

WHO WE ARE: Lou Nicholson

An independent push for the region

Story by **Emma Masters**. Photograph by **Jason Porter**.

It's no small feat to jump into the pressure cooker of political life, let alone decide to tackle a state election as an independent, stepping into the fray without the resources of a major party and its wealth of connections.

But that's just what Goolwa mum of three and small-business owner Lou Nicholson did. And when South Australians went to the polls in March, she managed to achieve what many have only ever dreamed. Lou came within 343 votes of winning the seat of Finnis, an electorate that's been considered safe, blue ribbon Liberal territory since the 1940s.

The newly-minted independent said her political spark first ignited as she was making her rounds delivering boxes of organic fruit and vegetables to residents around the Goolwa region. 'My little business had about fifty to sixty customers a week and I got to talk to a lot of people,' Lou explains. 'A lot of the concerns people were raising were around not feeling heard or represented.'

Originally an occupational therapist taking leave to raise her young family of children (now aged two, four and six) Lou had also been following the passage of legislation through parliament and felt disappointed about the lack of informed debate. With these issues in mind, she decided to support someone to run in the state election. But then a post on social media caught her eye.

The post was from a South Australian consultancy who support women to enter politics. 'It was talking about women running for parliament and how we might not always take the most conventional path into politics, but what a positive difference we can make,' Lou says. 'My interest was obviously piqued, so I sent the founder Chelsey Potter an email telling her I loved the message.'

'It just started a conversation and she began encouraging me to run,' Lou continues. 'That was probably the real turning point where I really switched from 'we need someone', to 'I could do it'.'

Buoyed by the support of a seasoned political advocate, Lou launched her campaign on 19 March 2021, exactly one year before the state election. She said the first time she publicly announced her intention to run was nerve-wracking. 'It was a palliative care community forum and it took all of my courage to find the right

moment to stand up and announce to a rather large audience that I'm pretty much coming out of the blue and letting you know I'm running as an independent,' Lou says.

'My voice was shaking, my knees were knocking and for all of the ninety seconds I did not breathe, so by the end I was speaking like I'd just sucked in a helium balloon. Then a gentleman came up to me afterwards and said, "Fantastic, I'd like to help".'

It wasn't long before Lou had gathered a team of ten volunteers who'd meet fortnightly to assist her campaign. Meanwhile, she went to as many events as possible to listen and talk to people and build a platform based on issues she was hearing in the community. She knew it would be a busy year, but never quite expected her push for a seat in parliament would take over her life.

It was only after polls closed that she was able to stop and reflect. 'Just getting in my little car by myself and having a real, wavery moment of thinking, wow, it's done,' she recalls. 'Just feeling relief, really proud, a real moment of clarity about what we'd just done and the team's incredible effort. They really do a lot and you need them to do a lot.'

Lou spent election night with her family and team at the Middleton tavern, with the crowd growing louder as the results started rolling in. 'It was fantastic to get the results where I was in the lead, we were cheering and celebrating,' Lou laughs. 'But we were very aware that we'd have to see what happened with the pre-poll.'

The counting took days to finalise and eventually the Liberal Party won another term in Finnis, but Lou says the intense fight was worth it. 'My analogy is that of a basketball hoop that's so far you can't possibly imagine getting a goal but you throw that ball with all your might and I managed to get it sort of spinning around the ring,' she says. 'From the get-go we were told it was impossible so I'm really pleased to get so close. And if you're going to come second, to do it in such spectacular fashion is the best you could hope for.'

Lou says she's waiting for the dust to settle before making future plans. 'I'm deciding on what's the best way to stay engaged with the community and be able to keep participating and contributing to some of those issues that were raised such as health, housing affordability and climate action,' she says. 'My passion for our community and the issues here and for state parliament have certainly only grown.'



Above: Lou Nicholson at The Joinery, Factory 9, Port Elliot.