

Arts, health, community resilience and healing: the importance of the story

Rosa Maria McManamey¹

¹University Department of Rural Health, University of Tasmania

There are two big forces at work, external and internal. We have very little control over external forces such as tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, disasters, illness and pain. What really matters is the internal force. How do I respond to those disasters? (Leo Buscaglia)

Abstract

This paper discusses a response in rural communities and rural health communities to challenges and natural disasters little noted in research that contributes greatly to their ongoing health and wellbeing. It suggests the collection of stories, accounts, impressions and creative responses to difficulties and disaster within communities that rise to show and promote resilience further strengthens not only the health and wellbeing of the geographic or health related community affected, but impacts significantly on the fabric of the Australian ethos. The paper draws on one case study in rural Tasmania and includes examples of the outcomes and resilience of community creative response to bushfire, health issues and drought policy in rural Australia.

Introduction

Drought and natural disasters, such as bushfire and flood, impact dramatically on rural communities affecting their economic, ecological, social and health wellbeing. The Australian environment is *inherently* vulnerable to specific natural disasters (Maguire & Hagan, 2007). The external response and attention to disaster is immediate. In the longer term, when the public focus has moved from a particular event, in what ways might communities respond to the social and mental health repercussions of a natural disaster that builds resilience and recovery? This paper discusses a 'grass roots' led community initiative to engender healing and regeneration through art and creativity in rural Tasmania, Australia, as a response to a natural disaster, the Tasmanian East Coast bushfire 2006. While there are anniversary event and celebrations marking recovery after disaster, this paper focuses on the publication of written and creative expression emerging from the rural communities. These stories and publications are often part of a combined community initiative to mark resilience and regeneration.

Community led publications as a response to natural disaster containing stories artworks and poems that contribute to a multi layered series of needs and processes. They initially function in a community historical context. Experiences are shared from a broad number of areas both from within the affected community and from those involved in aiding rescue and recovery. These publications are highly significant in that they contain impressions and stories that not only contribute to community recovery, healing and wellbeing after an event, but they are rich in local knowledge, and they provide examples of remarkable community cohesion and regeneration. They are the result of, and contribute to, the further development of bonding, bridging and linking social capital surrounding recovery.

These publications show both written data and visual expression that can not only bring about community healing and closure but inform on issues pertaining to a number of area of recovery policy and preparation for future events.

Background to a natural disaster—Tasmania 2006

Tasmania contains a population of 485,300 and has the most regional population in Australia with 59% of its population living outside of the capital city, compared with 37% nationally (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2005). While Tasmania has suffered from the increasing effects of drought over the past seven years, areas are not as severely affected as other areas in Australia such as the North-West of Victoria and parts of South Australia. Tasmania however has the highest percentage of natural timbered and mountainous terrain of any state, prompting the most difficult access to, and areas for, bushfire.

On 10th December 2006 a fire was first reported in the East Coast Nicholas Range as intense, burning out of control and spotting rapidly. The fire continued over three weeks. The areas covered by the Tasmanian East Coast Break O' Day Council, the council affected by the 2006 bushfire, include the inland population centres of St Marys, Fingal, Mathinna, Mangana, Cornwall, Pyengana, Goshen and Weldborough. Its area covers 3,809 square kilometres and has a population of 6,000. Eighty nine Tasmanian Volunteer Bushfire Brigades were involved in fighting the fire, as well as a number of firefighting crews from mainland Australia. The town of St Marys experienced falling cinders throughout that period. The community was continually on alert to protect their properties. Shortly before the bushfire ceased, there was the loss of one life, a young man of 20 years. The area, 30,000 plus hectares burnt, included areas of crown land, forestry cultivation, farms and private properties including 23 individual homes. Response to the fire was immediate and cross sector

The bushfire was contained totally by mid January 2007 and the more visible environmental effects remained unchanged. While many positive events and generous actions and high commendations had occurred, the negative remained strong in the community psyche and storytelling and communication appeared to focus on and enforce a sense of decline. A need to assist community healing and social recovery was apparent.

