Merrie Carlshausen

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

GRDC investment, farming communities, succession planning, family dynamics, rural financial counseling, Liebe group, research development, wheat belt, family meetings, collaboration, innovation, women in agriculture, soil health, mentorship, future innovation

**SPEAKERS**

Oli Le Lievre, **Merrie Carlshausen**

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:01

This series is a GRDC investment that takes you behind the scenes as we sit down with some of the people shaping our grain industry, uncovering their journeys, learning more about their passions and the projects that are part of their everyday. We are over in Western Australia. This is now the third part of what has been the GRDC In Conversation Podcast. We’ve covered Southern Australia, we’ve covered the north across NSW and Qld, and now we’ve headed west to meet with all sorts of growers, advisers, researchers and people involved in the Aussie grains industry. Welcome to the next series.

**Oli Le Lievre** 00:44

Now this conversation in Dalwallinu is probably one of my favorite conversations that I've had as part of both the GRDC in conversation, but also the Humans of Agriculture podcast, because it's people like Merrie Carlshausen who are just the heart and soul of farming communities and just incredible people, and we're so lucky to have them and get to know them in agriculture. Now, Merrie shares her journey from nursing to becoming an integral part of her farming community in Western Australia. She discusses her background in psychotherapy and how it's influenced her work with farming families, particularly in conversations around succession planning and family dynamics, Merrie emphasises the importance of collaboration and innovation and the role of women in agriculture that not just through her time, but also through the next generation that are coming through as well. She highlights her experiences with the Rural Financial Counseling Services and her contributions to the Liebe group, focusing on research and development in farming practices. Throughout this conversation, Merrie shares many valuable insights on the challenges and rewards of the significance of family relationships and the need to be continually learning and adapting in the ag. sector. So we're good to go. Merrie, if you are? How are you feeling?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 01:53

Yeah, a little bit nervous, yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 01:55

No, don't be. You would have talked in front of so many people.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 01:59

Yeah, I have, I never actually enjoy it that much.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:03

Oh, really?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 02:04

Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:05

Just to do it to help others.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 02:06

Yeah. Do it because I have information that I really believe is useful, and it's not very common. It's not the sort of background that I've studied in is not common sort of information, so people benefit from it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 02:23

And so, Merrie, are you able to tell me a little bit about the region here? Like…as for your reference, it's my first time up through this area of the wheat belt in Western Australia. It's looking amazing this year.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 02:35

Yes, it is. And this region is the Dalwallinu Shire, and it's one of the biggest wheat growing shires in the state, this year, where we've had a later rain, later germination of the crops, but we've had good winter rains, so the crops are looking really good. We will need some finishing rains in September, which is a little unusual. So we'll just keep our fingers crossed for that one.

**Oli Le Lievre** 03:05

We will. And I think when this episode goes live, will be harvest time. And so hopefully the fruits of the labour are coming in, and that rains fall. And so we'll keep our fingers crossed for you.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 03:17

Yes, thank you.

**Oli Le Lievre** 03:19

And so today, what I'm really interested to learn more about you and your career, and obviously share with the GRDC audience. But, the kid from a farm, and this is my summary, kid from a farm went nursing, fell in love, met a farmer, came back, and you've been incredibly involved in various groups, including where we were recording in the Liebe group here, but then also with the Rural Financial Counseling Service, and quite a stint with both of them, and so I'd love to know to as a bit of an elevator pitch, if we met at the coffee shop, how would you describe if you were to summarise your career in a couple of sentences?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 03:54

My background is in psychotherapy and counselling, but also a great deal of facilitating. So it's meant that I've been involved in lots of groups, whether they're family groups, in counselling situations or in farming situations, succession situations. And I really love work shopping and being in families, because farming families mean a lot to me, and successful dynamics within a family can really make a difference to the family business. So…

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:31

Do you think that love and care of family farm or farming families? Has that been instilled in you since your childhood, like through your parents?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 04:40

It actually was. My dad was one of 10, so I had 36 cousins, and we spent a lot of time together, and family was integral to our lives, so it probably is an early childhood thing, but really embrace families even now.

**Oli Le Lievre** 04:59

What was your Christmas like, as a kid?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 05:00

Oh, it was fabulous. Christmas and Guy Fawkes night and all sorts of times of the year we'd find an excuse to all meet up and have picnics.

