

BUILT ON TRUST

More than three decades after its establishment, the Connellan Airways Trust continues to deliver on the vision of its founder.

STORY NATHAN DYER

When Edward 'EJ' Connellan sold his beloved airline in 1979, he wanted to ensure its legacy of serving outback communities continued. With part of the sale proceeds, the outback businessman and pastoralist established Connellan Airways Trust. More than three decades on, the trust continues to honour EJ's vision, supporting families and communities across remote Australia.

Former chairman and foundation trustee Max Horton says that right from the start the Connellan Airways Trust was focused on supporting people living in remote Australia. "Our concept of 'outback', is the remote outback," says the retired lawyer who spent 39 years practising in Alice Springs. "It's really the 'back-of-beyond' type of outback we're talking about." By focusing on truly remote areas, Max says the Connellan Airways Trust has been able to maximise its impact. "You find they're get-up-and-go people, and its good to be able to help those kind of people help themselves."

Since its establishment in 1981, the Connellan Airways Trust has maintained a clear vision: "To promote and encourage the advancement of knowledge of people, especially younger people, living on remote stations and in small settlements in outback parts of Australia such as those formerly served by Connellan Airways".

Over the past 34 years, the trust has distributed more than \$3 million to 2593 recipients through general grants and the annual EJ Connellan Award, which provides up to \$20,000 for individuals to undertake further study or research. To be eligible, applicants must live on stations or communities in remote Australia, or be based in larger regional centres but serving people living in remote areas.

"We work more on a helping-hand concept," Max says. "We tend to subsidise, rather than pay the whole amount for something." The trust provides regular general grants, normally between \$200 and \$5000. Although grants have been extended to sporting clubs and other community groups, one of the trust's most enduring legacies has been its long-time support of Schools of the Air and distance

education and Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education.

Administration manager at the Alice Springs School of the Air, Anne Winzar, says the trust's support helps many remote families with their accommodation expenses for 'in school' weeks. "Families come into the school four times a year, once a term, and usually for five days each time," Anne says. With a classroom covering 1.3 million square kilometres, stretching across the Northern Territory and into South Australia and Western Australia, many of the school's 130 students face a significant financial burden attending such weeks.

"We've got some remote students who live up at Corella Creek [250 kilometres north-east of Tennant Creek] and they actually hire a bus and the teachers and a few family members bring the students down and they stay at the caravan park," Anne says. "They do a bit of fundraising themselves, but they wouldn't be able to come down without the trust's assistance."

After almost 20 years working at Alice Springs School of the Air, and having relied on Katherine School of the Air to educate her own daughters, Anne says the trust's ongoing commitment to bush education is vital for outback families. "They're there to help these remote families get a fantastic education in anyway they can."

Up on the Darling Downs, Qld, veterinary science student Amy Harding says the Connellan Airways Trust has played a big role in helping her to follow her dream. Based at Toowoomba and attending the University of Queensland's Gatton campus, the 21-year-old Territorian was awarded the 2014 EJ Connellan Award and \$20,000 to assist with obtaining her degree.

"Because vet science is quite a heavy study load, you have to be at uni most days of the week from eight to five, so it's pretty hard to get a job," Amy says. "So having that extra money from the trust reduces the pressure." It's also allowed her have experiences that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. "I've actually just got back from South Africa, where I was working in a humanitarian capacity, but also on conservation with cheetahs and crocodiles," she says.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A Connellan Airways De Havilland DH89A Dragon Rapide at Timber Creek, NT; Edward 'EJ' Connellan; veterinary science student Amy Harding at home on Gorrie Station, NT; Alice Springs School of the Air preschool teacher Vicki Skoss during an 'in school' week.

Growing up on Gorrie Station, 80km south-west of Mataranka, Amy attended the Katherine School of the Air before moving to Adelaide to complete Years 11 and 12 at Pembroke School. She became aware of the trust through its support of families like hers through the Isolated Children's Parents' Association. Asked what she wants to do when she graduates, Amy's answer is emphatic: move back to the Top End. "When you grow up somewhere like that, nothing ever compares to it," she says. "I'd love to be able to go back and put something back into the community that helped me so much."

