

## **Shared Journey**

### **1. Can you tell us a little about yourselves and life on the farm outside Yass?**

Carmel came to the farm about 37 years ago – she was only supposed to stay 18 months as the first full-time dietitian at the local hospital and somehow never left. Nearly 40 years later, here she is. Jayne grew up in a small country town, headed off to university, and found herself drawn right back to the country life she loved. These days, both run the property together as women farmers, alongside their dietetics work. They've got a commercial Hereford cattle breeding and grazing enterprise.

### **2. What has it been like sharing both family life and the dietetics profession as mother and daughter?**

Carmel remembers all those years of dropping Jayne off at childcare, wishing she could just be with her. Now, after 12 years of working closely together through Advantage Nutrition, they've more than made up for it. The downside? Family dinners can get a bit painful for everyone else at the table – when the two of them get going on work, no one else has a clue what they're talking about.

### **3. Carmel – how did it feel when Jayne decided to follow a path into dietetics?**

Honestly, Carmel's first reaction was "no, keep going with medicine!" Jayne had been studying at ANU and Carmel thought she should stick with it. But then Jayne came and spent three months learning about clients over her holidays, and that was that. The patients loved her – they wanted Jayne instead of Carmel. It was wonderful, Carmel says, to think she'd finally managed to clone herself. It just took 25 years and a bit of education.

### **4. Jayne – did having a mum who was a dietitian influence your career journey?**

Jayne has had plenty of different career ideas over the years – she admits she thinks things through to the very end and beyond. But growing up watching her mum work showed her just how varied dietetics could be. When she was doing her undergraduate in medical science and her focus on genetics, she'd come across some fascinating rare conditions. When chatting with her mum at dinner, her mum would go, "Oh, I've got a client with that." The way genetics and nutrition could intersect with the real person sitting in front of you – that was what really hooked her.

### **5. How would you describe the similarities and differences in your approaches to dietetics?**

Carmel describes Jayne as the best clone she could manage – after 12 years as her mentor and boss, Jayne has picked up a lot of her good habits and systems. But Jayne has brought something fresh to the table too: a real flair for technology, and a depth of knowledge in physiology, genetics, and pharmacology that has genuinely strengthened the practice. Their approach is probably a little different to most dietitians – they come from a very science-heavy and medical focus. Etiology planning and understanding the disease comes first, then they layer in everything else: living situations, eating for emotional or social reasons, preferences,

intolerances, all of it. The NDIS work is a great example of how both skill sets come together – you need the clinical rigour to justify and understand what's going on, but you also need to come up with real-world solutions for people's day-to-day lives and social and functional outcomes.

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## **Career Pathways**

### **6. Carmel – what first inspired you to become a dietitian more than 30 years ago?**

It's actually closer to 39 years ago now – Carmel's showing her age, as she says. She was doing her undergraduate in applied science in Queensland, and her thesis project was on the effect of tartrazine – an artificial orange-red dye – on mice. Eighteen months of biochemistry and histopathology, and she was absolutely hooked. That project helped get her into QUT (Queensland University of Technology), which was no small thing – only 15 graduates from across the whole state were accepted each year, through a thesis presentation, an oral interview, and the marks to back it all up. Her grandfather, who'd lived through the depression and the great wars, had told her: do something for a career that involves food - 'people always need to eat'. She took that advice to heart. Now she produces food as a farmer and works with its effects on people as a dietitian – she doesn't think that's quite what he had in mind, but here she is.

### **7. Over your decades in the profession, how have you seen dietetics evolve?**

A lot has changed. Since COVID, telehealth has been a massive leap forward in how dietetic counselling gets delivered. There's been so much more research and development across different areas too – dietetics is still a relatively young profession, when you think about it. So there's always something new to keep up with, which makes it challenging and exciting all at once. The big challenge in recent years? The rise of misinformation and influencers in the nutrition and dietetics space. It's enormous, and it's growing. How dietitians reclaim that ground, Carmel isn't entirely sure. She does believe that dietitians hold a high level of credibility when people are genuinely looking for reliable nutrition information.

Jayne adds that one of the biggest evolutions in her career has been the creation of the NDIS in 2013. Carmel has worked in disability since Jayne was about two – nearly 30 years – and the NDIS was something they had fought and lobbied for hard, after years working within the institutionalised system. It has completely revolutionised allied health job opportunities across Australia. Carmel was particularly proud to advocate through DAA (Dietitians Association of Australia) to get dietitians included in the NDIS – that wasn't a given at the beginning.

### **8. Jayne – what initially led you to study Medicine, and what inspired the switch to dietetics?**

For the record, Jayne was in Bachelor Medical Science, not Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery – though up until her second year she was absolutely heading towards medicine. She'd applied for the GAMSAT and was choosing subjects with that in mind. But watching her large undergraduate class start to split into different streams, she noticed that the people being

selected for medicine tended to fit a particular mould – and she realised quickly that she was not that mould. She couldn't just rote learn information; it had to be relevant to her. When she could take her genetics knowledge and connect it to diet and nutrition, watching how it all presented in a person – that's when she got very passionate. In the end she did six years of study: a three-year Bachelor of Medical Science, a Graduate Diploma of Nutrition at the University of Canberra, and then a Masters of Nutrition and Dietetics, also at Canberra University.

