



Tineke Westwood

On February 7 2008, Tineke Westwood lost her father. Exactly a year later, she lost her home in the Black Saturday fires.

Just before Tineke and her husband, Keith, fled their house, they proposed a toast to their home and wished it luck. Unfortunately it didn't help and the couple lost everything they owned.

Tineke remembers the day starting with beautiful blue skies and two small clouds.

However, she had an uneasy feeling and was 'out of sorts'. The heat made her feel unwell, like her head was exploding. They spent the day with the curtains closed, watching Austar TV. Tineke went to lie down at 12.30.

Nick, their son, phoned around 3.00 pm from Justin's, his friend's house, to tell them there was a fire. While Keith said he couldn't see anything, Tineke instinctively knew there was trouble. They were facing Callignee and became frightened when they turned around and saw what looked like a big mushroom cloud.

Tineke filled three buckets with water and set their garden hose ready to use, but they knew it was not enough.

The ABC radio gave the warning to activate fire plans or leave the area, then they lost the broadcast signal.

Their fire plan was to leave. Keith would have left without anything because he believed they'd be returning and didn't want to have to put everything back after they returned, but Tineke was determined to take some belongings.

Nick was still at his friend's house, so she called him, yelling that she needed to pick him up. While running down the driveway to meet her, Nick apologised that he had forgotten some of his

belongings, but there was no time to waste.

Back home, they packed for about an hour. Their panic was that enormous that Tineke didn't know what to take. She grabbed some photos, birth certificates, passports, jewellery, a painting of her mother, and one of her father. Keith took the golf charger and Nick took a tin of Mint Imperials.

Nick also took his Playstation 3 – 'because it's not insured Mum'.

Their daughter, Katja, took all of their pets to town in her car – their Bernese Mountain dog, Basle; their golden retriever, Boot; and their three cats, Itchy, Scratchy and Sam. At least they were all safe.

They took some of Katja's Beatles collections and one music book. Katja lost all of her sheet music.

Keith also took some hand-crafted, soapstone seals. He helped put the doonas and pillows in the car for the overnight stay at their friend Lindy's, so she wouldn't have to go to the trouble of cleaning linen afterwards.

She threw her arms up in the air and asked what to take – everything was too big and heavy to take.

Tineke's father was a composer and a very creative man; they had a collection of instruments including a grand piano, antique piano and five synthesisers. They also had an extensive collection of antiques.

They closed all of the windows and curtains. Keith closed all the internal doors and Tineke put all the washing in the machine. 'If the fire brigade is coming they can't say my house is not tidy.'

They toasted the house with a cider and a whiskey and wished it good luck.

At 4.30 pm Tineke realised they had forgotten the camera. It contained photos of the house that she had taken to show people overseas when she took her father's ashes to Holland to her mother's grave.

The family turned back to retrieve it. In hindsight, she thinks it was stupid to return, but at that time everyone thought they would be still okay.

Tineke grabbed the camera and the bottle of whiskey– they needed a drink when they got to town. In the midst of this their neighbours reminded them to register in Traralgon.

It was dark and scary when they got to their friend Lindy. Tineke couldn't get in touch with anyone on the mobile so she didn't

know what was going on. There was nothing on the news about the area.

They had a report from their neighbour Linda that the fire had gone through the entire garden, but left their house. Tineke thought it was a miracle.

They went outside – to get some air. They could see a red glow in the hills. When they got back inside, they received a call that their house was on fire.

Linda rang back and said, 'The wind had changed, it's not good and I have to go now'.

Tineke was scared for the lives of Linda and her other friends. There was only one way in and one way out. 'It was awful.'

When the Westwoods were able to return, they had no idea what they would find. The stress caused a strong response in Keith while he was driving up to the 'house' and at one point Tineke thought he might have a heart attack.

Tineke was scared to face reality. They thought that maybe some possessions might have survived because they prepared so well. There was absolutely nothing left. What had been a 60 square house with three chimneys was now random bits of colour.

Tineke misses her 'beautiful house with a nice atmosphere and beautiful furniture'. They had just finished renovating the house a week earlier, including a repaint and \$6,000 worth of carpet.

There have been tough moments when birds were singing and the sun was shining, but there were no neighbours. With all the houses gone, it was incredibly quiet.

'Everyone has been impacted and you can't say one is worse than the others. Unless you lose loved ones – that's the worst', she said.

The Westwood's initially stayed with their friend Lindy, before moving to a rental home. The Monday following the fire, they were second in line to book a builder to rebuild their home, saying insurance was the best investment they had made.

Their Tint a Car business was impacted. Tineke was distracted when she needed to concentrate. The business suffered – made worse due to the economic climate. Another blow struck when their Bernese Mountain dog, Basle, was put down a month after Black Saturday.

The couple's story was featured on Dutch television. They say the support they received was amazing and the important thing was they had each other. 'The fire was not that strong that it can take away our love of life', Tineke said.



Gavin Wigginton

As the house ignited, Gavin Wigginton and his son, Andrew, sought refuge in a car in a shed. It was their last option and they believe they would have asphyxiated had they not crawled inside the car. They'd extinguished flames in the shed before leaping into the vehicle and weren't sure they would make it.

Gavin, 63 at the time, said that according to 40-year-old Andrew, the pair were 'dead men walking'.

Gavin had moved into the sustainable home on the Trust for Nature protected property in October 2008. The property is 236 acres and before the fire had a huge range of flora and fauna, including rare orchids and a koala colony.

They say that they initially survived the blaze that day because the house protected them from the radiant heat of the fire front.

Gavin is a governance and risk consultant, a lifelong environmentalist and on the board of the Australian Conservation Foundation. He and Andrew had identified the property after a lengthy search around Victoria for land with outstanding biodiversity. They obtained a Trust for Nature covenant three months after acquiring the property in 2007.

Above: Gavin has some work ahead of him!

On taking up residence, Gavin and his immediate neighbours had formed a Community Fireguard Group (CFG) and he had developed a comprehensive fire plan for the property with assistance from the CFA. On the 7 February 2009, he was fully prepared for the type of fire that the CFA train you for, but not the one that actually hit.

On the morning of the fire, Gavin was visiting Melbourne where his mother lived in a nursing home. He was alerted to the threat of fire by another member of the CFG, so he and Andrew drove to Callignee to protect the house. They had no indication of how severe the fire was going to be. If they had known they were going to confront the kind of temperatures involved, they might have had second thoughts.

When they drove into the Callignee area, there were no roadblocks and not much going on. On arriving at the property, they implemented their fire plan, including hosing down the house. It was smoky, becoming increasingly dark and everything went very still. Then the fire appeared; first there was a white glow on the horizon, then orange, and finally, red light travelling at an amazing rate. It started at ground level and then the red wall just grew to 60 metres before their eyes. It was twice as high as the highest tree.

There wasn't much of an ember attack before the fire front arrived. Trees around the house appeared to instantly combust and they seemed to be under attack from two directions, explained in part by a change in wind direction.

As Gavin and Andrew stood inside the house, the flames enveloped the house and spread along the double glazed windows. Then the aluminium window frames started to buckle and the fire entered the house. At this point, the fire hose, which Andrew had brought into the house, ceased to work. They retreated into the laundry, which had been constructed as a sealed area with fire-fighting equipment. They stayed there for about six minutes, lying on the floor until they started to run out of oxygen.

By this time the main fire front had passed through, but the house was well alight.

At this point, Gavin was having trouble breathing and Andrew made the call to abandon the house. He dragged Gavin down the burning back steps of the house as he started to choke. 'I wouldn't have survived this by myself', Gavin said. They ran 8 metres to the shed. There was no time for fear – they were just implementing the final stage of their plan and running on adrenaline. 'Andrew was just telling me what to do and I did it. He saved my life.'

When they reached the shed, they found fires inside it – plastic that had self-ignited. Gavin and Andrew put the fires out by beating the flames with rags and cloths. They then put the roller door down and climbed into the car – Andrew in the front and Gavin in the back. With one last look at the house, Andrew saw

the building start to go up.

Gavin thought they could be finished – 'I wasn't sure we would survive', he said. 'The car had good seals and if we hadn't jumped into the car, we might well have died from asphyxiation in that shed.' Later, when they emerged from the car, they found that the intensity of the heat had caused the wing mirrors to droop and other plastics to buckle.

That car was their last refuge and they were lucky it was a good quality shed – it remained standing after the fires.

They emerged from the shed after about 20–25 minutes. The house was already a ruin with the roof on the ground, despite it having been built to the latest fire regulations, incorporating non-combustible materials. The clearing of trees 30–50 metres around the house had no effect in providing protection from a fire of that ferocity. The fire was going at 100 kilometres horizontally and didn't stop. Everything was ablaze. Even the solar panels that supplied all the power to the fully sustainable house were ripped off the roof of the shed and thrown 50 metres.

Gavin lost pretty well everything in the house. There was little to be found as they sorted through the debris after the fire. Gavin only recovered an undamaged Wedgwood jug and a few ceramic tiles. In the shed they saved a few things – tools, a wheelbarrow, a table-tennis table and a partly melted plastic clock – its hands set at 6.47 pm. 'It's a real memento of the time the front passed through.'

Despite his brush with danger and thinking he was 'really lucky' to survive, Gavin had no hesitation in saying that, except in extreme circumstances, he 'would definitely defend again'. They had a fire plan, they implemented it and it had worked.

Gavin is now well on the way to completing the construction of a new house on the same site. The design includes a range of features geared to resisting fire, including a concrete slab, a steel frame, a roof with flame zone tested insulation, Hebel cement walls, double glazing and metal shutters over all windows. The new house has a safe area with additional fire resistant features and equipment.

After the fire, Gavin slept in his shed for several weeks before renting a property in Traralgon. He was pretty upset about the devastation to the bush, but staying on the property was a way of staying faithful to the land. Although he and Andrew own the property, they regard themselves as trustees of the land for future generations.

Within months of the blaze the main tree species on the property were showing signs of recovery with epicormic growth (shoots arising spontaneously from dormant buds following exposure to fire). Gavin said that an amazing array of plants emerged quite soon after the fire. He has established 16 photo points to monitor how the land recovers as well as a program to record fauna.



Brent and Sue Wilkerson

Sue Wilkerson's family did not realise the enormity they were facing with the fires.

They were completely oblivious to the looming danger approaching, until they received a call on Sue's mobile from her mother (their landline phone had been out for weeks). They leapt into action. Fortunately, Sue's father, Bob, and brother, Nick, arrived to help safeguard the house and property in case of fire. Nick was, coincidentally, visiting from Western Australia, as the family had attended a close family member's funeral the previous day.

