



Wool classer Caitlin Heppner from Nuriootpa, South Australia, pictured with her pet kelpie Ella, loves the career she has working in the sheds.

A YOUNG CHAMPION CHAMPIONING WOOL

Barossa born and bred **Caitlin Heppner** grew up surrounded by viticulture, but she is pursuing a career not in wine but wool – a love for which she is keen to share with other young people.

At the age of 10, Caitlin Heppner visited Portree Station at nearby Blanchetown with her parents to watch the Australian shearing and wool handling team train. She had never set foot inside a working shearing shed before – and little did she know how much she was about to fall in love with wool.

Caitlin says in the shed that day were shearers Shannon Warnest, Jason Wingfield and John Dalla and wool handlers Mel Morris and Debbie Chandler.

"I remember sitting on the catching pen rails, watching everyone, totally engrossed in the atmosphere, when suddenly I couldn't see anything... Jason had thrown a fleece over me,

and the feel of the wool and the aroma of the lanolin felt like home. In that moment I knew my life would revolve around the wool industry."

Caitlin began working as a wool handler in local sheds. At 14 she learnt to shear and started to compete in shearing and wool handling competitions – and at just 18, she fulfilled her dream and became a registered Australian Wool Classer.

"I had attended Nuriootpa High School and completed my secondary schooling in 2016 through a full-time school-based traineeship in Certificate IV Wool Classing, working with a shearing contractor in outback SA and NSW. I worked as a wool handler under

Master Classer Jared Phillips.

"Leaving home at the beginning of 2016 was a massive step but choosing to complete my secondary education the way I did was the best decision I ever made. I not only got a head start in my career, but I made many industry contacts and got the chance to live and work in some amazing parts of the country."

FLEECE JUDGING CHAMPION

Soon after receiving her AW stencil, Caitlin decided to try out fleece judging competitions, starting at the Crystal Brook Show which duly she won. Never did she

imagine that this would lead her to winning her state's 2016 Merino Fleece Young Judges Championship and then go on to compete at the National Finals in 2017 at the Royal Melbourne Show.

The competition, for people aged between 15 and 25, involved judging two lines of four Merino fleeces (eight in total) on style, uniformity of length, staple strength, handle, colour, crimp formation, density and fleece weight. She competed against the other state champions and the New Zealand champion.

Using all the skills and experience she'd learnt wool classing, Caitlin expertly continued an unbeaten run of six wins from six fleece judging competitions by winning the title ahead of Amy Hoogenboom of New Zealand and Tessa Runting of Victoria.

AWI helps fund the National Finals (along with the corresponding National Merino Sheep Young Judges Championship) to further young people's skills through visual selection and appraisal of wool and sheep. By providing the opportunity to broaden their experiences and knowledge base through competition, the finalists become ambassadors for the wool industry.

And Caitlin has certainly become a stellar ambassador for wool. Read on...

PROMOTING THE WOOL INDUSTRY

Caitlin selflessly instigated – and sponsored – a Merino Fleece Junior Judging Competition at her local Mount Pleasant Show in March, encouraging young people interested in agriculture to step up and "have a go". Caitlin is also generously sponsoring prizes at this year's State Championship in Adelaide in September.

"I wanted to give back to the industry from which I have benefited and love so much," she said.

Last year, Caitlin also became one of six new Young Farming Champions sponsored by AWI, to help promote the wool industry to students participating in Art4Agriculture's school program who might never have considered a career in agriculture.

Young Farming Champions provide a network of enthusiastic young professionals who share a passion about teaching others how Australian agriculture is a dynamic, innovative, rewarding and vibrant industry.

"Essentially my aim is to close the gap between producers and consumers and create a better understanding and appreciation of what really happens in the wool industry," Caitlin said.

"I am only 19 years old, but while I know that my future lies with wool – I hope to continue as a wool classer and eventually run my own Merino stud – I am also very keen in helping and encouraging more youth into the wool industry and helping bridge the gap between the producer and the consumer."



AWI-sponsored Young Farming Champions Deanna Johnston and Lucy Collingridge promoting wool to school children at the Sydney Royal Easter Show.

YOUNG CHAMPIONS PROMOTE WOOL AT THE SYDNEY SHOW

Two AWI-sponsored Young Farming Champions recently shared the story of wool with more than 1,000 school students at the Sydney Royal Easter Show.

Deanna Johnston, a shearer and wool classer from Longreach, and Lucy Collingridge, a biosecurity officer with Local Land Services in Narrabri, teamed up at this year's Sydney Royal Easter Show Primary Preview Day to present 15-minute sessions about wool to students and teachers.

The two Young Farming Champions are part of a network of young agricultural professionals, developed by Art4Agriculture, who have a passion for sharing the good news stories of their industry and teaching others about the pivotal role Australian farmers have in feeding and clothing the world.

2018 represents the sixth year AWI has been involved with the program, to help educate the broader community on the importance of the Australian wool industry and develop young industry talent.

Held prior to the official opening of the Sydney Royal Easter Show, the Primary School Preview Day invited students from Years 4-6 to meet the faces of Australian agriculture.

The aim of the workshop was to raise awareness of the unique and diverse properties of wool as well as an appreciation for the high quality of wool that is produced on Australian farms.

"We had a quick slideshow to show the kids where we were from and explained what we do in our day jobs," Lucy said. "We then had an interactive questionnaire game where we were able to improve students' knowledge

of the Australian wool industry and wool products. Then we had a few activities using wool products. Students were able to handle examples of greasy wool, wool top and lanolin.

"We had a 100% wool jacket with four kids holding a corner each. Deanna poured water on it to show its water repellant properties. It was a fun game. The students were confident the jacket would absorb the water and of course were fascinated when the water went everywhere. We also had Sam the Lamb and material sample books from AWI for the kids to take home, which they loved."

With more than 1,000 students passing through their presentation, Lucy and Deanna were exhausted by day's end, but also inspired by the students (and teachers) and their willingness to learn.

"The kid's enthusiasm was great," Deanna said. "They were so excited and so happy to learn, and amazed wool could make soft garments that can be worn by everyone from babies to people playing sport, as well as insulating and carpeting your house. For me it was a massive learning curve. I didn't realise how hard it was to get a primary school kid's attention and keep it!"

"We had a very special moment with some school kids with disability who were mostly non-verbal but we were able to use the samples of greasy fleece, wool top and wool clothing for a very tactile experience," Lucy adds.

MORE INFORMATION
www.wool.com/YFC



Caitlin (second right) with the other five 2017 Young Farming Champions sponsored by AWI to promote the wool industry: **Katherine Bain, Sam Wan, Lucy Collingridge, Hamish McGrath, Caitlin** and **Deanna Johnston** (see article opposite).



Caitlin on the way to winning the 2017 National Merino Fleece Young Judges Championship which is funded by AWI.