

HUNGER FIGHTER

Lou Revelant is 'filling the pantry' for the needy with rescued fruit and vegetables from Australia's largest food bowl.

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

It's 9am on a hot summer morning in Griffith, New South Wales, and Lou Revelant has been on the road for two hours. First delivering a trailer of empty bins to a citrus grower, a dozen more to a watermelon grower, and now talking on the phone to a transport company about getting onions to Sydney. For a bloke who's supposed to be semi-retired, Lou's pace is frenetic.

As he rattles down the dirt driveway of yet another farm, the 74-year-old talks about his role as produce manager for food relief organisation Foodbank, a job which brought him out of retirement eight years ago and one he's uniquely placed to do after a 40-year career working with growers from Dareton to Bourke as a horticultural extension officer with the Department of Primary Industries. "At the moment we're getting a lot of watermelons and a lot of onions and potatoes," Lou says. "The Mitolo Group at Hillston, for example, give us a B-double of potatoes at a time – that's 72 bins, about 30-odd tonne."

Since taking the role in 2011, Lou has worked hard to build a network of growers and companies to source produce, and get empty bins to packing sheds and full bins to Foodbank's massive Glendenning warehouse in Sydney, from where the food is distributed to hungry mouths across the state. "We're like a pantry for the welfare sector," Lou says. "There are a lot of needy people out there, whatever the cause may be, and this is really good produce; there's nothing wrong with it apart from size or blemishes."

What started as a community program, with Lou driving around with a ute and trailer to pick up unmarketable produce, has grown into one of Foodbank

NSW and ACT's most important supply chains, providing one-third of the organisation's fresh fruit and vegetables. Last year the program rescued close to 1500 tonnes of Riverina produce. "But that goes up and down depending on the seasons, depending on the produce and depending on a whole range of things," Lou says.

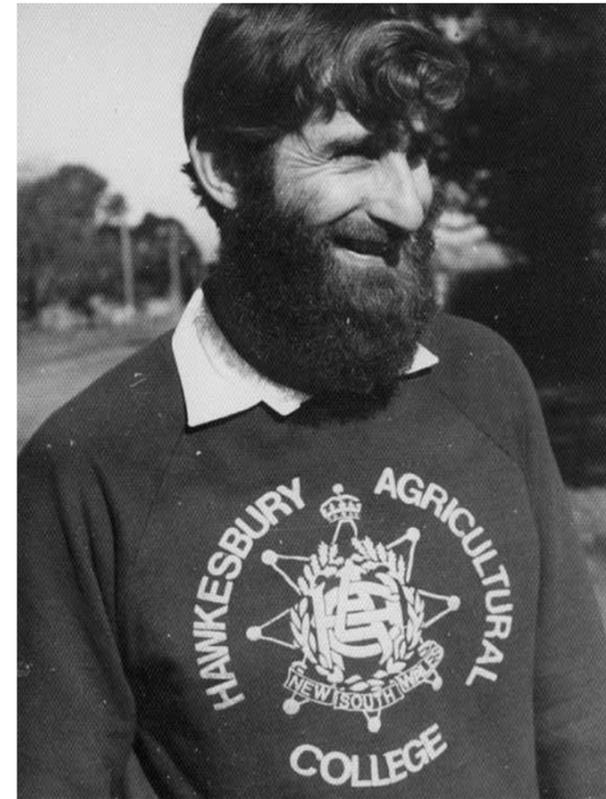
Foodbank NSW and ACT chief executive Gerry Andersen says Lou's tenacity is a big reason for the program's success in the Riverina. "His passion is unbendable," Gerry says. "And he's worked in that industry all his life, so he knows everybody and everybody knows him." Last year Foodbank diverted more than 12,000 tonnes of food from landfill and provided more than 20 million quality meals to people in need, through more than 600 agencies across New South Wales and the ACT. According to Gerry, nothing is ever too hard for Lou, which is important in a job that often throws up challenges. "I like to say we have a surprise chain, not a supply chain," Gerry says. "But Lou's a 'can-do' man; he doesn't procrastinate, he just goes and does it."

Back in Griffith, Lou says the support of a whole range of local companies that provide services and assistance is crucial to his ability to get things done. Above all, he says, you've got to make it as easy as possible for the farmers. "Because they're trying to make a quid and you really need to support them, so when they offer you something you take it."

Citrus grower Dom Mancini, who's been donating produce for almost a decade, says Lou's connection to the local community has been crucial to getting growers on board. "Knowing Lou for a century – he's been around that long – makes it

Lou Revelant is passionate about reducing food waste in the Riverina.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Lou talks with rockmelon grower Frank Zirilli; Lou as a Hawkesbury Agricultural College student; Lou and his wife Betty outside their Griffith home; Lou delivers bins to a farm in the Griffith region.

easier,” Dom laughs, leaning on a trailer of empty bins outside his packing shed. “He makes it easy to give.”

