

Written by Michael Lipari

I moved to Bylong when I was about 11 and I remained there for about 10 years. My family and I lived on the property "Hillview" on the end of Upper Bylong Road. It was an idyllic upbringing. Our property was bordered by other farms and National Park. We had views across grazing paddocks and of sandstone cliff faces. I spent countless hours after school and during school holidays exploring the surrounding bush land.

I've returned often over the years. The memories, the mateship and my sense of belonging are so strong that I've recently persuaded my Wife, after many years of trying, to buy a 50 acre bush block at Growee, on the Southern end of Bylong.

I attended Bylong Public School, which marked its 100th anniversary in 2012. The school has closed since Kepco (and others) started buying up the land for the purposes of mining the Valley. Kepco now own the land where the school sits, now empty.

During my early high school years, the Bylong community held the inaugural Bylong Mouse Races. The Mouse Races celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2013. Over those 25 years, the event raised in excess of \$500,000, which went in to providing for the Bylong community. The event was cancelled in 2014, after Kepco started buying up the surrounding lands.

My first job was working for Jane Thomson, of Kingston Stud, a thoroughbred horse stud. At that time, Kingston Stud was one of three horse studs in the Valley. Each of those studs is now closed and Kepco owns the lands.

One of my last jobs in the Valley was as a gardener at Cherrydale Park. That property is now owned by the O'Beid family or a related entity, as a result of a shady mining deal which led to an extended ICAC investigation and findings of corrupt conduct against Eddie O'Beid who is currently imprisoned and due to face trial over the deal in 2019.

The Bylong Valley had some of the largest pastoral operations in the Hunter. Those operations consisted of enormous land sizes, up to many thousand acres held as single landholdings. Those properties were highly productive agricultural lands. They had significant water holdings. They included historic cattle studs. They included the prototype for Natural Sequence Farming. Those lands are all now owned by Kepco.

Most importantly, prior to the time when Kepco started buying up the land, there was a close-knit community in Bylong. A weekly get together on Fridays, great camaraderie and true mateship. Since then we've seen friendships fracture as a result of probable non-disclosure agreements and gag-orders and as a result of those bought out fleeing the Valley in droves.

You might think I'm totally opposed to mining. You might then be surprised to discover that I work as an open cut mining operator. Ironically, a previous

employee of the mining company that sold the licence to Kepco. A previous employee because I lost my job as a result of a PAC decision rejecting an application for an extension. I, along with 500 of my colleagues. Those 500 jobs were no less important than those that Kepco is apparently offering. Now, like then, jobs and economics are not and cannot be the most important consideration.

I've seen the impact of mining on the land. The enormous whole dug into the earth. The dust that floods the air. The water that is no longer suitable for irrigation. I speak regularly to my mining colleagues and, even amongst us, there seems to me to be a general consensus that coal mining does not belong in the Bylong Valley.

Aside from the environmental impacts, I've seen the impact of mining on the community. Coal mining has its place and that's not in the Bylong Valley.