

Kay Hull believes everyone can make a difference.



KAY HULL

REGIONAL BELIEVER

From the corridors of Federal Parliament to the rice farms of the Riverina, Kay Hull has spent three decades fighting for the bush.

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

Sitting on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, Kay Hull laughs as she recalls her first meeting of the Wagga Wagga City Council. It was 1991 and, having ran for office as a voice for small business and to fight a planned median strip outside her family's smash repair business, the then 37-year-old councillor was ready to make a stand. "I hadn't done my homework and, of course, the first time the median strip issue came up they said, 'You have to leave the room, you've got a conflict of interest'," Kay says, grinning. "So I couldn't participate in the discussion at all."

It was the first of many political lessons for the girl from Guyra, in northern New South Wales, who would go on to represent the people of the Riverina for more than a decade in Federal Parliament. A tenacious advocate for small business, regional health services, agriculture and tourism, Kay says throughout those years one lesson stood out. "Never forget where you came from." Although four consecutive terms in Canberra taught her plenty about people, Kay traces her biggest life lessons to a small-town childhood and building a business with her late husband and biggest supporter, Graeme 'Hully' Hull.

Growing up in Guyra, between Armidale and Glen Innes, where her father was a linesman for the Postmaster-General's Department and her mother a housewife, Kay, the youngest of four children, recalls a childhood connected to the land. "My parents were both raised on the land and we'd often go out to Mum's family farm, and out to Dad's family property," Kay says.

Although capable at school, Kay admits she wasn't dedicated in the classroom. "I was very into sport and dance, and loved performing," she says. "I'd rather spend my time raising funds so we could have dance bands

come from other towns and perform at our school socials," she says. "I think people thought I was a bit wild and had something renegade in me, but I just liked to be active and engaged."

When she won a scholarship to a performing arts school, the young go-go dancer almost had her ticket out of the bush, but her parents couldn't afford the accommodation. She stayed in Guyra, finished school, and then headed for Sydney and a job on the stock exchange. After two years, she moved to New Zealand, working and travelling, before returning home when her father had a cancer scare.

It was 1974 and Kay decided to get a job while visiting her sister Pam in Wagga Wagga. Then she met Graeme Hull. "He was 31, with two sons, Darren and Daniel, aged 9 and 7, and he was a sole parent," Kay says. Things moved quickly. "Suddenly I was 20 and married with two children." Two years later, Kay gave birth to another son, Brett.

When the smash repairs business Graeme was managing shut down, Kay and Graeme set themselves up to replace it, taking on all 30 employees and starting with just \$2000 in the bank. "I was young and had no real business knowledge, but I knew Graeme could do it," she says. "I had faith in him, and we were able to convince the bank manager to have faith in us, too."

Then, in March 1980, Graeme broke his back. "He was opening a car bonnet with a crowbar and the bonnet gave way and he dropped to the ground onto the crowbar and broke his spine." With three children under 12 and a husband with a broken back, Kay rolled up her sleeves. She soon discovered there were some things women apparently weren't meant to do.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Kay with former Prime Minister John Howard during her time as Member for Riverina; speaking in the House of Representatives; Kay with grandchildren (l-r) Indie, Willow and Ashton, and newborn great-granddaughter Callie.



AAP IMAGE/ALAN PORRITT

“When I went to get my tow-truck licence the guy at the RTA said, ‘You can’t’, and when I asked, ‘Why?’ he said, ‘Because women don’t have tow-truck driver’s licences.’” With her trademark determination, Kay enlisted the help of her staff. “The fellas at work were amazing and they taught me how to do it all,” she says. She returned to the RTA and duly got her licence.

Attending accidents taught her a lot about people. “It taught me to have patience and understanding, but most of all respect. Everybody is valuable and every life is valuable, and everyone deserves respect,” Kay says. “Our tow-truck drivers did such a great job and I became proud to be one of them.” They were life lessons that would prove invaluable in Canberra. Be patient. Never judge too early. Everyone deserves respect. Do your best. Be proud of that. And listen.

Two years later Graeme was back on his feet and life got back to normal. Then, in 1991, the Wagga Wagga City Council wrote to local businesses about that median strip. When Kay gave an impassioned speech about the impact of roadworks on local businesses, a councillor suggested she run for office. Kay got elected and spent eight years on council, including five as deputy mayor, speaking up for small businesses and farmers, and promoting regional tourism.

