

Picture: Adam Armstrong



Art blooms in the bush

Grazier Stephen Tully and his wife Annabel, the acclaimed landscape artist, have been married 12 years, have five kids and live on 80,000ha sheep and cattle property, Bunginderry, near Quilpie. Here they host regular art camps to showcase the Australian bush to visiting artists, writes Leanne Edmestone

Stephen Tully, 40: There was no ifs, buts or maybes – I was going to be a farmer from about the age of two. (Bunginderry) has been handed down from my father, but for generations we've been in a very similar area. I love the land and yes, I do love the stock, but I also love the independence and I love, ah, not blaming anyone else but myself. You've got to problem-solve. I'm good at nearly everything because that's what you have to do. You have to fix stuff, you have to muster, build stuff.

Annabel was a teacher in Charleville, 300km away. I had a group of friends and we used to go in there and socialise, and we met through those things. We have five children, from four to 10 years – two sons, three daughters.

If they want to come farming I will be excited by it, but if they want to do another profession I will be excited by that as well. I want them to do something that they love, not something that they feel they have to do.

I've always denied (that I'm an artistic person) but I have started to express some of those things I didn't actually realise I had. We live in a family where art and creativity is encouraged throughout. The best part about art is that it's a form of expression that breaks our traditional barriers.

We have the artist camps here where artists from all over Australia, from all walks of life, will turn up together and after living with us, seeing what we express through what we do and what we say, they learn more about farming that week than they probably do about art, though that's what they come here for. They have full

appreciation of it all, whereas if I went up to some stranger and started going on about farming and what we do from the environmental side or the production side or the animal welfare side, they would close their ears and wouldn't listen – but art opens those doors.

We've both got strong personalities, all of our kids have got strong personalities. My joke is I married *one* strong-willed woman and now I've got *four* of them to deal with.

I love my job. I love everything about it. I just wish it would pay more sometimes. We've been overseas, we've been on holidays. But when I'm here I feel I can cope with anything. (It's) probably a sense of comfort.

We have had some big tests on our relationship. Annabel survived breast cancer twice, we've been through 10 years of drought. We know we need each other, we work very hard to keep each other going very well, and we bounce off each other. You've got to make sure you remember why you are together.

Annabel Tully, 39: I met (Stephen) at a little town called Eromanga, which is 1100km west of Brisbane. Good old B&S Ball. I was on my way home actually, I was just heading out and someone introduced us. I was a teacher in

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Charleville. The boys and girls would come in (from Quilpie) and we'd play up on the weekends and he was always around.

Always, always hanging out, good mates.

Then I said I was going overseas and all of a sudden, I had this person sitting next to me very, very closely. A little shadow following me around. I was a bit of a

socialite so I needed, what's the word, a constant hint that he was there, I think.

I'm from Brookfield (Brisbane) originally. When I first left school – I was a bit of an outdoors girl, the thought of doing more study was a little bit too much for me, so I started to spread my wings and headed west. I worked as a governess on a station near Dirranbandi and I really loved it. So I went back, did my teaching degree and then came back out again. I thought I wanted to be in the bush, I wanted to travel – whether it be Australia or overseas. Teaching's a really good, easy job to have.

Because I was an itinerant teacher, there's very few schools in that southwest region that I hadn't been to. I love, embrace the bush. The lifestyle really, really suits what I like to do. I miss my girlfriends, the regular catch-up with friends and family, and I still miss that the most and probably always will.

What are (Stephen's) characteristics? He's independent, he's intelligent, he's very family-orientated which is very important to me, he's funny, he's witty, and he's humble. I'm probably a bit more of an artistic, adventurous personality. I'm always, 'oh come on, let's go do this, why don't we do this?', and he's like 'well, who's going to pay the bills, where are we going to have a home?' He's a really good leveler for me.

Three of the five children are home-schooled through the Charleville School of Distance Education. All five will be home-schooled. It's not by choice, it's because we live 80km from a school. But it's gorgeous. I'm a really big player in their education and you know what goes on in the school room, and they get to be at home. It's a really supportive way to grow up.

The biggest driving force behind (the camps) is as a remote artist, I tend to work alone. There's not a lot of artistic influence, there's not a lot of cultural events, there's not a lot of go-tos for arts stimulation. It's a double advantage – a) it would be great for me to have some artistic influence around me and b), we're able to share the awesome outback open channel country landscapes with other people who want to come here.

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