

Eulogy for Dr Amabel Fulton

Amabel Fulton was respected by all those who knew her, and she was loved by all those close to her. She was a very generous and caring person who fully understood the importance of respect for others, the need for effective social process, and the significance of family. She was a dedicated and devoted mother, and we are very mindful of the impact her passing will have on her three children, Tom, Ben and Sarah.

It is perhaps fitting that we should be in this building today to commemorate Amabel. Amabel went to school here, the old Hobart High School, or Matriculation College. As she did at most things, Amabel excelled in her studies, being top in the state in a number of subjects, not surprisingly including psychology. Although she did not initially pursue her studies in the social sciences, preferring instead to do an agriculture degree, inevitably she was drawn back to complete a doctorate in rural social research, to make an intellectual case for something that is blindingly obvious – why social issues are important in the lives of farmers – or as she would say, family farm businesses.

I was very fortunate to have supervised her PhD, and I am very pleased that her doctorate was able to be awarded to her, even if only a few months ago.

In the 12 years or so I have known her, she has made a big impact on my life. She was much responsible for my coming to Tasmania in the first place, over seven years ago. On settling here, she was instrumental in getting me grounded, in getting me connected, and in reassuring me when times were tough. I valued her friendship greatly and I will miss her much.

Being in this building is important, too, because it was here at this school that Amabel Townshend first met David Fulton, having been introduced by their friend, Tom McCardle. Amabel and David have traveled a long way together, from being childhood sweethearts, to being partners in life and business.

Over that time, there have been several traumas they have had to face together, including of course, the diagnosis of breast cancer. Determined not to let it get to her, Amabel doggedly fought on until to the last moment. In the last few weeks of her very full life, and while she had taken up residence in the Whittle Ward, Amabel was still negotiating to do a presentation at a conference and was still trying to complete the writing of a book chapter. Ever since her initial diagnosis, Amabel maintained as much of a normal life as possible, juggling chemotherapy treatments with her other activities, in much the same way as some people might juggle picking up the kids from school, or going to the dentist for a routine checkup.

Her organizational and facilitation skills were legendary. But she always had time for her friends and family, and the Fulton household in Warwick Street had a constant stream of visitors dropping in, often unannounced, for a coffee, a glass of wine, or for dinner.

In fact I am reminded of how much the Fulton household is like many farm households – with the kitchen being the centre of activity, not just of cooking and eating, but of family life and business. So many discussions have been had around that kitchen table in Warwick Street.

David and Amabel developed a business together, Rural Development Services. It too was hatched around that kitchen table. RDS has gone from strength to strength, and has grown in size. While once contained, and then constrained within the office next to the Warwick Street house, RDS now has a prime location in the Hobart CBD.

Now, with Tom Lewis as its CEO, and with new staff it will continue to provide private research, project management and extension services to Tasmania's and Australia's rural communities and industries – in short, it will continue the work that Amabel started. This is just one of the many legacies Amabel has left.

It would be impossible for me to outline all the contributions Amabel has made, but it is worth mentioning a few of them. Each of us here knew Amabel in our own way, and in our own context, and we may not be fully aware of the diversity of her work or the extent of the impact she has had, and will continue to have.

Amabel had a major involvement with the Australasia Pacific Extension Network, or APEN, playing a variety of roles including being National Secretary and Tasmanian President at various times. Together with me, she organized the APEN conference in 2003. This was a very significant highlight of my time with Amabel.

Also for APEN, Amabel ran several training courses that assisted the professional development of many young people involved in agricultural extension and natural resource management. These courses have been run all around Australia.

Amabel has been a major influence in getting the role of women in agriculture appreciated. For example, she was a member of the Federal Government's Regional Women's Advisory Council. Much of her research and advocacy work was about creating awareness of farms as family businesses rather than as singular farmers.

Together with Cathy McGowan, Jeanette Long and others, through a range of professional and personal development courses, Amabel assisted many women to increase their effectiveness at being heard and having influence – at home, in their family farm businesses, in their local communities, and at a national level.

In fact, Amabel had such a positive influence on the lives of so many women that many have written in to acknowledge their appreciation for what Amabel has done for them and for others. One of them, Sally, wrote that she had found a poem that she thought was really fitting for Amabel:

*The tide recedes, but leaves behind bright seashells on the sand.
The sun goes down, but gentle warmth still lingers on the land.
The music stops, and yet it echoes on in sweet refrains.
For every joy that passes, something beautiful remains.*

Sally went on to say that the beauty in what remains is Amabel's legacy, and the lasting effect of her influence in our own personal memories and on our own lives.

Amabel received many awards in her life, including the 2008 Telstra Tasmanian Business Women's Award in the Innovation category. She was also a finalist in the Tasmanian 2008 Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation's Rural Women's Award.

Just as these awards recognized Amabel's contributions, I ask that you join with me in standing and clapping to thank Amabel for her contribution to our society and for her contribution to our own lives.

Prof Frank Vanclay
20 August 2009