

Michael Joyce - TCRT

Farm consultant Michael Joyce was in Paris in 2008 when a call came through from Taranaki Rugby chief executive Mark Robinson.

Despite not recognising the number, Joyce answered and listened intently to what Robinson had to say.

“He gave me a very brief overview about what was being planned with the farm which at that stage they were putting in for the tender,” he said.

“He just said the guys were wondering if I might entertain supervising the farm. I immediately said yes because for me, that was just a huge privilege to be even considered and then asked for something like that.”

Keen not to take too much of Joyce’s holiday time, Robinson told him they would go into more detail once he returned to New Zealand.

That duly happened with a meeting set-up on his return.

“In the interim and before I got home they had been notified as the successful tender and it just went from there,” he said.

Meeting the trust founders and those working on setting up the farm, Joyce said he was immediately struck by the amount of work they were putting in and the passion for the project they all displayed.

“Some of those people, and in particular Ray (Barron) and Peter (Crawford) and Mark (Robinson) for that matter, they were never going to accept ‘no’ from anybody. Once they got on that path, it was just full steam ahead.

“It was very easy to join that approach and work with those people.”

Without a previous working relationship with the trust founders, and never actually having met Crawford before, Joyce said they combined remarkably well to the challenges put in front of them.

As donations and offers of farm equipment, fertiliser and stock came flooding in, Joyce quickly realised he had made the right choice to become involved at the coal face.

“To me, the wonderful thing about all of this, and the Taranaki spirit, is everyone’s willingness to say ‘yes’.”

It was a word he would also go on to use often when asked to provide more help and guidance over the farm’s operation.

“I started off as the farm supervisor, and I thought that was all I was going to be engaged to do but it became obvious very quickly that they wanted me on the ground floor,” he said.

“That was evident one night when Peter Crawford rang me and said: ‘Right, we need a budget. Can you do a budget for us?’

“I thought that had already been done, and it probably had, on the back of an envelope, probably.”

“But these guys, their enthusiasm was so strong that things like budgeting, they knew it had to be done so we had to get some formalities around it. They were not going to accept ‘no’ from anybody and they kept forging ahead and talking to people until all the doors were open.

“And it was not long until Peter called and told me he thought I needed to be called the farm manager.”

While not always 100% confident all the challenges the trust faced in the early days would be overcome, Joyce never stopped believing in the project and the group driving it.

“It was genuinely exciting and I was just swept along by the enthusiasm and the can-do attitude of those guys. I learnt a huge amount because it was the first major community thing I had been part of.”

The ‘talk-to-people and doors will open’ mantra that became such a common thread to the work the trust was doing in the early days did help overcome the obstacles and Joyce said improvements were made year on year.

The farm staff bought into the fact that things were going to be a bit different, especially with stock arriving at different times early on, and Joyce was more than happy with the contractors and service people he described as “buzzing” to be part of the project.

“It was quite a lot of work and there were quite a number of unknowns but problems got solved because of the people thing.”

Such was the satisfaction he took from his involvement, Joyce said he put his time working with the trust at or very close to number one over what was an extensive rural career.

“I can’t think of anything else that eclipses it,” he said.

“In terms of the community initiative, there’s nothing else that rates with it.”

After five years supervising the farm, Joyce said he came to the realisation that the trust needed to bring someone younger in and he believed Brendan Attrill fitted the bill to take over, which he duly did.

Joyce said the work he did never overburdened him, making sure he always “made space” for the trust and what needed to be done.

“I just kept thinking this was a huge privilege and honour to be asked and having the opportunity to work with all of these wonderful people, and help deliver something back to the community, especially around kids’ health, wellbeing and fitness, it was never a burden at all.”

As for personal highlights, the involvement and hosting of former Prime Minister Sir John Key, was top of his list.

“That was really special. Realising the pool that had to get further support for the trust, that was a real eye-opener.

“Ray was just so insistent that we had to get John Key, we had to get the Prime Minister here, even though people were saying he’s really busy, Ray just said ‘no-no, this is what is going to happen’ and that is what happened.

“The collective power that these guys could come up with, and the little bit that I could contribute to make that happen, was hugely satisfying.”