

FROM CATTLE YARDS TO CANBERRA

WORDS: JO ROBERTSON. PHOTOS: STEVE STRIKE.

Kicking around the yards as a little girl on the cattle property her family managed in South Australia, Tracey Hayes' dream wasn't to head up a \$300 million cattle industry one day. It was to take the reins from her dad.

"I always thought I could run the show - I had big brothers and dad struggled to keep me out of the stock camps, but when you're the only girl, you learn to do most things as well as anyone can," said Tracey, who's just replaced Luke Bowen as acting Executive Director of the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association.

Tracey's association with cattle has been lifelong. From her fond station upbringing, to settling in Alice Springs for boarding school in the mid-80s then, as a teenager, falling in love with Billy Hayes, a fifth-generation Alice cattle station kid with whom she spent 27 years on Deep Well and Maryvale stations and shares four sons.

When an opportunity arose in 2000 to join the NTCA board, it was a natural fit.

"Life was busy at that time; we were running the station and I was home-schooling the boys, but I felt it was important to contribute to our industry and become involved at some level," said Tracey. "The kids have always been the priority, but supporting the Territory's cattle industry is a very important role for me, too."

Tracey's personal circumstances changed a few years ago, now based in town, life is busier than ever. On top of her NTCA role she's the Territory's National Farmers' Federation representative, and since 2008 she's operated a busy equipment hire business in Alice Springs. Tracey is also mum to four boys: Luke, 19; Tom, 16; Sam, 11; and Harry, eight. Thankfully, she has the perfect right-hand woman - her mum Jill.

"Mum came up to live with us after Dad passed away a few years ago, and I honestly couldn't do what I'm doing without her," said Tracey. "When I need to travel for work or I can't make school pick-up, Mum's here to back me up. We're very blessed."

Travel is something Tracey does a fair bit of. Between Alice and Darwin; on trade missions to China to explore opportunities for NT cattle producers in the increasingly powerful Chinese market; and to support a ground-breaking student pastoral program the NTCA is running in Indonesia.

"Agriculture students from universities in Indonesia spend 10 weeks here on NTCA members' properties learning the tricks of the trade - how to ride a horse and muster cattle and sharing knowledge on production issues and land management," Tracey said. After 10 weeks, Territory students reciprocate and head to Indonesia.

"It's a wonderful program through which we're developing valuable relationships with our trading partners

at the grassroots level and it also worked well with the NTCA's Indigenous employment program that has operated for the last eight years" Tracey said. "It's not just about a one-way trade of NT cattle going into Indonesia; we respect their farmers and their production systems, and with 240 million people in Indonesia with increasing middle-class affluence, there's real opportunity for NT beef producers."

Tracey also makes the trip to Canberra to lobby the government on issues dear to cattle producers all over the Territory. She recounted one extraordinary trip when the live export crisis erupted in June 2011.

"When live export trade was suspended, it was quite extraordinary.

It was so difficult watching an industry we love - and its people - brought to its knees. It was up to the NTCA to get things back on track, and we needed to get to Canberra to do it. Next thing we know, an Australian aviation company called Pilatus supplied two PC-12 aircraft and flew around the whole Territory picking up board members from their properties and flew us all to Canberra. After lobbying 30 Members of Parliament for five days, they flew us home again, all free of charge.

It was an extraordinary show of support that demonstrated how important the cattle industry is to the Territory and to Australia. I've been back to Canberra a number of times since then, but it's never been quite that intense!" **TQ**

