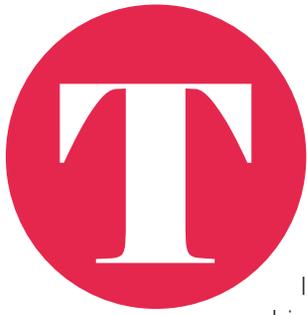




BLACK SATURDAY 10 YEARS ON

February 2019 marked 10 years since the 2009 Victorian Bushfires claimed the lives of 173 people and seared its mark on the pages of history as one of the nation's darkest hours. Yet, among the devastation, communities banded together to give victims the strength and resources they needed to begin the process of recovery. Rotary's work over the ensuing decade continues to improve the lives of those who suffered so much.



The Black Saturday Bushfires are among one of Australia's all-time worst disasters.

Extreme heat, low humidity and high winds created a perfect storm of fire conditions. When fire sparked on February 7, 2009, the blaze quickly spiralled out of control.

The results were devastating. Over 400 individual fires were recorded, burning 450,000 hectares of land and 3500 buildings, including 2000 houses. There were 173 direct fatalities, 414 people grievously injured, and more than a million wild and domesticated animals lost. Many survivors were left homeless and entire communities unrecognisable.

The Kinglake-Marysville fire complex was the largest and ultimately most destructive of the Black Saturday fires, consuming 330,000 hectares of land, 1800 houses and causing the deaths of 159 people alone.

A bushfire rages out of control from the Bunyip State Park towards the townships of Labortouche and Tonimbuk. (Photo: Jason South / THE AGE)



Despite the efforts of almost 20,000 fire fighters, the Black Saturday fires continued to burn for weeks.

Black Saturday caused significant and lasting economic and environmental damage. The loss of family and friends, destruction of homes and complete alteration of familiar landscapes, had grievous psychological consequences for those in fire-ravaged regions. A high rate of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse and addictive behaviours such

as gambling has been recorded in bushfire survivors.

The fallout from Black Saturday continues to this day. But Rotarians were there – on the ground helping those in need in times of despair and looking for ways to make the future better. Projects implemented at the time have subsequently been utilised when other disasters have struck.

Thank you Rotary. What a difference you made to these communities.

At 5 years post bushfires, 22% of people in high impact communities were reporting symptoms of mental health disorders at approximately twice the rate evident in low impact communities and what would be expected in general population. Social networks made a difference.



More close people generally relates to better mental health and personal wellbeing



Risk of depression was higher for those connected to other depressed people



Risk of PTSD was associated with more fractured social networks



Involvement in local community groups and organisations was associated with more positive outcomes in terms of mental health and wellbeing

(Infographics: Beyond Bushfires, Final Report, The University of Melbourne)



Internationally, the Black Saturday bushfires are ranked as the ninth worst bushfire/wildfire in recorded history.

Time 1: 3-4 years post bushfires



Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery

Nearly six years after the Black Saturday bushfires, a study showed a quarter of survivors from the worst affected Victorian communities were still experiencing serious mental health problems.

Led by the University of Melbourne, the Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery study surveyed more than 1000 people affected by the fires in 2009 to examine the impact of their physical and mental health. Rotary clubs and districts around Australia were keen to provide funds towards the Australian Rotary Health backed research.

The researchers found that within high-impact communities 26 per cent of people reported symptoms

of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or severe psychological distress. Likewise, 17 per cent of medium-impact communities, and 12 per cent of low-impact communities reported serious, long-term effects from the trauma.

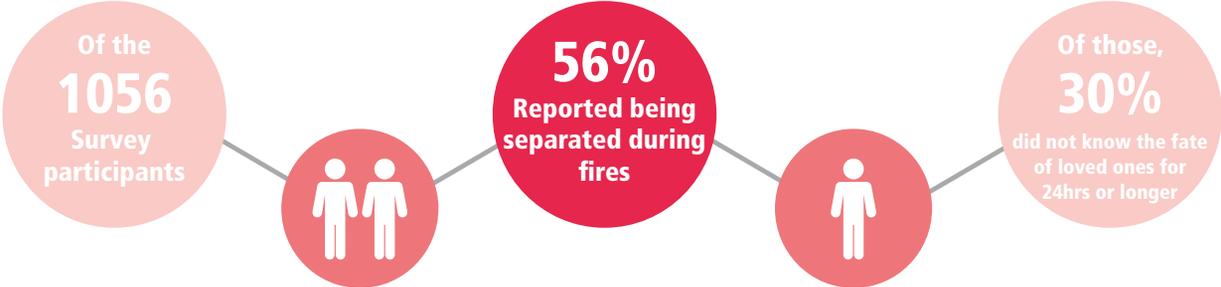
The study further aimed to build understanding of the interplay between individual, social and community level recovery. It revealed major life stressors, for example change of income and accommodation, and the experience of community loss, associated with the bush fires, were predictors of poor mental health outcomes. Individuals connected to others suffering from depression, for example within their family, or associated with fractured

social networks, were also more at risk of depression and PTSD.