After a huge effort clearing vegetation it became extremely still and the danger seemed to have dissipated, so Sue, Bob and Nick sat down to a relaxing drink and chat. However, Sue's husband, Brent, didn't relax and continued to pace and scope out the scene. All of a sudden the wind changed and 'whipped up'.

The situation seemed to have suddenly taken on a new level of gravity and the combination of the sun and nearby fires provided an eerie, orange glow. Bob urgently said that if he were taking the boys, Liam, 13, and Chase, 7, to his home, he would need to do so promptly. On leaving, Liam enquired if his friend Kyle could come back over later that afternoon when the fires had passed. Sue said her father and boys 'barely got out in time'.

As the three of them left and it was evident the fires were approaching, Chase commented to his grandfather that two of them in the vehicle were frightened. Bob asked who was the one that wasn't scared, and when Chase said it was Bob, Bob quantified that the three of them were equally frightened.

Sue, Brent (an American who had never had any experience of bushfires) and Nick got into fire-fighting gear they had prepared two years earlier.

Sue and Brent's eight weeks of CFA training gave them the confidence to stay and fight; something they never would have considered without it. A lack of vegetation (including the disposal of their once beloved Virginia creeper that afternoon – described by Bob as potential suicide) and other combustible material gave them hope that they could save their home.

They filled the bath and rubbish bins with water, put fire-fighting equipment in the house and placed wet towels along the base of the doors. When the ABC transmission ceased from nearby Mt Tassie at 6.45 pm, they knew the fire was close at hand. They heard the howling roar and saw the fire front coming their way from the north-west. When they saw a house about 150 metres

away from them literally explode into flames they knew the battle was nearly at hand.

Embers began raining in horizontally on three sides. They were 'pinging' against the house, hobby shed and workshop, with many lying against the bottom of the doors and window frames.

Brent and Nick fought the fire front with water from the bins. There were only two masks, so Sue stayed on the inside to provide the guys with buckets of water from the bath after the bins ran dry. As the house filled up with smoke Sue put a bandanna over her face, particularly her stinging eyes. She needed to soak the bandanna with water three times as it kept drying out so quickly.

The night was intense. It was dark and there was chaos. The burning trees and bush in the surrounding area took on the appearance of a 'Space Wars' type city glowing in the night.

At one point, Brent dropped a concrete water tank lid on his finger. It remains scarred with a loss of feeling to this day. His toenails turned black from wearing his boots for 36 hours straight. Sue said the trio was 'so into it' that they didn't ever feel like they would lose their lives. If it wasn't for the CFA training there may have been a different outcome.

After the ember attack and when the garden, grass, and spot fires around their concrete water tank had burned out, they deployed the fire-fighting pump and hoses, but never had to use them. They had totally defended their property with rubbish bins full of water and buckets, and when they felt they were reasonably in control they were left with half a bathtub full of water.

Strangely, at no time did they ever feel in any danger. They had their fire plan for action, they knew what they had to do and how and when to take evasive action. They just got on with it as if it was another day at the office.

When the situation at their house was under control, Brent turned his attention to the two nearest neighbours' homes. Surrounded by lots of pine mulch, their back gardens kept reigniting and required more than 100 buckets of water to get the fire under control at both places.

Brent and Sue live in a bush estate with 40 homes, each home on about 1 hectare. Unfortunately, there were only 20 homes left after the event. Four of seven unattended homes on their street burned to the ground. One household was plain lucky, while the other doused his house and grounds with about 10,000 litres of water, then left. Two more unattended homes on the next street, behind the Wilkerson's, burned down.

Opposite: Asphyxiating smoke as it approaches Red Hill Rd.

One of these lit up four hours after the front went through. Brent was able to check their two immediate neighbours' places and douse small spot fires for them, but he couldn't be everywhere, and is sad that other properties burned. He is so thankful that there was no loss of life in their estate.

Brent and Sue lost a hobby shed and a garden equipment shed, and watched gas bottles vent 'like dragon's breath' as their cedar hobby shed erupted like 'fireworks' going off. The following morning's daylight heralded utter destruction all around. In addition to the sheds, Sue and Brent lost a lot of fencing, their water infrastructure and tank, and garden. They also lost electric power.

A very difficult element to deal with in the following days was discovering they were caught inside a crime scene and unable to leave for four days. It was extremely difficult to obtain food, water, tools, petrol for their generators and general supplies due to the police roadblocks. However, thanks to friends living outside of the 'crime scene' the supplies were obtained by meeting at the roadblock. Their children couldn't return for eight days as there was no electricity or water available. Sue and Brent felt it was much better for them to be at a stable location away from the confusion.

While Sue knows she is lucky to have saved her house, she feels guilty mourning the loss of her garden. 'We're the lucky ones; lucky but unlucky.' The event changed her outlook a lot and that is something she hopes she can retain. Watching television has stopped being significant; as have things she used to worry about. 'Before the fire I remember feeling quite annoyed that my husband accidentally broke my peg basket!'

Throughout the ordeal, their dog, Flash, was kept in the bathroom for his safety. Afterwards, he refused to go into his kennel for six weeks, sleeping outside the front door until a piece of his old blanket was found. 'His world wasn't the same either.'

Every day, as Sue leaves her property, she sees the charred remains of four houses in her street that totally burned to the ground, and says she is fortunate not to see that view from her windows. An avid walker, it took six weeks before she could face walking up Red Hill Road again.

Brent said, 'Having a plan and the correct equipment, knowing how to use it, and CFA training worked for us, and of course I think a bit of luck didn't hurt either.'

Just weeks after the fires, three little leaves appeared on Sue's bonsai, which had appeared to have died from the radiant heat. She considered this as a definite symbol of regrowth and regeneration, and better things to come.



Sue Williams

Sue Williams managed to laugh when she realised she'd saved 11 cakes of soap. That was after she found out fire had destroyed her home.

She said her house was just a house, 'just bricks and mortar' – it's losing the garden that upsets her more. She'd put years of work into it.

Managing to find another light moment, Sue said she'd only just mopped the floors before the fires.

She received a warning about the fire from a neighbour, but had lived there long enough to know that any smoke was not good.

Word was that if the wind changed, fire would be upon them within 20 minutes. Sue said nobody phoned her in that time, but she didn't think to ring people either. 'You just get into doing mode.'

Sue turned on the radio and only heard one thing about Calligee all day – that was a report that there could be an ember attack if the wind changed.

About an hour later, as she was packing her car to leave, a friend called in to see if Sue was okay.

Above: Burnt orange sky as seen from nearby towns.

Sue had lived there 30 years. 'I always said I would get the kids, animals, photos and get the hell out. I was insured, could build again – it's only items. I was so bloody glad I wasn't there. I know some stuff can be sentimental – from kids or parents. I had time to pack some of those things.'

Sue managed to get her dog and one cat in, but couldn't find the other cat. 'Even after all that I remember hoping she would turn up.'

While it was hard to leave, 'I was not about to lose my life over my cat's life or items in my house – it's not worth it.'

Sue was pleased to have taken her hard drive and photos in her mother's glory box. Her son, James, daughter, Kim, and Kim's fiancée, Ross, brought vehicles to help.

Sue said she didn't ever think her house would burn and it was hard to think on the spot about what to save past the animals, computer and photos.

'All the reports said it was still blowing the opposite way. I never thought my house was in danger.' When they suddenly saw a whirlwind ripping around them in all directions they decided that was the cue to go.

Sue said there was no sense in staying if you could get caught. Discovering a neighbour had died at the bottom of her driveway was sobering. 'That could have been me.'

She threw things in the car and had to laugh when she got to her daughter's place and discovered she'd saved 11 cakes of soap. 'At least we would be clean while we were staying.'

James wanted to go back to help his girlfriend's family with their horses. Luckily their place survived the fires.

As they left, the firestorm was creating its own weather. The fire hit their property from different angles and Sue is aware how easily it would have been for them to get caught.

Despite losing her home, Sue has tried to remain positive and was looking forward to the birth of her fifth grandchild.

She wasn't comfortable in her temporary accommodation. She felt like she was in neutral, just biding time. The lack of garden made her feel hemmed in and she was looking forward to starting to rebuild.

When she returned to her property several days after the fire, it was like a holocaust. Sue wasn't so much sad, but more 'absolutely in awe of what a fire can do'.

She was upset her orchids were totally gone. Some ceramic pots survived though most had disintegrated into nothing. Amazingly, one fence was still standing.

Somehow in the hideousness of it all, there was beauty in her burned trees – apples and pears had literally baked on the branches and looked amazing.

She's grateful she got her kids out and that she had insurance. She has many memories and is lucky to have saved her photos.

A small amount of kitchenware was salvaged along with bits of pottery. Sue found a pool of aluminium from the pressure cooker.

She saved her son's boxes of 'stuff', but he would have been happy not to have to sort through them!

The generosity of people was something she couldn't comprehend and it regularly brought her to tears. 'People have gone into their cupboards and given private, personal items. I never cried over the fire but I cried over that.'

Sue said she was the first person to buy land on Old Calligee Road 31 years ago. She said you buy in the area knowing the risks.

No matter what the circumstances, she would still leave. 'It wouldn't matter if I had a mansion and antique furniture. It's just not worth the risk to human life.'

a match in hand

A match in hand ... the sparks they light,
It's daytime though it looks like night,
The fires big, the fires bright,
Fire fighters working hard to fight.

The smoke is thick and very black,
The fires burning up the track,
Fires destroying what's in its way,
Some people won't survive this day.