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:11

You'll have to educate me here, Merrie. What was Guy Fawkes night?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 05:15

Guy Fawkes night, it was a celebration of when Guy Fawkes burnt the government down in London. I think it was in the early 1800s so there was this fireworks that you used to have on Guy Fawkes night in November, they stopped it because everyone had props ready to harvest and everyone would be throwing crackers and fireworks around, and there was, was a lot of accidents, and a lot of fires started as a result of it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 05:52

Oh, there we go. Kind of glad it doesn't happen anymore. And so going nursing, what was the interest there for you?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 05:58

In my day, the choices really for women were about administration or teaching or nursing, and I decided to go nursing. And that was a very naive decision that I made, but it was a great decision. It's been great, but I didn't nurse after…so after I finished nursing, my husband and I went off travelling for nine months, and then came straight back to the farm. The local hospital really wanted me to go back nursing. My idea was that I didn't want to deal necessarily with sick people all the time, and I thought I really want to understand people more than the health of people, or the…not the physical health, but the mental health of people. So that's when I started studying.

**Oli Le Lievre** 06:51

And because, well, I'd say it's a topic which is very prevalent in front of mine today. What time is this?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 06:56

This was when I was 32, I started studying.

**Oli Le Lievre** 07:01

Did you do that out of a personal interest, with a career ambition or an idea, or not?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 07:06

I didn’t know where this was leading to, which has been lovely, because it's actually given me a lot of imagination of where it could take me once I had the skills and the knowledge, and I've learned all the way along too. It's not just been a matter of studying. In that time, I've joined up a lot of different topics and subjects and concepts along the way that actually make my career what it is, which is, you know, very diverse in a way.

**Oli Le Lievre** 07:39

It is. It's incredibly diverse. When you look at the opportunities for especially women in agriculture today, in the development of the industry, is there an area that you're particularly drawn to that if you were 20 something now starting out, you'd be drawn to?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 07:52

Yes. There's a lot of opportunity. And we saw it in the girls in the the office here in the Liebe group, where agronomists and researchers are really…they're sought after, and every town has an agronomist in it, and there's a lot of women now taking on that role, but also in farm businesses, women really add a massive dynamic. Or quality to a farm business, and often are the ones that are keeping the structure in the business side of the farm going. Yeah, so that’s good.

**Oli Le Lievre** 08:34

For you, your husband being one of 10, which is just…oh, sorry, that was your dad. Sorry. Your husband, when it came to joining his business and coming back up here. Who else? What did their farming business look like when you guys stepped in?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 08:46

Yeah, it was a pretty simple sort of business and smaller. So we had four young children when Ron's father died suddenly of a heart attack, and suddenly I was pretty much thrown into being in the jockey seat with Ron, and that gave me the confidence that I was able to actually be part of a business. So we didn't really go through a traditional succession process. We were just thrown into a situation and then had to do the succession, which was not complicated at all, but over time, we had our own family that we started thinking about. And I was looking at different families within the community who were struggling with succession. And I thought there must be something that mothers and families can do that actually enable family groups to be diverse and have different personalities and interests and qualities and things they can add to a business without there being conflict and major ruptions that can really unstabilise a business.

**Oli Le Lievre** 10:06

And so you saw that kind of more broadly in the businesses around you, how did yourself and Ron approach the partnership that you were establishing?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 10:15

So the first thing we started doing was having family meetings as a precedence to having good, strong business ideas into the future. So we used to have family meetings over holidays and where we'd go and what was happening on the farm and who's going to be doing what, and our kids at that stage would have been less than 12 or 13. So four of them. And so in doing that, you have to be able to set an environment of collaboration, rather than competition, and cooperation and enthusiasm for the family to engage. So as a consequence, we've got three members of our family who are farming, which is fabulous.

**Oli Le Lievre** 11:06

So would you say that, like your family became a bit of a social experiment?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 11:10

Looking back, I think it probably was, because I don't think people generally think in succession planning, that it takes some qualities that you can build into your family really early on that will enable that adult group of people to be able to value and respect difference and diversity.

**Oli Le Lievre** 11:33

And did you have a goal in mind, like where you saw success down the track when the kids were adults, or anything like that, as you were working? Or was it really just trying to create good humans?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 11:43

Well, it was a bit of both, create good humans, but also, we always said that anyone in the family who wanted to would be able to go farming. Because I'd come through a generation where women, girls were told they couldn't go farming. I actually had a sister who was not allowed to go farming, who would have loved to have and I thought that it's not okay for male farmers to make that decision, that the women can't go farming. And now we see a lot of successful women who are in farming, which is fabulous.

**Oli Le Lievre** 12:17

There's more and more. And I think the other point you make there around…It was about creating a family that would collaborate, not compete with each other. And so siblings really being friendly, being able to settle disagreements.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 12:30

Yeah, able to settle disagreements. And still, as 40 year olds, all of them are over 40, still very close and connected. And their families, consequently, all the cousins are really connected and enjoyed being together. Spend a lot of time together.