On the other hand, involvement in local community groups and organisations and being integrated within the community was generally related to better mental health and personal wellbeing.

“The study has shown that community groups, including Rotary clubs, can play a special role in assisting recovery from similar disasters,” Australian Rotary Health CEO Joy Gillett said.

The Beyond Bushfires study has made a list of recommendations for individuals, families, government, and service providers to continue supporting those affected. Copies can be downloaded from https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3043187/Beyond-Bushfires-Final-Report-2016.pdf



Working together towards recovery

*By Michael Englefield
Rotary Club of Eltham, Vic*

The anniversary of the catastrophic bushfire event of February 2009 rekindles raw, vivid memories for all Victorians. However, for Rotarians in District 9790 it also brings reminiscences of how we worked together to profoundly contribute to the recovery process.

All Rotarians in the district immediately wanted to do something to assist the surviving bush fire victims.

The Rotary Club of Eltham organised and held a fundraising concert in Alistair Knox Park within a couple of weeks of the fires. The funds raised were contributed to the Rotary District 9790 Disaster Relief Fund, earlier established in 2008 to assist rural flood victims.

At the same time, Aquaboxes were donated to fire victims who had lost their water supply, typically provided through water tanks in the rural area – the first domestic deployment of Aquaboxes within Australia. Aquaboxes were also available to anyone who came to the distribution point at Whittlesea. (See page 46 for more information on Aquabox.)

The District 9790 Bushfire Recovery Committee gathered over \$3.5 million and donations in-kind to use in support for the fire victims. These came from Australian and even international Rotary clubs, as far afield as Russia and Mongolia. As well as funding a variety of projects, the Bush Fire Recovery Committee provided vouchers through local Rotary clubs valued at up to \$1000 each to affected families identified as in need by the nearest aid agency, such as the Salvation Army. There was no restriction on where, how or why the vouchers could be used except that, if possible, they were to be spent at small, local businesses. Over \$500,000 was distributed in this manner.

Financial and other support was given by District 9790 to establish a temporary village at Marysville. Here, a bank, small supermarket, café and so forth were set up so that locals did not have to travel long distances for food and other general supplies and services. Additionally, Rotarians contributed countless volunteer hours at recovery and distribution centres.

District 9790 was further invited

to take over the auspice of Blaze Aid in its initial stages. This involved, among many other tasks, website management, setting up correct accounting procedures and systems, providing initial funding of \$10,000 (all of which was later repaid) and general support. Rotary's active participation ended when Blaze Aid became an incorporated entity, however, without Rotary's involvement, Blaze Aid would certainly not be what it is today and possibly would have folded.

In mid-2009, it was recognised Kinglake small business owners previously operating their businesses from their now destroyed homes, were in urgent need of proper office facilities. The Bushfire Recovery Committee requested the Rotary Club of Eltham's assistance in establishing temporary offices on vacant land adjacent to the Kinglake Hotel. Former Rotary Club of Eltham member Ray Kelsey provided building site sheds at a heavy discount, and many other locals and tradies came together to fit out the sheds for use as a temporary business centre by the end of the year.

*“A tragedy beyond belief, beyond precedent and beyond words... one of the darkest days in Australia's peacetime history.”
– Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, 2009.*

The Rotary Club of Mansfield, with support from the Rotary Club of Sandringham and the district, similarly provided 20 large sheds for use as temporary accommodation and housing. When the recipients were eventually able to replace their family homes, this temporary accommodation could be converted into farm shed.

