



Annabelle (left)  
and Robbie on the  
latter's farm near  
Manilla NSW.

## OUR LIFE IN THE COUNTRY

THOUGH THEY NOW WORK SEPARATELY, **ROBBIE SEFTON** AND **ANNABELLE MONIE** SPENT YEARS 'JOINED AT THE HIP' — AND BOTH STILL DIVIDE THEIR LIVES BETWEEN FARM LIFE AND BUSINESS.

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"WE NEVER HAD A BLUE OR DISAGREEMENT, WE'VE JUST WORKED THINGS OUT."

**ANNABELLE MONIE AND** Robbie Sefton once worked together and remain closer than many ex-colleagues. Partly this is because for some months of the seven years Annabelle worked at Sefton & Associates, she also lived with Robbie and her husband, Alistair Yencken.

Annabelle, 33, credits Robbie, 47, with teaching her everything she knows about PR, describing her as more mentor than boss. "I've always had great bosses who have allowed me to be who I am," Robbie says. "I know if you look after people, then they'll look after you."

Eventually, Annabelle moved on to have her own family and a separate career; she's the communications manager for the Border Rivers-Gwydir Catchment Management Authority and lives on a cattle stud near Bingara NSW with her husband Ben and their three children — Hugo, 6, Cilla, 5, and Oscar, 2.

Meanwhile Robbie, who was NSW Rural Woman of the Year in 2002, kept expanding the firm and now leads a team of 13 women who work from Tamworth and from home offices in NSW, Queensland and London. But while she may travel interstate during the week, on Saturdays, Robbie swaps suits for workboots and helps Alistair on their property near Manilla.

When Annabelle made the hundred-kilometre drive south for a catch-up visit recently, it was clear in the wide smiles and happy laughter that the professional relationship had grown into something stronger and more personal. But it's still easy to imagine them in an office planning a project, discussing a communications strategy or debriefing after an event.

Annabelle moves from room to room of Robbie's house, admiring recent renovations, collections of boldly coloured glass and vibrant artworks. Robbie joins the singing of *Happy Birthday* to five-year-old Cilla as she blows out the candles at the kitchen table. And the old friends remember days when it was just the two of them working long hours on high-pressure projects.



*annabelle* I grew up on a property at Moree NSW. It was a cotton farm and branched into horticulture — it was through the olives that I met Robbie. She was talking in our sunroom, about what our growers' group could do with the oil. She asked "What do you do?" and I told her about my degree in marketing.

It was fortunate timing that we struck each other. It was when she had a bit more time on her hands and I was lucky to just be a sponge. I lived in her house at Coonabarabran for a few months so we were side by side.

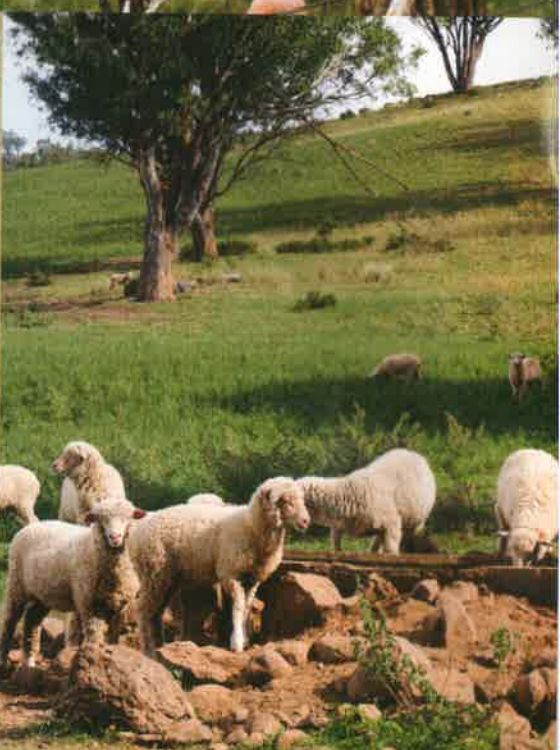
The thing Robbie and I like about each other is that we're both ready to have a go at anything. One time Alistair was shearing and this really cold wind and rain came up, and we picked up sheep suffering from hypothermia and put them in the woolshed until 2am. We would do job interviews and on the criteria list was 'princess factor' and it mattered: there's just no room for it. I didn't have a princess factor.

I met Ben during my last year of uni. We did the long-distance relationship thing for a couple of years and didn't live together 24/7 until two months before Hugo was born. When Hugo was about six months old, I started working for Robbie again. It was the dream job for a mother. She understood that the split lip comes first.

