

Opportunities for families

By Di Stanley

She's petite, polite yet incredibly persuasive, and in the words of her sister Janine, where other people see barriers and backtrack, First 5 Years founder Melissa Webster "just smashes through".

At the official opening of the Retro Street early childhood education centre on Saturday, 20 May, Mrs Webster paid tribute to the village of local builders and tradespeople that helped bring her vision to life in one short year.

"This has been an absolute community effort from day one," she said.

"Only two weeks ago we did our purposes and values. We spent two days doing that and they are Passionate, Empowering and Inclusive.

"That's what we stand for and I can see it in abundance already."

Councillor Megan Daniels thanked Mrs Webster for researching the data and seizing the opportunity to expand Emerald's childcare.

"Childcare has been an issue for all our businesses, for our local families for quite some time and to have an investment like this is amazing," Cr Daniels said.

"When Melissa first came to council and showed us the designs she was proposing I was so excited to see something that is so beautiful with the play area embracing what we were calling controlled risk which was something very new."

Cr Daniels said she had firsthand experience of the childcare squeeze in Emerald.

"As a working mother... I've walking into a childcare centre and been told I would be 73rd on the waiting list if I signed up today," she said.

"So, by creating these 93 new places, it's creating opportunities for many more fami-



Gregory MP Lachlan Millar, councillor Megan Daniels and Flynn MP Colin Boyce join founder Melissa Webster to officially open the First 5 Years early childhood education centre in Emerald on Saturday, 20 May.

lies to return to work, both parents or a single parent.

"It's also important for women as well.

"That's something we really need to recognise, that allowing women to re-enter the workforce needs support through childcare

and by that, we are empowering women, creating equality and breaking down barriers."

Gregory MP Lachlan Millar said adequate childcare and aged care facilities were vital for sustaining liveability in western Queensland communities.

"Know what you've been able to do here is important," Mr Millar said.

"It's what I call the bell curve – we start at youth and we end at aged care and they are the two issues we need to address more.

"So many mums and dads at the moment need a dual income to meet the mortgage and cost of living, and we also need to have our mums back into their careers.

"They play an important part in our nation going forward and our state going forward.

"To get people to come out west, they need to know they can get childcare, have children, and to get people to stay out west, they need to know they have aged care."

Federal Member for Flynn Colin Boyce congratulated Mrs Webster for choosing to use a local workforce from suppliers to builders, electricians, plumbers and landscapers and contributing to the local economy for the project.

Australians, Mr Boyce added, generally got "the bum steer" when it came to childcare.

"The government in their wisdom has done a lot recently to help affordability of childcare everywhere but it's also about accessibility, and one of the things we try to advocate for and try and make our colleagues in Canberra and in the states aware of, is that many rural and regional places, all centres just don't have childcare," he said.

"And in this day and age it's something that we should provide to the family unit given the fact we all suffer the cost-of-living crisis and everybody wants to go back to work and we need to have places for our small children today and into the future.

"It's a great thing for the community here in Emerald to have a brand-new facility in little over a year in the building, absolutely amazing result."

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