

Seeds of HOPE



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT HAWKINS. STYLING BY BIANCA LANE. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY HOLLY HARNWELL.

Her uncle, one of Australia's most notorious paedophile priests, brought untold pain to the people of Ballarat, but Lou Ridsdale is doing her bit to bring some optimism to the city, planting the seeds of change in her own backyard and sharing the bounty. **Susan Horsburgh** reports.

In 2011, after two decades in Melbourne, Lou Ridsdale decided to move back to her hometown of Ballarat – no small thing considering she carries probably the most despised surname in the city. In local shops, she is still self-conscious when she has to say it. "I don't think anyone has said anything to my face," says the 45-year-old, "but it's always on my mind. It's a tainted name. It holds a lot of dark connotations."

For that she can blame her uncle, Australia's most notorious paedophile priest, Gerald Ridsdale. Since he was first charged in 1993, he has racked up an appalling 161 convictions for abusing 65 children over three decades – and they are just the victims who have come forward. The real tally, by Ridsdale's own estimation, could top 1000. Last August, his sentence was extended yet again, meaning the 83-year-old will most likely die in prison, but he has left a shattered community in his wake, and his crimes have had a devastating ripple effect.

"If it were a flood or a disaster, there would be people running to help victims," says Lou. "This is a silent epidemic. These men and women can't get out of bed. They can't feed their children. They have chronic PTSD. The mental health system is buckling as a result."

Visitors don't have to look far for reminders. On the main road into Ballarat there's the gothic stone edifice of St Alipius, its iron fence festooned with multi-coloured ribbons acknowledging those who have suffered abuse there, chiefly at the →

hands of Ridsdale. There are ribbons scattered across the city in front of private homes, too, tied onto picket fences as gestures of support for abuse survivors.

It was to this broken city that Lou returned seven years ago, priced out of the Melbourne property market and yearning for a bit of space. Grief-stricken after nursing her mother through the final stages of cancer, she wanted to make a difference, so she started in her own backyard, inspired by the global guerrilla gardening and Food is Free movements.

One day in October 2014 she put some homegrown fruit on a table in the laneway beside her house with a hand-drawn sign saying, "Food is Free". She didn't think anyone would return the favour, but a week later a bunch of parsley was left with a note that said, "I thought you might need this."

With that, her idea took flight, and Lou formed a not-for-profit group with a bunch of friends and neighbours – the first of about 20 Food is Free operations around Australia. Three years on, 40 volunteers work out of Lou's huge backyard, a riot of improvised pots and garden beds planted with everything from rhubarb and broccoli to walnuts and wasabi lettuce.

On a sunny day, up to 100 visitors stop by the adjacent 30-metre stretch of laneway in Warrior Place, which is lined with boxes of seedlings and baskets of produce up for grabs. They might drop off some surplus lemons from their own gardens or donate some useful recyclables such as egg cartons or bottle tops for an upcoming kids art project.

Open to anyone, the Food is Free Laneway has become a social hub, a cheery place to chat and swap recipes and gardening tips. Lou's elderly neighbour has even had a gate put into her side fence so she can join the action. "She's out there all the time – it's a really big part of her world now," says Lou. "Most of the time, people don't come for food, they come for conversations."

Too many of us, she says, are aching for a sense of connection. For years



"Growing stuff gives you hope. It takes you out of your space of pain."

Lou knew none of her neighbours and now she hangs out with them all around the food tables. "We live in isolated communities these days and I think a lot of that has come from fear – thinking that the world's a bad place," she says. "That's been probably the biggest lesson: just to have faith in community and not be so driven by headlines that are all doom and gloom."

In a city where only six per cent of the population gets their recommended veggie intake, the project is a way of not only injecting some community spirit but also improving nutrition. Homeless people often drop by for food at night and Lou receives heartfelt messages thanking the group for letting them eat that day; still, there's no policing who takes what.

"No one is judged on what they bring or take," she says. "It's really not about making sure that it ends up in the right hands. It's for anyone who enjoys eating well, but people aren't greedy – because it's a public place and people have a conscience. We've never had an incident – not a raised voice, we've never had anyone steal anything – it's been a testament to the community who come along and cherish it."

