



**Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus**

Episode 6: Sallie Jones, Co-Founder and Director of Gippsland Jersey

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Interviewee: Sallie Jones**

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Sallie Jones, Co-Founder and Director, Gippsland Jersey on promoting a fair go for farmers, driving social change in rural mental health and encouraging a culture of kindness. Hear how Sallie forges her leadership by finding comfort in the uncomfortable and having courageous conversations.

Julienne [00:00:00] This podcast contains content about mental health and suicide, which some people may find confronting. If you or someone you know needs support, visit beyondblue.org.au or call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Julienne [00:00:17] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources to help activate your leadership. Hi, I'm Julienne Price, Executive Manager of CommBank's Women in Focus and Leading Women is just one of the ways we support women at all stages of their business journey. So no matter where you are on your journey, we're here. Enjoy this episode as we redefine the business landscape together.

Shivani [00:00:49] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and redefine the business landscape. I'm your host, Shivani Gopal and today's episode, we chat with a pioneering leader whose powerful resilience through adversity continues to impact an entire community and industry. From her humble lived experience on the land to following in her father's footsteps, Sallie Jones, Co-Founder and Director of Gippsland Jersey, shares her leadership journey that promotes a fair go for farmers, drives social change in rural mental health and encourages a culture of kindness. Hear how Sally forges her leadership by finding comfort in the uncomfortable, having courageous conversations, embracing the power of the breath and the role a humble piece of butchers paper plays to ignite change. Sallie, welcome to Leading Women. It's so great to have you.

Sallie [00:01:51] Thanks for having me on.

Shivani [00:01:53] We have such an exciting conversation ahead, can't wait to get started but before we do, I want to know where are you joining us from today?

Sallie [00:02:00] I'm joining you from Gunai (Kurnai), which is in Gippsland in a place called Warragul, east of Melbourne.

Shivani [00:02:08] And I am joining you from Gadigal Land of the Eora Nation, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. Sallie, your unique leadership journey is a full story in itself, thrust into leadership, you knew there was no choice but to take leadership by the reins to make the difference your community, industry and family needed. Can you share how you experienced your leadership spark?

Sallie [00:02:32] Sure, well, the leadership journey that I've been on is probably a little bit different from others. I was born on a dairy farm in Lakes Entrance where we value-added to the milk that we produced. We milk cows, made ice cream and had an ice cream shop. So I guess there's always been a lived experience of doing things a little bit different and not conventionally. I didn't go to school actually until Grade 6 and then went off and became school captain in Year 12, which was a wonderful experience and I think that certainly crowned me, as you are a leader and do have an ability to make things happen. The most recent big

leadership challenge journey that I've been on is when I have created a milk brand called Gippsland Jersey and there's a very personal reason as to why we started that. I guess that's what I'd love to share with you today of how you create a milk brand, and that's very much about farmers being paid a fair price and just bringing some fairness back to dairy and the industry and acknowledging that there are very real mental health issues going on in regional communities, especially amongst men.

Shivani [00:03:47] What an eclectic mix of highlights you've got there, Sallie, it is so rare to have that kind of mix, so it's no wonder that you practice pioneering leadership and the spirit of going first. In fact, the Gippsland Jersey brand continues via the legacy of your late father that I know that you shared a little bit about, and I hope that you might feel comfortable talking a little bit more about today and all those threads of why you believe it's so important to focus on mental health. Let's chat a little bit about the leadership of Gippsland Jersey and why it's so important to have a first follower. So Sallie, tell me, how do you get buy-in and acceptance from the people that you lead?

Sallie [00:04:27] I just love to share a little bit of background as to how we came to the point of creating the milk brand and that was my dad did suffer mental health issues and depression in the three-year period where we really journeyed that as a family. Never did we ever think that he would take his own life, which happened in 2016. It was insanely tragic. It left me brokenhearted and I needed to channel my grief into creating something and as a side note, I had created Warragul Farmers Market and when the dairy crisis happened a few weeks after my dad's death, people were just inundating social media, asking, what milk can we buy? We want to support local dairy farmers and know that the money we're spending is making a difference. In my grief I was able to, I guess, come up with something that I felt comfortable with. So dairy, being in my blood, knowing that my dad had pioneered the way for wanting to be a price setter, not a price taker, as a dairy farmer, I just knew that I could create a greater legacy for his life and that his very tragic death would actually go into creating a difference. I remember it was June, 2016, we had a panel of farmers that came along and were interviewed by ABC journalists with a big crowd of probably 100 people or so and it was within that moment where I turned to my friend Steve Reynolds, who's a dairy farmer who also lost a lot of money during that time and he wanted to create a difference for himself and his family moving forward. And we just said, let's do this; let's create a milk brand that has three pillars one that farmers must be paid a fair price. The second one is around creating a social change in rural mental health and addressing suicide prevention. And the third one is kindness and those three pillars launched us into putting milk in a bottle three months later. And without people standing beside us, beside me, you know, I've got an incredible network of friends and people that really believe in what we're doing and why we're doing it. And without that support, nothing would have been possible, you know, if you want to make change, you have to have people on your team and backing you. And you can have all of the ideas and all of the energy but if no one's on board, you can't get it off the ground.

