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## INSIDE

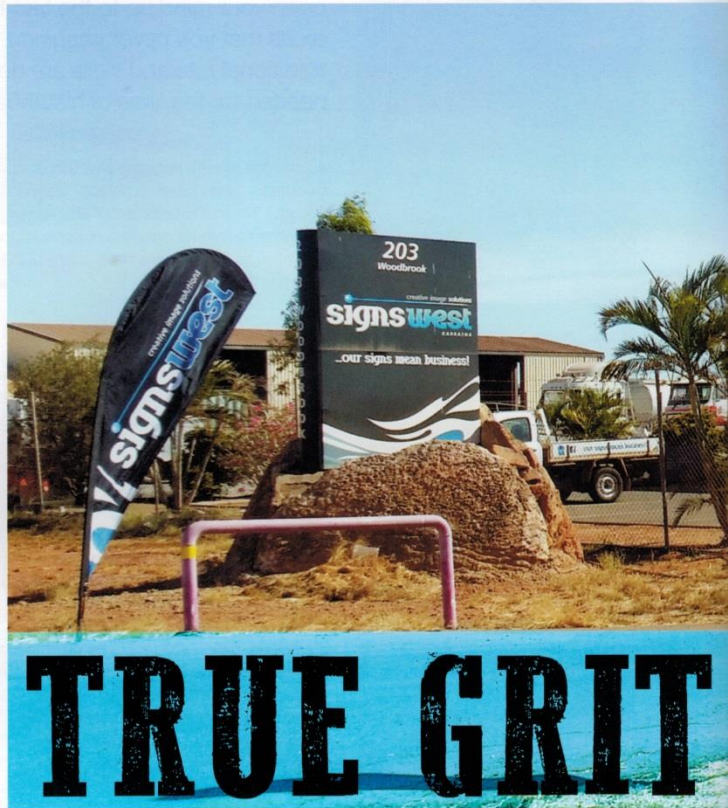
**AUSTRALIA ON SHOW**  
ASGA Awards 2018

**COOL, CALM & COLLECTED**  
Trotec's Reece Moore

**TRUE GRIT**  
Tamara Heckingbottom  
from Signswest

**NEVER A DULL MOMENT**  
Engraving Services Co

The Pilbara region of Western Australia is not for the faint of heart. When it's not hot, it's \$%#&@# hot! And if the heat isn't trying to kill you, then the tropical cyclones just might. But despite the challenging conditions, the region is also home to world class national parks, has untold riches beneath the soil and, breeds some of the toughest, most down to earth people in the world, of which Tamara Heckingbottom is one. She loves a chat, is very business savvy and, as the driving force behind Signswest will do anything to get the job done, even if it means getting up a ladder when 9 months pregnant to help install signage. She's got true grit, and that's one of the reasons why Signswest has not only survived tough times and conditions, but has been able to grow into a successful multifaceted print, sign and display business.



# TRUE GRIT

## – Tamara Heckingbottom,

The Signswest story begins in 1997 when Tamara and Les Heckingbottom started the business. At that time, Les was working for another sign company in town but things weren't working out. He decided to leave that job, and with Tamara set up from home with a printer and plotter. At that time Tamara was also working as a teacher, but pitching in for the business whenever possible.

"When we started Signswest, we worked out of a small room in the then family home," said Tamara Heckingbottom, Managing Director, Signswest. "We were very limited by space and what we could offer. I had never run a business, so initially I got someone in to teach me how to set up and manage the books, inventory, filing and so on, so that I could take care of that side of the business. I made it my place to organise the accounts and take care of the administration needed to run a business." Tamara's role in the business would quickly

become more 'hands-on' as the business grew, this included installation and anything that needed doing.

"Eventually we had to rent a premises in the middle of town," said Tamara. "I learnt on the job. I'd pick up the kids and then get into the workshop and do whatever needed to be done, it was just the way it had to be in order to complete jobs on time and make sure clients were happy."

As the business grew, Tamara and Les put on an apprentice and eventually more staff, but the extra hands didn't mean that she would take things easy. The idea of 'business' came naturally to her. Highly organised, focused and very determined, she was eager to grow the business further and seek more opportunity.

As the business grew, Tamara and Les knew they had to find a different location to work

from. Through contacts at the local Estate Agents, they were able to find land and bought a block then built a custom made factory, which is where the business still resides today.

"Back in the early days we were known as 'Stick With Us Signs', said Tamara. "It was back in 2007 that we moved into the new premises and at the same time we changed our name to Signswest as part of a revamp and as a way to celebrate our tenth anniversary."

At the same time, the business invested in some serious hardware, the Roland XC540. This would be the first of new range of technology the company would take ownership of. The anniversary, name change and new hardware marked a major turning point for the company that was about to be swept up in the mining boom that hit the country. Also, within a few months, the opportunity would arise to expand their business further afield at Port Hedland



# SIGNSWEST

when Hedland Signs approached Signswest with an offer to buy them out.