### **9. Was there a defining moment when you realised dietetics was the right fit?**

That three-month placement helping Carmel out with her clients was it. Jayne loves that she gets to surprise friends and clients with the scope of what a dietitian actually does – it's liberating to be able to say, "we can change that, we can target that, we can put something in place," rather than people assuming a dietitian is just going to tell them to eat more vegetables. There's so much more to it than that.

### **10. What has it been like building your own career while also sharing a profession with your mum?**

Jayne was very lucky, she says, that her mum is a genuinely excellent dietitian. Providing exposure to Dietetics at a very high level. Growing up, she was privileged to hear stories about some of the best dietitians in Australia and the incredible things they were doing – particularly within the NDIS. This year, Jayne has set up her own business, Advantage Dietetics, branching out from Carmel's Advantage Nutrition so the two of them can offer more to the community as parallel businesses, each with a slightly different focus.

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## **Life Beyond Dietetics**

### **11. How does farm life shape your perspectives on food, nutrition, and health?**

It grounds you. As a farmer, you see firsthand how hard Australian farmers work – without subsidy – to produce some of the highest quality food in the world, feeding not just this country but many others. The fact that you can have a cow eating grass and turn that into the highest quality protein for human consumption – Carmel still finds that astounding. Life on the farm has always meant a simple diet attuned to basic food groups. The rise of ultra-processed food is, in her words, a crying shame, when there is so much genuinely good, wholesome food available.

For Jayne, farming life helps her apply her knowledge in a very practical way. She finds it fascinating – and a little maddening – how little most people understand about the journey food takes to end up on their plate. There is so much misinformation out there about red meat, animal ethics, organics, intolerances, farming practices. As she puts it: no one loves their animals more than a farmer does. Jayne believes that food labelling laws need to be a lot stronger to protect what is genuinely wholesome food from what is ultra-processed food greenwashed to look like the real thing. For example, oat milk is not the same as cows milk, meat is not the same as artificial meat.

## **12. What does balancing life as both farmers and practising dietitians look like for you?**

Flexible, but not always easy. The farm runs on its own timetable – it doesn't care about your caseload – and learning to work around that has been a big adjustment. Carmel was always the off-farm cash cow (her words) and has only recently had to balance the two roles. But she says it brings a lovely balance to life. When you're farming, you're out in the fresh air, moving at the cow's pace. The cows don't talk back and they like her music choices. When you are a dietitian, you're going a hundred miles an hour, staring at a screen, dealing with problems all day. Farm problems exist too, but they're in a completely different environment.

For Jayne, being able to dip in and out of both worlds is what she loves most. When you've had a run of really complex clinical cases, the farm is grounding in a way nothing else is. A farm day might mean ten hours on a motorbike chasing cattle, which is exhausting in an entirely different way. And living rurally, you're not really worrying about first-world problems. You're worried about droughts and water and real things. That keeps you very grounded and very real, which is a wonderful thing in an age of constant social media and information overload.

## **13. Has living and working regionally influenced your professional experiences?**

For Jayne, it's the only professional life she's really known, apart from placements during study. Even during her uni years she was home most weekends, helping Carmel with admin, doing farm work, and generally keeping herself connected to the country. She is passionate about regional health services and genuinely shocked that, even as someone who lives regionally, she still spends most of her professional time travelling to city areas. The hole in service provision for regional communities is still enormous.

Carmel came at it from the other direction – she grew up in the city and landed in rural New South Wales as her very first job. She was the first full-time dietitian at the hospital and admits she was a bit of a novelty; no one quite knew what to do with her. Over time she moved up to work as the regional advisor for the Central West Area Health Service, eventually building a team of up to 16 dietitians. They started with food service – because the hospitals were the main hub – then moved into community health, then health promotion. When she retired from the Department of Health and set up private practice, she did the maths: two hours from her home, in every direction allowed her to access to Canberra, Goulburn, Parkes, Forbes, Cowra, Bathurst, Orange. There was sufficient population that could sustain a private practice if willing to drive.

Working regionally, you mend and make do. You develop a huge range of skills very quickly because you're dealing with diverse settings and not many resources. Regional people are pragmatic – if something doesn't work, you move on and try something else. And Carmel realises now she was doing a version of telehealth long before it had a name – following up clients by phone and email across vast distances, making technology work for her wherever she could. She was one of the first to have an old brick phone which to operate needed to be on the roof of the car and plugged into the cigarette lighter for power to get reception.

