

### **A gift that keeps on giving.**

Warren and Luandi Liebenberg had the opportunity of a lifetime to leave city life behind and move to a vibrant regional town. What made their decision even more a leap of faith? They would be relocating from South Africa to Australia!

In South Africa, Warren worked in project management, and Luandi was a teacher, which made her eligible for a recruitment process in Australia. It wasn't an easy decision, because of their young family and roots in South Africa, but they were excited for the adventure and chance to live in a country town. The department provided some options and, after some research, they chose Merredin for its population and proximity to Northam and Perth.

After a whirlwind two months, the young family arrived in Merredin, Western Australia, and immediately wondered, "What have we done?" After living in a city, with more than they needed, plus a two-week stay in a hotel in Perth before the trip to Merredin, they were hit by concerns around their decision.

"All our stuff was in a [shipping] container. So we arrived here with our bags and that's pretty much it," Warren says of their arrival. But from day one, the locals were generous and helpful, bringing the young family things to help them settle. "In the first week, we were sorted with everything that we ever needed."

The community rallied to support the new arrivals, something they weren't used to in the city. It wasn't long before their initial concerns were replaced by gratitude and excitement.



After exploring their options, Warren and Luandi let their daughter decide which school she preferred. “She struggled a little bit in the beginning because her accent was a little bit different and she would call things different names,” Luandi recalls. After their daughter settled in, she was proud of her school and loved the sense of belonging.

It was a greater challenge for their two-year-old at the time. “There’s only one daycare in town, I suppose that’s the biggest obstacle,” Warren says. He stayed at home with the kids until their daughter was in school and their son was gradually given three days a week at daycare, where their son is still exceptionally happy and the staff go above and beyond.

A major benefit of moving to a country town is the willingness to give others a fair go. Where cities will reject people because they have many options, regional communities are more willing to train and support people as they fill roles.

When his son was able to attend daycare more days each week, Warren became an Education Assistant, then later transitioned to an administrative position with the Shire of Merredin. His background as a project manager and eagerness for a challenge earned him the position of Asset Management Officer where he enjoys getting out into the community, dealing with farmers, and maintaining the Shire’s roads, facilities and parks.

Warren and Luandi also quickly discovered the sport and recreation culture in Merredin. They were surprised by the variety of options for adults and kids, and the way these groups brought everyone together. “Before they ask your name, they ask you what sport you play,” Warren says with fondness for his new community.

It wasn’t long before Luandi joined the local hockey club and convinced Warren to join too. Now they encourage everyone who moves to a regional town to get involved as a way to make friends and explore their region. “We still haven’t covered 10% of the things you could do,” Warren says of exploring Merredin and the surrounding area.

Life in a regional town offers the chance to watch your kids play sport because you don’t lose time to long commutes. Their daughter plays basketball and netball and loves the local dance group. They also take their young son to the public facilities to kick a ball and go cycling as a family without concerns about dangerous traffic. They also make the most of the walking trails and the public swimming pool.



Luandi grew up in a town similar to Merredin and used to visit the public swimming pool all the time. “It gives me such joy and pleasure to know [my kids] are experiencing something like that as well.” She also appreciates the short commutes around town, especially the mornings when getting the kids ready for school or daycare. The mornings are so much more relaxed because everyone can get up and spend more time at home without rushing around.



“The things I thought were going to be an issue for me moving out here are not – they’re the positives,” Warren says. All the luxuries are still available when they plan ahead with the local grocer, online ordering or a trip to Perth. Nowadays, they only travel to Perth for the beach. Living in Merredin helped them learn to live simply and to have patience; valuable lessons they’re glad to also teach their kids.

The stunning sunsets will always be a highlight, but time is one of the greatest gifts Merredin provides. Time to spend with family, to get to know neighbours, and to enjoy the sunny days and starry nights.

“We will look back at this time very fondly,” Luandi says, “and be very appreciative that we had this time with our kids.”