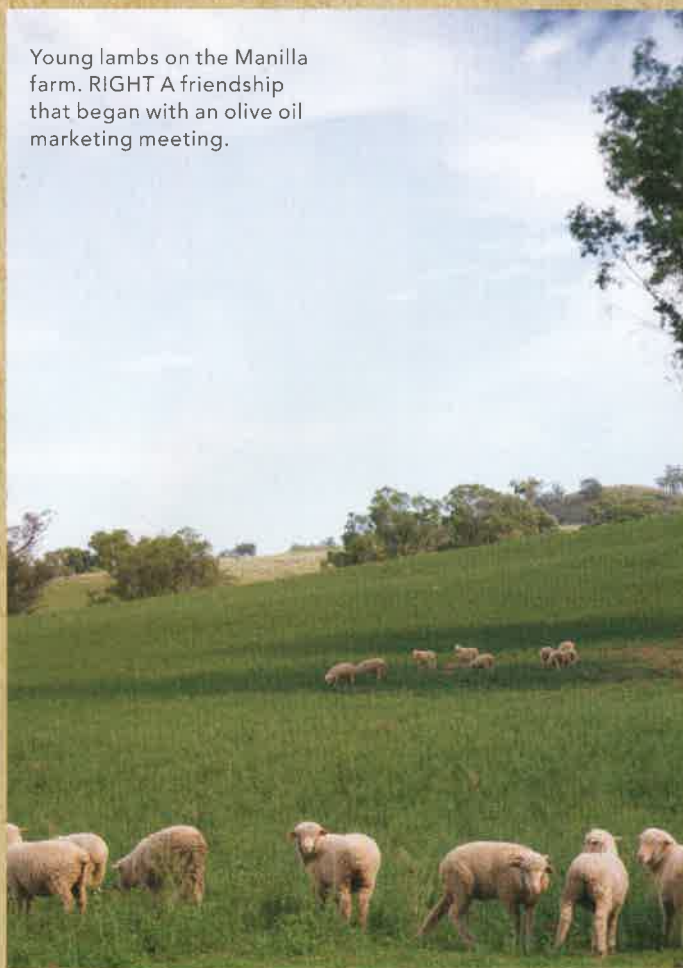
After Oscar was born, the catchment management authority asked whether I'd be interested in a couple of projects and I definitely was. We always grew up with >



ABOVE, FROM LEFT Sarge the red kelpie looks at his owner from a distance; the homestead at Robbie and Alistair's farm; Annabelle's eldest, Hugo and Cilla. LEFT Two-year-old Oscar. RIGHT The needs of stock and children are always equal to those of business. BELOW, FROM LEFT Familiar scenes: both women grew up in the country; Annabelle and Robbie catch up on old times; Robbie helps run the farm on weekends.



Young lambs on the Manilla farm. RIGHT A friendship that began with an olive oil marketing meeting.



“WE PACKED UP THE WHOLE FARM AND TRUCKED 6000 SHEEP ACROSS THE NULLARBOR.”

a real respect for the environment. Where can you go wrong trying to promote sustainable agriculture?

We live 25 minutes out of Bingara. I do some of the farm books. On weekends we try and find a mixture of just-us time and friends' time. I really love every opportunity to spend time with my kids. I can't imagine kids growing up where they can't have bare feet all the time or where they can't ride a pushbike over a cattle grid. We were lucky to be able to grow up and explore and do our own thing, and nothing has changed for our kids. I wouldn't have it any other way.

**Robbie** Mum and Dad were rice, beef and sheep farmers at Deniliquin in southern NSW. I went to Deni high school, worked in a vet clinic and went around Australia for a couple of years. I loved Perth and decided to get into PR and marketing. I looked up the Yellow Pages and those with big black writing I rang and asked if I could meet them for 15 minutes. All of them said “Yes” and within four days I had a job. I moved from jillarooing and buffalo hunting in the territory to being this girl in the city with two dresses that my mother made and a stick of lipstick.

I started my own company in the front room of our house. We bought Alistair's family's farm at Kojonup

and had it for two years when a friend faxed through a flyer of this farm at Coonabarabran. Alistair looked at the property on Thursday and it went to auction on Friday. He sent a pager message through saying, “Pack your bags”.

We packed up the whole farm and trucked 6000 sheep across the Nullarbor. We came across with the ute and horse floats with all the dogs on. I started the Sefton's business again out of the farmhouse and Annabelle came to work with me. I loved working with Annabelle. We were literally joined at the hip because some of the work we were doing was quite high level, rolling out national campaigns.

When she lived with us we had a great time. We worked so closely. It was an L-shaped office and there wasn't anything the other couldn't hear. I was always like a mentor to sort out problems. We never had a blue or disagreement, we've just worked things out.

We would finish work and do separate things, then meet for dinner and have great fun together. When we were not working we didn't talk about work. We don't always feel like we've got to talk shop.

Annabelle is a capable, soft, caring person, quite assertive, smart, really responsible and intuitive. She's a great girl, a great mother and I have so much respect for her. We don't see each other enough because we are both busy. She means just as much to me as she ever did. ✦