Background to the initiative

Regener8 project was set in motion to address the sense of loss, suffering and negativity within the East Coast community. It was initiated by a community member who proposed an exhibition and gathering of community stories to local community members. It was immediately supported by the Healthy Community Project, part of the Regional health Service St Helens. A core group from the local and broader Tasmanian community was formed. The purpose of the project in organising an art exhibition and publication of community stories and experiences was to mark the anniversary of the fire by displaying examples of growth and resilience after the fire in order to set in motion community healing. The event would not be termed "a celebration" as there were many within the community that had suffered great losses. While there was pain and anger over issues surrounding the fire, there were also positive outcomes and a need to acknowledge the many different forms of generosity given throughout

The publication of a book of stories relating to the event from a wide number of perspectives had three aims: that of acknowledging loss and further, gratitude engendering healing; the retention of history pertaining to the event; and the sharing of local knowledge. The sharing of local knowledge was primary and critical in both contributing to the regenerative process and as evidence for ongoing practice and learning.

Art, health and wellbeing

Where resilience is a positive response or outcome to physical, economic or health adversary, art in this paper is defined as creative endeavour giving expression to emotion and thought, and provides the voice to that response of resilience. "The role of community art is seen as a process that has outcomes of improved relationships and communication building social capital" (Kigma 2002). In this paper the role of art can be seen in the further context, as both a tool of resilience and reflecting resilience as engendering community wellbeing and health. The World Health Organisation defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely, the absence of disease or infirmity". However in standing by that definition as a fundamental basis of health the definition is qualified further and speaks of the "highest attainable standard of health" as a fundamental human right, thus taking into account limiting circumstances such as congenital handicap, or the serious consequences of disease or accident such as natural disaster (Gigase 1987).

The more accepted place of art related to health as arts-based activities in general literature is in its aim to improve individual and community health and wellbeing. In measuring well-being Vincent (2004) uses social cohesion as the basis for community resilience. These measures are based on social and support networks, social participation and community engagement. Wellbeing in socio-economic terms is seen as an extended multidimensional concept focusing on three important dimensions of life: standard of living, health and education (Decancq, Decoster & Schokkaert 2008). While Rolfe (2006) suggests there is no definition of social cohesion it is only based on togetherness and that the dictionary portrays it as a process or 'the action or conditioning cleaving or sticking together (OED 2000 in Rolfe 2005), social cohesion could be seen in the actioning of goals that result in benefits and improved wellbeing of a community by that community i.e. both in the formation and the results of its social engagement. The Victorian Government and RMIT University *Report on Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing through community and Cultural development* (McQueen-Thomson, James & Ziguras 2004) put forward the three determinants of mental health as: social inclusion, acceptance of diversity and economic participation.

Resilience

In a global and ecological though fundamental context, "resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb insults or disturbances without fundamentally changing or flipping often into a different configuration or state. The system can be ecological or socio-economic or both (a linked socio- ecological system)" (Hughes et al. 2008). Its importance is in the ability to grow and develop after adversity.

Rolfe 2006 suggests that resilience research explores the capacity of individuals, families and whole communities to respond effectively to significant adversity and risk. As an outcome of individual capacities resilience must be a result of personal capacities and social cultural and political assets (Ungar 2003). This is strongly supported in earlier research where social cohesion while seen as the property of a group is investigated through the understanding or combination of individual actions (Mudrack, 1989).

Where creativity is explored in research related to community resilience, termed *social resilience*, it is noted as part of three properties or aspects of how people respond to disasters: *resistance*, *recovery* and *creativity* (Kimhi & Shamai, 2004 in Maguire & Hagan 2007). Maguire and Hagan (2007) acknowledge that the more resilient a community is, the quicker it returns to its pre-disaster state. They find that "a creative community may learn from the experience and teach its members how to better prepare for future disasters...so that higher levels of post-disaster resilience are attained" (p. 17).

