

## Zoe Pogonowski.

They're young, many still merely mid-20s, but Port Macquarie has an emerging unsung band of youthful entrepreneurs and activists. Susie profiles one of our inspirational new generation of community builders.



Over the past four years Out To Lunch has met many of our local movers and shakers, business and community leaders and long-time identities who've driven the development of our town. Their average age is probably around 50. In a first this month, I'm meeting up with one of the new group of vibrant young people keenly building our social capital for the future, the "next gen". At just 26, Zoe Pogonowski is typical of the breed - she, involved in business and education, others eager to stand as councillors, for example, or creating their own flourishing enterprises from the ground up, across a spectrum as varied as from publishing to sport. Pogonowski's Polish surname is generations old: she's as Aussie as they come. But the thing that is truly esoteric about her is her love affair with algorithms - a handy skill in an age when computer literacy is king.

Five years ago Pogonowski abandoned Melbourne, happened on Port Macquarie, loves it and has made it her home. In that short time she's built a thriving small business at the pointy end of technology and acquired a partner and family, just for starters. She also tutors students in maths, lectures in building websites and online marketing at the community college, networks with business groups, mentors a younger employee, volunteers her professional expertise for a couple of enterprises, studies to complete her university degree by correspondence, takes regular walks along the sand from her Flynn's Beach home to town, practices yoga, rides bikes and, like any 20-something, finds time for the odd rock concert in Sydney.

Her passion for IT, she says, stemmed from

a natural aptitude for maths as a Melbourne school girl. "Dad brought our first PC home when I was seven," she recalls in a background page on her website. "He actually extended the mortgage on our house to afford it. Everything was still MS-Dos back then, so I was lucky enough to experience IT before the 'Mouse age' ... and then I grew up through every version of Windows. The machines and programs were primitive but they taught me that almost any problem can be solved with patience and persistence. When we had a problem Dad made us look in the Help files before getting involved himself. That way, we learned to help ourselves."

With a tertiary entrance score in the top echelon of the State she entered Monash University as a Performing Arts student but soon identified her true passion and switched to Science/Education, majoring in maths and physics. On a whim, she added computer programming as an elective subject - and suddenly found her intellectual home. She thrived in the discipline, transferred to a computer science degree ... and then, like many a noted entrepreneur, got diverted from academia by life itself. A uni break saw her visit Port Macquarie to help a family friend at an art gallery. The break stretched to a year, during which she organised exhibitions at the gallery - "It was lots of fun! I enjoyed running a small business but, when it came down to it, I couldn't keep up the façade of knowing something about art. I realised I'm a nerd. So I returned to my uni studies, knowing I needed to be in IT, doing what I'm good at." Port, however, also intrigued her. For one thing, she loves the weather and climate here, she tells me

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(at the peak of one of our seemingly unending typically rainy periods). *The weather?* "You have to remember I'm from suburban Melbourne!" she explains.

To meet people and make friends in her newly adopted home town, she joined a mountain bike club. Meeting Dennis - a keen recreational bike rider, and a carpenter and joiner with his own business designing and building distinctive custom-made timber staircases - was the outcome. "The day I met Dennis, I knew he was 'the one'. It was instantly 'game over': I knew this was the guy I'd end up with." Along with Dennis she acquired two stepchildren - a ready-made family, weekend step-mum duties and activities, and a cordial relationship with the girls' mother. The children, aged 8 and 7, will be flower girls at the couple's wedding in February. "It's not usually part of the life plan to become a step-mum at 21 - but I love the girls to bits and can't live without them either. As split families go, we've got it sorted; we're the model: everyone's flexible. The girls spend two days a week with us, they call me Zoe, and, without any disrespect to their mother Christine, they're like my own. She's their Mum and I'm their

step-mum." But the clock's ticking fast: "I love kids so much, I'm hoping to have a child of my own next year."

It remains to be seen how she fits that in amid all her life entails (including time exercising her dogs, Dyson, a German shepherd, and a labradoodle - named Rhombus!). Her business, XYZ support, specialises in website design and construction, search engine optimisation, application programming and IT support. Recognised in this year's Chamber of Commerce Business Awards, XYZ also operates group workshops on key computing subjects and tutors maths and computers one-on-one. Pogonowski's tutored maths since her own schooldays (inheriting a love of imparting knowledge from her mother, a teacher). That's aside from lecturing and mingling with groups like the Business Women's Network. Then there's a yearning to visit her parents in Denmark. Her father, an electrical engineer with Siemens, has been posted there for a few years.

Never mind that it's a long list.

For this maths and IT "nerd", it seems things tend to have a habit of always adding up.

**Out To Lunch is hosted by Lou Perri at The Stunned Mullet on Town Beach**

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