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MID NORTH COAST

A Quarter-Century of Service

Richard O'Leary's Legacy in Regional Development

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Celebrating 25 remarkable years of service with RDA Mid North Coast and its predecessor, the Area Consultative Committee, Richard O'Leary's extraordinary dedication stands as a testament to the power of sustained community engagement and the profound impact one person can make across multiple generations. His journey from reluctant recruit to passionate advocate offers valuable insights into transformational leadership in regional development.

From Accounting to Advocacy

Richard's path to regional development began unexpectedly in late 1999 when Garry Nehl, the local member for Cowper, approached him about joining a regional group. As an accountant with a farming background, Richard initially gave it little thought. But by early 2000, he found himself appointed to the Area Consultative Committee as treasurer—a role that would shape the next quarter-century of his life.

"I realised that I was probably in the deep end, and I had a lot to learn," Richard reflects. "I tended to take for granted what was happening in our region because I was more focused on my kids and our family life and our own businesses."

That awakening moment proved transformative. "It was a wake-up call for me. It was turning a tap on. And that's the reason why I lasted the distance, because I felt that age didn't weary them."



The Evolution of Regional Development

Richard witnessed firsthand the transformation of regional development from government-owned programs to community-driven initiatives. In the early days of the *Area Consultative Committee*, the focus was heavily on *funding allocation* and *job creation metrics*.

"We policed that, we audited it," he explains about the rigorous approach to grants. "Making sure we understood that it was costly to get jobs, and we had to make sure that we had a good rate of return out of that funding to the number of jobs."

The transition to RDA brought new opportunities and broader social focus. "I witnessed a very strong movement towards excellence over that time," Richard notes. "I think that we've done a lot of things that we would never have attempted to do way back in the Area Consultative Committee."

He observed how hidden social issues emerged into public consciousness: "The things that are a problem now were a problem then too, like social housing and children's services... They were hidden. Welfare and issues around support, such as domestic violence, social housing. Some of the things that really are very important that we tended to not even consider in those earlier times, they are now coming to the fore."

Richard emphasises that these issues require collective action: "We actually have an obligation to address the issues, and RDA is basically a forum that can work towards that... Problems we've got now probably could have been addressed much earlier, and we would have actually had a much better position than we have now."

The Science Challenge: A 25-Year Legacy

Perhaps Richard's most visible and impactful achievement is the annual *Science Challenge*, which he helped to establish in 2000 after a conversation with District Governor Gary Johnson led him to Newcastle University.

"I came away with a science challenge," Richard recalls of his meeting with Bob Nelson, University representative. "I suggested that what we could do, we could run the challenge in Kempsey, incorporating the three valleys, Hastings, Macleay and Nambucca."

The numbers tell the story of extraordinary growth and impact:

- Started in Kempsey in August 2000 with 450 students
- Grew to 580 participants by the 25th anniversary
- Engaged nearly 12,000 children across three valleys over 25 years
- In early years, 21% of university engineering and science students came through the program
- Over 45% of science careers nation-wide.

The challenge is now nationwide and overseas as well. "We started STEM before STEM even became STEM," Richard proudly states.

The personal moments made it all worthwhile. Richard recalls a particularly touching moment with a young Aboriginal girl from South Kempsey Primary: "She cartwheeled across the dance floor... put her little hand out to me, and said, 'Thank you, Mr O'Leary, this is the best day of my life, and we've won as well.' It blew me away... that made all of that time well worth it."

The program's resilience was tested during a flood when students from Bellingen protested having to leave mid-challenge: "The kids sat down on the cement in front of the hall and protested. They didn't want to go home." Richard's solution: arranging for them to attend the Narrabri challenge which resulted in the displaced team winning that competition.

Cooperative Movement Leadership

Richard's involvement with the *Cooperative Federation* spans decades, with his leadership during the International Year of Cooperatives in 2012 representing a career highlight. Working alongside RDA and director Peter Tregilgas, he helped transform the cooperative landscape nationally.

"The legacies out of that Federation and the partnership with RDA at that particular time fortified the Federation. It created a new body for mutuals and cooperatives nationwide. It gave state legislation national prominence. And we ended up with a National Cooperative Law."

His work expanded the Federation's reach dramatically: "We now operate out of Pitt Street in Sydney. NSW has got probably a third of the total membership of cooperatives from the states of South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania... we only had it in New South Wales before."