Common themes in publications

A common theme through community publications as a response to bushfire was the attention to the need and importance of producing stories to contribute to maintain history and local knowledge (Lannen et al. 2007 ; McManamey 2007 ; Proule 2006). After the South Australian fire on the Eyre Peninsular, Proule (2006) found that many people had written down their experiences to put perspectives into events as they unfolded.

An event of this magnitude is important part of our heritage and should be learned from. Many wrote to reflect what they did and what they would do given more warning. Many wrote as a means of passing on to others what they did and their response (p.4).

The stories and books were also seen as “champions for change and opportunities for improvement in the future” (Lannen et al. 2007).

Pomonal Bushfires: Stories as Told by Those Who Were There (Cope & Cope 2006) is a collection of personal experiences and of individuals and families who stayed on properties and recollections of those who evacuated were collected ‘as a reminder of the bonding of the people of Pomonal in the spirit and neighbourliness that arose out of shared adversity’ (p.iii) .

Since Black Saturday February 2009, Victoria two books have been published with community accounts of heroism and community cohesion. *Black Saturday: Stories of love, loss and courage from the Victorian Bushfires* (McGourty 2009) ‘a tale of everyday people who, when fate demanded, became heroes’.

One of the outcomes of the drought in Victoria in the Wimmera Mallee region was the construction of a pipeline to stem channel evaporation loss. However, this involved the filling in of farm dams and the channels in the area. While the pipeline was greatly beneficial, what for over seventy years in recorded history had been the source of great recreational and social activity i.e. family gathering, boating, barbeques, fishing and yabbing was ceased. Not only were farm families experiencing the serious impact of drought, loss of income, health and mental health issues, but also a further loss for social interaction adding to their social disengagement. *Dam fine yarns : watery tales from the Victorian Wimmera and Mallee* (McKinnon, Martin & Cathcart 2005) was a collection of stories i.e. *Yellow Yabbies, Muddy Oasis , Turning on the Tap* and recollections from families recording their memories and experiences of the family dam and social life and events involving the dams.

Case study background

A small explorative pilot study *Art Health and Wellbeing: Regener8 Project* was commenced in May 2007 and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network, University of Tasmania. The purpose in documenting the experiences of people involved in fire fighting and directly or indirectly affected by the 2006 East Coast Fires was twofold. Firstly, its aim was to assist in the publication of a collection of narratives and images as a publication *Regener8: stories and impressions of the Tasmanian East Coast Bushfire 2006* in December 2007. The publication documents and gives insights into the experiences, emotions and effects of the East Coast fires from members of the local community and people taking part, involved in or affected by the fire. Secondly, the research project studies the issues and resilience of a community regeneration process in relation to creative art practice.

Prior to holding the Regener8 anniversary event and to inform the collection of narratives, nine (4F/5M) semi-structured interviews were carried out. Two months after the Regener8 book had been published data was gathered from 18 individuals comprising 3 community members, 2 project organisers, 3 art and

story contributors, 3 volunteer fire fighters, 2 service providers, 1 political leader, 1 council members, and 2 members of the public were undertaken in February – May 2008. Feedback provided data on five questions: *major outcomes; negative outcomes; issues raised by the regenerate project; issues solved by contributions or response to the project; economic development from the project*. Survey data gathered at the exhibition sites contributed a response from attendees and general public ($n=173$). Therefore the semi-structured interview results, feedback and survey data contribute to shaping the response

The book contained poetry, art works, photos and images, narratives and reports. There were seven levels of contributors informing the sharing of local knowledge within the book. They were from: chief, officers, volunteer members of the Tasmanian Volunteer Firefighting brigades; households affected by the fire; community impacted on by the fire; NGOs' reports and observations; major services, both business and government, maintaining assistance under duress (e.g. Aurora Energy replacing burnt poles 100 meters behind, after fire had gone through); media reporters' independent observations (e.g. Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reporter's reflection on community spirit) ; and civic reporting, mayor and community development officer.

