

RESILIENCE & RESEARCH

Meet Claire, our 2024 Mark Ashford Scholarship recipient

Claire Scofield is a remarkable 36-year-old horticultural scientist and this year's proud recipient of the **Mark Ashford Scholarship**. She lives in Otago with her firefighter husband, Dan and is currently pursuing a PhD with the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture at the University of Tasmania. Claire's journey is a testament to resilience and determination and shows that you never know where life will take you. Born in 1988, Claire grew up in Glendowie, Auckland. CF testing was still new in New Zealand, and genetic testing was just emerging. Her newborn test results never reached her GP, so it wasn't until she was eight that she was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis.

"As a young kid, I kept getting sick and couldn't gain weight. I was pancreatic sufficient so that helped me fly under the radar but I had eight years of constantly getting sinus, ear and chest infections. So by the time I was diagnosed, I was already a step back with probably around 80% lung function," said Claire.

Her first admission came when she was 10, "After that, admissions were yearly. It was a massive change for everyone. I would say that I was a relatively non-compliant teenager due to starting CF treatments late. Starship was amazing though and I quite enjoyed the hospital as it was a good break from normal life."

AN UNEXPECTED PATH TO HORTICULTURE

School had never been her focus, as she preferred fine arts to academia, "I didn't love school. I probably didn't excel in my studies, which is funny considering what I do now, but I excelled in arts and fine arts."

In her late teens, she struggled with her health. She was in and out of hospital but still passed the university entrance to enable her to pursue her dream. Claire recalled, "I studied nursing and I absolutely loved it. It was all I ever wanted to do. In my second year, I found out I had Burkholderia, a potentially very dangerous bug.



My doctor at the time said that I should no longer pursue nursing. At that point, I had a bit of a crisis and didn't know what to do."

Feeling uncertain about the future, Claire initially pursued a path in animal management. However, it didn't click for her but when she discovered a horticulture course in Palmerston North, everything began to fall into place.

"My grandma was a keen gardener and I had always loved spending time with her gardening during holidays. I also really wanted to get out of Auckland and make a massive change. I've not looked back.

Today, I'm a scientist for Plant & Food Research in Alexandra, Central Otago. I've worked here for 13 years. I started as an undergraduate and just loved it. It's never the same day-by-day and year-by-year."

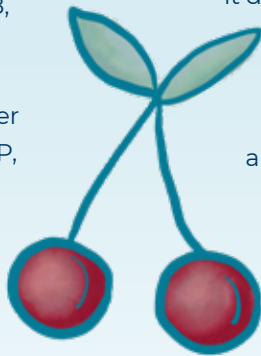
STUDYING FOR A PHD WHILE EMBRACING THE GREAT OTAGO OUTDOORS

After completing her master's while working full-time, she started her PhD at the University of Tasmania last year. Her research centres on understanding the factors that influence calcium uptake in cherries, especially in protected cropping environments.

"The goal of the PhD for me is to produce an outcome that will be beneficial for growers. At the moment that might be as simple as nutrient updates for trees."

But is working in horticulture a risky field for people living with CF? Claire says yes and no,

"There probably are some CF risks to what I do. I am very careful if I work around potting mix – but we all should be. I have never felt that I have been putting myself at undue risk. It's probably 50% or more computer-based, 25% field and 25% lab so my exposure to the plants is pretty small."



Outside work, Claire lives an active lifestyle with her husband.

"When I moved to Otago I got into tramping, cycling and mountaineering – all the good things. I actually met Dan at primary school and we reconnected in our 20s when he came down here for a holiday. We met up to go rock climbing and mountain biking. That's still what we enjoy doing but I now need to wear oxygen when I exercise.

We live on a lifestyle block and I'm hoping to grow flowers here to sell at local markets soon as a little side hustle."



MANAGING THE CHALLENGES OF CF

With two rare gene mutations, Claire started Kalydeco around 3 years ago.

"It was my lifesaver. I weighed 53 kg and was getting sick a lot so we were talking about transplant at that time. After a few months, I had gained 10kgs. There was no big wow moment but more of a gradual improvement. I didn't need to go down the road of transplant as I now have that future ahead of me.

With such a busy and active life it can be hard to balance treatments and self-care.

"Day-to-day, my CF isn't always managed the best. I am not perfect. Prioritising rest has been my main way to keep going. The good thing about doing a PhD is that it's flexible. I can wake up and set aside time for myself to walk the dog, do my deep breathing and do exercise and treatments."

I think it could be easy for others to view me as having it quite easy due to the way that I portray myself online. But there are a lot of key things that I don't show. It's important to remember we don't always know what others are dealing with," said Claire.

THE MARK ASHFORD SCHOLARSHIP AND BEYOND

Claire had previously received an Achievers Award from CFNZ and had known about the scholarship for many years but felt she hadn't achieved enough to apply until this year.

"I found out that I had the scholarship on the phone. I was so surprised. It was a really nice feeling and Lisa and Lizzie were so sweet about it.

There is the opportunity to attend the International Cherry Symposium in the US next year. I would probably be presenting two years' worth of data from my PhD so I will use the money for that and do some travel in the US while I am there."

Claire has some wonderful words of advice for other people living with CF on both applying for the scholarship and pursuing higher education, "My advice to others is to just do it. The worst that will happen is that you won't get it and if so, try again next time. It's been given to very accomplished people so I am very proud to be a recipient.

I am a strong believer in telling people that you never know where you will end up. I know a lot of people who were not able to prioritise education due to their health. I hope that future generations won't have that worry. You can never lose from having further education. It opens so many new opportunities for a new career, and it's never too late."

Thank you Terra
for generously sponsoring the
2024 Mark Ashford Scholarship,
helping us celebrate the
achievements of our
CF community.

terra
consultants