

## **Nikki Hellyer, agronomist, Southern Farming Systems co-ordinator**

My beginning in agriculture is a bit different to many other women who are involved and working in the industry.

I didn't grow up on a farm, I haven't fallen in love with a farmer and until five years ago, I barely comprehended where my milk came from for breakfast.

So from that, how did I end up working in the dairy industry? Good question. All I can put it down to is a series of events that helped me 'fall' into a career that I love.

After completing Year 12 in Traralgon, I started university in Melbourne. Within the first semester of my arts and law-based degree, I realised that this was really not for me. I had always liked animals and had a collection of pets at home so with that I decided that I wanted to become a vet!

Easier said than done. As most people realise, Veterinary Science is more difficult to get into than a medical degree and having taken no science and mathematics units in Year 12, it wasn't looking good on paper to any science faculty in Australia.

Being me, I didn't let that worry me too much. I've always had the ability to not let the finer details deter me from one of my latest grand schemes. My careers counsellor did a bit of research and discovered that Agricultural Science was the only relevant degree that didn't need Year 12 science and then I could use that as a stepping stone to jump over to vet Science. So she enrolled me in it.

It was tough. My first year I really struggled. I had the double whammy of the science units I didn't really understand; plus I was mostly surrounded by kids off farms. They took to our practical classes like a fish to water while I was the drowning cat. This just motivated me more to work harder because, in all honesty, I just wanted to get out of there as quick as I could!

Like a lot of people, I didn't see agriculture as a 'serious' or fulfilling career option and underrated the value of it.

But over time I began to look at agriculture in a different way. I stopped seeing it as a means to an end and started seeing it as a place where a really fulfilling career is available to any one who wants it.

To me, working in agriculture is serious business. The way I see it we, as an industry, deal in two of the most important fundamentals of our society – how we feed society and the land that sustains that food. Without these, our communities would not exist. I feel if I can make a positive contribution to this then this is the most fulfilling career out there.

I am now 25 and have been working out in the 'real world' for two years as an agronomist and pasture manager.

I'm not going to sugar-coat it – a job in agriculture for young women can be tough. At times, it is a harsh industry and I've had my share of moments of intimidation, bullying and not being taken seriously because of my age.

Being a friendly person but not particularly assertive, and very hard on myself to boot, I took these moments particularly hard and dwelled on them for months afterwards. This is the ugly side of the industry which I believe is marginal.

More often than not though, I have had fantastic experiences with great people who took the time to give me guidance and to openly teach me what they know. I appreciate every one of them for that.

So six years into what I'm sure will be a lifelong involvement in agriculture, there are two major things I think it has taught me.

The first is that anything is possible when you put your mind to it. Take a risk and don't take the easy road just because it's easier. What you see today as an enormous canyon in the road, a colossal mistake or unfair circumstances, will make you the stronger person tomorrow.

The second thing is that no matter what you do in life, make sure it's your passion. Do something you feel is of consequence and benefit to other people. It's the bigger

picture mentality and there are so many young people in this industry who reflect this everyday in their work. Knowing this, I think the bigger picture for agriculture as a whole is looking pretty exciting and I feel really lucky to be a part of it.