



Dubbo resident and founder of Connected AU, Mea Campbell. **FACING PAGE** Mea also started the Letterbox Project – a free service for lonely, vulnerable and isolated Australians.



## *To the letter*

LONELINESS IS FELT VERY DEEPLY BY SOME LIVING IN REMOTE AREAS, SO MEA CAMPBELL FOUNDED AN ORGANISATION BASED ON GOOD OLD-FASHIONED PEN PALS.

WORDS EMILY HERBERT PHOTOGRAPHY CLANCY PAINE

MEA CAMPBELL KNOWS WHAT IT IS TO BE LONELY and isolated. In 2017, the lawyer and writer moved to a property 90km outside Walgett in northern NSW, near her husband's freight business. While the family thrived in the small country community, the worst drought on record had started to show its brutal face.

"The only truthful description is it was the best of times and the worst of times," Mea, 34, says. "There was real community. The parents swam in the school swimming carnivals and everyone would congregate at the pub on Fridays after assembly and enjoy each other's company. I just loved it."

However, the flow-on effect of the big dry was terrible. Mea's husband, Scotty, 36, was forced to travel further away for work, just after the couple had welcomed their second daughter. "I saw the financial pressure change him into someone quite the opposite of who he was. He became frustrated, irritable and angry. This turned

into crippling depression," she says. "Even though the people and the community were fantastic, they didn't live with me and I was alone much of the time. The isolation was real, and that experience has clearly carved my direction in life since."

In late 2019, Mea decided to move to Dubbo with their children, Charlotte, 10, and Georgia, two, to be closer to family, with Scotty splitting his time between Walgett and Dubbo. When COVID-19 began to corral households within their homes, Mea had the idea for Connected AU – sparked by the memory of her late grandfather.

"I was very close to him all my life. He was a fiercely independent man," she says. "I kept thinking how distressing the experience of the pandemic would have been for him. In his later years he was blind and deaf. In today's world he would feel very small and invisible. I began using him as my compass when considering how vulnerable people feel in today's technological world." >



**CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE** Mea and her family now live in Dubbo; tackling the mountain of post; Scotty and Charlotte; the Dubbo landscape. **FACING PAGE** The Letterbox Project now distributes 500 letters to lonely and isolated Australians each week.





One sleepless night, Mea got up and started researching isolation and loneliness. “It’s estimated that 40 per cent of the 250,000 Australians in aged care don’t get visits, and 2.5 million Australians aren’t connected to the internet,” she says. “Loneliness is an equal mortality risk as smoking and obesity. Equal! The statistics were startling and just kept going. I decided I could offer a solution. I thought of the name Connected AU and the programs that would help a variety of people and then I went to sleep.”

The next day Mea woke early and got to work. She registered the business name, purchased domains, wrote the legals and created a basic website. Two days later, Connected AU was up and running; an organisation providing social connection, companionship and community for people experiencing isolation and loneliness.

Her first offering was the Letterbox Project; a letter-writing network for those who don’t have access or capacity to ‘get online’. Mea thought she would facilitate around 20 pen pal letters a week. Just 12 months later and the

project has reached more than 3.5 million Australians. Included among the scribes are students from 475 schools and employees from multiple national corporations, all writing to residents in nursing homes, people using disability services and those who register on the website looking for connection. Now, with Tetley Tea joining the organisation in 2021 as a major sponsor, the free national service looks set to grow still more.

“The program grew so quickly because people are inherently good, and when you offer a way for people to support others they want to take it,” Mea says. “Letters are tangible. We can touch the very paper that the writer has touched. We can see the slope of the handwriting and the smudges and blemishes. From all of this we can see and feel the effort.”

It’s not just about letters – Connected AU also offers a number of online hobby groups, including a virtual book club and gardening club. “The groups are designed for people who do have access to technology, but may not have >

The family enjoys a walk. **FACING PAGE** Mea picks up the post; the letters are a tangible way to connect; sisters Georgie (left) and Charlotte.


## PEOPLE DUBBO NSW

Through the Letterbox Project, handwritten letters are sent to nursing home residents, people using disability services and those who register on the website looking for connection.

anyone to engage with,” Mea says. “There are a lot of people who just don’t have anyone in their life. The groups are popular with isolated and lonely people who are looking for community and connection, but in a safe and monitored way away from social media.”

Local councils have been quick to jump on board. This year, Mea is launching tailored 12-month packages to Local Government Areas, including localised Letterbox Projects, access to the four online hobby groups and in-depth statistical reporting – and she’s happy to credit Tetley’s sponsorship for this particular win.

“Tetley’s support has been enormous; they provided the step I needed to build strong foundations and ensure sustainability moving forward,” she says. “There are 537 councils in the country. My goal this year is to engage 50, then over 50 per cent within five years. The data we can provide will support councils to better target and address mental health issues in their municipalities.”

It seems we needed one letter to turn a sleepless night into a solution tackling Australia’s rampant loneliness. We just needed someone like Mea to lick the stamp and send it. *For more information, visit [connectedau.com.au](http://connectedau.com.au)* 



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