

RDS PARTNERS WITH EMERGING LEADERS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Tom Lewis is a busy man by any measure. He is a principal and director of niche Tasmanian consultancy firm RDS Partners, executive officer of Oysters Tasmania and manager of the Allergen Bureau. He divides his focus equally between the seafood and agrifood sectors and the development of sustainable regional enterprises in Tasmania. As a Wynyard boy, Tom grew up with the land and sea all around and over him, and developed deep Tasmanian roots (and fins) early in life.

Tom is a graduate of the inaugural Tasmanian Leaders Program in 2007, on which he embarked to learn more about the challenges and opportunities facing the broader Tasmanian community.

And he wasn't disappointed. During the program, Tom was exposed to over 200 experts, critical thinkers and business and community leaders. But the most valuable and life-changing connection was with fellow participant, Maree Fudge.

"During the program, and maybe more so during the following year, Maree and I realised we had very closely aligned values and drivers, and unexpectedly complementary skills and experience," says Tom. Maree adds: "The reality is we almost certainly would not have even met, let alone developed such a dynamic and productive relationship, if we hadn't done the program together".

Maree 'grew up' professionally in the not-for-profit community services sector, a world away, or so she thought, from that of a marine biologist.

Maree was working with the community services peak body, TasCOSS, at the time the Tasmanian Leaders Program was established and undertook the program to see what value there could be for the sector. Maree wanted to challenge her assumptions about social policy and disadvantage and find ways to innovate the community services sector.

"To be honest, I wasn't sure what it would entail" she remembers, "but was interested in the potential of the program to help expand



RDS Partners principals Maree Fudge and Tom Lewis

the connections I could make across the State for the sector."

"The TLP process and its full year duration helped participants build a deep trust and shared understanding that Maree and I used to delve into the issues facing the company I was working for at the time" says Tom. "It didn't take us long to decide to join forces – to 'jump out of the plane' – to rebuild, reposition and rebrand that company into its current incarnation."

A couple of years after their graduation, Maree and Tom formally teamed up to develop their Tasmanian company, RDS Partners, to focus on regional and community development and social impact in Tasmania's agricultural, seafood and community sectors.

The small business leadership journey on which Maree and Tom embarked together presented two clear, major and overlapping challenges. The first was to rebuild and reinvigorate a small team that was passing through a fairly bleak period of loss and change within the company. The second was to identify how the company itself needed to change – both internally and in what services it provided – within the rapidly changing economic and social environment in regional Tasmania.

Maree thinks that amongst the most important factors supporting these changes are the pair's shared business and social values and the trust they are able to place in each other's decisions.

"A strong set of shared values and the joint understanding of how these inform our business decisions make it so much easier to articulate what we are about to our staff and clients. Once people understand where we are coming from, they understand our niche" adds Tom.

One of Maree and Tom's early business objectives was to get enough black ink into the RDS financials to allow them to provide some ongoing support to the Tasmanian Leaders Program. As they note, "If it hadn't been for TLP, RDS Partners would not exist".

And so the story continues – nearly three years on, RDS Partners is humming, and Maree's idea of providing a TLP scholarship to support others in this journey has been realised.

"We're committed to understanding what drives positive development and how to assess and modify social impact in Tasmania. Everywhere we look we see amazing social and economic



Sustainable Living Tasmania executive officer Todd Houstein. Photo: Sharon Pittaway

opportunities and assets just waiting to be realised. It takes community leaders as well as business and political leaders to do this. And we both know that TLP is a unique journey - it expands networks and connections; unlocks capacity and encourage participants to dream, think, challenge and take risks."

In 2012, Maree and Tom supported two applicants – Todd Houstein, Executive Officer of Sustainable Living Tasmania, and Cheryl Fuller, Deputy Mayor of Central Coast Council – to undertake the Tasmanian Leaders Program. As Maree says: "These two wonderful Tasmanian leaders provide a direct expression of our values, in that they are committed to a sustainable, inclusive and prosperous Tasmania and demonstrate this commitment every day through their work".

"Not-for-profit community organisations rarely get opportunities to accelerate their leadership capacity like this without the

support of someone like RDS Partners", says Todd Houstein.

Todd goes on to reflect: "the most valuable insight I've had about myself is that my tendency toward perfectionism, while beneficial in achieving high standards, sometimes holds me and my team back."

"Through the Tasmanian Leaders Program I am learning how to unleash the potential of my team so that Sustainable Living Tasmania can thrive into the future and assist Tasmanian communities to do the same," Todd says.

Cheryl Fuller brings a different perspective by saying: "The Tasmanian Leaders Program has provided me a fast track, intensive insight into Tasmania; its history, people and future opportunities; as well as gaining invaluable networks outside my circle of influence. This unique opportunity has opened my eyes to the possibilities and will enable me to ensure Tasmania is a prosperous and inclusive place to live."

Cheryl and Todd will continue their life changing journey throughout 2012, developing and refining their core leadership competencies and learning more about themselves and their place in Tasmania. The end result will achieve positive outcomes for these two TLP participants, their employers and Tasmania, by helping make the State a better place in which to work, live and do business.

Meanwhile Tom and Maree look forward to finding out who the lucky recipient of their RDS Partners scholarship will be for the 2013 Tasmanian Leaders Program and have this advice for anyone considering a leadership role: Make stuff up and make stuff happen: the more you think about what leadership is, the more nuanced it becomes and the harder it is to define.

If you really want to make a difference, then surround yourself with great support and take your chances when they arise. ■



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