When the Nationals asked her to run for NSW Parliament in 1999, Kay thought, ‘Why not?’ Then, when the federal member for the Riverina Noel Hicks retired, the party suggested she run for federal preselection, even though there was little hope of heading to Canberra. The fallout from John Howard’s new gun laws and the rise of Pauline Hanson had eroded the party’s base, and the prospect of a GST had

dashed small business confidence in the coalition.

Despite the odds, in October 1998, Kay became Member for Riverina in the 39th Parliament of Australia, and for the next 12 years represented the region, advocating to prevent impacts of the Murray Darling Basin Plan on agriculture, fighting against the deregulation of the Australian Wheat Board, helping to stop the sale of the Snowy Hydro Scheme and crossing the floor to vote against her own government’s proposed sale of Telstra due to her concerns about its impact on country people. When Ansett collapsed, Kay helped establish Regional Express Airlines. One of the fleet now bears her name. Her work to establish vet science studies at Charles Sturt University is reflected in the naming of the Kay Hull Veterinary Hospital in Wagga Wagga. In 2008, she was appointed the Australian representative on the International Parliamentary Union’s Geneva-based UNAIDS HIV committee.

Through it all, Graeme remained her rock. “Graeme was so supportive and he kept it all together at home,” Kay says. “He really believed in me and thought that I could do anything.”

Former Nationals Party leader and colleague, Tim Fischer, says Kay punched above her weight in Canberra. “Kay Hull is a mighty mouse in so many ways, always energetic, determined, dynamic and a great woman,” he says. “She was a stella example of a good local federal Nationals Party member.” Tim says Kay always had direct access to John Howard and other senior ministers. “She knew how to properly channel senior contacts and not be a time waster, but be very focused in her messages,” he says. “And to this day she has enormous respect from people on both sides of the aisle.”





*Kay and husband Graeme with sons (l-r) Daniel, Brett and Darren in 1998.
OPPOSITE: Kay with son Brett outside the family business in Wagga Wagga.*



In 2010, Kay announced her retirement. “I felt I’d missed too much and I needed to be back home.” For the first year everything went to plan. “And then Graeme became seriously unwell with pain,” Kay says. After a year, Graeme was sent to Sydney for a heart check. “Within an hour of us arriving at St Vincent’s Hospital we were told Graeme was dying.” A month later, Graeme passed away. “I thought we had all this time, but we didn’t, we had four weeks,” Kay says quietly.

Eight years on, Kay says she’s found a good balance, spending much more time devoted to her growing family, including 14 grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Outside family life, she remains heavily involved in the local community. She sits on the NSW Skills Board and chairs The Australian National Advisory Council on Alcohol and Drugs. In 2015, she was awarded an AM in the Queen’s Birthday Honours for her contribution to Parliament and her leadership in the Riverina.

Youngest son Brett, who now runs the family smash repairs business, says his mother’s relentless work ethic taught him the importance of hard work. “Mum wouldn’t ask someone to do something that she wouldn’t do herself,” Brett says. He says his mother has a unique ability to relate to people from diverse backgrounds. “She can empathise with anyone, because she came from nothing and she’s had to deal with every

single walk of life on the way up.” But, above all, Brett says his mother has been an inspiration. “Probably the key thing Mum has taught me, and what I hope I can instill in my own kids, is that you can achieve anything.”

As chair of Agrifutures Australia, formerly the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC), Kay continues to promote Australia’s agricultural sector, which she says is in very good hands. “Because this new generation is doing things differently,” she says. “They’re very exciting, and it’s easy to work in an exciting environment with people who are just doing it.”

As evening falls on the Murrumbidgee, a flock of white cockatoos circles noisily above. Sitting on the riverbank, Kay says she’s thankful for the opportunities she’s had. “I was given the privilege of representing the Riverina electorate at the federal level and few people get that privilege,” she says, looking over the river. “My gratitude will always be to the loyalty of those communities, because together we were a great team,” she says. “And I think they appreciated that I would have a go.”

And having a go, according to Kay, is what life is all about. “Can you imagine if everyone tried and everyone did something to help other people – what a difference we could make,” she says. “You can’t underestimate what you can do as an individual. Everyone can make a difference.”