## **14. Are there any unique lessons farming has taught you that also apply to dietetics?**

The overlap is actually pretty good. Their professional job is to manage weight for people. Their

farming job is to put weight on cows. There's quite a bit of crossover. They manage the nutritional health and wellbeing of their cattle and their clients simultaneously. If anything, they've probably applied more dietetics to farming than the other way around – the poor cows get vitamin replacements, protein intake tracking, and are weighed rather too often. Classing weight scores on cattle is very similar to a subjective assessment for people. The general principles of slowing down and observing apply to both, and so does the satisfaction of watching good nutrition do its job.

#### **15. What do you love most about your lifestyle?**

Carmel: the ability to control her own destiny. She's watched plenty of restructures happen in the Department of Health and seen jobs disappear. Early on she realised her job security wasn't in the position she held – it was in the skills she had as a dietitian. She loves applying her skills, knowledge and experience, and gets enormous satisfaction from the care and compassion that come with the work. Even the small wins – fixing someone's constipation, sorting out their reflux, getting their weight into a healthy range – make a real difference, especially for clients with disability.

Jayne loves being able to combine the two lives and move between them. She loves dietetics but is conscious that health professional fatigue is real when you've been dealing with complex cases and complex living situations. The farm is the antidote to that. It's grounding, it's physical, and it's real. You can actually switch off, which is a rare and wonderful thing.

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### **Mother & Daughter Connection**

#### **16. What do you admire most about each other, both personally and professionally?**

Carmel: Jayne is her daughter. She's beautiful. She loves her. She remembers when Jayne was born. Professionally, Jayne has grown into a very competent dietitian and businesswoman, and Carmel could not be prouder. Watching Jayne set up Advantage Dietetics this year, running alongside Advantage Nutrition, is just wonderful. It's only been a month, but it's already proving its worth. Carmel can start moving towards retirement. Jayne can fly.

Jayne: Where to start. Resilience and capacity – Carmel operates at an extraordinarily high level, both personally and professionally. As the saying goes, you can't be what you can't see. Jayne has had the enormous privilege of watching her mum build something remarkable – her business, her reputation, the impact she's had on patients and other dietitians – and that shaped what Jayne believed was possible for herself. She's not sure she would have ended up in this profession if her only exposure to dietetics had been the textbook version.

#### **17. Have there been moments where your careers have brought you closer together?**

Carmel was Jayne's boss. Jayne needed money to live. That's one way to put it. But more seriously – they've always been close, and the interesting shift now is that they're starting to separate in a new and exciting way. The NDIS has been a great shared passion. Ten years of an ever-changing system that they've had to tackle together, needing both their skill sets – Jayne's

freshness, technology skills, and different way of thinking, and Carmel's deep knowledge, skills and experience of what actually works for people with disability. The NDIS has been the thing that truly catalysed their collaboration. And now, ten years on, they are in a place where they can begin to devolve that into two distinct, parallel companies.

### **18. What does Mother's Day mean to you both?**

For Carmel it is a time to reflect on being a mother which one of her most important job roles. One of her greatest joys is spending time with her children.

Jayne is away at a friend's hen's party on Mother's Day this year, so perhaps not the smoothest timing. For Jayne, it's about acknowledging those who came before us every day, and not just on one day. With dietetics being such a female dominated field, while it does bring some challenges, there is also a great sense of community for everyone to support each other.

### **19. What advice would you give to other women balancing family, career, and life in regional communities?**

Carmel: It can be done. She and Jayne are living proof that you can have a very successful long-term career as a dietitian in a rural setting. Technology has changed the game completely – telehealth has opened up so much. Carmel's come to believe that trying to completely separate work and life is a bit of a myth, at least for her. Her day has work in it, and fun, and business, and emptying the dishwasher. It's all intermingled. Making the most of each day, built to be sustainable – that's the goal.

Jayne: Know that the fundamentals still apply – you just might have to get creative and apply them differently. If travel is the sticking point, lean into telehealth. Manage the small stuff because on a day-to-day basis it adds up. And take care of yourself. She sees a lot of her peers – women starting and growing their own businesses – hit serious burnout very quickly. Women are told they can do it all, and they can, but it is bloody hard. Self-care is not a dirty word. You need to be able to breathe as a person, and you will be a better professional for it.

### **20. What legacy or impact do you hope your shared story leaves for future generations of dietitians?**

Carmel and Jayne hope it inspires dietitians to enjoy their careers and understand just how many different ways there are to be a dietitian. The problem-solving skills the profession builds are not just useful in dietetics – they help you navigate every area of life. When Carmel started out, she genuinely thought they were going to crack diabetes and heart disease. Fix it all. Now she feels a bit like the David Attenborough of dietetics – looking back and going, we knew what to do, why didn't we do it? Why has health and wellbeing gotten worse? There is still an enormous amount of work to be done, which means plenty of work for dietitians well into the future. AI will not be doing the jobs that genuinely skilled dietitians do in pulling together person-centred health and wellbeing recommendations for real people.