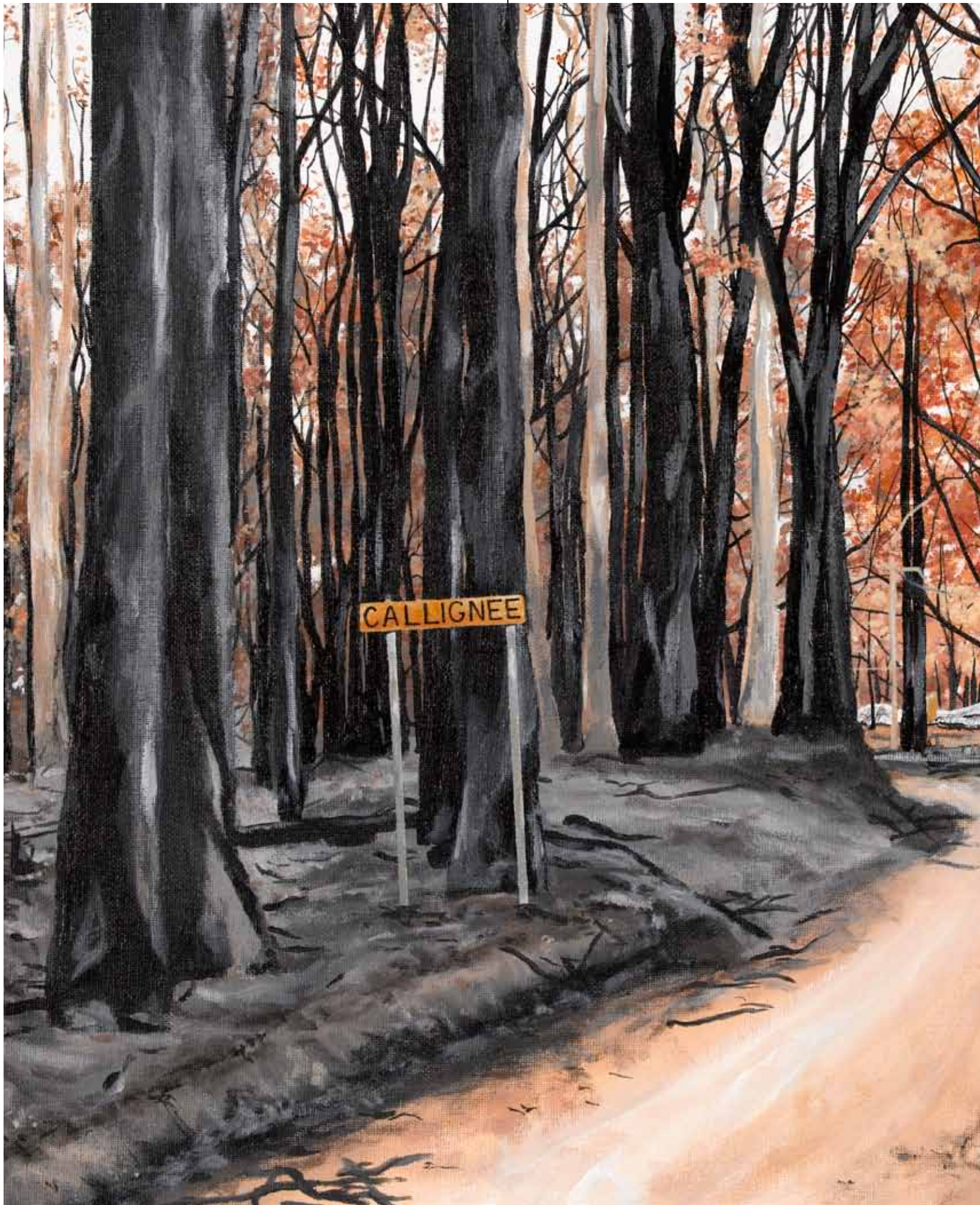
Homes, lands and possessions burn,
Animals, loved ones and forests in turn,
Ash is landing everywhere,
Embers are flying through the air.

Choppers flying over-head,
Dropping water as the fire fed,
The fire is coming close to our homes,
The wind changes and on the fire roams.

The match is struck ... it's all alight,
It's daytime though it looks like night,
The fire is bigger and much more bright,
Fire fighters working hard to fight.

*Ashleigh-Paige Harrison
Traralgon South - Feb, 2009*

out of
the ashes





Above: Regeneration begins.

Fire Captain Eric **Bumpstead**

As a result of his own experiences from Ash Wednesday Fire Captain Eric Bumpstead felt compelled to help our community in the wake of the Black Saturday bushfires.

It's a dodgy knee that keeps Eric from being amongst the fire action. He'd still be out fighting fires if he could – even at age 76.

A knee replacement sidelined him four years ago – but fire fighting is still in the blood.

Eric remembers Ash Wednesday only too well. Two fire crews in his area were engulfed in flames. It's something that has been imprinted for life.

Ash Wednesday changed lives forever. People refer to events as being pre- or post the fires, which, up until recently, were Victoria's worst.

He was alerted to the Ash Wednesday fires by his wife, Joyce. In those days, telephones had a special ring tone if there was a fire. She'd driven the car into the orchard, tooting until Eric appeared from a row of trees.

Eric is well aware that he was lucky to escape with his life when the two crews in his area were caught out. The fire passed over

where he was and the wind changed. He was lucky to have shelter as the fire roared over the top of their refuge.

It wasn't until the next morning he discovered tragedy had struck and considers himself lucky to not be the person who discovered the unlucky crews. He'd had an uneasy feeling about the direction the two crews had gone and had set off in search of them.

His search was abandoned after his vehicle became tangled in telephone lines. It was on that same track that the bodies were found.

Despite the tragedy, his members felt an obligation to the community to keep on going. 'They were looking to us for support.'

Black Saturday brought a lot of memories back.

He said that in the time of Ash Wednesday, there was also an element of guilt felt by many who had not lost their homes.

'People don't know the enormity of losing a home. You can build a new house, but you can never rebuild the same feeling', Eric says.



CWA

Lipstick, shampoo and nail clippers are just some of the items that filled more than 100 hampers that were brought to the Traralgon South Relief Centre by the Upper Beaconsfield CWA, Woorinyan Branch.

Fourteen members of the CWA brought the hampers in buckets and laundry baskets. All of the items were donated. They included items such as nail polish, razors, shaving cream, hair accessories, tea towels, towels, gloves, sanitary items, toothpaste and toothbrushes.

Many of the women had been through the recovery phase themselves and knew what families would need. They also provided packs for babies and small children, and food for pets.

They obtained all the items by handing out lists outside the supermarket and asking people to buy one item on the list. Many bought several items and some people bought everything on the list. In one day they filled 15 shopping trolleys with donated goods and received even more on the second day. They collected goods worth more than \$15,000.

The journey proved quite an emotional one for many of them as they visited fire-ravaged areas.



Opposite top: Stitch 'n chat – a work in progress.

Above: One of the hundreds of quilts lovingly donated to members from our community.

Left: Children enjoying themselves at the 2009 Christmas event.



Ange Gordon

When Ange Gordon became the Chair of the Traralgon South and District Community Recovery Committee (CRC), she had no idea what she was getting herself into. It soon became a journey filled with challenges, rewards and the formation of friendships with some of the most amazing people she's ever met, within and beyond her community.

Ange, her husband, Chris, and their daughter's, Tahlia, 12, Shenae, 9, and Elyse, 6, evacuated around 2 pm, soon after the fire began. Ange asked her three daughters to pack a suitcase each with whatever they thought they would need. For Elyse, 'that included a bag of second-hand school uniforms, about to be handed down to another family; a bag of old shoes; and the door handle off her bedroom door!'

Their first stop was Won Wron where Chris's parents live. Ange and the girls left Chris to help his parents, who were busily getting their property ready for the fire and looking very distressed and exhausted. Ange took the girls to Yarram, but this too was soon under ember attack, and the girls, feeling uncomfortable, asked if they could head for Inverloch. As they were leaving Yarram a paddock and fence line were on fire and

Above: Locals gathering together in Traralgon South to pack and distribute supplies to those in need.

the fire was heading straight for the highway. The girls screamed as they saw the flames, but they were quickly through and, luckily, that was the last of the flames for Ange and the girls.

On Monday, Ange left the girls with her mother at Mirboo North and returned to Traralgon South. Her mother's property had been the containment line of the Delburn fire, which had been burning for a week. The bush was still burning, but was under constant surveillance and relatively safe by that stage. Ange's sister had also been affected the week before, as she lives in Boolarra and had evacuated to Ange's house with her family and a friend's son. They also had three dogs living with them during that oppressive week. Two dogs were elderly and needed to be kept inside due to the extreme conditions. 'I think most people were exhausted before the fire even existed!'

On returning to the township Ange could see that they had been spared, however, the immediate vicinity had not been so fortunate. The army had set up base camp across the road from Ange's house, next to the CFA station. 'It was an eerie feeling.' Ange felt a real need to see her friends and make sure they were all okay.

Recovery began almost immediately after the fire. This occurred within the local community and was initially amongst the fire survivors themselves. Within the space of one day the locals had already moved one family into the only vacant house in the township. It was amazing that within one small township they had managed to fully furnish a house for a family of five. 'The new neighbour had even parted with her kettle without realising that she now did not have one!' The owners of the property had recently sold, however, they quickly terminated the contract, so the new tenants would have somewhere to live. 'This was an incredible act of selflessness.'

A brand new spec home in Traralgon had also been offered to this family. They didn't need it, but Ange knew who did. Her very close friend had just lost everything, so she, her terminally ill husband and twin girls were living with an elderly couple in Morwell. They desperately needed their own space.

The following day the family had a fully furnished, brand new house to live in. Once again Ange was witnessing the remarkable strength, determination and care, which can evolve so quickly from such tragic circumstances.

Tahlia also returned to school on Tuesday. Due to the state of turmoil left by the fires, Traralgon South Primary School didn't reopen straight away, so Shenae and Elyse didn't return to school for a week. After dropping Tahlia and her friend Megan at their school in Traralgon, Ange and Fiona (Megan's mum) decided to drop into the Traralgon branch of the Salvation Army, located next door to the school. Ange had never been to the Salvos before and to this day she doesn't know why she decided to drop in, but what a blessing it was that they did.

'Hi, we're Ange and Fiona from Traralgon South', she said.

'Thank God you are here', was the reply. 'We have plenty of supplies, but we have no way into the area as the roads are blocked, except to locals.'

The Salvos filled Ange's car with green shopping bags full of supplies – water, long-life milk, tea bags, cereal, soap, gloves – to name a few. Ange returned to Traralgon South and soon decided these items were of no use in her car, so she drove up Red Hill Road. The houses that were left standing (about one half were destroyed on this road alone) were her target. Nearly all of the residents said the same thing – 'I am okay, but you can give this to my neighbour'. Ange replied that there was plenty more and they would receive some too. She'd then leave the bag and walk away.

That afternoon they loaded two cars and the next morning they sent in a four-wheel drive with a horse float attached. 'It was an amazing sight to see nearly every child and adult within the township packing bags ready for distribution.' They had a large map of the area and began allocating vehicles to different roads. The locals were the only vehicles on the road except for SP AusNet, Telstra, emergency services and the army. The roads were considered unsafe for any government workers to travel on, so aid was up to the locals. Ange believes the army needs more flexibility in these types of disasters, as they were there for retrieving the deceased – not for assisting the living.

This process continued for the remainder of the week during which time they had moved a relief centre from a spare room in Traralgon South Primary School to the church, then briefly to the Traralgon South Community Hall and, finally, to the Callignee and Traralgon South Cricket and Badminton Clubs.

From Wednesday, some vehicles had access to the township of Traralgon South, but no further. Many trucks had begun to arrive with goods. They needed somewhere to store the goods, so the double badminton courts became the Traralgon South Relief Centre, which they continued to operate until December 2009.

During that first week Ange doesn't think that anyone within the township was back at their usual job, so they had many hands of support. They knew this wouldn't last, so they had to encourage the traumatised members of the community to travel into Traralgon South to source their aid. 'This was great as many people did not feel capable or comfortable with venturing into Traralgon. It was a very unpleasant experience for many as it was apocalyptic in our community, but things seemed so "normal" in Traralgon. This experience was very normal for many locals for several weeks after the fire.'

Whilst they were packing bags for delivery, a man picked Ange out of the crowd and said, 'You seem to know what is going on. I'm from Westpac, what do you need?'

Ange replied, 'I don't know what's going on any more than the next person, however, there are some things that we need.' Ange rattled off a list! She asked for toilet and shower facilities to be located at Callignee, Koornalla and Traralgon South. These were soon sourced and put in place. A laundry was also placed in Traralgon South.

She also asked for someone to come and sit in a corner and collect some stories. There were some amazing stories of survival surfacing and Ange could see that what they were experiencing was life changing for the entire community. This was their history in the making and she felt it needed to be recorded – good or bad. Despite the fact that it can be gruelling at the time, even years after the event, Ange believed that telling their story could be a therapeutic exercise for many. Two weeks later Melina made contact and began her own journey of collecting stories.

The relief centre was about 100 metres away from the Community Hall where all of the government officials were initially located. Agencies such as the Latrobe City Council, Centrelink, Telstra, insurance companies and banks were all located in the hall. This was good as people could access grants and other service providers locally.

The relief centre was an experience in itself, providing items such as clothing, manchester, food, tools, toiletries, furniture, pet supplies, massage, household goods, internet access and, most importantly, a local, friendly face to have a chat with or a shoulder to cry on. For many months the Salvos provided lunches from the cricket club kitchen. This was a great effort as the conditions were nothing short of appalling. 'In fact, the local health inspector wanted to close the facility, but he knew he would be 'lynched' if he did!' It was definitely a case where bureaucracy needed to be overlooked for the short term, because there was a much greater need at hand.

The relief centre operated very smoothly because they had a great working relationship with the Salvos. Daily calls were made to Naomi or Bruce as to what goods were needed and a delivery would soon follow. Water was nearly always on the list. 'At one point in time we had 18,000 eggs delivered, which we managed to disperse effectively!'

As time elapsed they also linked in with the aid centre based in Melbourne. Many companies and individuals also contributed goods to the relief centre. Loy Yang Power, Blackwoods, Leightons, Rotary, Lions, Our Kind of Country and Timber Communities Tasmania to name a few. Within a few months, organisations such as St Vincent de Paul, Anglicare, Rotary, Lions and the Salvation Army were operating from the Traralgon South base, which was imperative for the recovery process. They also had a great relationship with all of these agencies. Ange is 'sure that all of their resources were stretched to the limit, both physically and emotionally'.

Politicians and footballers would often arrive unannounced or with little notice. One day everyone was busy working away when suddenly there seemed to be hundreds of children. Ange looked over to the tennis courts and thought to herself, 'I'm really glad that dad has shown some initiative and is entertaining the kids'. Moments later she was introduced to Lauren – Gary's partner. Ange said, 'Hi, who is Gary?' The person who introduced them smiled, rolled his eyes and walked away. A minute later one of the locals gave Ange a footy signed by Gary Ablett Jnr!



Above: Ange and a local CFA representative talking on ABC radio with the Strezelecki Stringbusters providing live entertainment.

The Hawthorn Football Club were also a great support. They arrived on several occasions and completed tasks such as fencing, visiting the school children, attending the local cricket training, running football clinics and some even attended memorial services. At no time did the media attend, which was great as it showed that the visits were genuine and not publicity based.

Politicians at every level, including the Prime Minister, visited the community during the first six months. 'These visits were appreciated by many.'

One day, Premier Brumby was visiting and to this day he does not realise just how close he came to an encounter with one of the locals, who had been relaxing at the relief centre with a 'hot pink' bra attached to his very hairy chest! He had left a few minutes before the Premier's arrival. Ange had been in a dilemma as to whether she should inform the local of the impending visitor, so she decided to let nature make the call!

Tasmania has been an integral part of the community's recovery. Fencing was one of the biggest priorities and, unfortunately, one that government wasn't able to assist with. Members from Tasmania Rotary and Timber Communities Tasmania came to help.

Weekly crews arrived via the Spirit of Tasmania, which provided free sailing both ways. They were initially accommodated at the Cowwarr Pub, then Benn and Robyn Frederiksen's (the fencing coordinator's property), and finally, Rotary rented a house in Traralgon. Not only did they fence, but they brought loads of fresh Tasmanian produce, tulip bulbs, plants, tools, clothes horses and whatever else was needed. Sometimes the 'cups of tea' ladies would also come. These ladies would visit the locals and check on their wellbeing. On many occasions it was just a listening ear that was needed.

The fencers worked very hard. Terrain was steep and the conditions were often testing – either very hot with Jumping Jack ants, European wasps and flies to contend with, or freezing cold with strong gusty winds.



Right: Islander street youth from Dandenong entertaining the local school children.



Left: Enjoyment as the bongo drums and dancing overwhelm the children.

Ange remembers meeting two brothers from Huonville, who came to help at their father's request, because Victorians had come to his aid after the 1969 Tasmanian fires. They arrived off the Spirit of Tasmania in their F100 truck, as they could not both fit in a standard four-wheel drive. 'For breakfast they had a loaf of bread each, however, they worked to match their food intake!' Ange went to visit them one day to thank them for working on her friend's property. They were pulling out a burnt, barbed fence line with their bare hands whilst tears welled in their eyes as they thought of her friend's tragic situation.

Fencing volunteers also came from South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and other parts of Victoria. A group of six retired locals from Traralgon fenced from the beginning to the end of the fencing process.

Some volunteers lived in tents and caravans next to the relief centre. 'This was a huge commitment.' They had Ken and Jen from Queensland for several months and the week they left, Ian and Helen arrived from Western Australia and also stayed for several months. John from Somerville almost became a 'local'.

Boundary fencing took almost two years to complete, with the final stages being completed via the support of a GippsTAFE program, which was funded by the Indonesian Government.

In May, a special member from the Tasmanian Rotary visited. Her name was Marian Lerner and she was offering over 500 nights of free accommodation in the Port Arthur area. She had experienced trauma and tragedy in her own life with the Port Arthur experience, and she knew that a huge milestone in her personal recovery was being able to physically get away from her environment about six months after the event. She was able to sign up families for holidays from June to August. The guests were treated like royalty and were given a basket of goodies, free entrance into Port Arthur, free adventure boat rides around the peninsula (a highlight for many) and discounted meals.

Marian would personally meet every family and made a point of having at least one meal with them. She would also escort them to local Rotary dinners. Many people returned from these holidays very refreshed and with a positive outlook on the journey ahead. At Christmas, Marian returned with her grandson and a truck full of artwork from Rotarians in Tasmania. 'Once again we were on the receiving end of their generosity.'

Recovery during the first twelve months was certainly aided by the presence of the relief centre and its hard working volunteers. Weekend art classes were offered by Hazel and Miranda and a variety of pieces were produced, including painted teapots and other crockery, 'which we had an abundance of at the relief centre'. These were collected and displayed at an Art Relief exhibition. Artists could reclaim their work after the exhibition and some items were auctioned off or sold – the profits going back into the community.

Stitch and Chat is a craft group, which was initially established at the relief centre. This group has been a huge success and is still going strong two-and-a-quarter years later. A quilting exhibition was held and all locals received quilts.

Many events have occurred since the fires. Some of these include pamper days and evenings, art relief, community days, rock nights, Greg Champion, comedy nights, Tim Cope – a motivational speaker who addressed the community and a group of approximately 450 students – Rob Gordon, Christmas, Christmas in July, retreats for many – including a cruise from Melbourne to Adelaide for 56 women – YMCA holiday programs, a student exchange with Merrimac Primary School in Queensland and two army cadet weekends.

During the cadet weekends the cadets worked very hard on labour intensive duties, such as cleaning, gardening, stacking firewood, clearing fence lines, piling up burnt debris and moving mulch.

The Christmas in July event occurred six months after the fires and was probably the most rewarding of all. Around 500 people were fed and entertained with the assistance of Westpac staff; Melina, Dave and volunteers from m.a.d.woman; Salvation Army; St Vincent de Paul; Koko the Clown; Muz and Mrs Jones;

a local DJ; Pauline and Russell Taylor; and Chaci's cafe. Three hundred and fifty adults were fed a traditional Christmas dinner in a marquee set up on the local cricket ground with portable patio heaters attempting to provide the warmth! The kids were fed party food in the local hall and were entertained by Koko the Clown, face painters, a disco and movies to complete the evening. Prior to this evening many locals had not decided if they were returning to their land, however, after catching up with many neighbours and friendly faces, the decision to return was made for them.

Networking amongst different organisations was a positive and very productive process. An example of this was when the local Westpac branch manager, Mike, drove a removal truck hired by the Salvation Army and furnished a house for a family with a brand new baby and teenage son. Mike also used the truck to collect and deliver hay. 'We never knew whether Mike would arrive wearing his suit or his removalist clothes!'

The Community Hub was strategically placed next to the relief centre. This was a one-stop shop for support from agencies, such as Centrelink and the Department of Human Services. Any issues concerning the residents could be either addressed here or the appropriate contact details given. The concept of Hubs is great and they work because they enable these agencies to work together with less bureaucratic red tape. An individual would only have to explain their circumstances once. This could often be very harrowing for all involved, so reducing the number of these types of conversations was a positive and constructive process. These guys were at the 'coal face' and became very much integrated within the community. They understood the

Right: The temporary shower and toilet facility at Callignee. A haven for tired bodies at the end of a dirty, dusty days work!



complexity of recovery and the importance of all agencies working together, including government and non-government, to achieve the same outcome, which was recovery of both individuals and the community as a whole. John and Trevor (from the Hub) are great guys and Ange had many discussions about several different issues with them. Many words of great advice were given to Ange, as she had by now found herself in the new role of Chair of the Traralgon South and District CRC.

A tool library was established on the other side of the Hub. Two shipping containers full of tools were available to anyone within the community and beyond, including towns or districts such as Boolarra, Yinnar, Hazelwood, Jeeralang and Gormandale. The tools included items such as wood splitters, and power and agricultural tools. The most popular included the wood splitters, rotary hoe, mowers, pole saw, whipper-snippers and general hand tools. These tools were provided by Lions, Valley Christian Centre, Habitat for Humanity Victoria, St. Michael's Church in Traralgon and Cafe Jett from the Mornington Peninsula. A fencing trailer was also provided by Samaritan's Purse.

The tool library was initially operated via the Hub and eventually transitioned into the care of six local volunteers when the Hub closed. The tool library is still active and will soon transition into the care of the new Traralgon South Community Shed.

Ange said that 'the role of Chair of the Traralgon South and District Community Recovery Committee has been challenging at times, however, overall it has been a very rewarding and worthwhile experience. I really had no idea what I was getting myself into!'

The CRC was established soon after the fires. The main purpose of this committee was to create a link between local government and other government and non-government agencies. They were tasked with the job of identifying and prioritising all of the projects associated with community recovery. A recovery action plan or 'RAP' was produced. This included items, such as the upgrade of the cricket club kitchen (to allow for community meals), buildings, health and wellbeing activities, economics, wildlife, memorials, weed control, fire preparedness, walking tracks (as safer routes for children and other pedestrians) and many more. 'In all there were 89 different tasks identified!'

VBRR (Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority) was established to assist the communities with the recovery process. VBRR initially led by Christine Nixon (Chair) and Ben Hubbard (CEO) has been a pivotal authority in aiding recovery. From the top down, the workers from VBRR had regular exposure to all fire affected communities. They listened to the needs of individual communities and followed through to assist in any way they could. Cath Peterson was the VBRR Community Development Officer and she worked very hard and diligently to support the community.

Some of the projects were funded by the VBAF (Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund) panel whilst others were not and had to be sourced from other places. Many hours of 'behind the scenes' work went into this process. A great deal of knowledge of 'where to go' was also required, including many grant applications.



Left: "Rotary lending a helping hand."

Working with local government has been a very important relationship. 'Personally I have had a positive experience', said Ange. She especially appreciated working alongside Deb Brown from Latrobe City Council and Russell Northe, the local member of parliament. Other individuals within the community may disagree or have had their own challenging moments, but Ange found that taking a moment to look at the big picture allowed her to see that people are just trying to do their job.

The first twelve months after the fires were very 'hands on', dealing with many distressing and challenging, yet rewarding situations. It was a very demanding time, both physically and emotionally, which was endured by many, including the fire affected and the volunteers. 'A good sense of humour and positive outlook is imperative to survival at these times of crisis!'

Ange said that 'the second year has brought its own challenges' – a steep learning curve in dealing with bureaucracy whilst trying to implement some of the projects. An increase in chronic health problems began to surface 15–18 months after the fires and is continuing to date. This has added another dimension to people's lives and their recovery process. Ange said, 'It is humbling to observe the resilience of some of our residents'. They have endured life-changing experiences on two or even three occasions in a relatively short period of time. 'Some people may not experience any of these in a life time!'

Ange has also found herself working on recovery beyond her community. A document, 'Lessons Learned from Victoria' has been written and was published in 2009. This is a document of advice from one community recovery committee to another. It is broadly focused and can, hopefully, be useful in assisting any disaster-affected community in the future.

Ange says it has been a life changing experience for many and hopefully these people can continue to focus on the positives from their own experience. 'We must always appreciate just how lucky we are to live in a country like Australia, especially when tragedy strikes.'

Ange is 'proud of the resilience, determination and care, which has come to the surface in our time of need from within the heart of our community'. Thousands of hours have been volunteered by many individuals and organisations to assist the community. Ange is sure that this is greatly appreciated and hopes it will never be forgotten. 'One day we may be able to pass this forward!'

Reflecting back over the past two-and-a-quarter years, Ange says that there has 'never been a dull moment!' She has been constantly overwhelmed by the generosity and support offered from across the country. She has 'personally met and developed friendships with some of the most amazing, courageous, selfless, resilient, caring and resourceful individuals from within and beyond our immediate community.' Her description of these individuals is one that many people, within and beyond the community, would also use to describe Ange.



Rob **Gordon** DHS

When disaster strikes, the aftermath is not like a Hollywood movie where attractive people live happily ever after.

Those were the words of Clinical Psychologist Rob Gordon, who was giving emotional survival tips and techniques to Black Saturday bushfire survivors in the Traralgon South district.

He was well placed to provide advice – this was the 25th major disaster in which he'd been involved in, as well as a raft of smaller incidents.

In 1983 he was a psychologist at The Royal Children's Hospital and he also worked in the Macedon area after Ash Wednesday. He provided support after the Queen Street shooting and Maryborough fires, taking with him vast experience from one event to another.

He has learnt about social dimensions and what is normal after an abnormal event. Disasters have a community-wide impact.

He says people can take their relationship for granted under normal conditions, but when the danger comes, the survival mechanism switches on.

Above: These ferns were a lovely sight for sore eyes!

'Adrenaline makes us completely ready for survival. It increases our capacity for something at the expense of others. It shuts down what you don't need. You focus on the threat and ignore everything else.'

He cited examples of some people not feeling hot while fighting fires – they shut down their emotions, becoming 'survival units'.

However, adrenaline uses up people's reserves after eight days. People hit an abnormal state of 'human arousal'. The adrenaline allows 'feedback systems' to be bypassed and shut down feelings of tiredness, pain and emotion. This remains as long as the person is in survival mode.

Rob said that the longer you stay in this mode, the more emotionally draining it is on your psychological resources. Memory, concentration and attention are all reduced.

People forget recreation and enjoying themselves – 'they just plod away'. Privacy and intimacy need to be recreated.

The next stage is one where cortisol kicks in. 'Long term stress in this state affects many functions in the body and uses up what is needed, causing problems in other areas, such as using up calcium, resulting in osteoporosis.'

High blood pressure is another result of continuing stress and is bad for the kidneys if it continues for too long. You lose awareness and it can produce a physical breakdown after a few years.

Some people completely neglect things that they later can't rebuild. They may choose to focus on a house versus a relationship. They need to make strategic decisions, but that's the opposite of what happens in an adrenaline-fuelled frame of mind. Many experience 'cognitive disruption' where they can't think clearly or solve problems.

Some victims feel despair or anger. He talked of 'emotional overload', 'action impotence' and an overwhelming response that they 'can't cope with problems'.

'The longer they stay in [that state] they lose that reference point about what reality is', Rob said. These effects can accumulate over time, particularly if people aren't sleeping well.

He's seen other disaster situations and is concerned that only half of those affected access counselling or 'psychological first aid'. Many issues then follow such as post-traumatic stress, substance abuse and depression.

There are simple activities people can do to help themselves. Breathing consciously and deeply helps, as does yoga to relax the sympathetic nervous system.

Low impact physical exercise, like long walks and swimming chew up excess adrenaline, and bathing or a hot shower can help.

'Nothing works for everybody, but everything works for someone', he said. People need to give themselves time to recover.

He said the recovery of the community was a marathon, not a 100 metre sprint.



Michael Harper

The people of Traralgon South never knew if Westpac bank manager, Mike Harper, would turn up to see them in his suit or his casual clothes.

They got so used to seeing him cart hay and help out with recovery efforts in his blundstones, that it was an unfamiliar sight to see him wearing a tie and suit at the bank in the coming months.

Mike had been out paying for a family holiday to the United States when he saw smoke. He thought 'that's not good', but didn't think too much of it all at that stage.

Arriving home about 5 pm, his wife Robyn told him to 'look at the moon'.

'I said, "That's not the moon, that's the sun hidden behind the smoke in Glengarry", 8 kilometres on the other side of Traralgon.'

Above: From left; Ric, Ken and Mike from Westpac presenting Lindsay Swift (far right) with the raffle prize at the 2009 Christmas in July event.

Unsure what to make of it, he continued with his plans for the evening – attending a buck's party for staff member Scott.

When he arrived, Scott was leaving, telling party goers that he was heading to Traralgon South to help defend a house. Unsure if he would be returning, Mike and others waited about an hour and a half. The mood was sombre.

The group was outside, and as it started to rain, Mike realised it was actually raining black soot onto his white shirt. The windows of the house were also black with soot.

Scott didn't return, so people went home. It would have been a big night. It was never rescheduled.

Mike recalls the intensity – being amazed that the fire could cause 'black rain' that far away.

News was sparse, but he knew the fires were bad from ABC radio reports. The full extent would not be revealed until the next

day. Mike went to bed at 3 am. Not having experienced anything like these fires before, he didn't know what to expect.

He woke up at about 7 am, finding a lot of burnt leaves outside. He checked the CFA website, stayed home and packed belongings 'just in case'.

The TV didn't work so he listened to the radio, spending the day cleaning up outside until he received a phone call at 4.30. It was his former boss from Bendigo asking if Mike could open his Westpac branch. By 5 pm he'd notified staff and was open for business.

He headed for the emergency relief centre in Traralgon to let the Department of Human Services know they were open.

'I cashed twelve emergency relief cheques for \$1,200 each. It was the hardest day, to see the emotional state of people. People were just numb. People were telling stories and breaking down.'

It was incredibly hard for Mike and his team. They extended opening hours until 6 pm each night for the first week. His memories of it are a blur.

'Mainly people were coming in cashing cheques. The transactions were taking ages. Everyone was talking to each other. There were no queues, just a milling of people.'

A counsellor was brought in for staff on Wednesday. Emotions were raw everywhere, and the anguish of customers was starting to take its toll.

Mike will never forget the distress of one customer who learned of the horrifying fate of her family from another customer while she was in the queue. 'She was distraught. We wouldn't let her leave until she spoke to a counsellor.'

There were times Mike found it really tough, such as when people broke down, like a customer aged over 60. 'There is only so much you can hear before you get emotional yourself.' In the beginning, bushfires would be shown on television and Mike would find himself crying.

On Wednesday the relief centre opened and on Thursday Mike and staff headed there with \$100,000 cash in a box, opening a makeshift bank. While they had a security guard in tow, there was never any fear of the money going missing. 'There were more police than I had ever seen in my life. Nothing would have happened', Mike said.

'The arrangement became that DHS staff and The Salvos were writing cheques at one end of the table and we were cashing them at the other. Many people had no ID but others in the community could vouch for them.'

Westpac staff were out there every day while Melbourne staff volunteered to run the Traralgon branch. They were open seven days a week with extended hours, working late to process paperwork at the end of each day.

However, within a few days they realised residents needed more than cash, so they started 'pitching in'.

Given that many people had lost everything, Mike said it felt inappropriate to wear his full uniform and so he changed his uniform to a black shirt and jeans. He did his bank duties interspersed with helping people.

'I had an opportunity to help so I did.'

Mike got a van from Hertz and added 'courier' to his job title, for both residents and The Salvation Army. He carted hay, helped unload trucks and did odd jobs as well as his banking duties. He would leave home at 7 am and wouldn't get back until 8 pm.

Westpac had also given him a budget, which meant he was able to fund games and DVDs for kids while their parents were trying to get necessities sorted. They also donated 25 laptops, which Mike presented to local school children.

It completely changed Mike's relationship with the community. Dealings were no longer transactional – he formed friendships and people knew him by name.

Mike attended rebuilding committee meetings, and even used some annual leave to visit the community, often finding ways of helping people, such as buying boots for a young girl who'd lost everything.

For a long time after, he saw people as they struggled through the grant process. He no longer saw them as people in a queue, they became people Mike knew, who all had stories, many of which he now knew.

It was quite common, even months later, for people to break down. People were finding it pretty tough and Mike felt very attached to the region. He had been there for 12 months before the fires, but during and in the months following, he became fully part of the community. He reluctantly accepted a transfer to Bairnsdale months after the fires.

But one positive Mike was able to take with him was the memories of seeing the way everyone pulled together, exhibiting what he calls 'Aussie spirit'.

'When the chips are down, everyone gets in and helps.'



Marian Larner

The kindness of strangers after surviving Australia's Port Arthur massacre led Marian Larner on a journey to help more than 125 Black Saturday bushfire survivors.

Marian has experienced more than her fair share of trauma.

Not only did she survive the Port Arthur tragedy, but in 1967, with three children under five, she survived bushfires in Tasmania. Fire swept through the area, killing people in its wake. Trapped in an isolated area, Marian and her children were spared, but their ordeal was traumatic.

Marian recalls her husband, Roger, a forest ranger, leaving very early to fight fires. Before he left he told her to fill the car with 'baby stuff, food and essentials' and to sit under irrigation sprinklers at home. She said it was very frightening.

'He'd gone at 4 am, we had no communication and I did not see him until after midnight.'

Marian and the children, aged one, three and five, sat in the car listening to the radio as embers flew over them, but she's sure his advice saved their lives.

Above: Benn Fredrikson (back left), with one of the many Tasmanian fencing crews refuelling before another challenging afternoon ahead.

When she heard about the Black Saturday fires, her own bushfire experiences flooded back to her, as well as the terror of Port Arthur.

Marian recounts that on the day of Australia's worst shooting, the gunman, Martin Bryant, a former student she had taught to ride horses, came to her home looking for her.

She said her husband managed to steer him away from the house and at that stage they didn't know that he had already killed two people. They heard shooting not long after he had left.

When the horror unfolded, Marian took on survivor guilt and had issues for many months afterwards – 'you don't just get over things like that'.

She said that after six months, she, her daughter and her then four-year-old grandson, Jack, were offered a holiday in New South Wales. 'It was just so wonderful to have total strangers give you a hug and tell you they cared. The compassion from strangers gave us hope and belief in humanity and that was when our mental healing began.'

They were given a stack of vouchers and breakfast baskets and if they didn't want to, they didn't have to go out.

'It was the most amazing thing that complete strangers could have done for us, it was fantastic.'

Marian's Rotary Club of Tasman Peninsula planned to send money, but Marian wanted to do more. She knew that six months after the fires was when people's faith in humanity would be slowing down and people would need extra support.

With her daughter, her daughter's partner and a friend, she formed a community group and visited many holiday accommodation providers on the Tasman Peninsula.

They asked businesses to donate three to five nights of accommodation. 'Everyone was whole heartedly behind it', she said.

Next they went to businesses in search of vouchers and the generosity flowed. Each visitor was offered free passes on Tasman Island Cruises, free entry to historic sites and the Tasmanian Devil Park and other businesses organised breakfast baskets.

In all, holidays were created for 125 people to spend 500 bed nights in the area.

Marian personally met every couple and family when they arrived at their accommodation and greeted them with hugs. 'It really helped them having a human touch.'

While there was no pressure on people to talk about their experiences, many chose to, several even sharing their stories with the Tasman Rotary Club.

People were matched with holidays by President Chris Payne of the Hazelwood Rotary Club and the Traralgon South recovery team, 'who knew which people were falling apart and could really use a holiday. Many couldn't get their head around how a holiday would help them', Marian said.

She said removing people from where the tragedy happened helped the healing process start. 'People realise there is a life at the end of the tunnel.'

'For so many of them it was hard to see how the pain was ever going to end and there were many tears.'

Marian was particularly moved to have 'grown men cry on my shoulder when I offered them a holiday'.

Another project Marian undertook was collecting artworks from her artist friends in her art group and through Rotary clubs from all over Tasmania to give to people who had lost every thing. In a bus driven by her now 17-year-old grandson, Jack, they delivered 250 paintings through her 'Art From the Heart' program to give to people in the Traralgon region.

Marian visited devastated areas three times and regularly emails friends she has made. She said it was amazing to watch a positive transformation in people.

On her most recent visit, many people had very different outlooks and were moving forward. Being shown through their new houses was great.

She's proud that her Rotary group and Tasmanian Timber Communities sent over more than a dozen teams of people for a week at a time to rebuild fences. Her Tasman Rotary Club also raised \$2,500 in the local area, which the Tasmanian Government doubled before sending it to the Black Saturday Bush Fire Appeal.

While Marian thinks her contribution is a 'small offering in the scheme of things', she said it is the personal touch that matters.

'When people help one another there's lots of resilience being shown. People have been renamed as "survivors" not victims. Compassion in people is so important.'



Trevor McDonald

After giving fire safety advice to his brother in Marysville, Trevor McDonald lost contact with him. Hoping for the best, he was ‘freaking out’ until he spoke to him again 12 hours later.

Trevor, a CFA volunteer, was working in Alice Springs. He’d started following the weather because he knew it was bad and realised there would be problems on that day.

He’d been back in Gippsland two days after the Delburn fire – just four days before Black Saturday – for a funeral.

At 8 pm on Black Saturday, Trevor had a call from his brother, Graham, who was in Marysville. He said fire had just gone over and asked Trevor, ‘Are we doing the right thing?’

Trevor advised him to patrol and to keep it up. He then lost contact with him for 12 hours. Half an hour after he rang, Trevor heard, unofficially, that in Marysville, all but four houses were destroyed.

While he was freaking out, he knew that his brother was doing the right things and knew that he also had some safe shelter.

Above: The local Hub alongside the tool library. A place where many locals received support and assistance on many different levels. A huge part of our recovery must be attributed to the services which came from here.

As a CFA volunteer it was frustrating to be so isolated and to be unable to do anything. He tried calling Graham numerous times but didn’t get him. Graham’s wife, Leslie, and daughter, Shannon, 11, were with his brother.

Trevor felt a sense of panic; he needed to hear his brother’s voice to hear he was okay. When Graham finally called him at 9 am the next morning ‘it was a relief’.

Trevor’s next phone call was to his wife to let the family know that Graham was okay. He said that Graham had been in the SES and is an ambulance officer, but knowing Trevor was in the CFA, he’d turned to him for fire advice.

Trevor flew down on February 13 to work out of Yarra Glen and Healesville for three weeks. He went back to the Northern Territory (where he had been for 18 months) for three weeks and then asked to transfer home permanently. ‘I knew I could do more good here.’

He said his brother struggled to cope after the fire – he lost too many friends.

At Easter, Trevor arrived in Gippsland to work in the Traralgon South Community Service Hub. Being able to also go to Bairnsdale and to help Labertouche and Mirboo North with their recovery provided a great coping mechanism for him.

Trevor’s job has been supporting the community and delivering Commonwealth Government services. This has essentially been helping people connect with the right services – to help with their recovery – a one-stop shop.

It has helped the community by minimising the running around for people in trauma – they only need to tell their story once.

He has built relationships and trust with people, and the hub environment has meant the services have been supplied to suit individual people’s needs. This has included Trevor being quite mobile and going to people when needed.

People have been really unsettled and one of the hardest things for people to deal with during the recovery process has been the paperwork.

Trevor has only been home for two days a week, so it’s been hard living away from home and working a lot of hours. He’s worked a lot of nights and sometimes travelled up to 300 kilometres a day.

The positives have included watching houses spring up, making friends and building relationships, and watching the community rebirth as people emerge from ‘a fog’.

It will be a different community, but the sense of community will be brilliant. He’s watched it unfold.

One of the things he’s learned from this is that this hub-style of government support could be transposed to other communities.

He is full of praise for the Salvation Army, St Vinnies, Rotary and the Lions, who have just been amazing in the communities. ‘No matter where I have been, they have been there.’

Trevor feels part of the Traralgon South and District region and thinks he will always have a connection. ‘It’s a lovely community with lovely people.’

When he heard about the Black Saturday fires, Trevor felt somewhat helpless. He has a long history with the fire service and this is the first time he didn’t fight on the frontline – ‘I’ve always done something’.

This time, his focus was on the people and the aftermath, and some of Trevor’s most satisfying moments of the year were things that he did outside of his work to help the community.



Barry and Joan **Medwin**

Barry and Joan Medwin drew on their own experiences from Ash Wednesday to support the Traralgon South and district communities and help with the recovery process after the Black Saturday fires.

They also provide a story of hope. On 16 February 1983, their region lost 27 lives and more than 160 houses as flames ripped through in what is now known as Ash Wednesday.

Barry had intended to retire at 50 from his role as an engineer at Repco Research. He was at work when a colleague looked out a window and saw flames on the hills in the distance.

‘It was a really bad day and I knew the fire risk was high.’

Barry could see the flames burning in Upper Beaconsfield, where he lived. He asked his boss if he could leave early, jumped on his motorbike and rode home.

He passed fires burning on the way home and went to check on his wife Alison, 47, and daughter, Kerry, 17. He found them playing in the pool.

Above: Santa comes to town!

He checked their water pumps and moved their car so it was in an outwards-facing direction. After establishing that his family was okay and everything was ready in case of a fire, he called the fire brigade and offered his help as a volunteer.

It was his first experience with a major bushfire and he spent from 4.30 pm till nearly 1 am out with crews. When he finally returned, there was no sign of fire in the direction of his home until he got to within a kilometre of his house. Flames were raging and he had to ask to be allowed to return to his home.

When he got there, he found it burning, with his car sitting in the driveway, burnt out. The house was a smouldering ruin and there was no sign of his wife or daughter.

Barry looked in the car, but couldn’t see any sign of bodies. ‘I looked everywhere, the best I could, but I could not see any sign of them.’

He left his home in search of his wife and daughter. He went to his best friend’s house – Roy Harris. He’d been friends with Roy and his wife, Joan, for 20 years. Many local residents – up to 80 or 90 people – were there, seeking refuge from the fires and there were lots of cars in their paddock being regularly hosed down.

Alison and Kerry were not there, so he went searching for them at another three known refuges in the area. They hadn’t reported in at any of them.

He went to a friend’s place, but as soon as his host went to bed, Barry headed back home in search of his loved ones. By that time it was almost daylight, but it was very bright from all the fires that were still burning.

Barry searched paddocks and his dam, but there was no sign of them. He fell to his knees, praying to God for a sign that they were safe.

‘I felt that they were safe, but I didn’t realise that they were already in God’s care’, he said.

He walked back to the house and started lifting sheets of roofing iron. That’s when he found the bodies of Alison and Kerry, cuddled together.

Despondent, he went back to Joan and Roy’s where he was fed, showered and clothed. The soles of his boots were burnt out and he only had the soiled clothes on his back.

Barry notified both his and Alison’s families and then Roy took over, organising police and undertakers.

For eight months, Barry lived in a room with another family as he struggled to come to terms with his loss. He would cry at the drop of a hat – ‘I never realised a man could cry so much.’

At first, he thought he could never return to his land. However, he soon realised that he needed to be in a place where people understood him, in a place where his community had experienced similar things, in a place where he was among friends.

With the help of the family where he was staying, Barry’s home was rebuilt and he believes it was a good decision.

The key to this was the ability to be on his block and sift through the ashes, where little surprises would sometimes appear. ‘You can see the joy that can come from finding something, even a little melted ornament, even years on.’

‘It was important to be back on the land. It was very much part of the healing.’

Barry says it still hurts 26 years on, but he can bear that pain, particularly if telling his story can encourage someone else.

‘You can choose to stay in a pit, or move yourself up and rebuild.’

Love from the ashes – Barry and Joan

Every week after the Ash Wednesday fires, Barry dined with his best friend Roy and Roy’s wife, Joan, for dinner. It was a tradition he carried on for ten years, even after Roy lost a four-year battle with cancer.

Joan and Barry found comfort in each other, but neither thought the other was their type. Until one day ‘something changed’ and they decided to take a risk. Love blossomed. The pair got engaged and then married within a few months. They have been together for what they describe as ‘16 years of honeymoon’.

They say the secret is that they don’t have anything to hide from each other.

‘We had great relationships before and now have a great relationship together.’

Joan, who has been a CWA member for 56 years, spent six months coordinating the Upper Beaconsfield Relief Centre after the Ash Wednesday fires. Her CWA group lost eight members in those fires.

Joan moved into Barry’s house that had been rebuilt on the site of his lost home. Despite everything they have been through, when fires appeared this time, they were prepared to stay and defend their property.

Although fire came at them from three directions, it did not come close.

This couple say that, for them, retiring means putting new rubber on old wheels and while they would sometimes like a bit of time out, they have much to achieve in their lifetimes.



Pam and Owen **Pattison**

Former Salvation Army stalwarts Pam and Owen Pattison stopped in Traralgon South to lend a hand while on a retirement holiday. They stayed four months.

In their late sixties, the couple were holidaying during their fifth year of retirement. They were going round the country and 'got waylaid by 16 weeks'.

They were proud to be able to help 50 families in the first three days after the fires and another 30 the following week. Tasked with dealing with a flood of donations, they opened and ran a facility for second-hand clothing. It took three months to sift and sort through the offerings.

They recalled an emotion-fuelled experience, peppered with both sadness and humour in very difficult circumstances.

The Pattisons said it was wonderful to see the unity and cohesive approach of volunteers from the community. 'There was a willingness to be there when they were needed. People were humbled.'

During their visit, the couple called into homes, visiting around 300 people again and again.

Above: Rollo and Bev Roylance's garden begins to regenerate.

Right: Regrowth emerging – a very common sight across the affected areas.



While impossible to quantify the extent of their help, the pair helped distribute around 10,000 rolls of toilet paper, thousands of bottles of water, 'biscuits and chips by the hundreds', thousands of eggs and a massive amount of toiletries.

They had many unusual requests to fill, with the most memorable being a rabbit hutch. With the assistance of a radio bulletin, they managed to get one within an hour. They were also able to source special ointment for bull ant bites, cleaning products and baby food.

When reflecting on the community they befriended, the pair said they were sad to leave. 'We'll miss them.'

The couple, who married 17 years ago after meeting through the Salvation Army (their children introduced them), also spent 17 days assisting after Cyclone Larry and have worked in women's refuges. Owen is a former fitter-welder and Pam had a career in education.

Owen had done a lot of physical work and was a little weary but 'never ran out of puff'. They developed friendships and have friends all over the country.

Pam and Owen consider it a privilege to have been in the area and part of the recovery process, although many of the community feel the privilege was theirs.



Chris Payne

As President of the Hazelwood Rotary Club, Chris Payne wanted to help the residents in her area, who had been in the firing line of the Black Saturday blazes. But for two weeks, aid workers were not allowed to enter the area. It had become a crime scene and there were also concerns about health and safety. Chris knew people needed goods and support and was very frustrated at not being able to provide it.

'Black Saturday was a day that we hoped would never happen to our area.'

But when it did happen, Chris knew people who were impacted, including fellow Rotarians, and there was an agonising wait for nearly four days, waiting to hear if people were okay. 'It was daunting', she said.

Used to news coming at the flick of a button, the lack of communication took a lot of getting used to. Power was out and there was no news. 'We knew nothing of what was happening on our back door when we lost the ABC receiver on Mt Tassie.'

While they were waiting for access, the club began receiving calls from other Rotary clubs and private organisations offering

Above: Rotary hard at work protecting this caravan.
Opposite: Fencing crews in action.



assistance. This gave the Hazelwood Rotary Club the ability to supply goods as required by families. They began raising money, gathering resources and working with the Salvation Army to sort clothes. By the time they were allowed to see locals, they 'had an active plan together'.

In the weeks following the fires, Chris said people were not able to 'think past tomorrow'.

She was greeted by people who were apprehensive and fearful of the unknown. People were broken and traumatised. Some were, initially, unable to make conversation. Others seemed to think there were people who needed support more than they did.

Many people were 'going through the motions' and unable to do things a person would normally do on a day-to-day basis, such as make a cup of coffee.

Chris and her fellow Rotarians were encouraging victims to take care of themselves and provided the tools for them to do it.

Chris had a car full of 'one-stop pots' – cooked stews, soups and roasts, as well as first-aid kits, cups, saucers and bed linen. 'My little car was always full and I looked like I was a travelling

gypsy.' Being able to share much-needed items, and often just time spent with the families helped in many ways.

At each stop, individual needs had to be assessed – 'then and there'. If the Rotarians couldn't provide what was needed, they pointed them in the right direction. The Traralgon South Relief Centre was the backbone of all support.

'People were very appreciative of a little thing, like a torch to enable them to go to the toilet, along with jackets and gumboots, because of the toilet now being outside and the weather was getting cold.'

Rotary Clubs were calling from all over Australia. More than \$70,000 came from a neighbouring Rotary Club.

Tasmanian Rotarians were particularly generous, sending money for chainsaws, a trailer, fencing supplies and volunteers, and a caravan, along with nearly 530 kilograms of hay and 6,000 bulbs to begin new gardens.

South Australian Rotary took ten families under their wings – funding wish lists from families, which included requests for doonas, general household goods, games and photography equipment.

'People gave and were very generous. Watching proud people receiving their goods was very touching as it was a humbling experience to them.'

Chris said high functioning people became needy, but not necessarily for goods. 'They needed help, support, encouragement and camaraderie. There was mental anguish and it had been very traumatising. They needed to feel part of a team – a community. People who have always been in charge, all of a sudden they were unable to do so. Their ability to make big decisions was no longer evident.'

Chris said the Traralgon South community pulled together and made themselves a pilot program for dealing with a disaster. 'There are lots of communities around who don't have the energy, enthusiasm, leadership. They haven't stopped.'

The 'power of a few' had shown what could be done in a small community. Support from locals had been for 'real reasons. It was done from the heart'.

During this journey Chris has met some 'wonderful people' and forged strong friendships. In a show of collaborative support, Rotary enjoyed working closely with other care groups such as St Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army, Lions, and CWA.

'It's been humbling to be a part of the community and offer resources that were needed at the time.'



Cath Peterson

Cath Peterson's first visit to Traralgon South and the surrounding district following the Black Saturday bushfires was when Christine Nixon, Chair of Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBBRA), attended the community day to talk with community members. As Cath, the VBBRA Community Engagement Officer for Gippsland, drove across the hill from Yarram and along Balook Road, she found the enormity of the fire hard to comprehend.

The community gathering on the oval included activities for children, music, food, local support agencies and pamper support. It also included an update from the Traralgon South and District Association (TSDA), Latrobe City Council and the Department of Human Services. Christine Nixon spoke to the more than 400 community members in attendance and, later, spoke with individuals and small groups of locals who wished to raise their concerns with her. The relief centre was operating out of the cricket club and badminton hall and many volunteers were on hand to help community members with goods, material aid and support.

Above: Marching Band comes to town!

Opposite: The cadets come to Traralgon South for the weekend.

A parade and lunch completes the experience and offers the locals the opportunity to say "Thank You".

Support for the communities affected by the fires in Gippsland was wide-ranging – from VBBRA through to the numerous local communities. Their coordination and passion to get the job done and provide support to those in need was amazing. Traralgon South and District Association had a real and practical support focus, with a clear understanding of the emotional impact and the support needed to help people through the recovery process.

The Community Hub was busy with people popping in and out – some needing to work through personal issues and gain support and some to register for fencing and firewood. There was a constant buzz around the tool library and relief centre.

The community recognised that those living on their blocks required access to toilet facilities and showers, so quickly arranged for the hire of facilities, generators and water tanks at strategic locations.

Community members were trained in safe chainsaw operation, and then, with the support of Loy Yang Power, cut and split hundreds of tons of wood for distribution to those in need. It was a very practical way of helping people who had lost their firewood or were living in sheds.

Similarly, the Community Recovery Committee (CRC) recognised the importance of maintaining and encouraging social connections and support. Regular gatherings were held, and visits were made to check on those who might not have been into the relief centre or hub for a while. The CATS Cricket Club established Friday night dinners at the club. These dinners have been an important way to maintain contact and, where people were experiencing difficulties, a place to discuss concerns and to seek support. For the CRC members, the dinners were also a way to check the pulse of the community.

Regularly, key people in the community would call with issues to be followed up and items to be secured. The list was broad and, at times, some items were very difficult to source through the donations team. Donors had specific ideas about what they would give and sometimes the supply did not meet with the need. Thankfully, there were many other occasions where support for difficult-to-find items was secured.

Latrobe City Council has been a key resource and support for the community. There were times when it was a rocky road, however,



with goodwill and capacity, and a willingness to work through most issues, a positive relationship developed, which led to many positive outcomes. Maintaining this relationship and supporting each other through the recovery process has been an important element in ensuring the best for the community.

The TSDA has a 'can do' attitude and understands the importance of securing additional support for its community members. Developing relationships and partnerships were recognised as being of significant benefit to the community. These relationships were fostered and developed through regular conversations and updates regarding how the community was travelling, and what some of the achievements, issues and challenges were. It was important that when there were needs identified that the key leaders could contact the relevant people, discuss what was needed and a solution sourced.

Most importantly, the community members that took on these leadership roles were very focussed on supporting the surrounding areas, especially while people in these areas were not in a position to become involved in supporting the community. The CRC members were strong advocates for these communities and have encouraged participation when people felt they were able.

VBRRAs approach to working with the community was to provide a link and information that could be shared through the community. Where issues were raised or opportunities were identified, VBRRAs would work with the community and other agencies to find a solution.

A key focus was to work with the CRC and Latrobe City Council to secure funds to deliver the key priorities of the community recovery plan (CRP). The plan was quite extensive and it was important that the group prioritised the projects that had been identified across the community. The group was mindful that the benefits needed to be shared across the communities, including Callignee, Le Roy and Koornalla. Some projects were also prioritised in Traralgon South – projects that would benefit the broader community and district.

Working more broadly across the Gippsland fire-affected areas identified some consistent priorities following the development of CRPs. The key was caring for the wellbeing of community members, supporting people to return to rebuild, replace and/or improve community infrastructure and community gatherings.

Supporting people to re-establish their boundary fences was an important priority. Hundreds and hundreds of kilometres of boundary fences were lost. With the generous support of volunteers, including service clubs such as Rotary, Lions Australia, Apex, four-wheel drive clubs and many other generous volunteers, boundary fences were slowly rebuilt. The work was difficult and in harsh terrain, but it was very important to the community members. It was about re-establishing their sense of place and the feeling of security. Re-establishing the fences also helped people to tackle some of the many other challenges in re-establishing their blocks.



Working with GippsTAFE; Latrobe City Council; Berry Street; and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, VBRRAs established a Jobs Fund project that employed 40 unemployed people to assist with bushfire recovery projects. Many kilometres of fences were constructed, parkland areas redeveloped and many property owners were supported by a crew for a day. The crew members benefited from knowing that they contributed to the recovery of the communities, and gained new skills, qualifications, confidence and work experience to assist them with stepping into the workforce as valuable team members.

At the heart of all the work and many projects was the desire to support the people that had been affected by the fires and importantly the support was multifaceted. Cath met Marian Lerner, a Rotarian from Tasmania who had organised more than 500 nights of accommodation that had been generously donated by Tasmanian businesses.

At the local level, the Stitch and Chat group was established, and began to make quilts. Some of the ladies designed their quilts in a way that shared their story and experiences. Many of these quilts consisted of fine and exquisite needlework. Most importantly, when Stitch and Chat met, the women supported each other through friendship.

Members of the Koornalla community began to re-establish the entrance to their community and the parks. Working together to plant many trees, they designed the plantings to highlight the features of the community.

In Callignee, rebuilding the community hall and CFA station were very important projects that community members worked on to help reconnect their community.

The Men's and Community Shed in Traralgon South will, in time, become an important meeting place for people of all ages. Eventually, the shed will house much of the community-owned equipment; the tool library will be relocated to the shed and a well-equipped workshop will be established. The shed will include a place for young people and community groups to gather or participate in training and skill development.

Cath said her 'experience working with Traralgon South and the Gippsland bushfire affected communities has been an extraordinary experience'. She's met many people who have worked extremely hard to re-establish their homes and lives, as well as support their neighbours and friends. 'The role that the community of Traralgon South took in supporting the local areas of Koornalla, Le Roy and Callignee cannot be underestimated; their work was tireless and the commitment to support those areas that were so badly affected was inspiring.'

Cath hopes that the community retains the strength that has been developed over the past two years. Continuing to work together and support each other, and build on the relationships and partnerships that have been developed will be key to the continued success in the recovery and rebuilding of the community and its members.



Opposite top: This sign on Red Hill Rd put a smile on many faces. A sense of humour is an essential factor when coping with adversity.
Right: This koala was more fortunate than many.



Naomi and Bruce **Thorne**

Transferring with their children, Tanika, 15, and Ayden, 11, from Western Australia during January, Salvation Army Captains Bruce and Naomi Thorne began work in Traralgon – just ten days before the fires blazed through the area. There was no time for finding their feet; they had to hit the ground running.

They were expecting to use their first months to catch their breath, and to reconnect with the community once again, as they had previously lived in the area. They quickly achieved their goal of meeting people – just not in the circumstances anyone would have wished. And their ten years' worth of knowledge of the local area and networks was immediately put to good effect.

On Saturday, they were in Melbourne when they received information about the fires, later confirmed via a text concerning members of their congregation. The text made it clear that the fires were much closer than they had originally thought, but at this point those they knew were safe. Despite heading back towards Traralgon, the usual two hour trip took closer to five hours due to road closures. Increasingly aware that the fire was 'huge', the Thorne's had no idea of the full extent of the situation. It soon became apparent.

Above: Koko the Clown came to town on many occasions and would entertain both adults and children with his witty sense of humour!

Following a restless night, it came time for the Sunday church service, which was very solemn. Several members of the congregation who lived within range of the fires were not in attendance, and some were known to have stayed to protect their homes. News was sketchy, but they learned that for one family, although their house was still standing, some members of the family needed medical attention.

On Sunday afternoon Naomi thought, 'How do we do this?' (That is, not only look after our own, but as Salvos, also serve our hurting community.) Naomi admitted to feeling out of her depth.

Bruce was committed to a week of studies in Melbourne and Naomi was not keen for him to go. In hindsight, however, she was okay that he went, because she rose to the occasion, finding skills and a capacity she never knew she had. To coordinate what was to come was bigger than Naomi thought it would be.

From early Monday people started donating without any call going out. At that stage it was envisaged by the local council that the Traralgon Salvos would be the place for the overflow of all the donated goods, which were still being primarily directed to the council's 'Little Theatre' in Traralgon.

During Tuesday, retired Salvation Army officers, Captain Pam and Major Owen Pattison from Queensland, who were travelling on holidays with their caravan, came in and offered their help. Naomi was very happy to have their assistance. They were a huge help and became a vital part of the team, staying on until the end of May.

By Tuesday it was evident that the council facilities were overwhelmed. At 7 am on the Wednesday, Naomi met with Latrobe City Council and Red Cross representatives, offering the Traralgon Salvation Army facilities as a relief centre – but requesting 24 hours to create some order from the chaos.

Twenty-four hours later the Salvos were packed to the rafters. Every nook and cranny was occupied – the quiet room was used for counselling; the sanctuary housed electrical items; the foyer was home to the crockery, kitchen items and food; another room held clothes and toiletries; the shower was well used; tools were in the entry; and so on.

They were feeding everyone who came in; 150–200 meals a day, plus a seemingly endless morning and afternoon tea to go with the constantly flowing coffee and tea. It created a heavy workload, matched only by the amazing dedication of a band of volunteer kitchen staff.

Many volunteers arrived from near and far, many unannounced. Moments of panic came and went as trucks arrived with relief packages and donated items they had nowhere else to store. People would advise they were coming to help 'at some time' making coordination challenging. But solutions were found and the Westpac Bank offered to fund a coordinator's position.

Lindsay Fox dropped in, of his own accord, lending considerable support with the provision of shipping containers for storage and assisting with transport.

When Traralgon South resident Ange Gordon arrived, there was relief, particularly in the first few days while the roads were shut. Only locals could get in and out of Traralgon South and its surrounding communities and she was able to coordinate transporting goods to families in need. This connectedness with the local community became a hallmark of Bruce and Naomi's work, and great cooperation with locally affected communities was established.

Knowing practical help was needed, Naomi would 'intentionally linger' at the Traralgon South relief centre once it was established, to see how she could be helpful. A friendship had well and truly taken root with the residents running the relief centre. They worked really well together, with the Salvos becoming a resource for the relief centre. It was non-stop for the months following, with the support of helpers such as Pam and Owen Pattison, Alan Austin and Russell Dent.

Familiar with the area and its vulnerability to natural disaster, Naomi and Bruce's eyes were not only on providing a response to the bushfires, but also to making an enduring contribution to the preparedness of the region for future disaster response and relief.

Naomi's passion is for working with women and children – she never imagined she would be involved with bushfire relief. She is amazed at people's overwhelming generosity. She will never forget the looks in the eyes of people who had lost everything. It is imprinted on her mind. What got Naomi and Bruce through the tragedy was, not only their deep confidence in a God who cares for all our concerns, but the feeling of being in a privileged situation and, hopefully, being able to make a difference for those they drew alongside, bringing comfort and hope.

Donated portable buildings were renovated to provide space for the recovery work to continue, and to free existing buildings for the resumption of a life, as close to 'normal' as possible for other users of the Salvo's facilities.

Months down the track just one volunteer, Beth Estcourt, remains – and has been there serving selflessly and faithfully since day one.

Unfortunately, the fires took their toll on everyone, and after more than a year of providing relief to others, and marking the anniversary of the fires, the Thorne's made the decision to leave the Salvation Army for their own 'fresh start'.