Volunteer Contributors	Number
Book — stories and poetry	60
Images and photography in book	29
Exhibition art works	38
Supporting project and book production	32
Song/music composer "Scamander Burns"	1
Total	160

Issues raised and addressed within the book

In a social context the issues that the participants felt were addressed:

- *Appropriate means of paying tribute* to a young life lost, and ongoing losses suffered by the community members;
- *Isolation*—social inclusion—means of drawing affected community members closer together as part of a healing process;
- *Negativity* replaced with a greater understanding of impact on and positive responses of others;
- *Acceptance of diversity*—forestry workers' contributions not valued or initially acknowledged; tension in the area between environmentalists, volunteer fire fighters, and forestry;
- *Greater understanding of others' experiences and volunteers' contributions* by unaffected individuals — "all was media hype";
- *Greater understanding of physical issues volunteer fire fighters face* and logistics associated with overall organisation, e.g. initial food provision for volunteer fire fighters; map reading and difficulties in firefighting out of local area;
- *Community cohesion* brought about by the acknowledgment of community members "everyday heroes" across a spectrum of social and economic backgrounds;

- *Strengthening successful policy*—stories showed strong support for success of the stay and defend policy along with support of members who did choose to leave early;
- *Support for future preparedness*—overall discussion and examples within the publication supported preparedness and enabled community members—empowering the community;
- *Problems with mapping and fire fighting* in different rural settings and out of one's own locale away from local knowledge;
- *Increased learning*—shared stories inform individuals, community and policy;
- *Attention drawn to “non preparedness”*—towards preparing for the future. It related to a lack of awareness /compliance of community members to general local regulation related to safety e.g. two entrances/exits to properties, safe pipes and adequate water to maintain a defence;
- *Reduced negativity*—through inclusion of stories containing experiences from contributors with a broad range of demographic, social and economic backgrounds, many felt their perspectives and understanding of what others had experienced, suffered and contributed had broadened.

Participants’ view on the importance of the book

From the data in the pilot study of the Tasmanian East—Coast Bushfire, it was felt that the publication *Regener8: stories and Impressions of the Tasmanian Bushfire 2006*, (McManamey,2007) did achieve its aims of acknowledging loss and gratitude engendering healing; the retention of history pertaining to the event; and the sharing of local knowledge both contributing to the regenerative process and as evidence for ongoing practice and learning. Participants in the pilot study felt the sharing of stories was important because of:

- They showed areas of recovery, bravery, resilience and understanding of suffering.

Lil and I fought the spot fires around the house for as long as the water held out. At times the smoke was so thick and so little oxygen in the air we struggled to get enough air to breath. When it was at its worst I started to feel that we'd made the wrong call and now the family was going to die. The feeling of guilt and responsibility was terrible

- The giving of stories, interviews and experiences for publication, and exposing of self could be seen as examples of high levels of individual trust (Trust, 2006).

He laughed, sprang into the Ute, tossed me a bottle of water and I never did see him again. The two plates glowed with reflected firelight and looked as if it had just come from outer space. (It was a long day). I pulled back the foil and the smell hit me like a sledge hammer. Roast lamb, potatoes, peas and gravy. Somehow by the will of Allah it was still hot. The first mouthful was the best thing that ever happened to me in my entire life. Tasmanian lamb, gravy and ‘goddamit’ mint sauce.I knew what I had to do. Go home, get a divorce, track down the lady who cooked this, remove her husband and marry her in a happily ever after fashion. That’s when I realised that something so perfect could not be of human hands and that somewhere in the valley was a dead set angel slaving over an Aga. I hope someone thanked her for the pleasure she brought to the fire line. Maybe I have passed her at the supermarket or more likely at the butchers where she was rejecting an inferior cut of lamb and I would never know. I am always on the lookout and one day I will recognise her mint sauce at fifty paces (Page 35-36).

