Speaker 1:

Welcome to Ag Vic Talk, keeping you up to date with information from Agriculture Victoria.

Drew Radford:

Trying to get into farming from scratch is not something that happens often these days, as the price of land and equipment is prohibitive to most 20-year-olds. This was exactly the situation faced by Sarah McLean, who grew up in a fifth-generation farming family. She knew the possibility of running the family farm was a long way off, so she left to become a neuropsychologist, a career that would let her start saving for her own property. Along the way, she has pursued every opportunity to help make her dream become a reality, and one of those was successfully applying for the Young Farmers Scholarship. I'm Drew Radford, and Sarah joins me in the Ag Vic Talk studio to discuss pursuing a dream that many would've shied away from.

Drew Radford:

Sarah, thanks for your time.

Sarah McClean:

Thank you, Drew.

Drew Radford:

Sarah, you and your husband, Byron, have done it the hard way to become farmers. There aren't too many people that start from scratch these days.

Sarah McClean:

Yeah, that's right, Drew. I was actually born into a farming family; however, having two siblings, basically I didn't want to wait until any sort of succession plan because I didn't want to farm when I was 60, I wanted to farm when I was young and could still enjoy it. My husband wasn't born into a farming family at all, he actually was born in Geelong, in the middle of town, though he was always interested in farming, so he worked on some local properties and things like that from a young age.

Drew Radford:

But you left the farm to become a psychologist, though, so did you give up that dream at some stage?

Sarah McClean:

I always had the dream, I guess I just didn't really know how to follow that dream and do it when I was young. Everyone said that it's not possible and it costs too much money to buy your land, and then you've got to buy your cattle and machinery, so you can't really set up. Most kids where I grew up, they all left the family farm to get a profession.

Sarah McClean:

I remember when I was really young, a doctor asked me what I wanted to do, just my local GP, and I said I wanted to farm. They said, "Well, how are you going to do that?" I was about 12 at the time, and I said, "Oh, I guess I'll get an education and try and save up a bit of money so I can buy some land." So it was always in the back of my mind, and I always did like psychology as well. I worked with horses, and I think that sort of got me thinking about, I guess, the mind, actions, behaviours and mental state. So, I went to Melbourne and I studied neuropsychology, which was eight years in Melbourne.

Drew Radford:

That’s quite a step away from farming, what was involved in terms of getting you back on the land?

Sarah McClean:

I guess it was always in the back of my mind. As soon as I qualified, I got a job in Warrnambool, that was the closest large centre to where my parents were, to try and get back on the land. Then I guess I was trying to figure out how I was going to buy my first parcel of land. Originally, I was thinking maybe just 20 acres or something so I could have my horses, and then, when I met Byron, he originally wanted to go back and work on a station up at the Kimberley somewhere. As we got talking about different models, he had had the same background as me and said that he always thought that he would never own his own place, because that's what you're told: unless you inherit it, you don't get it. Then we saved hard, we worked hard, and then we managed to buy our first block of 90 acres.

Drew Radford:

That's a long path just to get to your first 90 acres. You've grown it from there, though, haven't you?

Sarah McClean:

We're up to about 700 acres now. We bought 90 acres, and a lot of people said, "Oh, I wouldn't be bothered with 90 acres." We could run 25 cows all year round, and their calves, and sell the calves as weaners, but you still need all your machinery, you still need all your tools, so it's a bit of expense for not much profit, but doing that helped us establish relationships with the bank. Though I'd grown up on a farm, there was actually so much I didn't know about running a business. It's a bit different running it yourself than having mum and dad to lean on and give you guidance of what's happening.

Drew Radford:

So, in regard to the bank, Sarah, and also the knowledge of running the business, is that where applying for the Young Farmers Scholarship comes in for you, to help build that knowledge?

Sarah McClean:

Well, originally, I'd suggested that Byron apply for it. I'm not really sure why I did that, I think it was just the gender stereotype thing. He ran out of time, and I said, "Well, if you're not applying for it, I will." I applied to do a course run by RCS, it was Grazing and Farming for Profit, and it's a pretty broad course. It covers business, land management, and the people aspect of your business. So, I didn't really think I had a lot of chance, because I only had 90 acres, in getting that. I just really hadn't considered myself as a farmer at that stage, I thought it was too small, but it really set the scene in a lot of different interest areas that I have now.

Drew Radford:

Actually, access to the scholarship helped you access doing the course. How else has the scholarship been beneficial?

Sarah McClean:

It's been beneficial in a lot of ways because the course helped me get a real framework in terms of my business, and it also introduced me to land management techniques and looking at soil health rather than just putting stuff on the land because it's what we are told to do. Also, different grazing techniques to get the most out of your land. The other thing that I guess opened my mind up a little bit was the people side of business. We hear a lot about farmers and mental health and people struggling on the land, and there's a bit of a story that goes with farming that, yes, it's tough, yes, it's hard, and you just have to suffer. Where, the courses I did makes you step back and go, "Okay, you've also got to work on your relationship," that's with your family, with yourself, with the land, and I guess be happy farming. It's not a narrative that we often hear in the farming sort of world, is, "Oh, look, they're farming and they're happy," but ultimately we all must love doing it because you wouldn't do the long hours otherwise.