The cooperative sector's growth under his leadership is remarkable: "... every week we're creating new cooperatives. And contrary to belief, we don't actually have many failures."

Agricultural Advocacy: Fighting for the Right to Farm

As a fourth-generation farmer in Australia, Richard brought authentic agricultural perspective to local NSW Farmers, driven by deep family heritage. "Way back in Ireland in the 1700s, we were farmers," he explains. "My brother and I are fourth generation farmers. If my kids take on the farm, they'll be fifth generation farmers."

His advocacy began dramatically at the biggest farm protest ever mounted in Canberra in 1985: "I held a placard which was 'Support Farmers' Right to Farm'. I could hold that placard again today and it would be just as relevant."

Richard's passion for farming goes beyond economics to cultural preservation: "If we don't advocate the right to farm, we don't get behind farmers, then we're going to lose big time. And under those conditions we're going to see a way of life that is actually lost forever."

His work with Cattle Sale Yards Committee demonstrates community understanding: "Cattle sale yards are a social hub of most towns... At any one cattle sale yard you see a lot of people from those valleys communicating, getting part of, talking, even saying, how are you going, mate, is a really important part of mental capacity."

Rotary Leadership and Innovation

Richard's 40-year involvement with *Rotary* showcased his progressive leadership, particularly his initiative in 1996 to introduce the first women members to his club, shortly after it became legally possible.

"I introduced the first ladies into our Rotary club... some of those ladies are still with Rotary in other clubs. And so over the years we have seen these numbers increase so, our club now includes both genders and we are made up of about 40% women and certainly we're better for it."

Through Rotary, he helped establish the *Macleay Vocational College* for disadvantaged youth.

The college's success with Indigenous students particularly pleased him: "A lot of our First Nation kids are actually going on and getting further education... we've got young First Nation kids going to Newcastle University, and other universities."

The Foundation of Service: Catherine McAuley Connection

Richard's commitment to service runs in his blood through an extraordinary family connection to *Catherine McAuley*, founder of the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin in the 1820s.

"Catherine McAuley was my great, great, great aunt. She was the sister of my great-great-great-grandmother, Mary McAuley," Richard explains with evident pride.

This connection profoundly shapes his service philosophy: "I have always taken the view that 20% of my time would be in some shape or form to volunteer in the service of others. That's my faith. My great-great-great-aunt... started the Mercy House in Dublin putting 100% of her time and money into the Mercy Foundation."

When he first visited Dublin, the Catholic weekly announced "Willie comes home," referring to his great-great-grandfather William Armstrong McAuley who had emigrated to Australia in the mid-1820s."

This heritage influences his ongoing work: "I've always worked with the Mercy nuns to do work on budgeting for the young women that may or may not have needed a hand relating to how they could budget to survive with their kids and so forth. Not everyone has been in a happy family situation. A lot of things have happened. And I've worked with Sister Cabrini and others to make sure that we gave them a fighting chance of actually getting some money together and also working towards a home."

His dedication to serving others reflects the Mercy tradition: "It goes back to, as I said, the best plan is the last plan... And so just for professionals such as lawyers and accountants to give their skills to an organisation and to give that organisation a hand up if needed and therefore giving people and places support for growth and creating wealth for those families."

Addressing the Scale of Social Issues

One of Richard's most passionate concerns is the growing scale of social issues he's witnessed over 25 years. He recognises that many problems were hidden in the past but have now reached critical proportions.

"Clearly they are of great concern to me personally," he states about issues like social housing and children's services. "I've been brought up around social issues as well. As I say, I'm not political. No one owns the social environment. No party owns it. It's a problem we have as a group, and we've got to address it."

Richard emphasises the growing inequality: "In a way, middle Australia has been squeezed, and we're seeing more out on that... you've got lower class technically that is widening, you've got an upper class that is widening, and middle Australia, which is where families and others are, that have been squeezed."

This drives his continued advocacy: "I look at my own family and how much work they have put into pulling the kids up through education and so forth and supporting their own kids. We're very fortunate. A lot of people are not so fortunate, and that's why there's substantial pressure from a community point of view."

He stresses the collective responsibility: "We need more support for our people. We need to recognise that a lot of people are struggling. We need to be able to put a platform there that helps them in those struggles... Not everyone actually causes their own problems. A lot of those problems occur through other issues, such as the environment or social justice, as well as many other issues outside of their control."