In the meantime, a request came to the club from fire devastated

Blacksmiths from around Australia and the world spent five years and countless hours crafting a memorial tree for the victims of the Black Saturday fires. The tree, which weighs three tonnes and features more than 3500 intricate and individually forged leaves and twigs, was unveiled at Whittlesea's showgrounds on November 30, 2013, before being permanently erected in Strathewen in 2014. Strathewen lost almost a quarter of its population in the bushfires. This particular leaf is forged stainless-steel, crafted by blacksmith Doug Tarrant. For more information on the Blacksmiths' Tree project, visit www.facebook.com/BlacksmithTreeProject. (Photo: Supplied by the Blacksmiths' Tree Project manager Amanda Gibson) INSET: Also in Strathewen, colourful mosaic mailboxes replace those lost in the fires and serve as a sign of renewal, brightness and enthusiasm for the future. (Photo: BIGCOL)



“She had so much trouble going back to school. She couldn't think, concentrate at all. Everything seemed irrelevant that she was doing, and they tried so hard. They were very helpful, but she had a lot of trouble with just fitting in with the kids that she knew before there. They weren't understanding her, and she just felt that all their problems were very trivial.”

– Parent of a child bushfire survivor

Strathewen to help replace mailboxes destroyed by the fires. A local artist suggested they be created in a new artistic style, covered with colourful mosaic tiles. The boxes are not only a permanent reminder of the Black Saturday fires, but, by their colourful nature, a sign of renewal, brightness and enthusiasm for the future.

A further issue resulting from the fires was the absence of meeting places and facilities for the youth of Kinglake who had lost family members and friends in the fires. With funding assistance from the Victorian State Government and the District 9790 Bushfire Recovery Committee, the Ellimatta Youth Centre was constructed.

In July 2010, Alan Anderson took over the role of District 9790 governor. Mindful of the contribution and influence Rotary brings to communities, Alan asked the Rotary clubs of Eltham and Diamond Creek to sponsor the establishment of a new Rotary club in Kinglake. Members from each club, and the district, proceeded to garner local interest and mentor interested individuals to take on the inaugural committee positions.

In early 2011, Rotary International president Ray Klinginsmith visited Australia, and as part of his tour came to District 9790 to observe the

post-fire devastation and Rotary's recovery work. Alan and wife Dorothy chaperoned Ray to officially open the Ellimatta Centre, where he also presented the Rotary Club of Kinglake Ranges' inaugural president Brad Quilliam with the club charter. Eight years on, the club is thriving, providing the community with support and purpose. The Ellimatta Centre continues to provide mountain and ranges kids with a meeting facility where they can socialise and are provided with life skills and vocational advice, training and services.

Dorothy chose the Australian Children's Music Foundation as her Partner's Project. Money raised ended up being used in primary schools to fund musical programs to assist children's recovery from trauma associated with the fires at Strathewen, Kinglake, Kinglake West and St. Andrews.

So, while we remember February 7, 2019 as the 10th anniversary of a



devastating and life changing event for the people of Victoria, we as Rotarians can take some humble pride in the fact we were able to contribute significantly towards assisting with the rejuvenation of communities devastated by the tragedy. We were there, giving people homes, places to work, water, food, new facilities, therapeutic support and, perhaps most importantly, hope for the future.



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Redefining emergency response

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A pamper day held in Callignee in April 2009; New fencing erected at a Callignee property in June 2009; Volunteers Sheila and Geoff Peddell helped restore the community of Dunalley following the 2013 Tasmanian bushfires, returning the support the Tasmanian district gave to District 9820 following the Black Saturday fires.

*By DG Janne Speirs
District 9820 Emergency
Management Chair*

Fire and flood events have occurred all too regularly over the years in District 9820, which covers all of Gippsland, with Dandenong, the Mornington Peninsula and Phillip Island along the western edge. However, no one was prepared for the events of Black Saturday and its aftermath.

The previous week had been bad enough, with bushfire burning the area in and around Dellburn. Here, some of the local Rotary clubs began assisting, including the Toyota Land Cruiser Club, which moved in to help with repairing fencing, particularly in a wildlife sanctuary.

At 1.32pm on February 7, another fire started just south of the Churchill township. Within hours, the fire had affected many small hamlets in the Strzlecki Ranges. By the following day, 11 people had lost their lives, and over 150 houses and some 40,000 hectares of pine plantations, bush and farmland had been destroyed.

The presidents of the Rotary clubs of Traralgon, Traralgon Central, Hazelwood, Morwell and Moe met under the chairmanship of then immediate past district governor Janet McCahon to map out a plan of operations to support impacted communities. The community leaders and Recovery Hub of Traralgon South, as well as Latrobe City, became particular focuses of the committee, which played a valuable part in the recovery process, making up the formula as it went along.

