MY TOWN

Murray Bridge

After-hours play dates in the zoo, an inclusive ethos, a squawking bunyip and people who truly give a fig: proud locals introduce **Susan Horsburgh** to the charms of South Australian river town Murray Bridge. Photography by Claudio Raschella.



CAFÉ OWNER

David Phillips

"I spent my childhood on a farm in Penola, in South Australia's south-east, but I went to Adelaide for boarding school and then went into hospitality and travelled. I always wanted to have my own business and my last manager pulled me up one day and said, 'You keep talking about "one day" – when's that actually going to happen?' It was the kick up the butt that I needed.

My partner lived here and we saw there was an opening for the style of café we wanted to own. We opened The Davery Establishment on 5 February, 2013. It's actually a combination of our names – my partner's name is Terry [Mangelsdorf] so it's the D-A-V-E of my name and the R-Y of his. But I have a tendency to hijack it.

My partner thinks I know everyone in town. He's lived here in Murray Bridge for 30-odd years and I've been here for seven and I seem to know more people than he does. I like to acknowledge people by name. For me, community is really big.

The café's vintage fit-out gives a feeling of home. It comes back to that sense of community and belonging. We hear it all the time: 'My grandmother used to have that table!' It's also an open-plan kitchen so people can talk to us while we're cooking. We get people who come in with buckets of figs and say, 'Our tree is loaded – would you like some?' Then we start putting figs in salads and all sorts of stuff.

I'm apparently one of Murray Bridge's best-known beards. Sometimes it can be big and woolly, the whole Ned Kelly look, and other times it's trim and neat. When I did the [Leukaemia Foundation's] World's Greatest Shave last year I didn't realise how much it would affect me, cutting it all off. You feel very vulnerable. And I shaved my head as well so I looked like an unfinished Muppet. In 2017 I did a 35-kilometre walk to raise awareness for mitochondrial disease. Every year I try to give back.

I have noticed huge changes in Murray Bridge. It's finding its place in the tourism market. It's a growing population but it's still got a small-town feel – I don't mean that it's narrow-minded or backward; it's actually very progressive. It's a regional city so it has size and opportunity on its side. And the river is just glorious."



ZOOKEEPER

Nicky Tomkinson

"'Chimp keeper' is a pretty good way to introduce yourself at parties but it generally takes over the conversation of the whole room! People are fascinated. Chimps are similar to humans in so many ways – they share about 98 per cent of our DNA. You do get emotionally attached but I've learnt not to have a favourite. One of the chimps, Soona, died about three years ago giving birth – she's the one that hit me the hardest – so I've vowed to love them all equally.

I've been working with chimps for 10 years. I grew up in Brisbane and my dad was an animal nut so we had peacocks, snakes, owls, ducks, you name it. I was lucky to get a job in my early 20s at Lone Pine, a Brisbane wildlife park, and I've been at Monarto Zoo for 20 years. Monarto is the biggest open-range zoo in Australia and 10 minutes from Murray Bridge.

We have 11 chimps at the zoo. Hannah, who's 25, had her first baby in February. She's a cutie. Hannah is very protective so bub's on mum's front, sleeping and eating, and Hannah's not letting anyone touch or sniff – she'll just push their hands away. Qantas has donated a heap of blankets and Hannah collects as many of them as she can to line her nest at night.

"I live at the zoo with my partner and two kids. When everyone's gone home we walk or ride our bikes around."

We start at 8am and get the chimps' breakfast ready. If we put all their food in one pile it would be gone just like that so we hide it throughout the exhibit. It's really important for captive animals to use their natural skills. It's all about keeping them stimulated so we play music and hang mobiles and mirrors; sometimes we tape dried fruit and nuts between the pages of magazines so they have to flick through to find their treats.

Murray Bridge is a really good family town with swimming-pool slides, playgrounds and things for kids. We're river people so we love our fishing and water sports. I live at the zoo with my partner and two kids, who are six and 10. When everyone's gone home we walk or ride our bikes around the zoo, which is nice. We're pretty popular for play dates."



TEACHER AND TEAM MANAGER

Prue Boland

"The Australian International Pedal Prix [21-22 September] is a 24-hour endurance race for velomobiles, those bullet-shaped vehicles with pedals. There are 200 teams and St Joseph's, our school, has two in the competition with 10 to 12 kids on each team. Murray Bridge is buzzing and Sturt Reserve is covered with tents and caravans.

We break the teams into smaller groups who are rostered twice over the 24 hours – say, 3-6pm and 3-6am. Each kid will ride and when they've had enough, they put the next rider in and just rotate through that group for the whole timeslot.

In 2017, parents raised funds and the school contributed to buy two new bikes, which cost over $14,000. It can cost a lot more but we went for the poverty pack. Our aim isn't to win. For us it's a collaborative thing. It's fantastic for those kids who never get on the football or netball team because we have a policy at St Joe's: if you want to be in it, you're in it. You just have to be prepared to pedal your heart out. The first time they overtake someone or get smacked in the side by another car it's a bit scary but then they get an adrenaline rush. I've never had a child who hasn't wanted to go back on the track.

Murray Bridge is a great little town. People know each other. I grew up in Adelaide and married a local farmer and I've been here 15 years. Back then there was one doctor's surgery and now we have three; I would never have dreamed we'd have a 24-hour gym, but now we've got two.

