# Dying to change rural drinking norms

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### One conversation at a time, Shanna Whan is changing the culture of celebrating hard drinking in the bush.

Shanna Whan was dying from alcohol. Now she wakes every day determined to continue changing the hardened drinking culture in the bush, one conversation at a time.

“I was looking at an early death, either by accident or by my own hand.”

Facing premature death is not a situation one would normally associate with being “the greatest thing that ever happened to me”. But Shanna is an expressive as well as impressive storyteller. When Shanna shared her very personal story of hitting “rock bottom” on [ABC TV’s Australian Story](https://www.abc.net.au/austory/last-drinks/11705194) this week, she didn’t hold back on the problem of alcohol being an invisible, yet in-your-face epidemic in rural Australia.

https://www.abc.net.au/austory/last-drinks/11705194

Perhaps the combination of being an ag professional , a photographer and a journalist is partly the reason that Shan so unpretentiously recounts her experiences of using alcohol and the harm it caused throughout her country upbringing, schooling and adulthood.

Perhaps it’s her vivacious (but equally shy) personality that makes her story so relatable and, importantly, unthreatening to every other drinker in the country – especially in the bush. Undoubtedly Shan’s infectious passion is ultimately what grabs and holds the attention of friends, strangers and the media.

Speaking the simple truth is therefore the essence of [*Sober in the Country*](https://www.soberinthecountry.com.au/), which has gone from being Shanna’s blog for raising awareness and building a supportive online community to becoming a registered not-for-profit organisation.

This is perfect timing as media interest in her story rapidly gains momentum, leading to the Australian Story episode and a bursting schedule of speaking engagements and interviews.

At FARE we are happy to say that we’ve found not only a new friend, but also a buddy in advocacy. *Sober in the Country*has joined the NSW ACT Alcohol Policy Alliance and works alongside FARE on many issues and policies relating to rural and regional alcohol harm.

Shanna gives a fresh, honest voice to the unique issues around alcohol, including the prevalence of alcohol as the social thread that marks out bush culture, and the prevalence of alcohol involved in motor vehicle accidents, domestic violence and suicide.

FARE’s Chief Executive Michael Thorn was invited to comment on Shanna’s story on ABC Radio Western Plains this week, where he said the disproportionate harm from alcohol in rural areas is a sad indictment on society.

To a listening audience based in Shanna’s own region around Narrabri, Mr Thorn commented that Shanna was an ‘out of the box’ advocate for the rural community, and that too many people in the bush have been suffering in silence.

He said governments – federal and state – are out to lunch on urgently-needed action. And Mr Thorn warned that action must be more than putting the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. By that he means that increasing treatment services is not good enough and that the overarching culture around the use of alcohol must change.

With Shanna’s goal of making it ok to say no to a drink and FARE’s goal of reducing alcohol-fuelled harm, together we are urging the federal government to put money behind public awareness campaigns in a bid to create a new Australian norm in the way people socialise and live their lives.

Well. Blow me down with a feather.  
I’m almost speechless.  
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Timbo and I are being loved on right now with such beautiful messages from across the entire country that it’s actually impossible to even explain.  
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We… <https://t.co/Flm1S3jtEr>

— Sober in the Country (@shannawhan) [November 18, 2019](https://twitter.com/shannawhan/status/1196395095488172033?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

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