Technology's Transformative Impact

Richard experienced the complete digital transformation of regional Australia, from introducing computers to his accounting practice in 1984 to witnessing smartphones revolutionise rural connectivity.

"I first used a computer in our accounting practice in 1984," he recalls.

The change has been dramatic: "We've got a lot more knowledge at our fingertips. We can make decisions quicker, but at the same time, some of those decisions... we can adjust because we may have made the wrong decision."

RDA's Greatest Achievements

Reflecting on 25 years, Richard highlights several major accomplishments:

The 2012 International Year of Cooperatives: "Personally, that was a great achievement for me personally, but also for Regional Development Australia at that particular time."

Strategic Planning: "The strategies in the business plan that we've done just recently, I thought that that was probably the best document that we created in the whole time that I've been with RDA and Area Consultants."

Norfolk Island Beef Industry: Despite its modest scale, Richard takes pride in helping restart Norfolk Island's beef industry: "I wouldn't have cared if it cost \$150,000. I would still have actually been supporting that particular venture."

The Philosophy Behind Sustained Service

Richard's approach to volunteering is both disciplined and values-driven: "Being an accountant, I tended to budget my time. And I've always worked on that discipline of actually budgeting my time."

His principles guide his choices: "I'm driven by my principles and values... if you look at the principles of cooperation... there are guidelines that are actually created for the welfare of an organisation and the people they're part of."

Central to his philosophy is a fundamental service ethic: "I serve myself last, and others first. So, it's all about service of life." This "service before self" mentality has guided his decades of community involvement.

Political neutrality has been crucial to his longevity: "I will say that I've never been a political person... That could be one of the reasons why I lasted 25 years as well... I pushed good policy as much as I could, and I commented on good policy, and I certainly commented on bad policy."

Advice for Future Leaders

Richard's counsel for aspiring volunteer leaders reflects decades of experience: "Stay as young as you can, because you're running out of time. Do the job. Always work together with the principles of that organisation... you're going to volunteer and you're going to make a difference."

He highlights the importance of active participation: "You can't influence anything if you're just someone putting your hand up now and again and not making any comment. You've got to advocate your position, but at the same time, sometimes it may not be the position of all."

His grandmother's wisdom continued to guide him: "My gran often said to me, Richard, you might not see what you're doing now, but later on someone will see it."

Looking Forward: A Vision for Collaboration

Richard advocates for improved coordination between government levels: "I think the model that probably is the best, is somewhere between Area Consultant Committee structure and RDA structure, where both, that is federal, and state governments are working as one."

He reinforces community ownership: "We need to get regional development to be "part of" ... You walk up to the sale yards in Kempsey and you're "part of". You go to a school for a school day function, you're "part of."

The Power of One Person

When asked about individual impact, Richard is emphatic: "I think that one person can make a difference. First of all, they're in a committee that is a democratic committee. They're actually given great opportunity to be part of representing their community."

His approach to board participation is thorough: "When I get a board agenda, I read every bit. I look at it and I write notes on the whole thing. But I might not make any comment on a particular thing. But that doesn't mean to say, by being there... you are a principal supporter, and you actually are making a difference."

A Living Legacy

Richard's influence continues through the institutions he helped build, the policies he shaped, and the countless individuals inspired by his example. The Science Challenge thrives under new leadership, cooperatives operate under reformed national law, vocational college graduates pursue university pathways, and a new generation of regional leaders carries forward his commitment to sustained service.

His 25-year journey demonstrates that regional development isn't just about programs and funding, it's about people committed to staying at the table, advocating for their communities, and believing that persistent effort creates lasting change.

For Richard O'Leary, carrying forward the legacy of Catherine McAuley's service to others has been a guiding belief, one that's been validated through a quarter-century of service that transformed not just his region, but countless lives touched by his unwavering commitment to community.

"I've always taken the view that 20% of my time would be in some shape or form to volunteer in the service of others," he reflects. "And I'm very proud of the position I've taken."

Richard O'Leary has served with distinction on RDA Mid North Coast for 25 years, beginning with the Area Consultative Committee in 2000. His contributions span regional development, education, agriculture, and cooperative enterprise, leaving an indelible mark on the Mid North Coast community and beyond.

To hear more from Richard, click the [LINK](#) to our interview with him at the Slim Dusty Centre.