

Community inclusion

'Very accepting of new people'

JENNY DENTON

AN AWARD for diversity and inclusion won by the Kia-Ora Piggery at Yarrowalla last month belongs to the whole Pyramid Hill community, owner-manager Jarad Smith says.

The award, from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, recognises the piggery's diversification of its workforce through the employment of skilled Filipino staff and its support for the Filipino community which has established itself in the area and the annual multicultural Fiesta.

"It started with Dad going over to the Philippines and interviewing people about 10 years ago, and sponsoring four workers," Mr Smith said.

Mr Smith has operated the piggery since 2016 with his brother Caleb and their partners Adelle and Miranda.

"Since then the Filipino portion of our workforce has increased at a steady rate," he said.

The business now employs about 25 Filipino workers, who make up half of the operation's workforce.

According to Mr Smith, the Filipino community itself has been responsible for the increase in numbers, and as he points out, its expansion into the local workforce hasn't been confined to Kia-Ora.

"Because they are such a family and community-oriented people, they often have friends and family looking for work," he said. Members of the 35 Filipino families now living in and around Pyramid Hill are employed

at the chicken farm, local dairies, apple orchard and town businesses as well as at Kia-Ora and other piggeries.

"It's a real honour and privilege to have received the award," Mr Smith said, "but we feel we've received it on behalf of the community. We were part of the early story, but the whole community has been really accepting of the new people."

Frederick Estrella, who was a vet and farm manager at home on the island of Luzon, is one of the four workers originally sponsored by Jarad's father, Tom, and has been working for the Smiths for more than 10 years.

Three weeks ago his brother, Francis, started part-time at the piggery on a student visa. Mr Estrella said having good bosses and family and community close by had enabled him to stay in the job long term.

But there was a note of compromise in his working situation.

While the Filipino workers sometimes spoke Tagalog in the sheds, they were discouraged from doing so when others were present, he said.

"Obviously there are cultural differences," Jarad Smith said. "Everyone has to adapt. No matter who you're working with, you have to bend and flex a little bit."

In Pyramid Hill, cafe proprietor Dee Simms has a lot of anecdotes about cultural difference and nothing but good things to say about the recent arrivals.

"One of my workers, Gaby, when she first came asked me if I was very rich because I had a box of lettuces! In the Philippines let-



INCLUSIVE: Jarad Smith holding a piglet, daughter Abby, 5, wife Adelle, and long-term employee Frederick Estrella, from Luzon Island, in the Philippines.

tuces is an imported item," Mrs Simms said.

"I've had 10 to 15 male and female Filipino staff, and they've all had a wonderful work ethic, unbelievable maturity and great kindness and sincerity."

"We would've lost our Catholic school without the Filipinos. It was on the verge of closing down. We've got 35 families now and they've got involved in the community," she said.

"They do sewing classes, cooking classes, organise fund-raisers in the park, they've joined the CFA. I don't see a negative in it anywhere."

Pyramid Hill Fire Brigade captain Steve Mann, when contacted, said he was sick of media interest in the six Filipino recruits who were among the graduates of Country Fire

Authority training in October.

"They're not Filipinos to us; they're just members," Mr Mann said. "As far as we're concerned they're just part of the community, no different from the other 30 members."

Back at Kia-Ora, where business innovations include generating power from effluent ponds and producing pig food from the bi-products of people food, Jarad and Adelle Smith were busy handing out Christmas hams to the workers, one of whom was nervous about reporting to the office.

"It's funny. There are a few of the Filipino staff who are still scared of me after all this time," Mr Smith said. "While others just tell it to me like it is!"

"We're really lucky to have such a good crew here, really fortunate!"

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