As well as individuals and schools, the trust assists remote communities to come together. Out on Yuruga Station, 90km south of Longreach, speech pathologist and pastoralist Jenny Lindsay was awarded a general grant in 2013 to support the running of a wellness forum at nearby Stonehenge. "We ran that over the Anzac Day weekend last year, and it was a preventative health strategy supporting social and emotional wellbeing," Jenny says. The trust contributed to the presenter's fees and travel expenses, reducing the cost to participants.

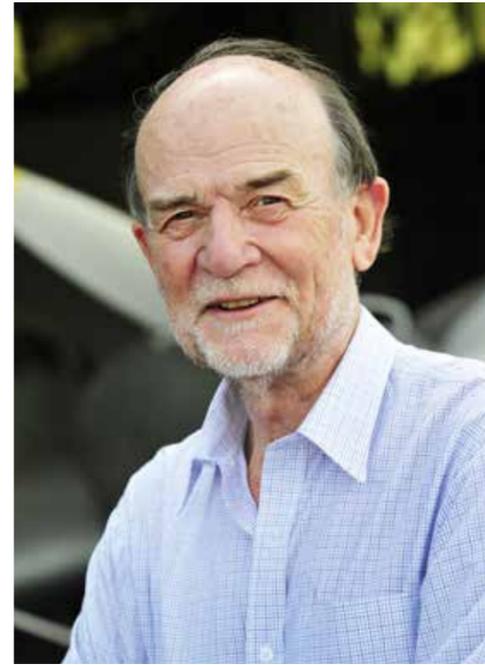
Jenny says the Connellan Airways Trust has a unique approach, different from other funding sources. "It's not like these 20-page processes you have to go through with some other organisations; they support you through the process," Jenny says. "I just think the way they operate, it does encourage you to think down the track, 'Well we've benefited from Connellan let's see how we can possibly donate back to them so they can then support other people in the bush'."

EJ Connellan was born at Donald, Vic, in 1912. His family later moved to the Riverina district of New South Wales, where he spent his childhood before leaving to finish his schooling at Melbourne's Xavier College. He later became a teacher and taught at schools in country Victoria before looking to the north to fulfil his dream of becoming a pastoralist.

After gaining his pilot's licence, EJ sought the support of Riverina pastoralists to explore the potential of aviation in the development of outback Australia. He completed two aerial surveys of the Northern Territory in 1938, which eventually led to the establishment of a government-subsidised mail run from Alice Springs to Wyndham, WA, in 1939.

Connellan Airways was registered in July 1943. With EJ at the helm, the company expanded to include commercial routes, but maintained its commitment to remote communities through its mail runs and contracts with the Royal Flying Doctor Service. When the company was sold to East-West Airlines in October 1979, EJ negotiated with his fellow shareholders to contribute 47 percent of sale proceeds to establish the Connellan Airways Trust.

A Deed of Trust was signed in June 1981, with the trust officially launched by Deputy Prime Minister Doug Anthony at Alice Springs in February 1983. EJ Connellan passed away just 10 months later but his family remained directly involved through EJ's son, Chris



Former Connellan Airways Trust chairman and foundation trustee Max Horton OAM.

Connellan, until his retirement from the board in 2006.

Despite its success, the Connellan Airways Trust has remained a low-key operation. Rather than attempting to grow its asset base through mainstream promotion, Max Horton says the trustees decided from an early stage to keep a low profile. "We could have gone the way of the Royal Flying Doctor Service in looking to bump up the funds, but we chose to be boutique," Max says. That meant focusing on asset management to grow, without relying heavily on external donations. The trust's value has grown from \$1 million at establishment to \$6 million today, with annual disbursements averaging between \$140,000 and \$160,000. Max adds that there have been a number of significant donations over the years – all of which above \$2 are tax deductible.

According to Max, the trust's success has long been due to the quality and dedication of its people, with an administration and board of volunteer directors recruited to ensure a broad skill base. Max is a case in point. He served the Trust for more than three decades until retiring from the board in December 2014. Current directors include an accountant, magistrate, pastoralist and senior public servant.

Max says although he didn't get to know him well, EJ was an impressive man. "He was a big character in a personality sense, he had a real presence, and what you would call 'bushy toughness'," Max says. "Something that is a great satisfaction to me is that I reckon EJ would be pleased with where the trust has gone and where it is today." 

For more information about the Connellan Airways Trust phone 1800 733 810 or go to www.connellanairwaystrust.org.au.