit differently". Alex pitched the concept of an online >



'Plant a Seed for Safety' project to the judging panel of the AgriFutures Rural Women's Award and was named SA's winner for 2018. Since then, she has been enlisting 100 rural women to raise their voices and share practical advice on injury prevention. The underlying message is simple: Save a life, listen to your wife. "When the media talks about safety, they talk about fatalities and statistics, but they never really shine a light on how to prevent those incidents from happening in the first place," Alex says. "If you think about the millions of hours spent working on farms, most of the time people don't get hurt, so let's talk about what's already working well."

Tips now being shared on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram include something as simple as fixing a guard on an auger or placing a snakebite kit inside an empty chamois container and strapping it to a motorbike. "It doesn't have to be genius – it just has to be practical and make sense in the context of their businesses," Alex says.

New Zealand social media users are now also sharing their tips, adopting the #PlantASeedForSafety and

#SaveALifeListenToYourWife hashtags. Alex is aiming for global reach, and her Adelaide-based mentor, Susy Daw, has no doubt she will succeed. "She makes it fun and practical while bringing that absolutely deep and serious message of how important safety is, and she's got the big heart with it," Susy says.

Chris Thomas is now living in the Mid North town of Crystal Brook, where a wonderful tribe of rural health experts helps keep an eye on his welfare. Alex visits as often as possible, and spends the rest of the time on the road, checking up on the safety of other families like hers.

"There's an enormous opportunity for rural men and women to make better decisions when it comes to health and safety, and knowing what I know now, I refuse to let things remain unchanged because it's 'the way it's always been,' she says. "I don't want this to happen to anyone else's dad because they're a part of that bullet-proof generation that weren't taught or empowered to think otherwise."

*Alex chats with sheep
and grain farmer
Alex Wendland on
Coomunga Springs, SA.*

