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| **Rural and remote teaching podcast series** |

Catherine Cargnoni – Hebel State School

*Catherine Cargnoni is a change of career teacher who is currently teaching principal at Hebel State School. After leaving school Catherine worked in various hospitality jobs including training and working as a chef before deciding to become a teacher. Catherine has been a teacher for 13 years and is a passionate advocate for the profession and teaching in the bush.*

**Announcer**: This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: Queensland state schools offer a variety of teaching experiences including the opportunity to live and work in unique rural and remote destinations.

Hi, I'm Virginia Bowdidge from the Queensland Department of Education, and in this podcast series I talk to state school teachers living in unique corners of our vast state. Today, Catherine Cargnoni joins me. Cath is the teaching principal at Hebel State School. Hebel is a tiny rural town of less than 70 people on the Queensland New South Wales border.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: Thanks for joining me Cath to talk about your experiences in outback Queensland.

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Thank you for inviting me to talk about my experiences.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: Can you tell me a little bit about your career before teaching and why you decided to change careers and become a teacher?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Before I was teaching, I did multiple jobs. Most of those jobs were in hospitality. What happened was I fell pregnant with my first daughter, and once I had a couple of children, it became evident that going back into the hospitality industry, with three small children, was going to be very difficult. I just figured that I needed change of career. So I come from a family when my mother is a teacher, and my sister is a teacher, and I saw how much it worked for me as a child growing up, having a parent as a teacher, and being able to be at home in holidays. And I decided that I would do that.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: How long have you been teaching?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: This is my 13th year in teaching for Education Queensland.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: And do you think the move from your prior career to teaching was a good one?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Absolutely, it was definitely beneficial as a parent with three small children.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: How long have you been teaching in Hebel?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: I arrived in Hebel in Term 4 of 2018 and it is now Term 4 of 2020, so just two years.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: And can you tell us a little bit about Hebel?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Hebel is a very, very small town. We have a general store, we have a pub. The general store has a little bit of a caravan park attached to it because we are on the Castlereagh Highway.

Hebel was a base town for Cobb & Co when it was traveling from Melbourne, up to Brisbane and through to Longreach and all those sorts of places and Roma. And so, it became a little township many, many years ago. The school is actually 120 years old next year. We only have 20, less than 20 residents that live in the township itself, our students come from the farms that are near Hebel. We have some students that travels 70 kilometres to get to school every day, so that's 140 kilometres round trip. And we have other students two kilometres from town, their farms are just on the outside of the township.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: And why did you move to Hebel?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: I was applying for principal positions as I had been doing some acting roles on the Gold Coast, in a small school, Numinbah Valley State School. It was just time for me to step up, it was time to do something different. The principal at Numinbah Valley State School had been a principal here at Hebel. And when this position became available, I asked him, how did you find Hebel? And he said, "Loved it, you'll have a great time. The people are fantastic, give it a go". So on his recommendation, I said, yep.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: And so what do you do in Hebel when you're not working?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: The local communities out here, really do run a lot of things. Last weekend, I went up to Dirranbandi, which is about 70 kilometres away. They had an art show on, the art centre was putting on a display of local art. My students had created some artwork to go in the show, so I made an appearance up there to have a look at the artwork. I’m 70kms, north of Lightning Ridge, it's my closest place to go shopping. So weekends are doing the groceries and things like that. So yes, there's always something to do.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: And were the logistics of the move difficult to navigate?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Not particularly because Education Queensland are quite experienced in moving their staff. Communication with them is very clear, very easy. They're pretty flexible with picking up your goods and getting them to and fro.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: What is it about teaching remotely that has drawn you in?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: The sense of community. Teaching is, it's a great profession. You meet so many wonderful creative people. However, out here, I think what's really got me is the fact that in a primary school, the parents are really involved. This is their only opportunity to be involved with their children's education hands on. All of my students go to boarding school when they reach high school.

