

THE AUSTRALIAN

Zanda McDonald's legacy in the Outback

TRENT DALTON THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM December 6, 2014



Looking ahead: Julie McDonald, centre, with (from left) Laura, Bella, Katie and Millie. Picture: Eddie Safarik

KEEP this. Read it when you're ready, this story about your father told by those who knew him well, this story told for you. "I don't easily look back," says your mother, Julie. "Or easily look forward." But for you – Bella, Katie, Laura, Millie – she does both. She takes a deep breath, weeps at the first mention of his name – Zanda McDonald – and speaks for 71 unbroken minutes about how much he loved you.

It begins with a borrowed jumper in June 1997. Julie was 24, a tax accountant raised on a 40ha hobby farm in Cudal, central western NSW. In the Royal Hotel in Orange, a teacher friend told Julie she was taking a posting at a school in Mt Isa, in Queensland's Gulf - Country. "Do you want to come?" said her friend. Julie smiled. "Why not?"

She first met Alexander "Zanda" McDonald in the Post Office Hotel, Cloncurry, 120km from Mt Isa, on the night before the Cloncurry show. They shared mutual friends, started talking. He was more interested in Julie's life than sharing details of his own: that he was the heir to the largest private cattle operation in Australia; the son of former National Party president Don McDonald; that he would soon run, alongside Don and Don's brother, Bob, McDonald Holdings (MDH) – a 180-year-old, \$375 million cattle dynasty working 170,000 head of cattle through 11 cattle stations spread across 3.36 million hectares of the vast northern Australian Outback, the seventh-largest private land holdings in the world.

"He loaned me his jumper that night because it was so cold," Julie says. "As we went back to the place where we were staying I said, 'He has to ring me because I've got his jumper'." He did ring. And every day of Julie's life from that moment on was joyful and fulfilling and challenging and wondrous, just like he said it would be.

It's been a year and a half since April last year, when Zanda passed away, aged 41, in Townsville Hospital from head, spinal and chest injuries sustained when he fell 4m from a windmill he was servicing on the historic McDonald family station, Devoncourt, near Cloncurry. "I can't remember a lot of that time," says Julie. "I almost have a line, before and after the accident. There's certain words I can't bring myself to use. I get almost offended when someone says, 'When Zan died'. I think, 'Ahhh, you can't use that word'. That's a really abrasive word, so I refer to it as 'the accident'. And 'widow', you know, what a terrible word. I don't feel like a widow. I feel like a wife. But I know if I draw a line from the accident forward, I know that I'm much better now than I was a year ago. And that's a space that I can look back into without falling apart."

She remembers the before crystal-clearly. Seeing Devoncourt for the first time, the historic and majestic station once owned by Alexander Kennedy, an original director of Qantas. She remembers meeting Zanda's parents, Don and Christine, two people completely unaffected by their lofty place in Australia's pastoral history. Zanda's face when their eldest daughter, Bella, now aged 14, was born on his birthday, July 29. She remembers the three years they spent raising two toddlers, Bella and Katie, on Rutland Plains, the McDonald family cattle station near remote Kowanyama on the Gulf of Carpentaria.

While most beef producers were selling cattle to exporters, Zanda secured a live export licence, went direct to Indonesian feedlots, booking and boarding the ships himself, feeding his own beasts on the journey and cleaning out their pens. Julie remembers Zanda leading MDH into the future, and changing the face of the northern Australian cattle industry in the process. To further drought-proof his family's properties in 2002, he researched and designed the cutting-edge 10,000-head Wallumba feedlot on the Darling Downs. He began exploring genetics to improve meat quality. With scientists from the University of Sydney, he led research into cattle pain stimulus and ethical ways to alleviate pain.

"He became thoroughly engrossed in research and development," Julie says. "Zan got busier and was doing more and more exciting things, and I was so impressed and so proud, but a lot of me was saying, 'When am I going to see you? C'mon, four days away is too long. You have to be home. You have to be at sports day. You have to be at school. I need you.'"

And he'd be there, solo flying across a state to attend an athletics carnival, a school recital, a graduation. His four girls brought out a tenderness in the sun-kissed cattleman. During afternoons at Devoncourt he would bowl cricket balls down a makeshift pitch to cricket-mad Katie. "Come inside for a beer," Julie would call out to her husband. "Just 20 more minutes," he'd say, rolling his arm over another delivery. They'd play for 30, 40 more minutes, another hour, time from back then given so much weight and gravity in the now, when Julie watches Katie step onto the cricket field as vice-captain for the under 12s Queensland girls' team.