"We were already doing some jobs in the Port Hedland area and decided to look around the business that was for sale," said Tamara. "When we walked into the business we were a little surprised at the state it was in, but we saw that there was potential but would take a lot of work to bring it up to scratch. After a protracted negotiation, we decided to take the risk and push forward." Tamara redesigned the structure of the business, working to bring it up to the standard they had created in Karratha.

The mining boom brought in a lot of business for Signswest. They would forge relationships with the likes of BHP and Rio Tinto – key clients they still have to this day – and expand their staff numbers to deal with the work. It was at this peak that the business would again undergo a major change as Les and Tamara



SignsWest staff members Steve Boyce, Jules Davis, Grant Elliott, Kate Elliott, Sue Lee, Tamara Heckingbottom



decided to go their separate ways. After having invested so much time and effort into building Signswest, as well as discovering that she had a real knack for business, Tamara offered to buy Les out and take sole ownership of the company.

It was a big, gusty move to make, but that's the type of person that Tamara is. She's not afraid of a challenge and to role up her sleeves and once again put in the hard yards to continue on the path of success.



The real challenge Tamara would face would come as the mining boom slowed down. Tamara had to take action to keep the business running and adapt to the new market.

"At the time I bought the business outright in 2011, it was the height of the mining boom," said Tamara. "We had 11 staff and were flat out. When the boom ended I was forced to let some people go whilst others went on their way. It takes a certain type of person to live out here. You either love it or hate it. It has always been a challenge to find staff, especially qualified staff. There's a lot of expense involved compared to the major cities. You have to offer well above the average wage and you need to add incentives such as housing, airfares and a vehicle."

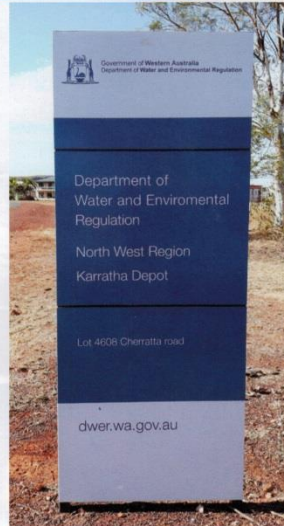
The challenge of finding good staff is not the only one faced by businesses in the region. Apart from the natural elements, expenses such as rent, transport and basic supplies are all well above the average price, so it's not cheap to run a business in the Pilbara.

"As difficult as it is to find staff, I am really fortunate to have a great team with me," said Tamara. "They will put in and they treat my business like it's their own business. There's nothing they won't do and they work really well together between the two sites. I couldn't ask for a better team."

With the mining boom downturn leveling off and the business back to a more manageable size, it was time to move forward and look to getting back on the front foot.

Tamara is always on the go; it's just her nature. Her approach to business is to never leave anything on her desk that is unfinished. She puts in very long days and will work to get quotes back as soon as possible to clients.

"If I have to work till 12 at night, then I will work till 12 at night," said Tamara. "Then I'll do it all again the next day. We have to be faster, better and more reliable than our competitors. "Sometimes I have started at 5 in the morning to work on the books, handle quotes, write up job sheets and whatever else that needs to be done. It's not always like this though,



sometimes there may only be 5 quotes to do, other days there may be as many as 30 quotes to do."

Tamara and her team have worked diligently to create a comprehensive business that provides almost all forms of signage.

"About the only form of signage that we don't offer is the creation and installation of in-ground pylon signage," said Tamara. "Because we work in an area that gets frequent cyclones, the likes of pylons need a lot of engineering certificates and very deep footings to be able to withstand the winds. Given all the factors involved, it's one area we pass on."

Whilst they may avoid pylon signage, the Signswest team love to tackle major projects. As preferred supplier for Rio Tinto, they were involved in the company's major rebrand a few years ago. The project ran for a long time and involved a lot of work across many sites.

Today, the business is going well. It will be 21 years that Signswest has been in operation and Tamara is still as passionate about it as she has ever been. She took a lot of risk to get to this point, learnt a lot about business and developed skills and expertise in areas

she never had experience with. She's worked hard to get where she is and has always been prepared to roll up the sleeves when required. That spirit of determination also serves her well in all other aspects of her life. Tamara loves to ride horses and is a qualified gym instructor and Personal Trainer.

"I started my Cert III in Fitness in November 2016 and completed that and then my Cert IV in Nov 2017," said Tamara. I teach group fitness part-time at my local recreational centre. I have had to drop back a few classes as things have gotten busier, but I still do a couple of classes there. In 2016 I did the Ride to Conquer Cancer charity ride. It was a 200km bike ride (over two days) to raise funds for Cancer Research. A very close friend was going through Stage 4 breast cancer and I felt I needed to do my part."

As Tamara and the Signswest team look to the future, they can do so knowing that they have the people, technology, facilities and the true grit of the owner, to tackle the weather, winds and anything else the Pilbara can throw at them.

For more information about Signswest, please visit [www.signswest.com.au](http://www.signswest.com.au)