I've been a teacher for about 30 years and, as clichéd as it sounds, I believe I make a difference. I hope the kids leave my class thinking, 'I had a good year, I learnt stuff and she actually cared about me.'"

MAYOR

Brenton Lewis

"I grew up in Murray Bridge – I went to the local high school and my mother went there before me. It was a nice, quiet river town. There were about 11,000 people. Now there are 22,000 and it's growing at 2.3 to 2.5 per cent per annum. Its industry is predominantly food production and processing. We're very big in pork production, chicken, sheep and beef.

There is a lot of commuting between here and Adelaide but it still has that country atmosphere. We've gone through the horrendous Millennium Drought and last year our major employer, Thomas Foods International, had its factory burn down and yet Murray Bridge is still doing pretty well. It says a lot about the resilience of the community.

I became mayor in 2014 after I looked at the nominations and couldn't see anyone I thought would have the vision to drive the place forward. I was silly enough to say, 'I'm that person.' I wanted to make things happen. There's a growing focus on tourism. The Australian International Pedal Prix is probably our number-one event. The Bend Motorsport Park, 30 kilometres from here at Tailem Bend, is a $110 million-plus development expected to bring hundreds of thousands of people on a per-annum basis. The Murray Bridge Racing Club has built a $36 million complex which can seat 600 people; the Monarto Zoo is set to attract a $35 million investment on accommodation and they're predicting 250,000 tourists a year once that's completed. So there's a lot happening and the council is intent on developing the riverfront.

The Bunyip? It's been at Sturt Reserve since 1972. Last year we had to pull it out and give it an overhaul. People used to have to put a dollar in; now you just push the button and it'll scare you. It's a steel structure but the bunyip itself is a big plastic caricature. It squawks and groans and carries on. We turn it off in the evening so it doesn't scream at you all night."





ACTIVIST

Heather Courtney

"I was one of two people named 2019 Murray Bridge Citizen of the Year on Australia Day. I grew up in Adelaide but my husband had lived here almost all his life and had a good job as workshop manager of a crash-repair business so we built a house here 40 years ago. We have three grown-up children, two of whom have moved back here. A lot of young families are moving back – it's close to Adelaide and more affordable.

My father was a Lutheran minister and taught me to make sure people are supported. I'm involved with White Ribbon Day, Neighbourhood Watch, International Women's Day and last year the Mental Health Expo. I also volunteer at Concordia Kindergarten playgroup. I'm retired now but for more than 15 years I was a support worker at a shelter for the homeless and [victims of] domestic violence. If someone was in crisis I'd sometimes take them to motels and arrange food for them. Now I'm on a committee and we discuss how to improve things, like we have a vigil every May to remember the women and children who have lost their lives [to domestic violence]. We light candles and float flowers on the river.

"I've seen women remake their lives. I see them around Murray Bridge, people who've gone on to better things."

I haven't been personally affected by domestic violence but I know people who have. People only think of the shoving and physical stuff, but the spiritual, economic and verbal [abuse] is just as damaging. And people who are well-off are just as vulnerable. It's pretty tough to have to move out. Anything you can do to re-establish them in the community is vital. Even now, if I'm walking down the street, someone I've helped in the past will give me a big hug and thank me again. I've seen women remake their lives. I see them around Murray Bridge, people who've gone on to better things.

What sets Murray Bridge apart is the lifestyle. The river has houseboats and the marina and *Captain Proud* does paddleboat lunch and dinner cruises. It's a community where you know your neighbours. My friends say it's the best-kept secret. We've been to a lot of country towns and I always come home and think, yes, this is where we belong."

COMPOSER AND SOUND ARTIST

Jesse Budel

"I was born in Bordertown and moved to Murray Bridge when I was five. I always seemed to live across from a paddock so having those open spaces and attuning to those acoustic environments meant they became an interest in my music. A composer works with traditional concepts of music – melody, harmony, rhythm – whereas a sound artist treats sound outside the scope of music as their main source material. That can be anything from synthesised sounds to field recordings of things like birdsong and traffic.

In 2013 I wrote a piece for the Australian String Quartet where I recorded whale song and notated that down on the page for the string quartet to play. Later I started recording sounds in the environment and playing them back through a surround-sound speaker system with no instruments.

As part of my PhD study, I did a piece looking at Long Island, which bisects the Murray River at Murray Bridge. On one side you've got motorboat traffic access and on the other side it's prohibited to allow for waterfowl refuge. I did recordings both above and below water and compared the experience of listening on one side of the river to the other. I played them at Murray Bridge Town Hall last year in a surround-sound concert and people were shocked at how loud the boats were. There's a lot of research indicating that motorboat traffic is having a detrimental impact on aquatic species because they're pretty much going deaf. Hopefully it was a wake-up call for the audience.

In the same way that a landscape painting captures a place in visual form, the recording of a soundscape can allow you to hear all the different components of that place, from the sounds of living creatures through to sounds generated by humans such as transport. Data can be analysed by software and you can see patterns emerging: changes in biodiversity, changes as a result of climate change.

Murray Bridge is a special place because you can head an hour in any direction and experience an entirely different ecosystem: the lush eucalypt forests of the Adelaide Hills; the incredible coastline at Goolwa; the Riverland and then the desert if you head north-east. I'm privileged to have such diversity at my doorstep. That's why I've stuck around – just that sense of place. And also the Murray. It's such a core part of the town's identity."



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