Practical and financial support flooded in from Rotary clubs and individuals who wanted to help. The most incredible effort, given over a sustained period, came from Rotary District 9830 in Tasmania and the timber communities based there. Without the work parties, financial and practical support of District 9830, we simply could not have achieved what we did.

Using third party referrals to determine priority needs, Rotary helped build sheds, kennels, stables, fencing, carports, gardens and other structures. Some 100 tonnes of firewood was accessed through East Gippsland clubs and distributed via the Hub. Birdfeeders were set up with appropriate seed mix to provide for

returning native birds. Pamper days were also held, and distribution of donated goods, such as potbelly stoves, arranged.

When it was noted that senior school students impacted by the fires would benefit from an outing, trips to a number of sporting events, including cricket, AFL, tennis, rugby, soccer and basketball, as well as a DFO shopping day, were organised through the committee.

Even when the committee finally disbanded, calls for help continued to come in. Assistance was still being given by Rotarians some seven years after Black Saturday to those experiencing its impact.

Although this was a major disaster for the area, some wonderful learnings and repercussions resulted. An Emergency Management Document and protocol was developed for the district, which gave us close ties with appropriate Shire Emergency Management Committees. Now, we do not have to reinvent the wheel whenever there is an emergency.

Further, our existing Disaster Relief Fund has remained, in addition to a tax-deductible Emergency Trust created to assist cases of hardship eventuating from emergency situations.

Many of the relationships built through Black Saturday remain in place. Rotarians in the district have an ongoing relationship with the Traralgon South and extended community, resulting in continued collaboration in emergency work in other areas. Following the 2013 Tasmanian fires, work parties made up of VCAL students, local Rotarians and Black Saturday community members visited Dunalley and other affected areas to undertake building programs and other restoration projects – repaying the help given by Tasmanians to Victorians after Black Saturday.

District 9820 is currently involved in two Victorian drought situations. We have also become part of the recovery for the Bunyip and Yinnar South fires, following our protocol to ensure assistance is provided in as effective a manner as possible.

While nothing can ever erase the losses of Black Saturday and its horrors, as a district we can now react to emergencies in an efficient and structured manner, whether financially or practically, as circumstances demand.

Born from the ashes

After the devastation of the Black Saturday bushfires, Kinglake Ranges experienced firsthand the high level of assistance Rotary can deliver using its large network and skills to implement recovery and rebuilding.

Initially, Rotarians provided emergency residential assistance, mental health care, family and youth aid and business support. However, after 12 months a longer-range approach was implemented. It was decided to establish a local Rotary club, specifically aimed at maintaining connections and filtering support to the community. After several meetings with town residents, the Rotary Club of Kinglake Ranges was formed in 2010 and chartered in February 2011.

The new club went immediately to work, becoming integral in supporting the recovery of Kinglake Ranges through an enormous range of projects.

Members participated in numerous community projects and working bees to rebuild community infrastructure, including a main street beautification project. They also fitted out a building

for Food Share, a community-based program distributing donations from Foodbank Victoria and fresh produce grown in the Food Share Neighbourhood House gardens, helping people going through tough times.

The Rotary Club of Kinglake Ranges additionally worked with the Ellimatta Youth Centre to obtain funding for a commercial kitchen and air conditioning. They also donated two bed-wetting machines to the School Nursing Service in support of traumatised families.

Another project involved running Mental Health First Aid courses for locals to provide potentially lifesaving help to friends, family and co-workers. The 12-hour course covers the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, where and how to get help, and what sort of assistance has been shown to be effective.

Club fundraisers such as the Kinglake Rotary Art Show and Kinglake Ranges Produce Market have helped boost the town's cultural life and local economy.

The club puts their success down in part to building strong relationships

with other community groups, such as the Lions, Country Fire Authority, State Emergency Service and Community Emergency Response Team.

Club membership has remained steady, with the club balancing dedicated long-time community members with embracing new residents who have since moved to the Kinglake Ranges as the region redevelops.

As time has gone on, the Rotary Club of Kinglake Ranges has moved into helping others far beyond their local area, such as a project helping Laotian farmers learn beekeeping skills to boost their income and sponsoring children in an orphanage in Bali to complete their secondary education.

Out of the tragedy of the bushfires, has emerged a positive force for the local community and others around the world.



