

Dedicated Board Chair Bows Out

Pony Club Australia is grateful for the four years of dedicated service by Michelle Harper, whose term on the PCA board concluded on 9th May 2020. Michelle was an elected director of PCA from 2016 to 2020 including the last two years as Chair of the board.

Michelle was always connected with the grass roots of the organisation and took great delight in visiting as many clubs around Australia as possible on a holiday road trip in 2018. She also willingly accepted the invitation from states or clubs to speak about governance and development of Pony Club. During her time on the PCA board Michelle visited every state, the PCA Nationals in Toowoomba and Sydney, and also attended the Pony Club International Alliance meeting in the UK in 2018 at her own expense.

Whilst Michelle Harper was Chair, Pony Club Australia took significant steps to better meet the current needs of the community and the expectations of government. Governance of the PCA board was improved by the finalisation of a skills matrix to inform director appointments, an Audit and Risk Committee with independent Chair and board procedures to promote best practice decision making in the interests of the organisation's diverse membership. The high standards of governance of PCA were recognised by Sport Australia with excellent ratings across all categories.



Michelle Harper (l to r): In the kitchen helping at Yarra Glen Pony Club; at a PCA function with former Board member Shannon Durrant and CEO Catherine Ainsworth; and visiting a club, something she greatly enjoyed.

Conscious of the changing community, Michelle was instrumental in developing PCA Centre Membership so that people without a horse could also get to experience what Pony Club has to offer. Michelle also saw the role of Pony Club as the grass roots of equestrian sport and initiated the successful National Safety Conference for Horse Sports held in February 2020.

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Media Release
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Fellow Board member Andrew McLean was first to thank Michelle Harper for bring PCA “Bravely into the future in so many ways because of her breadth of thinking, meticulous approach and unfailing conscience.

“Although I believe Michelle would be sad to leave PCA, I also think that she must feel a sense of comfort that she had achieved so much leading various projects she continued on from Carol Paterson, as well as others she initiated herself,” he added.

“For example, the syllabus modernisation and the Centre Membership program. Michelle cared very much for the children and their education in Australia and she also believed that, as an expert equestrian nation, it was only right to cost-effectively help kids with their horses everywhere, if one were to be genuine about caring for kids and horses.

“Michelle believed that the Pony Clubber in Katherine is just as important as the child in Sydney or Melbourne, and she has very much helped ensure the longevity of Pony Club in Australia. Michelle's desire was for collaboration and compassion with and between member states, zones and individuals; to develop ‘The Pony Club family’.

Michelle’s own reflection on her time with Pony Club (over the page) shows the loyalty and lifetime connection of members with the organisation, and the goodwill of highly skilled people to give back to the organisation. Pony Club Australia very much appreciates the thousands of hours of time Michelle gave Pony Club over the last four years and we wish her well.

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My life in Pony Club (Michelle Harper)

Growing up, my unhorsy family were loving but, as the law would say, 'impecunious'. Seeing my first pony at 'pony rides' near my inner-city home as a toddler, I fell instantly in love and would dream of ponies and dream of living with them in the country. I cut out pictures of horses from the newspapers and made scrapbooks. I remember buying a picture book of horses on lay-by with my pocket money and pouring over the pages. I enjoyed finding it in storage just the other day.

By the time I was about 12, living in the outer suburbs, my mother finally convinced my father to buy me a horse, since I never let up on it. I was so excited and couldn't wait to ride him. My father, being a stern man of his times, told me that I couldn't ride the horse until I had got a job and earned the money to buy a helmet. After knocking on many doors, I got my first job stacking crates and stocking shelves in a milk bar for 50 cents per hour. The helmet was \$10 and 20 hours of work later, I had my helmet and I could ride! I still remember the excitement of it all.

I agisted my horse along with a friend from school who convinced me to join Pony Club with her. We did not have a float so we rode for about an hour to get there. We rode up to 10km to get to local competitions too. I just loved Pony Club and everything about it. I joined the newly formed Junior Committee at 14 years old and soon became its President. I recall we held a gymkhana and raised enough money to build a truck ramp at my lovely Doongala Pony Club. I understand that it was removed a while, but not that long, ago. Who needs a truck ramp anymore?