Shivani [00:06:55] There is so much challenging of the status quo right there, Sallie and having those three pillars around price, mental health and kindness, it came from your back story, but it also came from the kind of support that you needed. I've reflected on those wonderful conversations that you were so kind to share with me about when your father passed away, the kind of kindness that you were treated with through your wider community, and the power of women to get you through some really tough times.

Sallie [00:07:26] Don't ever underestimate the meal that you drop off to someone's house or the washing or the coming and cleaning your house, like it was just a beautiful moment of me being carried by so many incredible women that just showed up to me and they nourished and nurtured me and my family in that very sad time. And I think when people are going through really hard things, it's about showing up and I will be forever grateful for that.

Shivani [00:07:56] Sallie, what do you think that says about the power of collaborative leadership because the community really brought you together of course, you and your co-founder got together to really build and create this brand of Gippsland Jersey, but you had to collaborate with so many other farmers, create the markets, what does that taught you?

Sallie [00:08:16] I love collaboration. I am actually really bad at standing alone, even though I understand leadership does start with one person and then it has a ripple effect. But I very much understand the power of team and people and togetherness. When you're a leader and I've observed this with other leaders is that they

have to be able to share and cast the vision and I guess to be taken on the journey authentically about what you're doing and for me, I was able to share verbally about what had happened in a very difficult time. And I think something like suicide doesn't get talked about and I think I just had to come out with it and it was very raw. I remember posting on our social media pages with Gippsland Jersey at the time and just sharing my heart and sharing those feelings and being very raw and unfiltered. And I remember it being a brave thing to do because no one would even; it wasn't talked about in the media back then. It wasn't necessarily addressed and talked about like it is now, which is almost six years later.

Shivani [00:09:30] I'm so glad you used the word brave because it is so many women feel like they need to step into a position of bravery to share their rawness, their story and it's a scary place to be to authentically be yourself. What advice do you have for other leading women listening to this podcast thinking, 'Hey, I've got a really raw story that I need to share and that I might be able to collaborate and garner a community around but I'm really scared to do so.'

Sallie [00:09:59] Look, I think it's such an individual thing. We all experience our journeys and sometimes people are not ready to share their stories. It can take a lifetime to open up those wounds and to be comfortable in that and to be sensitive and don't force it. Like, you know, I think for me, it was the way that I dealt with my father's death was to talk about it and that's how I was able to heal myself and to really, I guess, dig in and to channel myself. Other people don't cope like that through grief so in terms of other women doing big things, I just say you need to be authentically you. You cannot be anybody else. It's your story, it's your purpose, it's your vision, and you do it the way you do it.

Shivani [00:10:52] Let's talk a little bit more about vision or clarity of purpose, as I call it, because you absolutely need to have it if you are going to create a brand, a business, a following, a leadership, and if there is anything that you're clear on, Sallie, amongst many things, for me, what stands out is your operating philosophy creating a brand of these three pillars because anyone knows that it can be so challenging to earn a living as a dairy farmer. And Gippsland Jersey runs on ethical philosophy and you promote a fair go for farmers, you create social change so how vital has it been for you to have that operating philosophy and how do you create that approach?