ABOVE: The Rotary Club of Kinglake Ranges participated in numerous community projects to rebuild infrastructure following the fires, including a main street beautification project.

RIGHT: Club fundraisers such as the Kinglake Ranges Produce Market have helped boost the town's cultural life and local economy.



"I went to four funerals in that week and there were two I didn't get to go to because I was at others... And none of those first four were for one person. All of them were for multiple people, and I had never been to a funeral for more than one person, ever, and I went to four in a week and I remember just feeling like... you were swimming underwater."

– Bushfire survivor

United effort

The Rotary Bushfire Relief Project began when then district governor Dick Cuttle approached Kevin Roberts, of the Rotary Club of Brownhill Creek, SA, to organise a hands-on project to provide relief. Kevin drove around the devastated Kinglake Ranges and Traralgon, returning with a proposal to take volunteer teams throughout to help with the clean-up and restore what had been lost.

The Rotary Club of Brownhill Creek took over managing the project on behalf of all clubs in District 9520, responsible for coordinating volunteers from Rotary clubs in South Australia and other community groups keen to lend a hand. Teams were formed to undertake a variety of tasks helping communities and fire survivors move on with their lives. This included minor building construction projects, cleaning up fire areas, assisting with wood splitting and replacing trees and vegetation destroyed in the blaze. Thousands of kilometres of fencing were also replaced, over the course of several years. Funding for activities was drawn from District 9520's Disaster Fund.

A particularly successful community partnership was formed for a vast

restoration project in Kinglake West. Upper Goulburn Landcare mapped out vital work to be completed in the area, where the Rotary Bushfire Relief Project could assist in helping badly affected families. The Rotary Club of Yea, Vic, sponsored the accommodation costs for volunteer teams provided by District 9520, the Uniting Church in Benalla provided a tractor and full-time operator to drive posts and clear fence lines, and District 9520 hired a full-time professional fencer to guide teams and covered costs for materials required.

"The partnership provided an amazing synergy and its outcomes were astonishing," said Bill Giles, who served as chairman of the Rotary Victorian Bushfire Relief Project management committee. Three buildings for families to live in were put in place, more than 40km of fencing installed, as well as provisions of firewood, fence posts, clothes, and food.

Over its run, the Rotary Bushfire Relief Project provided over \$1 million worth of work in fire-stricken areas, making an invaluable difference in struggling communities.

Using their experience gained in

"It's very surreal, you don't know how to react... you get told that your home has disappeared, you get told that all the homes have disappeared, that friends have died. It's a rollercoaster of emotions and you just don't know how to keep moving forward."

– Christine Adams, Marysville Resident

the aftermath of the Black Saturday fires, Rotarians involved have gone on to help when other bushfires have struck. The Rotary clubs of Brownhill Creek, Onkaparinga, Magill Sunrise, Morialta and Port Lincoln joined with the Sleaford Progress Association to help when 15 families were affected by bushfires in the Sleaford area just before Christmas 2012.

While less severe than the Black Saturday bushfires in scope, they were still devastating to those affected. Losses ranged from destroyed fences and sheds and burnt machinery, to one family losing their entire home. Together, Rotarians efficiently helped restore some 25km of fencing in the area. Now, and in the future, the clubs have the expertise to effectively step in and collaborate to help communities close to home, and further afield, get back on their feet.

Community revival

Over the past decade, District 9800 has directed extensive assistance towards the revival of individuals and communities affected by the fires, with particular emphasis on psychological recovery from the trauma of those dark days.

Input has been directed via funding and material support to organisations working on the ground to help communities, such as Global Care, who were one of the first agencies to enter the ravaged

town of Kinglake, soon becoming the leading assistance provider in the area.

Also heavily supported were the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation (Melbourne) and the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, which distributed donor funds across more than 200 projects covering a wide range of community recovery needs and priorities. These encompass programs centred on youth engagement and support, mental health and wellbeing, community strengthening and resilience building, environmental recovery, and disaster preparedness.

Additional support was offered directly to community groups, and occasionally to individuals, by District 9800.

Further funding was directed towards a major study by Australian Rotary Health into the psychological impacts of the disaster, with a view to determining appropriate remedial actions in the belief that addressing the psychosocial impact of disaster is of high priority.

The last Black Saturday project conducted with District 9800 funding was only completed in 2018, the program closely supervised by district Rotarians over a protracted period.