Sarah McClean:

The second part of the scholarship is a infrastructure-type grant. I originally had put in my application that I wanted to do some tree lines and plant trees, which I still am planning to do, but in the more short term, the more pressing issue was to get a new cattle crush. Before the course, I would have said that that was unnecessary because I had an old crush. The head bail didn't even work; it was quite dangerous. I remember at one stage I was quite heavily pregnant with my second child and I was trying to put a fencing post in behind a heifer that was calving when she was having trouble. I had my young daughter on the outside of the yard, just the other side of the crush. Anyway, the heifer kicked the fencing post, knocked me backwards, and briefly knocked me out, and I had a bit of a mark under my chin. From that it gave me a bit of a scare, and I realised probably the biggest risk to my business is me getting injured, and to make sure that I would actually be set up properly and in a more safer way would actually be important in my business, where before I'd said it was probably a bit of a luxury. So, I ended up getting a new cattle crush, which is amazing.

Drew Radford:

So, it's actually sent you down a path of farm safety as well?

Sarah McClean:

Yeah, that's right, and I didn't think about that aspect too much. Obviously, I'm always making sure that my kids are safe, and then, when I realized that, "Hey, if I'm knocked out in the cattle yards, I actually can't keep my kids safe," because my daughter was only 18 months old at the time and while I was alert I could actually watch her and she was quite happily just playing where she was, it was a bit of a wake-up call that the people in your business is probably the most important thing in your business, aside from grazing, and financial, and all the rest.

Drew Radford:

You've got a lot going on, Sarah. You're a mum, you're still practicing as a psychologist, you're trying to build up a farming enterprise. Was taking the scholarship on just a real opportunity, really, to start going down a different path?

Sarah McClean:

With the business that we've got and starting from scratch, you have to invest in yourself. Using the scholarship money, I did the RCS course because otherwise it's hard to justify, when you're trying to start a business, spending that sort of money. Now I see that that would've been the best money I could spend, even if it was my own money, but just getting that money out of your pocket in the first instant is difficult. I've also done a KLR Marketing School. I've recently just done a dog and stock handling school with Neil MacDonald. We're now studying Next Steps, which is like a mentoring program for your business. Some people would say, "Oh, it's just extra time. I don't have time for all that stuff," but if I didn't do that, then it would make my job so much harder and I probably wouldn't, even if I had the opportunities that have come forward...

Sarah McClean:

For example, the biggest part of my farm is actually lease land. There was a lady down the road that was looking to get out of farming, and she saw that I obviously tried to educate myself, I had the background in farming, and was actually doing it on my own. She gave us the opportunity, so credit to her because most farmers who are looking to lease their land would go for, say, an established farmer or a larger company where there's a bit more security. She took a bit of a chance on us because, number one, I guess we'd already shown that we were farming, and, number two, she did want to give the opportunity to a younger person. If you've got young people farming your community, that has flow-on effects for the local school, the kindergarten, the sporting teams, and all the rest, compared to just giving a lease to an already established, usually older farmer within the area.

Drew Radford:

Sarah, your commitment to farming seems to be very, very deep because you're also a member of the Young Farmer Advisory Council as well. What made you pursue that?

Sarah McClean:

I think, basically, because I'd been told that you can't start farming from scratch. I also have an interest in farmer mental health and in sustainable farming practices, and, I think, unless you're involved to some degree or you have some sort of platform to have that voice, that you can't really comment too much about what's going on in politics or what programs are offering or what there is available. Where, if you've actually got that platform to speak your mind, then you can really contribute and help other people and maybe make it a little bit easy for the next lot of farmers that come along as well.

Drew Radford:

Are you continuing on with the council? It sounds like you've got an enormous amount going on in your life as is.

Sarah McClean:

Yes, I'm continuing on in the next term. That's another three-year term. I'm going to be the chair of the next advisory council. I think it's nine members all up for this next term.

Drew Radford:

Congratulations with that and everything else that you've got going on ahead of you. Sarah, how far do you think you are from your dream and becoming a full-time farmer? Back to that question, I guess, that the doctor asked you when you were 12 years old.

Sarah McClean:

To be honest, the progress that we've made since buying that first block has surprised me, it's been a lot quicker, so I'm hoping it's not too long. Obviously, as I said, the biggest part of our business is lease land, so that's a risk to our business because you can lose a lease at any stage. I guess we just need to expand a little bit more to minimize that risk before we can look at doing full-time farming, but hopefully in the next five years.

Drew Radford:

Sarah, lastly, what would you say to somebody who's listening to this and contemplating applying for the scholarship?

Sarah McClean:

I would say don't contemplate, just do it. There's not much to lose in doing it. It takes maybe an hour or two of your time and it can really set you up to do what you love doing. It doesn't matter what level of farming business. Don't be put off if you think that your business is too small or it's just in the ideas phase. Even having it written down, even if you don't get the scholarship, putting your dream down on paper can be of a benefit anyway too.

Drew Radford:

Sarah McLean, you're doing an amazing job of pursuing your dream of being back on the land in between running a farm, being a mum, a neuropsychologist and also Young Farmers Scholarship recipient. Thank you so much for joining me in the Ag Vic Talk studio.

Sarah McClean:

Thank you very much, Drew.

Drew Radford:

For more information about the Upskill and Invest Young Farmers Scholarship and other Young Farmer resources visit [vic.gov.au/youngfarmers](https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/youngfarmers) or search Young Farmer Business Network on Facebook.

Speaker 1:

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