She watches Bella travel to Europe playing cello with her school and she thinks of the exceedingly unmusical Zanda passing her practice room in the hammy guise of a learned musical maestro: "Bella, I think your A-string is flat." She recalls the father throwing random questions at his daughters over the dinner table: "What's the capital of Greenland? What's the capital of France? If we want to load 180 head of cattle onto the road train at 24 per deck, how many decks do we need?"

Julie watches Laura, 10, and Millie, eight, walking cattle mobs down grassless laneways at Devoncourt and she thinks the greatest thing he might have left them was his work ethic, the idea that, no matter who your family is, no matter where you come from, if a job needs doing you get out there and do it. "That's why we were all out at the windmill when Zan had his accident," Julie says. "He and I and the girls, out there pulling a bore. That's the work ethic. He'd just come back the day before from signing a new contract to buy a place next to our feedlot. In

one breath he's negotiating with the Japanese on our beef and the next we're out pulling a bore. He wasn't above doing every facet of the business."

If his windmill needed servicing, he would service it himself. "When Zan had his accident, we were about to go down to Brisbane together to see Bella. And one of my first thoughts when he fell was, 'Awww, I don't think we'll be able to go to Brisbane to see Bella.'" She dwells on this for a moment. "The power of positive thinking, huh. Even when I phoned to get help I was thinking, 'He's going to sit up in a minute and he'll say, 'God, you called *who*? Tell them to stop!' You have no idea, you know. No notion."

Shane McManaway points to a replica Akubra hanging from a hat rack in the boardroom of Allflex Australia, in Brisbane's eastern suburbs, where he produces plastic animal identification tags for farmers across Australia and the world. "That's Zanda's hat," he says. Every time he hosts a guest in his boardroom from overseas or across the country, Shane points at that hat and tells his guests the story of his friend Zanda McDonald.

"He carries huge meaning for me and the industry," he says. In 2005, over a robust beer session, Shane and Zanda dreamt up the idea of forming a network of farmers across Australia and New Zealand that would build an agricultural bridge across the Tasman while pushing southern hemisphere produce across the world. Today, their Platinum Primary Producers group membership boasts 120 of the most influential farmers in Australia. A key part of the network is community support, fundraising for those in the bush struggling beneath the weight of climates, markets and misfortune. "Zanda was always trying to help somebody somewhere," says Shane. "He would say, 'Who's going good and who's down on their luck'. And there's a lot of people down on their luck in the bush. The bush is a magnificent place but it's a lonely place. If he saw somebody down, he pulled them up."

Shane thinks of how many times Zanda McDonald helped fellow farmers with a quiet word, a loan, a generous fundraising push. "Countless," he says. "If you were his friend, you felt like his friend. He had this ability to engage with people and make them feel good about themselves."

In the lounge area of Brisbane's Tattersall's Club, grazier-cum-agricultural developer Charles "Chick" Olsson looks fondly at a club bar where he shared many a long night with Zanda McDonald. "I was on a plane back to Sydney when I heard," he says. "I said, '... you cannot be serious. This cannot be true.' The loss was catastrophic to the industry." For decades Olsson's family business has sold cattle supplements and pharmaceuticals to the McDonald enterprise. "Australia is a dry continent," says Olsson. "We have these incredible cattle up north that forage in wet and dry seasons. Zan's one of those men who always said, 'Let's work on these products'. He was a guy who said, 'Let's test all the grasses, all the soils, on all our properties'. And we did. We came back knowing what was deficient and made up supplements particularly for those cattle for that area. He's the only one who did it."

"He was an enthusiast," says Lee Fitzpatrick, professor of beef medicine at James Cook - University, Townsville, who spent 10 years working on science projects with Zanda. "And his enthusiasm for the industry was infectious." Three days before the accident, Fitzpatrick visited Devoncourt to brief Zanda on the results of a project he had invested in, exploring the meat quality of young grain-finished entire (non-castrated) male cattle. "I've worked in the beef industry for 40 years and he was the most innovative cattle producer I've come across," he says.

At the time of Zanda's passing, Australia's cattle industry, says Chick Olsson, was wrestling a "new age" of global animal welfare awareness. "We had kids with iPhones who could pick up on a story of animal cruelty and it could spread across the world in a day," he says. "Once that damage is done I don't care how good your product is, a generation just switches off. Whether

it's Australian beef or lamb or wool or cotton or angora. The effects these days are massive.”

With a team of University of Sydney agricultural scientists, Zanda and Chick began trialling an anaesthesia spray on McDonald cattle to reduce the pain animals experience through dehorning, branding and castration. “We started putting this on and it was like, ‘Wow, this is ethically produced beef’. It’s never been done before. Zanda was two or three years ahead of the game.

