

Lean ON ME

There comes a point in your life when you stop being looked after by your parents and start returning the favour. This Father's Day, Kimberly Gillan talks to those who have stepped up to help their dads in need

Debbie Burgermeister, 38, helped her dad, Robert Kirsch, 66, through tough emotional and financial times on his farm.

"I decided to surprise my dad for Father's Day in 2009. It was an eight-hour drive from my home on the Gold Coast to his farm near Inverell in Northern NSW.

I hadn't seen him for about five months and, although I knew the farm was suffering from the drought, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw.

Dad had lost a lot of weight and was exhausted. His partner, Christine, worked away from home, so he was often there on his own. He was too tired from working on the farm to care for his own welfare and nutrition. It broke my heart to see my strong and capable father looking so defeated.

His cattle were skin and bones, too. All the grass had disappeared, the soil was eroding and the dams had dried up. Dad was

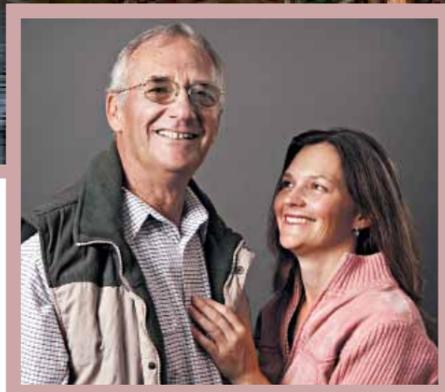
forced to drive his 200 cattle to the roadside to find grass for them to eat.

The financial stress was huge, too – he was paying the lease on his property and had rented a paddock near the road to hold the livestock at night. His biggest fear was that he'd lose everything.

I was pregnant at the time, but I jumped straight onto the four-wheeler and spent four days helping Dad on the road. Each morning, we'd drive the cattle from the night paddock to the roadside and spend the day trying to stop them straying. The cattle were so weak, they couldn't get up if they fell down, so we'd have to help them.

It was calving season, too, and 70 pregnant cows died, which equated to about \$70,000 in lost assets. Sometimes they gave birth before they died and Dad would have to take the calves home at night to hand-feed them to keep them alive.

I was so worried about him when I returned home – if he lost all his cattle, it would shatter him. I couldn't help him financially,



so I called friends and family and asked for cattle feed donations. I also rang the local paper and it ran a story asking for support. Living so far away, I couldn't cook for him, so I sent him protein shakes – that was as much of a healthy meal as I could give long-distance. I also phoned him often.

Thankfully, the drought finally ended and, in October 2010, Dad and Christine moved to a beautiful new farm near Manilla in NSW. Dad has his spark back."

Robert says: "Debbie couldn't have visited me at a better time. I'd started to wonder if I was going to get through the drought. I'd lost so much weight and the cattle were dying. Our relationship was strong before, but it's even stronger now."

PHOTOGRAPHY: EMMA PHILLIPS, RICHARD WHITFIELD, SCOTT MCGALE, GETTY IMAGES

Isaam Almaribe, 21, vowed to do everything he could to help his father when Mansor, 46, was jailed during a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.



"In October last year, my mum, four siblings and I farewelled our father as he left for the Hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Every Islamic person must make the Hajj once in their life if they have the means to do so. We were all smiling as we said goodbye.

Three weeks later, I was sitting in class when my brother rang to tell me Dad had been arrested for blasphemy in Saudi Arabia. He'd been accused of swearing at the prophet Mohammed's companions [those closely associated with the prophet],

Hannah Pate, 34, was a teenager when her dad, Anthony Venn-Brown, 61, announced he was gay.

"Growing up, my father was a travelling preacher and he'd spend half the year on the road. When he came home, I'd be so excited. He was very charismatic – his sermons were like rock concerts.

When I was 13, Dad broke down and told my mum, my sister and me that he'd decided to give up preaching. I was surprised, but just wanted him to do what made him happy.

Over the next year, things became strange at home. Dad moved between different jobs, and one day I came home to find he'd gone.

Mum told us Dad had left because he was gay. She handled it incredibly well, telling us, 'He'll always be your dad and you are always to love him.'

The first time I went to visit Dad, I was nervous. I'd never known a gay person and

although he maintained his innocence.

Straightaway, I called my dad's friends for advice. I was at university in Melbourne while the rest of my family was back in Shepparton, in rural Victoria. I knew it was up to me to be the strong one, so I kept calling them to make sure they were all right.

Australian officials told us things didn't look good for Dad and he'd probably be jailed for 10 years. We'd heard some people had been given the death sentence for blasphemy.

I contacted our local MP, who lobbied the foreign minister. We also spoke to the media, and I started a Facebook page to spread the word about Dad's ordeal.

My family had been separated before. We fled Iraq to escape the Gulf War in 1991 and went to Iran. Then my father came to Australia as a refugee in 1999 – it was six years before we were able to join him. In that time, he'd developed diabetes and had a heart attack due to stress. We were frightened he wouldn't survive jail.

The Saudi officials wouldn't let Dad speak to anyone but, about a month after his arrest, someone in jail gave him a mobile phone to secretly call us. It was such a relief to hear his voice, but when he told us he'd been sentenced to one year in jail and 500 lashes, we all started crying.

In January this year – after he'd spent two months in prison – Dad received a royal

we'd been taught it was a sin. But once I saw him, I realised nothing had changed between us.

I decided to be really open about the fact my dad was gay. I wanted people to know I supported him. Plus, I thought if everyone knew, no one could hold it against me or bully me about it at school.

It was only recently that I specifically told Dad how proud I am of him, but I think my actions spoke louder than words. I was always willing to go out with his friends and be part of his new life.

My two daughters, aged 10 and 14, have grown up knowing their 'Poppy' is gay, and I know if they ever have a friend who comes out, they'll offer acceptance without judgment.

We're still Christian and Dad has started an organisation called freedom2b, which supports Christians on their journey in coming out.

I'm grateful for this experience because it's allowed me to be accepting of people who are different from me. No matter what,

pardon for his charges. He'd get 75 lashes and then he could finally come home.

Two days later, our family and members of our community met him at Melbourne airport. Seeing my father again was the happiest moment of my entire life.

We could hardly recognise him – he'd lost 10kg and his beard had grown out. We stayed up talking all night about what he'd been through. He couldn't understand why he was arrested, because he didn't do what he'd been accused of.

It's impossible for me to imagine my father being jailed and lashed. He's such a strong and respected man, he didn't deserve to be treated that way. But, if anything, this experience has made me respect him even more. My family owned a fruit shop in Shepparton but had to close it when Dad was jailed. They've now moved to Melbourne and Dad has opened a new shop – it's great to see him doing well again.

My father would do anything to help our family, so I did my best to try to help him. He sacrificed a lot so we could come here and have a better life. I'm determined to do well in life so I haven't wasted that time."

Mansor says: "When I was in jail, all I wanted was to return to my normal life. I'm proud of Isaam and my family for helping me – we have a very strong relationship."

Dad will always be my dad – our relationship is more important than anything else."

Anthony says: "I didn't think Hannah would accept my sexuality and I walked away knowing I might never see her again. I'm so proud she speaks up when anyone displays ignorance about sexual orientation." ■