**Oli Le Lievre** 12:47

It’s incredible. Your off-farm roles have been quite extensive rural financial counselling service. And am I right in saying for 16 or 17 years or something?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 12:55

Yeah, for 13 years with rural financial counselling, yeah. And that was really interesting, going and being with families as they go through difficulty, and supporting them into making good decisions about their futures. And sometimes there was a lot of grief in it, because sometimes families had to actually leave the farm because they were going through financial difficulty. But the other side of it was actually exploring ways that they were able to refinance their positions and be able to actually make something of their futures, and gaining some extra skills, or bringing in some extra people who were able to be supportive of them. So it was fabulous work.

**Oli Le Lievre** 13:41

Because last year I got the chance to do…meet a couple of different rural financial counsellors. It's funny how once you've become exposed to it, then all of a sudden you start meeting them all over the place, and meeting some farms that had actually sought the help. And obviously there's certain criteria they needed to meet. In my mind. I guess I had this assumption of it was the butler that would use it, but actually, some really savvy farmers use it as going well, actually, it's a tool. It's another resource I can get out of my own head and get that third party kind of feedback.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 14:11

Exactly. And those rural financial counsellors are seeing multiples of these businesses and how this business that they're coming to could potentially make tweaks and make suggestions without actually advising, because it's not an advisory role. It's about a supportive role. And when they're being supported, they gain confidence in being able to make and explore different ideas that may be going to work for their particular business that the rural financial counsellor hadn't thought of. So, yeah, it's a really useful thing for people to tap into.

**Oli Le Lievre** 14:50

What do you get out of it the most when you were working with those different businesses during some pretty difficult conversations and times as well?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 14:59

For our own business, probably not a great deal. For me, it's a pleasure being with people and encouraging and supporting and being a mentor for them. So for me, there was a lot of self gain in it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 15:16

I think that's more than enough, because I'm sure they were…really benefited from it as well.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 15:21

Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 15:22

On the other side of the fence, you were working with the Liebe group. So I've heard more about it in the last 24 hours than I have ever heard before. Can you explain a little bit to me? What is it? How is it set up, and who's a part of it?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 15:34

So it's about 27 or eight years old. I think originally, the Ag. Department said that we were too far from them to be able to put trials in up here. So we decided, as a group of farmers, to start doing our own research. So we started a group that had a board and over the last 26 years, it's just grown and grown, not so much in membership, but in the expansion of the information throughout WA. Each year, there's a farm that puts their hand up to have a major research area. And these trials then measured, and the results come out in a R and D book at the end of the year. We've got a lot of different organisations engaged in doing the research, the AGS, the AGWA and the CSIRO, and different organisations that want to come up this far now, because they realise that the extension of that information goes a long way. And throughout WA we have a lot of farmer groups. I think there's about 30 or 40 farmer groups that at one level or another, are being run by farmers or in cohort with the agencies that are in farming, the Ag. departments and things.

**Oli Le Lievre** 17:11

My take on it is, and I could be wrong, but my take is, there's obviously the research and development arms, and then these farmer groups are far more closer to the commercial end, and so it's the R and D happens in the background, gets to a certain point, and then that's where the farmer groups come in, because within much shorter period of time, whether that's one to two seasons, that could be practically applied in the paddock.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 17:34

Yes. We have some really innovative Farmers up here who try things on their farm. And originally, we had a lot of that innovation coming through, but now it's about faster adoption of the technology or the research that's coming out, and WA is fairly fast on adopting you see, the landscape has really changed over the last 15 years.

**Oli Le Lievre** 18:03

Can you talk to me more about that, the transition from sheep and livestock through to cropping?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 18:07

So traditionally, up in this northern ag. region, we had a mixture of sheep and cropping, so 30 or 40% sheep and the rest cropping. And as the canola started coming into the system, that became a rotational crop for the lupins that we were growing for sheep, and it was much more commercially viable. And so now the lupins have really dropped out. You probably see 2% or 3% of this northern ag. region, of this particular region growing lupins, and it's been overtaken by the canola. And I think the canola is probably a 30 percenter or bit less in the cropping system, and the rest is wheat and barley.

**Oli Le Lievre** 19:02

Yeah, okay. So, it's just canola, wheat, barley.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 19:05

Predominantly, yup.

**Oli Le Lievre** 19:07

So your role has been a few different areas, from construction manager of facilities…How's your role changed and evolved as you've been here?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 19:18

Okay, so originally, I was a voluntary board member, and then they saw me as part of the administration and sponsorship development. So I did that for about 15 years, being involved in bringing in parties who were going to be beneficial to the Liebe group. We used to get parties wanting to get involved because of the name of the Liebe group. And it was never about that. It was about how much value can you add to agriculture? So I was fairly hard nosed about…where our priorities were, and then as a staff mentor. So I've had a lot of involvement with staff training and mentorship over the years.

