



## A LIFE-SAVING SAFETY NET

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**THE** removal of government subsidies in the mid-1980s threw the agricultural sector in New Zealand into crisis. Interest rates were on the move, commodity prices were depressed, and farmers suddenly found themselves in difficulty with their bankers and stock firms. Government took the view that the farming sector had to become competitive and be self-supporting.

In North Canterbury, a farmer's wife saw the signs. Husbands were depressed and weren't talking. They were spending more time out on the

farm and not coming home to their families. Some were taking the final step and committing suicide.

Farm advocacy groups were not addressing the issue, so a group of farming wives, together with Rotarian Grant McFadden, a senior policy advisor to government on farming issues, and representatives

from banks and stock firms formed The North Canterbury Rural Support Trust. The trust supported farmers and farming families, attended the difficult meetings with banks and stock firms and organised community events designed to bond communities in difficult times and keep everybody talking to each other. At times, all the

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counsellors could do was help ease the farming families off the land. During those times, 1000 farming families walked off the farms.

The huge 1992 Canterbury snow storm was a big test for the trust as it sought to support farmers and communities, who were without electricity for three weeks. There was national interest in what was happening in Canterbury, and in the early 2000s government moved to replicate the Canterbury model nationally. Fourteen rural support trusts were set up. Government also moved to codify the definition of adverse events at three levels and set out criteria for tax relief and government assistance. Papanui Rotarian Doug Archbold, a retired farmer, joined the support trust in 2001 and has been its chairman for the past eight years. Doug describes the work as hugely rewarding, especially when you have helped prevent another farmer suicide. It is, nevertheless, very time consuming.

He describes the support and advice as economic, climatic and personal. The trusts often have experts either on the board or in the networks, who are their eyes and ears on the ground, but they do not hesitate to refer cases where they feel professional help is required.

In more recent times, many of the trusts have been dealing with the

impacts of severe drought coupled with falling dairy prices. Other trusts have had to also deal with the impact of earthquakes and weather-related events.

Thirty years later, Grant is still heavily involved with The North Canterbury Rural Support Trust. Doug retires as

chair in May 2018.

Doug was awarded the Queens Service Medal QSM in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2014 for his services to farming and both he and Grant were recognised with Paul Harris Fellowships by the Rotary Club of Papanui in 2017.



**ABOVE:** Doug Archbold



**LEFT:** Grant McFadden