“It was price points for his company, of course, but it was also for the whole northern beef industry. Zanda opened this huge door up to the world saying, ‘Well, here we want to make sure the food is produced right. We don’t want to see cruelty.’ We now have four of the biggest beef companies in Australia calling up saying they want to continue Zanda’s legacy. Welfare is going to be the biggest thing we can actually market in the future. Feel good about what you eat. Zanda was the first one there.”

“It wasn’t well received across the whole industry, that’s for sure,” Julie says. “People were saying it’s too expensive, too time-consuming. But Zan didn’t worry what others were saying. He was saying, ‘Then, don’t do it. I’m not asking you to do it, but we’re going to do this.’ ”

It was at 9pm in a room in the Grange St Paul’s Hotel, London, opposite St Paul’s Cathedral, when Shane McManaway was informed of Zanda’s death. He was about to go to bed after a tiring board meeting that day. Instead of sleeping, he left his hotel room and walked to the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral where he sat and wept for his friend as tourists marched past him through the cold London night.

On his flight home he looked up from his business class seat to see the surreal figure of Richie McCaw, New Zealand rugby legend, sitting beside him. McManaway, a Kiwi-born All Blacks tragic, shared countless rugby discussions and Bledisloe Cup test matches with Zanda, a lifelong Wallabies supporter. He thought how much Zanda would have loved to be sitting there at that moment. And as the plane made its long journey south, McManaway shared his deep and profound grief for the loss of Zanda McDonald with the most unexpected and compassionate listener, the captain of the All Blacks.

Some 500 people from across Australia and the world – from Brazil to Japan, Korea to - Switzerland – attended Zanda’s funeral service, held in Cloncurry Shire Memorial Hall. At the next gathering of the Platinum Primary Producers agribusiness group, about 120 farmers from Australia and New Zealand agreed that an award in Zanda’s memory should be established for any agriculturalist under 35 who displays the kind of leadership and innovation that its namesake dedicated his life to. Next June, the inaugural winner will receive the trophy hanging on McManaway’s hat rack, a replica moulded and cut from - Zanda’s own hat, a well-worn Akubra that saw every corner of the country.

Windmill maintenance is a regular job on Devoncourt Station. It usually occurs when water stops being drawn and a windmill’s rods need to be pulled from underground, inspected, and sunk beneath the ground again. “Zan was up on the windmill feeding the rods down the bore casing,” Julie recalls. “When he fell, we had an hour out there before anyone arrived. It was just the girls and me. It was the most terrifying hour of my life.”

While nursing her husband, Julie sent the girls off to high ground to scout for the dust of approaching vehicles, signalling help. “It was an hour between my first call and his parents - arriving and then the ambulance and then the rescue chopper.” Zanda was airlifted to Mt Isa Hospital and later transferred to Townsville Hospital where, days later, he died of injuries sustained in the impact of the fall.

Winter wasn’t easy on Devoncourt this year. In March, Queensland Agricultural Minister John

McVeigh announced the state was enduring its most widespread drought on record, with 80 per cent of it drought-declared. Freight costs are up, beef prices fluctuate. “But we’re all getting there,” says Don McDonald. “We’re all continuing the things Zanda dreamt about. The things he was doing to assist the beef industry in northern Australia really were revolutionary. Those things are still going ahead and they will revolutionise areas of beef production in northern Australia. I have no doubt about that. He really has left a legacy of change.”

Every member of the McDonald family has rallied to fill the yawning gaps in the business left by Zanda’s passing. Every family member – including Julie, the chief financial officer – is working harder than ever to realise his vision, while wrestling with the fact he won’t get to see it. “It’s the hardest thing,” says Don. “[Zanda’s mum] Chris and I both feel, every day, the opportunities that we are missing with him. We had such a great relationship in his life. You expect it will go on forever. We were supposed to slowly fade away and the rest would be flourishing and going from strength to strength. Now, every day, we look around and think about what we could have been doing. It’s the hardest part of the loss.”

Julie talks often about the deep comfort and solace Don and Chris have given her and her daughters since the accident. But Don feels it’s nothing in comparison to the blessing she gave their family from the moment she met their son in Cloncurry’s Post Office Hotel all

those years ago. He sees everything that was good and decent about his son every day in the actions of Julie “I say to myself often, ‘What would Zan do?’ or ‘I’m doing this not nearly as well as I should be’. But I just remember he wants me to be.”

The land is in the girls’ blood. At 12, Katie can drive a ute, handle a bobcat and slash a field as naturally as she taught old Laura how to drive a tractor. And around 3pm most days, Julie and the girls take a gentle horse ride around windmill to another, the sun softening overhead, taking their time, one foot in front of the other, looking back to