

Entering new territory

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Ask Caitlin (Caity) Little about the downside to working as a paramedic on the frontlines of Alice Springs and you'll only be met with silence. If pressed, she will admit it's not always easy, but her incredible passion for her work and the satisfaction she draws from her extensive volunteering endeavours have always helped her through the tough times.





“It all started for me in Year 11 when I went to Rwanda on a fundraising trip,” Caity said. “I knew nothing about the place and very little about the country’s horrific genocide. While I was there, I visited some hospitals and I remember looking around thinking ‘these people are so happy and they have absolutely nothing’. And that was it. My interest in nursing and paramedicine only grew from there.”

Caity completed a Bachelor of Nursing/ Bachelor of Paramedicine at ACU’s Ballarat Campus and went on to work as a paramedic for two years at home in Gippsland.

“It was an exciting, busy job, but the truth is, I’d always dreamt of working with Indigenous people in a really remote setting,” she said. After being given a push by her supervisor at the time – “He said, ‘If you don’t do it now, you never will’” – Caity decided to swap country Victoria for Alice Springs.

Her plan to move north for a short six to 12-month jaunt quickly turned into four years – with no end in sight. “I got up here and I just loved it, even the weather,” she said. “Once you arrive, it’s really hard to leave.”

Caity now works part-time as a nurse in the emergency department of her local hospital and full-time as a paramedic for St John Ambulance. While most people associate St John Ambulance with first-aid courses and unpaid volunteers, in the Northern

Territory, it’s the only ambulance service available.

“The experience you gain from a place like Alice is invaluable to your career. I’ve seen and learnt things that will stick with me forever,” Caity said. “The work here is like nowhere else. You can’t even explain it to other paramedics as they think you’re exaggerating. We have a lot of problems with anti-social behaviour, alcohol abuse, and many people have housing issues. Sometimes we have to deal with violence and aggression, and often it is just you and your partner. We don’t always have the luxury of having the police with us on scene and we have to walk into some really hostile environments.”

Giving back to others has always been instinctive to Caity, and when she’s not busy working, her spare time is taken up by a range of voluntary roles. She’s a regular at the Alice Springs Animal Shelter, walking stray dogs and taking care of the animals, and she’s spent time working for the Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation, supporting children who come from families with mental health issues.

“It’s mostly for kids with parents in the Australian Defence Force who often have PTSD,” she explained. “We take the kids to a camp or run fun activity days. It’s about helping them develop strategies to manage the tough times and letting them know they’re not alone.”

Caity has also spent time volunteering with The Wild Medic Project in Nepal, a social initiative that brings communities and medical teams together. Last year, Caity and her team hiked up into remote villages to share their skills in first aid and CPR with local Nepalese school teachers. “The focus is on sustainability of the programs, so it’s about teaching the teachers and helping them implement their new skills into their classrooms,” she said.

While Caity remains eternally humble, ACU isn’t the first institution to recognise her natural ability to turn compassion into action. Last year she won St John Ambulance’s Paramedic of the Year award. “I was shocked! I didn’t see it coming and I definitely wasn’t expecting it. I was nominated by my peers so it was a huge honour for me.”

Caity isn’t sure what happens next, but she doesn’t seem too worried. With her career on track and plans to continue her volunteering, for now she’s content with life in the Territory and taking it as it comes.

Caity graduated with a Bachelor of Nursing/Bachelor of Paramedicine from ACU.