I had to pay my agistment (\$3/week), farrier (\$8/6 weeks), feed (can't recall except it was agonisingly expensive for me) and competition costs (50c/class), so there were many part-time jobs. I carried my saddle to school and the principal allowed me to keep it in his office. My friend and I caught the bus from school to the paddock and our parents would take turns to pick us up and take us home. Financially, I found it a struggle to juggle school, part-time work and study as a young teenager. Everyone at Pony Club seemed to have so many things to make it easier. Floats, nice saddles, lovely well-educated horses and riding lessons. So, at 15, I went around the club and asked all the parents how do you make that happen? And they told me – get a good education. So I did. I had to stop riding at 17 to get it, but emerged as a Registered General Nurse with a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Laws, admission to practice as a lawyer, a marriage and a baby. Along the way, I instructed at Kangaroo Ground Pony Club around the time they purchased their own grounds.

As soon as my children could conceivably sit on a pony, they were off to Pony Club. I joined the committees, but my home, personal equestrian competition and working life were too demanding to allow me to do much more at the time than contribute at meetings and volunteer at events. Once my children were independent and work requirements were not as demanding, I decided to commit myself to Pony Club to put back in and thank it for the wonderful opportunities it had provided to me in my life.

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I became the President of Yarra Glen & District Pony Club 3 days before the grounds were burnt down in the Black Saturday Bushfire. It was a tragedy for our club and 75% of our members were deeply traumatised by that event. Children needed to return to some type of normality as soon as possible. This many years past the event, I am now able to say that I was in my element and I thoroughly enjoyed applying my skills to rebuilding the club. With glee, I was able to use my legal skills to extract so much benefit from insurance, council commitments under the lease, politicians and grant providers who were very generous at the time. I was particularly delighted to motivate donors and volunteers, many of whom had nothing to do with our club, to provide a huge amount of materials and labour to rebuild our destroyed infrastructure. I will say there were a lot of BBQs and beverages, including soft drink, involved. Media coverage and published gratitude as well. After this experience, I was now interested in creation rather than administration.

I applied for the position of director on the relatively new PCA Board in 2016. It was a complete pleasure to be working with highly skilled, like-minded people towards the advancement of Pony Club across Australia. I spent my first year researching everything about Pony Club in each state at a club, zone, state, national and international level as well as its history from the very beginning. I can confirm that reading constitutions is exceptionally boring. I then travelled around Australia (on a personal trip) attending many clubs and talking to so many local people about Pony Club in every corner, particularly the small ones. I was amazed at the 'same, same but different' aspect of Pony Club in all of the states. A notable memory of that trip was sitting with a bunch of road train drivers in a remote part of the Northern Territory and, when I brought up the topic of Pony Club, they had all been members! They talked about their certificates and all the fun they had as members of Pony Club.

I became Chair of PCA on the commencement of my second and final two year term in mid-2018. My research had disclosed that Pony Club was about to celebrate its 80th birthday in 2019. As you know, a bit of a fuss was made, cakes were fabulously decorated by club members (and unceremoniously enjoyed by children) and over 100 people with a long lifetime in Pony Club were formally acknowledged. There was the usual time-consuming dealing with complaints, attending to 'corporate' matters and working on relationships and communication in Pony Club, but perhaps the public highlight of my time as Chair was being the concept creator and the driver of the National Safety Conference in February this year. I was so proud to see Pony Club lead the way in creating a dialogue about safety with all horse sports, and at every level.

My private highlight, though, is the creation of the Centre Membership program. For me, it speaks to the little girls (and boys) from unhorsy, urban, and maybe 'impecunious' backgrounds who dream of a pony each night. It speaks to that much younger me and I am proud to have been able to create opportunities for her. It took a lifetime.

Best wishes, Pony Club

Michelle Harper

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