

# Mass producing quality

TBB speaks with Rocklea based specialty trailer builder, **Mick O'Phee**, on his innovative trailer building success, recent new designs, and women in the transport industry.

**Trailer Body Builder Journal:**

With over 40 years of involvement in the manufacture and sale of semi trailers, O'Phee is still going strong – what's the secret to your success?

**Mick O'Phee:** No secrets – just a lot of hard work and an ability to listen to an industry that is always changing. In today's business you have to continually grow and develop and be prepared for change. Although we have never given up our roots as a family owned business, we have certainly evolved our designs and manufacturing processes. We realised a long time ago that we couldn't be everything to everybody and as a result we have concentrated on providing the industry with a quality product that is as specialised as the customer needs it to be.

We have put our family name on a product we really believe in and backed it up with performance, reliability and superior customer service.

Our association with Hamelex White and Vawdrey Trailers, along with setting up our own service and repair facility separate to our production facility, has also helped us separate ourselves from the competition.

We are now a one-stop shop, without having to sacrifice our uniqueness.

**TBB: You've really shaken things up lately with some fairly out there designs, including helicopter transport. What's the reaction been like from your customer base?**

**MO:** That particular job was a special build for a special customer, and certainly has been a talking point in many con-



Sharon and Mick O'Phee, with Axle the dog in the background, enjoying a ride in a custom built O'Phee design.

versations, and it offers a potentially new industry – in fact another design is under way as we speak.

We have one 'special build' type trailer coming through production all the time, mixed with our 'standard build' trailers. We find this gives us the correct mix of build in manufacture and engineering, as you can appreciate any special build is demanding.

O'Phee Trailers have always been committed to high quality production and a high degree of excellence, which ensures our continued acceptance in today's market place. We continually search for new techniques and invest heavily in the tooling and technology to maintain our competitive edge, providing efficiency, quality and ultimately customer satisfaction.

This is really no different – just another quality trailer, engineered and built for individual needs.

**TBB: What are some of the hurdles you face as a trailer maker in Australia?**

**MO:** As a manufacturer we are always concerned about the skills shortage and there has been a lot of talk about it in recent times, but as far as I can remember the situation has not changed a lot in my lifetime.

I think life values have changed though. I can remember that up until the 1980's it was almost a compulsory directive from parents to their children that after leaving school you would obtain a trade certificate, so you'd have something to fall back on if you ever needed it. I think the 1990's brought about a cultural change, largely stimulated by some changes in government policy, and people began dropping off apprentice training schemes.

I know governments, at both the State and Federal level, will eventually start addressing the problem again with greater incentives, but in the mean time we as an industry have been left to handle the issue on our own.

**TBB: So how do we come up with a solution that works for the here and now?**

**MO:** The basic fact is that our great country just does not have enough of a population base to draw upon, and with the increasing freight task we require more skilled workers than ever before. I think the answer is to work smarter. Our young people are the future of course, and through education of our industry we will slowly achieve what we are all aiming for, but it will not happen over night.

We are continually training young people in our businesses and have school based apprentices from first right through to fourth year.

Our company puts a lot of time, effort

and money into training these young people to expose them to various facets of manufacturing, repairs and service. It is a huge investment, but one of the most important we can make.

In saying that I feel we are very fortunate here at O'Phee as we have a great team of hardworking and loyal people, from administration, right through to engineering, managers and factory staff, as well as a very conscientious group of younger workers.

**TBB: In an industry that is fast becoming the realm of aging males – should we make more of an effort to target women to address the skills shortage?**

**MO:** I am extremely fortunate to work along side my wife, Sharon, who has been in the industry for 14 years and has taken it by the horns and run with it. She has taken our business to the next level through her role of general managing the day-to-day administration and trailer production control of the company.

She is also actively involved in bettering the wider industry through her role as the Vice Chairman of the CVIAQ board of directors; as the first ever female in the board's history this was an achievement in itself.

Her involvement and contribution to the transport industry has been invaluable and proof that we should target more women to enter our industry.

I think that Sharon is not alone out there though; it's just that there is not enough talk of women and the contributions they make. They are often the 'silent' achievers and partners in the manufacturing and transport business and they certainly deserve our credit. **TBB**

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