The laneway officially belongs to no one, but Lou didn't know that when she took over the public space – so she had her speech ready when the council rep came calling. The council, though, only offered help – and granted Food is Free a parcel of land across the road at the Western Oval. In fact, the initiative has encountered no opposition at all – and when Lou's rented house went up for sale two years ago and the laneway project was thrown into jeopardy, a wealthy local businesswoman bought the



CLERGY ABUSE Royal commission hears explosive evidence in Ballarat

Pell may have known of abuse by Ridsdale

Lou in her childhood years in Ballarat (above); it's a place where she has found contentment today (far left) along with her chooks. Left: When Gerald Ridsdale first faced the courts on sexual charges in 1993 he was accompanied by George Pell (right), then an auxiliary bishop.

property for more than $300,000 so Lou could keep living there.

The group has reached out to the Ballarat community, welcoming disability groups and at-risk teenagers as volunteers, and running gardening classes with the local kindergarten; this year there are plans to teach gardening to ex-offenders and cooking skills to those in need. Lou is a big believer in the therapeutic benefits of gardening. "Growing stuff gives you hope," she says. "It takes you out of your space of pain and gives you a project to concentrate on – you're nurturing something else."

Lou's twin loves are nature and music and there's evidence all over the house: seed packets piled on the kitchen bench, old vinyl records on the picture rails, and the cats, canary, chickens and guinea pigs all named after famous musicians (see Iggy the tomcat). "I absolutely love the music world, but it tends to be a little bit artificial," says the longtime publicist, whose clients have included the likes of Paul Kelly and Mental As Anything. "I need to be outdoors quite a lot for my sanity. Musicians are fantastic but vegetables don't have egos."

The youngest of three kids born to a full-time mum and a Telecom linesman, Lou grew up in Ballarat, playing cricket on the street and enjoying the freedom of a country childhood. After 13 years of Catholic schooling she moved to Melbourne to study arts, but dropped out of uni and eventually moved into community media, working at radio station Triple R and TV's Channel 31.

Lou was only 20 when her uncle was first charged, and none of her immediate family had an inkling. "It was an absolute shock," she says. "We had no idea and found out years later that most of the town did know. I still can't quite grasp how so many people knew and nothing was done about it. People say society was like that then, [but] it's never okay to rape a child – ever."

When Ridsdale, the eldest of her dad's six siblings, visited her parents 25 years ago to reveal the charges before the news became public, he was apparently remorseless. "My mother's first reaction was she wanted to vomit," says Lou. Her father and Ridsdale, with an age gap of 10 years between them, were never close. "He didn't like [Ridsdale], he still doesn't," says Lou. "He always felt he was aloof and arrogant. My grandmother really put him on a pedestal and a lot of her focus was on him, so I guess the other kids resented him." At family gatherings, she recalls, everyone would have to move their cars so Ridsdale had pole position. "It was almost like he was royalty and everyone had to get out of his way," she says. "He's such a narcissist, I think that was just the norm for him. I just got a really bad vibe from him. He was very domineering and I didn't like that."

At least two of Lou's 60-plus cousins are among his victims, and she has become friends with many of the other survivors too, some of whom come to the laneway and volunteer. Despite the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, though, the community, she says, isn't ready to move on. "There was a promise of a healing centre – nothing's happened there," she says. "There's been all sorts of promises that have not been fulfilled … The fact that only 10 per cent of his victims have come forward – no, there's so much work to be done."

Lou has never been out to atone for the sins of her uncle, but growing food and giving it away is just one small way of extending a hand and making others feel less alone. Her surname may still catch a little in her throat, but she is proof that there are, as she says, "a lot of good Ridsdales in this town".

"Being able to do something like Food is Free – it's not the reason why I do it, but it's just an added bonus – I can bring some lightness to the name and show that Ballarat's not such a cold, dark place," she says. "It's about light and hope."

On the side window of Lou's ramshackle weatherboard house, a "Thought of the week" is stuck to the glass, offering passersby some extra food for thought. "Small acts," it says, "transform the world." **AWW**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT HAWKINS. FAIRFAX MEDIA. YOUNG LOU PHOTO SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION.