

John Eagles - TCRT

Prominent former New Plymouth lawyer John Eagles is credited by many of the original Taranaki Community Rugby Trust board members for significantly helping it attain its charitable status.

Eagles, who is a life member of the Taranaki Rugby Football Union after serving a 16-year unbroken period as an independent director, plays down the part he played.

Instead, he points to the “incredible support” the trust received from the outset from farmers throughout the region who were willing to put their hands up to help.

“We got a huge response from farmers in Taranaki,” he said.

“Without them, the thing would have just fallen over while the work from the likes of Ray Barron and Peter Crawford was simply amazing. It still amazes me what they did.”

Eagles has been fully involved in legal, educational, sports and community groups in Taranaki for almost five decades, including CCS Disability, Govett Brewster, TSB Showplace, Pukeiti, Taranaki Rugby, Taranaki Anglican Trust Board, New Plymouth Boys' High School, Frankley Primary School and the Law Society.

However, the Taranaki Community Rugby Trust is one group which sticks out, he said.

“We started with nothing and it was a chance to involve a lot of people from farming to help the rugby community and assist young players which is important to Taranaki.

“In rural areas the options for young people to play different sports are not as great as they are for families living in the town.

“It was just an idea from two or three farmers who were involved in Taranaki rugby to enable junior players to be involved in the game.”

Eagles said the motivation behind his involvement in the TCRT was to assist rugby's growth in Taranaki.

“It sounded so easy,” he joked. “You form a trust, you get charitable status, you get a whole lot of cows to milk and the money would come out the other end.”

The enthusiasm shown by the likes of Barron and Crawford convinced it could work despite a number of early challenges.

“There was never a thought that it wouldn't work,” he said.

He has a very clear memory of getting the initial lease from Origin and the sudden realisation that they did not own one cow.

The attitude of making it work then took over.

The generosity of farmers who donated and helped out was striking for Eagles who admits he does not remember playing a significant hand in the trust getting its charitable status as much as he was credited for.

“Basically sport is not a charitable thing so we had to get around that and emphasise how much it was going to benefit education and the community.”

Eagles said there were plenty of other legal matters the trust needed doing around the lease, its negotiations with Fonterra and any other thing that cropped up.

He also worked closely on getting the guarantors in place to secure the bank loan they needed. While Barron admits the early stages of the trust's establishment and operation turned his hair grey with worry, Eagles said he was always “buoyed along” by the can-do attitude of everyone involved.

“The positivity was catching, it really was,” he said.

Eagles believed the trust's attractiveness to people willing to help out or make donations was down to them believing what the trust was doing was new and innovative that was going to benefit the amateur game, especially at a junior level.

He saw the tangible benefits the trust was achieving quickly and recalled many instances of visiting clubs and being personally thanked by parents, coaches and administrators alike. While they are among a number of memorable moments he has gained from his involvement, Eagles also took satisfaction from the work he did negotiating with Origin and its board who he said logically had no real idea or experience of leasing its land to dairy farmers.

"While the local people could understand it a lot of the decisions were made in Australia. But I also think we were a great benefit for Origin because they had this great green area that was being looked after and they didn't have to do a thing while we kept in touch with them all the time.

"They were generous in their attitude to the trust and that was really important for keeping everything going."

Eagles retired from the TCRT at the same time he did from the rugby union in 2020.

However, his work or contribution to the TCRT gave him "an absolute" sense of pride.

"It really does. One of the first ambitions was to be able to give \$100,000 back to the community and we managed to do that relatively quickly.

"One of the other most satisfying things was seeing the pride in Taranaki and the amazement from people outside the province when you explain to them what we were all about and what we had achieved," he said.

Other highlights that have impressed on him has been the high quality of work done on the farm by the trust's advisors and sharemilkers.

He believed that was imperative in giving people the confidence that their donations were being well utilised.