- There was a high degree of sharing information about defence and policy (Resource dependency, Adger 2000).

We had prepared our property well...we even had a back up escape route arranged in case a fire came through the bush along our drive way. Trouble was the fire circled round and came inland from the sea- the complete opposite direction from which we had planned (p 27)

Fuel reduction: 'It may not be in this immediate area but it will happen again. It will happen within the state and the problem is the laws and regulations are actually getting tighter on fuel reduction...It has to be a patchwork thing. You know little heaps of little ones are really good. If you burn them at the right time it'll burn round the trees and they still growing fine. It won't hurt them. It only burns the fine ground fuel basically' (p. 46).

Location and mapping: 'mapping was one of the biggest problems with people from out of the area. You would be going up to Lloyd's house or this bloke' house and talking about local knowledge. So then you would try to transfer that onto maps so everyone knew where you were. Even the locals say 'I'm up at such and such's house. I don't know the road name it's just Bogie's house'. The same happens if we go out of our area. It's not just this fire; it's everywhere. On something this big it is a problem' (Page 40).

Radios: 'They became a big problem. The radio towers got burnt out and the power dropped. The repeaters went down. There were black spots in the radios. You couldn't actually get a signal so they relayed through the helicopters and communications guys actually went up to Paddy's Head. I think one of them ended up taking a mobile repeater station right to the top after it burnt out and set another one up. They carried it all in by hand and they carried battery packs in to South Sister and got that one going to get the communications going. Normally you don't burn out three mountain ranges at once. When we lost the lot it was horrendous' (p.44).

Lost and mapping: 'so I stopped them and asked what they were doing and why they were tying green tape to my gates. They then informed me they were from Parks and Wildlife and were mapping out a route for the water truck to get to a house on the top of a hill up past Paddy's Head. Why I asked would you be going this way? One bloke said 'Yeah' that road up there is a bit rough in places. 'Well' I said that's because it's not a road, it's my back yard. How did you get in there?' After a lot of explaining, boy, were they lost' (p.17). .

- It showed what happens when "we unite in our communities and across state sectors to combat natural disaster and regenerate" (Social capital).

They had no trouble with people if they called up and said they wanted 500 fire-fighters in two hours they would be here. People come from everywhere, mainly volunteers from fire brigades around the state (p.41).

- The book went on to inform. Stories from the publication were used by ABC National Radio in developing early warning systems in South Australia to construct systems for "getting information from local people and out to people" (Personal communication, 2008)
- Interviews and stories from the book were used in the major regional newspaper to mark the anniversary event and contributed to furthering a sense of identity and pride.
- The book had brought about a realisation of the importance and examples of social capital in actions from smaller and less noticeable contributions, i.e. giving of time to do small items such as cleaning and maintaining fire engines, cooking food, sustaining volunteer fire fighters and community services—social cohesion and sense of community.

- People all around me needed hope and the return of some kind of normality. The insignificant act of making more small Christmas cakes was all I could think of doing.... Driving to Dublin Town, German Town and Upper Scamander was depressing—no colour—only blackness, no life—only silence. How could the gift of a small cake have any positive impact on the people who had witnessed such destruction? We prayed that it would give each person a glimmer of hope and some touch or normality (p.48).

- It further encouraged social cohesion and working together for future self reliance.

A lot more people have set up their own safety measures; they are a lot more self sufficient. Hardware's sold a heap of plotline and fire pumps. At Scamander, I'll use that as an example of lost power, when the power went off. A lot a people had freezers. Everyone's meat went off. Problems people hadn't thought about. They controlled the fires but a week later everyone's food was gone. Generator sales went up. Now everyone has prepared themselves. Many people didn't have torches or candles. I think it's changed the way everyone thinks. Everyone's a lot better set up and they've got a plan (P.42).

- The project and the book have brought closure, and “everyone together”—inclusivity (Existing norms, values/ attitudes/ Oxfam 2005).