Sallie [00:11:30] Yes, without a roadmap, without knowing why you're doing what you're doing, you'll end up in a circle so I remember having the piece of butchers paper. It was nothing fancy. There was no marketing agencies or anything like this because it was literally a start-up. It was just an idea. It was just, let's just have a go, you know and it was a piece of butchers paper and they were pillars. So the fair pricing was obviously a big thing at that time where farmers were just on their knees in that dairy crisis. It was incredibly wrong what happened and to see the devastation falling around so that was our first pillar. Farmers have just got to be paid a fair price. They do all of the work; they need to be rewarded financially for that. So as a brand, we will always pay the farmer first and then everything else can ripple on and flow down. And the consumer ultimately pays a bit more of a premium price for that. And the second one and obviously that's a personal reason is the mental health element. And it's very strange back then, maybe not so much now because mental health is on everyone's minds, but to, I guess, commit to creating change in mental health and we didn't know how we would do that at the time. There was not necessarily a plan. It was just; we're going to share the story. I'm going to share my dad's story, if it can happen to my dad and he's such a, he was an incredible man. He had broad shoulders. He could make anything happen. He was tough, resilient, all of those things and if it could happen to my dad, it can happen to anybody. And so by me, you know, just using that platform for me to share that story, it has now given other farmers an opportunity through a calendar that we create every year where they share their stories and that has had a massive ripple effect within Gippsland and the language that is used, especially around people and their mental health, like mental health is nothing to be ashamed of, it's your health, but it just happens to be inside your head that no one can see because if we don't look after ourselves, we can't actually look after the soil, the cows, the people, the business. We don't have food, if we don't have our health, essentially so that's for me pretty important. And then the third one is kindness, which is an interesting pillar because when we are in a time of distress or a sticky situation, when someone shows kindness to you, it is a game changer. So we choose to do our business in a spirit of kindness, where you can choose how you respond to whatever situation, you know, things happen and it's not an opportunity to go flying off the handle or whatever. From our business' point of view, we try to understand where people are coming from and just be kind and fair in the way that we do business.

Shivani [00:14:28] You're not just kind to others, you're also kind to yourself and checking your own mindset. I had this really powerful visual of you getting out that butchers paper and writing out your pillars, and I wonder if that also gave you your own clarity of saying, 'Hey, I've got to check myself and I've got to check my mindset so that I can create the kind of environment, the kind of mental health that fosters around everyone.'

Sallie [00:14:52] Yes, we all get up on the same side of the bed every morning and I'm very mindful about setting the tone wherever you go, you know, us as women in our houses are mindful that we're not the temperature, we are the thermostat of our houses. You know how I get up and respond and act sets the tone for my house so I take that into my work situations and things like that. So if I'm not feeling the vibe or not feeling the energy and I'm not feeling the love that's going to have a ripple effect. So I have been able to over the years, I guess, do a self-check. How am I feeling? And there's no scientific, you know, proven method around this, this is just Sallie Jones talking. For example, I did learn some tricks that someone told me a long time ago is that you can use visualisation and before you get somewhere, before you walk in that door to the office, before you go to that event and show up, is think about what you want to create before you get there. What's the spirit that you're showing up in?

Shivani [00:16:05] The spirit is so powerful and it gave my spirit a couple of goosebumps when you talked about we're not the temperature, we're the thermostat, it made me think about goodness, what temperatures am I absorbing and how am I responding to that? And I think the word respond is very apt because, Sallie, you've been through a lot. In fact, if I just say you've been through a lot that is a massive understatement. You've had a family tragedy, bushfires, the COVID-19 pandemic, and you found yourself in a dire situation and when you needed to get creative, can you share how you made the most out of a drastic situation or situations?

Sallie [00:16:44] I always believe that diamonds are made under pressure. There's always opportunity in adversity and in order for us to create the opportunity, you have to go through the hard stuff. You have to walk through the fire. There have been some really tricky situations that have presented themselves in my life over the years, and you have to be comfortable in the uncomfortable. You know, we don't like it as humans; we want to get to the comfortable bit, surround yourself with people that can pull you through those times. Secure your network. Have you trusted people? I know personally that my phone is full of people that I know I can call at any time if I need that. Don't do it alone.

Shivani [00:17:27] I think butchers paper is probably another thing that is in your list of not just people, but things that you roll out when you need to get down, do the work, and be really, really resilient because there was a time where you had to move your processing plants and butchers paper was one of your friends, wasn't it, in finding your next step and just breathing? What was the story there?

