

# Student Spotlight: Leila Benton

## Hands on the Land, Eyes on the Future.

Leila grew up on the outskirts of New Plymouth, surrounded by a community where farming was part of everyday life. Her family had a connection to the sector, with her dad supporting farmers through his business and her grandmother being a dairy farmer, yet Leila didn't begin to take an interest in the sector until high school.

Initially, she imagined a future in accounting, but a visit to a friend's sheep and beef farm shifted her perspective.

"I really loved it. I came back to school and realised accounting isn't what I wanted to do. I wanted something on the land, and that was my happy place. I finally found somewhere I fit.

At New Plymouth Girl's High School, Leila carefully selected subjects to support her growing interest in agriculture and consulting, while recognising that classroom learning alone wouldn't be enough. She focussed on gaining practical experience early, knowing it would be essential for her credibility and effectiveness in the sector.



"I knew a degree was essential for a career in consultancy, but more importantly, you need experience first. Starting early gave me practical skills and insights that would give me an edge later and help me relate to farmers in a meaningful way."

This blend of learning and doing became the foundation for Leila's approach.

Leila first got a taste of farm work in Year 10, visiting her friends' farm and helping with tasks such as docking, but she really started getting practical experience in Year 13. Through Gateway placements, she relief milked and assisted with calving, continuing to relief milk over successive summers.

During Years 11 and 12 Leila built foundational skills through WITT's Trades Academy Agriculture course. Over the years, she also worked on two dairy farms, including the one she had been with previously, giving her sustained, authentic exposure to farm life.

"I did 15 weeks straight of calving while balancing full-time study. I've been busy, but it's been worth it."

These experiences not only provided Leila with practical skills but also gave her credibility when engaging with farmers, and an understanding of how farms and industry operate in practice.

"Farmers know when you know what you're talking about. Getting experience on dairy and sheep and beef farms has helped me relate to farmers and build important interpersonal skills. You can't learn that any other way because farmers are unique people."

Leila's exposure to multiple farming environments naturally led her to consider consulting as a career. She recognised that there was a vital role in connecting farmers with advisory and regulatory bodies to ensure compliance and best practice, while also providing helpful solutions.

"I've always wanted to go into consulting because it's a mix of office and on-farm work. Being able to get out there and use critical thinking has opened me up to so many things I didn't even know were out there."

An internship with the Waikato Regional Council introduced her to compliance work, including assisting with water take consents and checking dairy effluent systems.

"There's a big disconnect because councils might visit a farm once every three to seven years. I want -

to be the middle person helping farmers meet standards before inspections, rather than just enforcing rules."

When it came time to pursue tertiary study, Leila chose Massey University because it offered more flexibility to study online while remaining close to her partner and being able to fully immerse in rural life, attending events like dog trials and ram sales that kept her connected to the community. Even while studying, Leila continued to prioritise practical experience, knowing it was essential for her future. She encourages students interested in the sector to pursue opportunities as early as possible.

"Get involved. The scholarships I received made a huge difference and opened doors for me throughout my studies. There are definitely jobs out there for graduates because the industry needs them."

Beyond her professional ambitions, Leila is drawn to the self-sufficiency and lifestyle of living on the land. Looking ahead, Leila hopes to own her own farm and raise a family on it, but in the meantime is focussed on building experience and working towards establishing her own consulting business.

With Leila's sights set on consulting and farm ownership, she is positioned to bring practical solutions and leadership to the land. Her story tells us what is possible when passion meets perseverance, signalling the arrival of a new generation of industry leaders ready to make a difference.