



Robbers give back

Many a successful personal and business partnership was born of a residential college at UNE. And so it is for professional company director Heith Mackay-Cruise, who completed a Bachelor of Economics in 1991.

“Robb College was the making of me as a person,” says Heith. “I had a fantastic time socially, academically and culturally, and my best friends are from my Robb College days.”

Coming as he did from a city background, Heith found his first taste of country living in 1988 quite an awakening. “I very soon developed from my peers a much more profound appreciation of how tough it is on the land, especially during a severe drought,” he says. “That still resonates with me and is just as pertinent in today’s climate.”

This is why Heith, now a non-executive chairman of UP Education and non-executive director of Vision Australia,

has generously supported the Robb College Foundation’s Leaders Scholarship Appeal to boost scholarship offerings for the college’s 60th year. “It’s incredibly important to give back to the Robb community and those who supported me,” Heith says. “My mother and grandfather paid for me to go through university and I’m not sure we would have been able to afford my final year at college had it not been for the Sinclair-Wilson scholarship. I know how important such financial support is.”

Efforts to boost Robb College scholarship pathways have been met by similar generosity from many “Robbers”, according to foundation chairman Geoff Perry.

“Since 2016 we have doubled our scholarship funds to \$550,000, with further pledges of \$134,000 given,” says Geoff, who was a Robb College resident himself in 1975 and 1976, and later a resident tutor. “Ideally, we would like to reach \$1 million over the next two years, so that we can double the scholarships we offer to students by 2022. By then we hope construction of the new college will be underway [the original Robb structures are soon to be rebuilt or refurbished]. This is part of a bigger plan to lift opportunities for our students, not only to help them succeed in their academic studies here at UNE, but also to forge links through our alumni to succeed in their future careers.”

With the majority of Robb College students coming from rural and regional backgrounds [70% study agriculture or rural science], Geoff says there is a serious need for support during the current drought. The appeal is a means for alumni to not only change the lives of individuals, but also their communities.

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“There are many ways we can help rural and regional Australia through the current crisis—like buying bales of hay or giving to emergency crisis funds—but these are short-term fixes,” Geoff says. “Scholarships not only immediately help families; they are also a perpetual investment in the future of rural communities and economies. They help families to employ others to replace their sons or daughters while they are doing their degree, which helps to maintain employment in rural towns, and that has a multiplier effect.

“Our scholarships also help the recipients to remain on campus, complete their degrees faster, and to return to work in their rural communities. A lot of our alumni become the backbone of regional and rural Australia. They go on to run our farms, to be the agronomists, lawyers, dentists, doctors, teachers, nurses and accountants that rural communities need. The challenges our young people face are large. They need to be armed with the best know-how, science and ability to apply those tools to improve our farms, professions and enterprises for a sustainable future.”

By combining old and new scholarships, the Robb College Foundation has established a scholarship pathway for each year a student resides in Robb. It hopes that offering scholarships to first year, as well as continuing, and more senior students will encourage residents to stay in college longer and to develop their leadership capabilities. The

current Sinclair-Wilson, Alice Coventry, Robb Leadership and Darren Ellis scholarships will be lifted or retained and a new Wal and Pam Whalley Senior Fellows Scholarship launched—with the aim of the pathway covering at least half the student’s annual residential costs. The fund is perpetual and it is hoped that by 2022 eight students will receive scholarships every year.

In reality, the extensive Robb alumni network acts to assist students throughout their life. “Our alumni have a history of casually supporting one another in their professional lives,” says Geoff. “We are looking to formalise that by introducing mentoring, work experience and graduate recruitment programs that take advantage of our 60-year foundation of relationships and a network that links metropolitan areas to rural and regional Australia. Being a Robber can have far-reaching impacts.”

With UNE having announced a \$300 million commitment to residential college improvements over the next 10 years, and Robb reconstruction underway, a new era is about to dawn for the college.

“The spirit of a college is much more than its physical structures; it is the friends for life and sense of community that the students benefit from,” Geoff says. “We have refocused the foundation’s efforts on our students, to help provide them with a positive, safe and exciting academic experience, plus opportunities for their future careers. The scholarship pathways will be an important part of this, and reinforce the camaraderie and support for which Robb is known.”

Geoff says the need has never been greater. “We had the largest number of applicants for our scholarships in 2019 that I have ever seen, and going through the applications was heart-wrenching,” he says. “The need has only increased; a lot of these students are putting themselves through uni because their families cannot support them. Our talented young people, who are our future problem-solvers, should not be handicapped by financial need. We need to accelerate their skills and uptake into careers to find pragmatic solutions that add value.”

“So if you are an old Robber or have a strong association with Robb College and want to give back, there’s no better way or time than to donate to our appeal. It will help four, growing to eight families right now and rural communities well into the future.” #

Robb College is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2020 and you can help support the scholarship appeal. Donations to the Robb College Leaders Scholarship Appeal are fully tax-deductible and can be made online through the UNE Office of Advancement, Communications and Events. Further information is available at robbcollege.com/donate

Opposite: An architect’s impression of the future Robb College development.