

Rural Woman of Year finalists announced

By **JACINTA BOLSENBROEK**

WA finalists for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation's (RIRDC) 2017 Rural Woman of the Year award have been announced.

Fleur McDonald, Tanya Dupagne and Alysia Kepert are in the running this year.

The award acknowledges women's leadership capacity in effecting change and influence through connecting and collaborating, and creates opportunities for women to drive innovation and build resilience.

As part of the awards, each finalist had to outline a project which they would use the bursary money to fund.

WA Governor Kerry Sanderson will announce the winner at Government House ballroom on Wednesday, April 5.

State and territory winners will each receive a \$10,000 bursary to develop their projects, before heading to the national awards later in the year.

Ms McDonald is a strong advocate for supporting victims of domestic violence living in rural areas of Australia.

"I believe that the vast, physical distances can create isolation for women living with domestic violence," she said.

"I want to diminish the myth that all domestic and family violence is physical and provide tools for women in remote and rural WA to improve their lives."

Ms McDonald is a published author, drawing inspiration from

having lived and worked for much of her life on farms, more recently from her co-owned 3200 hectare property east of Esperance.

Ms McDonald has taken an active leadership role in her community through the Committee of Farming Champions and the Bay of Isles Community Outreach Committee.

She is an active member with the Rotary Club of Esperance Bay and was the first female co-director of Prickle Farm, which is a major club fundraiser.

If successful Ms McDonald will use the funds to develop a website to provide a hub of information, networking opportunities and support for victims of domestic violence living in rural areas of Australia.

She said the website would act as a conduit to a wide range of health and community services, including from Esperance shire.

A member log-in area would provide users with safe and confidential access, connecting with other women using a virtual coffee chat-room approach.

She said this would be integral in helping women to form new networks, support and friendships.

Podcasts would also be available on the website, providing easy access to information on domestic and family violence and associated issues from trained professionals.

Ms Dupagne started Camp Kulin four years ago after moving to the Wheatbelt and identifying under-utilised recreational and community resources in the area.

Camp Kulin contributes not only to the well-being of young people



□ Tanya Dupagne has created a high school mentoring program in the absence of a school chaplain.

from regional and metropolitan WA but also to the local economy, with about 1000 participants and 200 volunteers annually.

Described as a natural leader and problem solver, Ms Dupagne has created a mentoring program to support children at two local high schools, providing mental health support in the absence of a school chaplain.

"One person can't change the

world, but they can change the world for one person," she said.

"That's the ethos we adhere to at Camp Kulin.

"We want to make a difference to regional women one at a time and support them to make a difference to others across regional WA."

Ms Dupagne's project is to build on the proven outcomes of the Camp Kulin program and develop a subsidised women's camp program

to support women from regional WA.

The program is designed to help develop essential life skills such as leadership, trust, self-confidence and ambition for the women to build on in their day-to-day lives.

It would involve an intense three-day camp where women would be able to experience the Camp Kulin activities.

Ms Dupagne said support

groups would be created via social media to enable participants to keep in touch and continue to build their skills.

She said the leadership component of the program would equip women to take on leadership roles and introduce positive change in their communities.

Ms Kepert wants to close the gap between the agricultural industry and the school education system.

"I am passionate about creating opportunities for young people to discover the diverse and rewarding opportunities open to them through the agricultural industry and the personal growth, satisfaction and sense of belonging that comes from connecting with rural communities," she said.

Ms Kepert is a national leader in the field of agricultural education and is committed to supporting the future of rural industries and communities.

As a curriculum consultant in agricultural education at the WA Department of

Education and as State and national president of the Agricultural Teaching Associations, Ms Kepert said she is committed to bringing the world of agriculture into mainstream, metropolitan education.

She said she is driven to inspire and develop young people, seeking out partnerships that lead to better outcomes in rural and metropolitan WA.

Her proposed agriculture education program would seek to address the gap between senior schooling and the agricultural industry by developing a matching service for work experience students in Years 10 to 12 with careers in the agricultural industry.

The work placement program would be particularly aimed at STEM students who have no prior experience of agriculture.

She said by attracting bright students with high-level problem solving capabilities, it is hoped that more non-traditional student audiences will be attracted to agricultural studies and careers.



□ Alysia Kepert is looking at closing the gap between the agricultural industry and the school education system.



□ Fleur McDonald wants to develop a website that supports people living in rural areas who have been victims of domestic violence.