Sallie [00:17:48] Yes, the butchers paper has a fair work out. Once we started our business and we were sort of underway and anyone that started a small business knows how hard it is to actually start. We had the rug pulled out from underneath us where we had a dairy processor say, look, we're not going to process your milk anymore. Initially we thought that's no big deal, we'll find another solution. But as we investigated, we were wrong and for all sorts of reasons we couldn't find somewhere, which then launched us into creating, you know, a piece of butchers paper with all of these opportunities and possibilities on it, and simply picking the phone up and unfortunately crossing them out. The very last option that was on that piece of butchers paper was the factory on my family farm in Lakes Entrance, which is 4 hours from the market that we could use as a processing facility, which is actually the factory that my dad built back in the '80s that wasn't the best option. It was covered in blackberries and there were horses living in there but anyway, we thought that is the only place for us to go. We didn't have money. We didn't have credit rating and that's a slight problem. I guess we then got creative and we thought, how are we going to raise some money to make it happen? We need to make it happen pretty quick. The whole philosophy and idea around crowdfunding was very, very new to me. Being country, we don't necessarily love asking for help and especially financial help I guess is a bit of a pride thing in there but we had no option. And we launched a crowdfunding campaign where we asked people to pre-purchase bottles of milk at a little bit of an inflated price. In order to back us so that we could get some money in the bank to do the work we needed to do on the factory so that we could start processing our milk. And it was the most humbling experience of my life. And, you know, years on now, people still say to me, I backed you, I bought milk, but not everybody claimed it back because this was the thing. We raised \$110,000 in three weeks.

Shivani [00:20:06] Wow.

Sallie [00:20:07] Mind blowing and that enabled us to spaghetti strap a processing plant together and get the factory up and rolling and it's been once again a journey for me to sort of go full circle, 360, back to the factory, sitting at my dad's desk in the same chair, doing the same thing. But chapter two has just been the best healing grief therapy you want to call it. I feel healed and whole, and I know that my dad would be so proud of the legacy that we've been able to create. And I guess just giving the dairy industry a little bit of hope because it's been a really tricky couple of years. Obviously, the dairy prices have come right up, which is a fabulous thing, but it's not necessarily a pay rise for those dairy farmers because the input costs are still huge that is a problem that we've lost 10% of dairy farmers in Australia in the last year, even though the milk prices have been great, which just shows that dairy farming is a very tough industry to try and make it work.

Shivani [00:21:19] Sallie, you mentioned chapter two, which gave me this urge to just know, what is next for you?

Sallie [00:21:28] We try to do strategic plans, you know, we never knew that we were going to have a pandemic. There is a little story about when you are in fresh food, especially milk; you can't turn the cows off. The cows keep producing milk day in, day out. When the lockdown happened, we got notification on the Friday afternoon and we had all the milk orders cancelled. What do you do with approximately 13 pallets of milk and cancelled orders? So we decided that we'd load all the milk into the back of the van and drive it to Melbourne. And we sold it out of the back of the truck in carparks without council approval. Sometimes you just got to ask for forgiveness later, which I did get a phone call from council on the Monday, but we didn't know that these things would happen. So we just, I guess we've been so reactive in our business that we dared not have a five-year plan. We had very much trying to plan for growth so our business has had 70% year-on-year growth, which has been incredible. And so we are trying to plan and I guess look at what that future will hold for us. My vision and what I want is that the mental health part of my business has a significant place and I recognise that there is a gap in rural communities for rural men. So if you are struggling with your mental health, there's nowhere to go. We looked at this for my dad. We wanted him to go and get help away from our family but it wasn't about a mental health institution, but it's about triaging people and especially farmers. So if we could create a space on a farm organically being available to farmers in distress that they can come in to seek help and to be nurtured and to be just have their hope reinstalled, it's such an important part but I believe that in our health system we don't have services available that are appropriate for rural men.

Shivani [00:23:38] Sallie not only do I buy into that dream, do I want that dream for you, we need that dream to come true and I feel so safe to know that that charge is in your hands. Also, I've just got a note that I'm all for animal analogies. We always talk about, you know, you can't lead a horse to water. We've got a quotable from you, Sallie, you can't turn the cows off and I think that one should stick and I'm here for that, too. Sallie, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership, what tool has ignited your leadership that you can share with us for the Leadership Toolbox?

Sallie [00:24:12] As I said before, you have to be comfortable in the uncomfortable or find the comfortable in the uncomfortable and for me personally that has been having some cold showers. And there's an app on your phone that is accessible to everyone called Wim Hof. And they take you through the process of being able to be, I guess, regulating your breathing and to be going in and having cold showers. It's hard, no one likes a cold shower, but I truly believe it's a fabulous tool for mental health and something that we can all do.

Shivani [00:24:48] Great advice and a great consistent theme there from you, Sallie, all around mental health. Sallie Jones, thank you so much for joining us here at Leading Women.

Sallie [00:24:57] Thank you so much for having me on. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Julienne [00:25:02] Thanks for listening to Leading Women, where we can all activate and redefine the business landscape. So now it's over to you, access the links, tips and tools discussed in this episode at womeninfocus.com.au and subscribe to Leading Women so you don't miss an episode. Leave a review, spread the word, and let's commit to keeping the conversation going at [#leadingwomensaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomensaus)

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