**Oli Le Lievre** 20:12

And alongside that, you've had a bit of involvement with the GRDC as well as a panel member and others. What's that relationship been?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 20:20

Was lovely and an eye opener to get the comparisons between the states and understanding what goes on in each state, and seeing the work that GRDC do, which is incredibly valuable to the farming industry. And you know that WA is a big contributor to the GRDC and the coffers of GRDC through our levies and things so with think it's important for WA farmers to actually engage in GRDC and get the value out of that organisation. Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 20:58

Merrie, one thing I'd love to know, has there been a favourite project, or a couple of projects that you've really loved working on across your career?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 21:05

So there was a soils health project that we ran for seven years, seven years, and kept the site going for I think, another 10 years. It's actually finished now, which may be a shame, because, you know, with all the soil science and things coming out, that was a really nice project, because it was very left field to the times then, because soil science wasn't really something that, you know, carbon storage and all that sort of thing wasn't really a thing back then, but it evolved after that. So it was a really interesting project, and we found that we needed 14 tons of carbon to actually create carbon storage in the soils, which is a bit of a reflection of our types of soils that we have. That was a great project. And of course, the projects on succession planning and things have been really interesting for me and doing workshops around succession planning and enabling farm businesses to have the confidence to take up some of the strategies that enable them to do it successfully and without any ruptions and problems happening.

**Oli Le Lievre** 22:28

And it's something that I know even in here, you're passing on a couple of those booklets as well, making sure that people have them. Like, what are the GRDC booklets that you've got and what are the couple of topics that they relate into?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 22:41

So there's communication and succession planning booklets and farm labour booklets that you can actually get online. But I had the advantage of being back where they were being published. And I used to say to the people, take them, put them in the toilet, and pick them up and and flick through them, and just look at some strategies that make families collaborative, or families that are able to engage in conflict without actually having any damage done. And people loved the booklets, and you can still get the booklets online. They're very good.

**Oli Le Lievre** 23:21

Is there something that you wish, like, having spent your career talking to so many different businesses, whether it's through a succession lens or rural financial counselling lens, or even just at barbecues and whatnot? Is there something that you just wish people would know, like, I'll say a secret, Merrie's secret to succession or or even just…yeah, secret to kind of success in farming.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 23:48

Firstly, enjoy it. Know that farming is a challenge, but it can be very satisfying, and that farming families can really do it well, I watched the corporates come in and do and engage managers and all sorts of disparate sort of people working there. And I look and I think farming families can get it so much better than a corporate farm can. They're much more productive and they're much better for communities. Communities really flourish when we've got lots of farming families, and I'm passionate about people knowing that when we have families that we encourage collaboration and respect and value of each other and embrace the value of difference and diversity, because that's often where the conflict comes from. But when you embrace that, you can actually learn from it and grow in ourselves. So it's a fabulous thing for farming families to know or any family to know.

**Oli Le Lievre** 25:03

And after several decades in agriculture, what is it that makes you hopeful about the sector for the future?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 25:10

Just the innovation that is constantly happening. And like the rest of things in life, the innovation is sped up. 40 years ago, innovation was about a slow process. Now it's actually a very fast process, and we need to be able to make good judgment around what that innovation is and how relevant it is to our own businesses and how we can adopt it well. The ones that are good for us? Yeah.

**Oli Le Lievre** 25:46

Well, fantastic, Merrie. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about?

**Merrie Carlshausen** 25:50

I mean, there's a few things that I'd like to talk about when we're starting succession, when we have a second generation coming onto the farm, some simple things like starting family or business meetings and treating them as a professional part of the business and an essential part of the business to do it frequently. You know, every six weeks having a business meeting is really useful, training and skilling up and doing that in multiple ways. So we're very fortunate in the Liebe group, where we have lots of workshops and things for young farmers. In other areas, it's about bringing in mentors or sending the young people off for workshops and having people that they can go to who who are more knowledgeable, and they don't have to take it from their father all the time, because that's very useful to a business, to not be just rehashing the generational stuff, because we don't know it all, so we need to constantly be getting information elsewhere.

**Oli Le Lievre** 26:57

Absolutely, that's where it's so important, isn't it? Whether you get the chance to work for someone else for a day a week, a month a year, whatever it is, it's that different perspectives.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 27:06

Yeah, having mentors.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:10

Yeah. Well, Merrie, thank you so much for taking the time to have a chat.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 27:12

It’s a pleasure. I've really enjoyed it.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:15

It’s fantastic and I think, over your life, the changes that you've seen and mentioned in the grain growing region up here in WA and I think what will continue to change is going to be really exciting to see, and ultimately it's going to be people at the core of it which are going to make those changes happen and continue the industry thriving.

**Merrie Carlshausen** 27:33

It's absolutely right.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:35

Thank you.

**Oli Le Lievre** 27:39

Thanks for joining us for the GRDC in conversation podcast. This series is a GRDC investment that's sharing the stories of the people who are living and breathing the Aussie grains industry. Make sure you check out some of our other conversations and hit follow on your favourite podcast app to never miss an episode.