Later, heading back to town, Lou reflects on what drives him. “I just can’t stand seeing things going to waste,” he says, something he attributes to an upbringing as a single child to migrant Italian parents in the small town of Coonabarabran. “There wasn’t any waste back then; we used everything.” Lou learnt to be resourceful from a young age. “We grew veggies and we also had an orchard and we preserved a lot of fruit,” Lou says. “I used to help Mum, peeling and putting the fruit into jars and using the old Vacola unit, and that way we had good fruit year-round.”

While his father, a builder, came out from northern Italy in 1926, Lou’s mother didn’t arrive until 1938. “She was on the last passenger vessel that sailed from Europe before the Second World War.” It was that war, Lou says, which resulted in the family being in New South Wales. “The old man was interned during the war and that’s how we came to be up there.” Lou recalls a carefree childhood closely linked to his European heritage. “There were only two Italian families in Coonabarabran,” he recalls. “And we did what Italians do. We grew grapes and made wine and taught the population of Coonabarabran in those days how to drink wine,” he

laughs. “We had some Isabella grapes and my job was to crush them in a tub, with my feet, stomping on them,” he says. “I remember getting drunk on the fumes.”

When he left school after gaining his Intermediate Certificate, Lou moved to Sydney, where he landed a job as a clerk with the Land Tax Office on Macquarie Street. Boarding with a family in Surry Hills, Lou says it was an exciting move, but not what he really wanted. “I’d always wanted go to Hawkesbury Ag College,” he recalls. “But when I went up there the principal interviewed me and in a nice way basically said, ‘Son, you haven’t got the wherewithal to come here.’” Despite the rejection, Lou persisted and two years later got his lucky break when another student dropped out. Three years later, he graduated with a Diploma of Agriculture.

After travelling overseas for a year, including hitchhiking from London to Cape Town, Lou returned to Coonabarabran. After a brief stint as a farmhand, he landed a job as Rural Youth Officer with the Department of Education in Cooma. It was there he met local girl, Betty. Two years later, in 1969, they had married and moved to Griffith.

When the Rural Youth portfolio transferred to the Department of Agriculture in the early 1970s, Lou





Lou talks with Griffith citrus grower Dom Mancini. OPPOSITE: Lou rolls up his sleeves in a packing shed.

changed jobs to become a horticultural extension officer. As he and Betty raised three children, Peter, Michelle and Susan, on their 10-hectare fruit block, Lou spent the next three decades travelling the state, providing advice to farmers about soils, inputs and new crop varieties, coordinating field days and sharing results from research stations.

In 2002, Lou and Betty moved to Orange, where he took up a job with Agsell, a niche unit focused on assisting small exporters. Three years later, Lou took a redundancy and the couple returned to Griffith to retire. Back in the Riverina, however, those plans were short-lived as Lou found himself doing quality assurance work for Keenan Produce, auditing farm businesses and school bus driving. Then, in the midst of the Millennium Drought, the Department of Primary Industries called and Lou rolled up his sleeves to work with farmers as part of the government's drought support program. What was initially a three-month role turned into four years.

It was during that time, Lou says, while working with Uniting Church rural chaplain Julie Greig and Carrathool Shire Council community development officer Penny Davies, the idea to do something about food waste emerged. "We got talking about the amount of food wastage, and we thought it's not a problem getting

food, it's what do we do with it." The result of those discussions was Waste Not Want Not, a community partnership between the department, Carrathool Shire Council, Uniting Church and Foodbank.

When Lou's drought support role finished up in mid-2011, Gerry Andersen was quick to offer him the job as Foodbank's Riverina produce manager. Lou says the job is a joint effort between him and Betty. "She's involved, but very much in a volunteer capacity, and I'd be buggered without her; she does all the computer work," he says. "We're a team." Eight years on and Lou's daily schedule is as busy as ever. "He leaves home at 7am, and won't be home until 5pm if he does a bus run, too," Betty says, raising her eyebrows at her husband of 50 years over a cuppa in their Griffith home. "Then, when he gets home he'll say, 'I don't know why I'm so tired', and I say, 'I wonder why?'"

Although he's in the process of handing over the reins to Keenan Produce colleague Bruce Dougherty, and has plans to hitch up the caravan and hit the road with Betty, for now Lou's focused on Foodbank. "Those years working with drought relief made me realise just how many people need help feeding their families and that people in need don't always fit the stereotype," Lou says. "And it made me realise it's worth the effort to save that produce and put it to good use."

