Driven by tragedy
Memories of a loved daughter inspire parents’ mission for change

In February 2012, Andrea Harris and Peter Young took the call that every parent dreads.

Their daughter, Jarrah Young, 26, had been killed in a freak bus accident in Namibia, Africa, along with friend Sarah Penberthy, 22, Jarrah’s brother, Joel, 33, was also badly injured in the crash.

Jarrah, who trained as a vet at University of Queensland, was holidaying after having worked for one year as a vet in Kenya and Tanzania, doing field research with the Australia Youth Ambassador program.

Some months after Jarrah’s death and still in the fog of grief, Andrea and Peter began to consider ways they might honour their girl: something lasting, sustainable, true to her values and character. Jarrah was “an extraordinary young woman”, an energetic, generous and compassionate soul, open to the world and with a passion for social justice and the environment.

Andrea was two years retired from a career in education and training and was happy enough — until the loss of Jarrah. She began to reflect on Jarrah’s work in Africa and the international aid work being done by eldest daughter Tarli, 32, in Nepal and became restless.

“I felt guilty about not contributing in some way,” Andrea explains, “I still had skills I should be using. It was partly to keep myself busy, but largely to honour Jarrah.”

About that time, Andrea had read a book recommended by Jarrah, Half the Sky, about the importance of education in changing the health and wellbeing of people in developing countries, particularly women. Andrea and Peter, who live at Tallai in the Gold Coast hinterland, decided education was the perfect vehicle — using Andrea’s experience in education and training to drive a social agenda of education for women in developing countries, and funding those women’s education.

Their vision culminated in social enterprise the Australian Qualifications Institute (AQI), a registered, accredited training organisation providing online, vocational training courses for women in developing countries. With daughters Tarli and Kirra and friend Marilyn Sopello, Peter and Andrea worked for 18 months to get registration.

Andrea says many of these countries have universities, but they have no vocational or TAFE sector, so AQI fills the gap by offering training in business, business administration, management and workplace health and safety, costing between $100 and $2000 per qualification.

“If students in developing countries were able to get a visa to come to study in Australia … they’d be paying more than $35,000 in fees and living expenses, and so this is available to only the very few,” Andrea explains.

Andrea and Peter, both 60, travelled to Nepal last year to forge links with three educational institutions. They plan to do the same in Sri Lanka, The Philippines and Indonesia. (At this stage, Andrea says the memories are still too raw to venture to Africa, but does foresee a time when she will.)

The other arm of AQI is providing scholarships to girls and women in developing countries, funded by allocating 30 per cent of its profits to the fund. A scholarship of just $400 could pay someone’s university fees, while $1000 can help a girl stay in school, they say.

But Andrea and Peter have gone further. They’ve also honoured Jarrah by giving back to International House (IH), the University of Queensland college where she lived while studying and which caters for about 200 students from 37 countries. With family and friends, they have funded a scholarship at IH, awarded to a student who shows values of compassion, participation and inclusion. The first recipient is LLP, a student from Burma.

Peter says IH’s culture and ethos helped make Jarrah the woman she was. “So for us it was easy to be drawn back to a place to celebrate the things she brought to the world.”

Andrea says the grief from losing a child never diminishes, but their initiatives have helped manage that grief. “Partly because it’s kept me busy, and focused on something positive and feeling like I’m contributing and getting something positive out of a terrible tragedy.”