



# Travelling tutors

*Students in remote Australia are getting a hand from volunteer teachers through VISE*

It's no secret that many on the land have been doing it tough, however, rural mums have probably been doing it toughest.

In the outback, managing the children's education has usually fallen to the missus. And with many having to take on more duties as financial stress bites, Mike Stock, the CEO of Volunteers for Isolated Student Education (VISE), has been left wondering how many of them cope.

Now in its twentieth year, VISE provides some relief, placing volunteer tutors for six-week periods in remote properties to assist with the teaching load and give the kids a hand in areas they might be struggling with.

Last year, 217 VISE tutors assisted 333 Prep to Year 12 children from 217 families living as far afield as the Pilbara in Western Australia across the Northern Territory to Mt Isa in

Queensland and down into north western New South Wales.

The programme draws volunteers from a pool of 500 retired teachers. There are 250 in the field in any one year, providing around three million dollars worth of unpaid teaching time.

Some put in six weeks a year but others who have found the VISE programme suits them take three tours a year, or more.

“We have two volunteers who are permanently on the road, travelling from one property to the next,” Stock says. “It’s rewarding stuff. Many of the tutors go on to form strong relationships with the families they’ve visited and use VISE as a way of finding relevance and adventure in their retirement.”

“We provide tutors to the showmen that travel the outback. One of our volunteers ended up travelling the entire country with the Moscow Circus. She became so attached that they ended up taking her to South Africa.”

The group’s good work has won it some prominent allies with the Rural Education Programme (REP) – a charity run by the Fairfax, Baillieu and Calvert-Jones families – having injected over \$200,000 during VISE’s lifetime. Recently, REP donated \$50,000 to assist with tutors’ travelling expenses, which can quickly rack up.

“This will double the amount of families we’ll be able to help,” Stock says.

VISE usually asks for a portion of their tutors’ travel expenses to be paid for by the families visited, but often waives the cost if the situation is particularly tough. REP’s extra funds will encourage more – famously proud – Australian farming families to come forward and ask for a VISE tutor.

The kids have a normal school day starting at 8.30 am and ending at 2.30 pm.

“We work in support of distance education programmes. Our tutors work to the curriculum papers of the distance education school, These families rely on distance education and the Department’s focus on electronic delivery has improved the situation a lot. We’re no longer seeing remote students waiting weeks to receive a paper back from marking.”

As reading is fundamental to any type of learning, VISE has a group of tutors specially trained to assist students having problems.

“When a student runs into trouble, there’s nothing like having a tutor sitting there to help,” Stock says. “If a student is falling behind in literacy the tutor will provide intensive assistance with two one-hour sessions every day.”

VISE continues to explore new ways of delivering education to remote students. Stock recently visited Longreach in Queensland to conduct a pilot programme instructing parents in the bush on how to deliver reading skills, funded by the Baillieu Myer’s Yulgilbar Trust.

“This will double the number of families we’ll be able to help,” Stock says.

When he started VISE 20 years ago, years ago, Stock was surprised with the volume of the response he received.

“It’s not for everyone. The volunteers that really take to it quite like the idea of working in the bush, being at the frontier. We have a number of volunteers who have lost partners, VISE gives them a way to fill the gap.”

Others simply like to teach, “A true teacher never really forgets how to do it,” he says.

## VISE tutor Peter Sheahan

**D**own the road from Miles in the Western Downs of South East Queensland is Wandoan, where Peter Sheahan, a teacher of 30 year’s experience from the Catholic education system, has just completed a five-week stint for VISE, the first, he says, of many.

After finishing a second career post teaching in behaviour management, selling his business and taking some time off for travel, Sheahan was casting about for something constructive to do when he read a piece about VISE in the local paper. That began a three-year relationship with the organisation, culminating in Sheahan finding himself and his wife in this remote part of Queensland.

You can’t question his commitment, considering he’s based in Ringwood in Melbourne’s east, some three night’s drive from his tutoring placement in Wandoan.

The trip wasn’t as bad as you might imagine, he says, with the wife there to share the driving.

And the couple, both having grown up in rural Australia – Sheahan’s parents were publicans – has found it refreshing to get back to the bush.

While Sheahan has been tutoring the children, 12-year-old twin girls, in English, maths and science his wife has been making herself busy

about the property, she was driving a ride on mower when we spoke.

Sheahan describes the children as a delight, very independent and resourceful as a result of their rural upbringing. They’ll be off to boarding school next year, the last of a tribe of kids to be home tutored at the property.

Mum, says Sheahan, has done a great job of tutoring the twins, both being quite advanced in their studies for their age, they’re also very adept at jumping from subject to subject.

His students were still buzzing when we spoke to Sheahan, having returned from a cluster muster in Miles the day before. For city folk, that’s a meeting of all the distance education students and their teachers and parents in the region. It’s a rare treat for the kids to actually talk face-to-face to others of their own age and an opportunity for parents and teachers to have a good old natter.

Sheahan is looking forward to a busy retirement, foreseeing one or two tutoring stints a year with VISE, fitting those around other commitments.

“The family has made us feel very comfortable here and the cooking has been great,” he says.

## VISE tutor Lyn Botterill

**W**hen Lyn Botterill retired from teaching, she and husband Norman were looking at hitching a caravan to the car and joining the grey nomads touring around Australia. But after finding out about VISE she quickly decided that tutoring with the organisation would be a much more constructive and entertaining option.

The result has been seven great years bouncing around outback Queensland (she’s based in Mackay) and forming firm relationships with the good people there.

Lyn doesn’t drive but luckily husband Norman, a retired diesel fitter, does and the pair has put in many miles, travelling to all corners of Queensland and even venturing into the Northern Territory.

Lyn’s enthusiasm for the VISE programme sees her take three to four tutoring placements each year.

Presently, she is completing a stay at Elwell Station, close to Prairie in northern central Queensland, after which it will be back to Mackay to rest up before another trip in July.

She tends to go back to the same families and Lyn’s worked with all of the three Read boys at Elwell, the eldest two having gone to boarding school, leaving her with young Matty. Much of her work is concentrated on his reading.

“Mike Stock’s (CEO of VISE) English literacy programme is a great way of filling in the gaps for kids who are having trouble with their reading, I’ve has a lot of success with it,” she says.

She says that mother Tanya has done a great job with administering the distance education curriculum but it’s nice to give her a break.

“The kids in the outback are all very polite, but you just know they’d much rather be out working with dad.

“What continually impresses me is how resourceful and independent the people out here are, and that’s something that characterises the students’ approach to their education as well.

“I find it fulfilling to work one-on-one or with just a few students at a time, and it’s good to be able to help out mums like Tanya,” she says.