I really enjoy the fact that the school is such a central part of the community. It's where we hold lots of different events during the year. My first term that I was here, we had our presentation evening, and I had seven students in that year. And I thought, okay, presentation night, the kids do a little play. I'll get 20 people, mum, dad, maybe a grandparent or so, there was 80 people. Because the whole community comes for the event. They come to see each other, they come to see the children who most of them, they've known since birth. They are maybe related somehow or their ex teachers from the school, or their children came here, their grandchildren have come here. The school links to so many people in the community, that when we have an event, lots of people turn up. Everybody wants to get together because we are so isolated, we don't see each other very often. So when there is an event, everybody turns up. And the generosity is just overwhelming.

We had a raffle night. And we had 120 people turn up to the pub and we raised over $5,000. I was blown away. I've been at schools where there's 1000 children, and we'll have a raffle, and we're lucky to get $200. And it was just that generosity, and that willingness to help out, that just drew me in and I thought wow these... I just love it. I just absolutely love being here.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: What do you love about your job?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Oh, love about my job, it's different every day. I can have my whole day planned, and I can walk in the office door, and then have to change everything. And that's something that can be frustrating, but I love the fact that it's a puzzle every day.

I love watching the kids learn. I love seeing when they look at you and you can just see that little light bulb go on when they realise, oh, they connect the dots, and they go, "yes, I can do that now".

And the relationships that you build with your staff, I have a number of staff here that are part time. In an urban area, you wouldn't necessarily get to know them because you'd only see them one day a week at work. Whereas here, you might only see them one day or two days a week at work, but you see them at all the other community events.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: What have you found surprising about working in Hebel?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: I think the biggest surprise for me was really the amount of commitment that the parents have to their children's education and wanting to be involved and wanting to know how the school's running and making sure that things are on track. So I think that was my biggest surprise, the amount of time and effort that parents out here are willing to put into their children's school grounds and school, and their education at a primary level.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: Has the reality lived up to your expectations?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: It's gone beyond. I came out here and I had lived on the east coast of Australia all my life, grown up within walking distance of the beach my whole life. And I spent probably 300 out of 365 days going to the beach, either in the morning or the afternoon. So coming out here, the first time I came out here and there had been no rain in eight years, I thought what am I doing in this dust bowl of a town with 200 kangaroos jumping up and down the street and dead on the side of the road and in my school grounds, hopping around. I thought what have I done? This is a bad idea I will never survive out here, in the heat and the dust.

But I've just come to love the peace and quiet. You sit out your backyard, in the afternoon watch the sunset, the sunsets are just amazing. And the stars and the quiet.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: What do you wish you knew before becoming a remote teacher?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Be prepared for the isolation at first. Be prepared to have some time to think about yourself as a person, what you want from the job while you’re in a rural and remote area to set your goals. Yeah, just be prepared to be involved and help out, because that comes back to you. Then you ask for help people are there, they turn up. "Yes, we'll help." So I think those sorts of things I would have liked to have known before I came out.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: Would you recommend teaching as a profession?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Absolutely. I think it's something that is it's continually growing and changing and you develop as a person. It's fantastic for family life, you find great friends. There's so many things you can do with teaching, so many places you can go. You don't have to stay in the one school for 20 years. You can go anywhere with teaching, you can travel the world. You don't learn at once, and then you're done. You keep learning every day, and about yourself, about your profession, about people, about students. It's great, I love it.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: And finally, what advice would you give students studying teaching or thinking of studying teaching?

**Catherine Cargnoni**: Go bush. Go west, go north, get out of your comfort zone. Just go. Don't hesitate. I don't think I have met any teachers out here, young or old, that have regretted coming out to the outback or teaching in a rural and remote community.

**Virginia Bowdidge**: Thanks for your insights Cath.

**Catherine Cargnoni**: No problem.

**Announcer:** You have been listening to the Queensland Department of Education podcast.