Resilience

There are eight areas of resilience that can be drawn from community response to participate in the project as individual indicators for evaluation. The areas should be seen as multi-layered and include the indicators of mental health—participation and community engagement; acceptance of diversity; and economic engagement. Resilience within the project could be explored in future research through:

- *Community leadership- The Regener8* project was set in motion by a community member bringing in others. The response to the bringing together of stories, art works and photographs was totally grounded on *trust* for that community member. It would be quite possible that external requests for stories would perhaps have not obtained the number, insights and openness given.
- *Participation and community engagement* within the project: a) integrated art forms and humanities engendering healing, community cultural understanding, and regeneration; b) assistance developing and supporting ongoing action and production of anniversary event (McQueen-Thomson, James & Ziguras 2004);
- *Individual works*—individual stories and art works as models of resilience. Interaction between Individuals and community acts to inform as a collective resilience and cohesive society (Rolfe 2006);
- *Acceptance of diversity*—acceptance of stories. Works revealed great vulnerability and bravery in making “public” certain feeling and emotions (McQueen-Thomson, James & Ziguras 2004);
- *Education*—sharing experiences by capturing history and sharing local knowledge: support and praise for the “stay and defend or leave early” policy present in writings (Macguire & Hagan 2007);
- *Attitude*—humorous content and stories, humility, gratitude witnessed in the written stories and poems (Maginness 2007);
- *Social inclusion*—means to support and build others through openness (Matarasso 1997);

- *Social capital*—cross-sector partnerships and social capital at the bonding, bridging and linking levels (Woolcock, 1998) both within the stories related to the events and the development and publication of the book (Kigma 2002).

Areas of ongoing learning

Ongoing learning through the sharing of local knowledge appears a major outcome of these community led initiatives based on literature and finding from this study, to date. For example, within the Tasmanian *Regener8* book the sharing of local knowledge appears to supports five area of ongoing learning:

- *Policy* strong support and acclaim in stories for 'stay and defend or leave early' (McManamey, 2007, p.42).
- *Back burning*—raises the issues around policy and law related to of clearing and preparing properties
- *Defence mechanisms*—informing new data for Early Warning Systems has been acted upon by the ABC national radio network in South Australia.
- *General bushfire information* on the nature and shape, size, movement of bushfires i.e. fire storms, spotting, wind action carrying embers and leaves can start fires four plus kilometres away.
- *Actioning safety*—courage, bravery faced in traumatic situations and the heroic actions of 'ordinary people' (p.27).
- *Future preparedness*—ongoing motivation and interest in communities to attend further sessions on safety.

The community led creative events associated with natural disaster act to empower, not only aiding community healing but also contributing ongoing learning to the local communities and the broader state sectors. In the instance of *Regener8*, the natural disaster was bushfire. While the initiative was community led, the response was as to the bushfire cross-sectoral. The collection of personal experiences, stories and expression of emotion from a broad range of individuals from affected communities i.e. school children, radio journalists, community members NGOs, local government officers, media reporters, allows a window into areas of natural disaster response, recovery and future preparedness offers valuable qualitative data and insight into community action, reaction and cross sectoral support.

Conclusions

While the evidence and stories that arise from the experiences of natural disaster inform major issues they are in specific context.

Some areas and issues within the stories can be generalised, others offer the insight and give alternate perspectives. The editors of the books in many instances introduce the stories with care to point out that the contents were accounts and impressions whereby the accuracy of detail was the responsibility of each contributor.

While the news media is instantly accessible it is also more indirectly attainable. It cannot show the personal response and community cohesion that marks community resilience after trauma. Publication of community stories and impressions acknowledge altruism and heroism of 'ordinary people' not only at the coal face but behind the scenes. The publication gives continuing dignity to the many roles and creativity

within the community associated with the trauma; and to the people involved in directly and indirectly supporting recovery.

This paper has explored a number of areas relating to the importance of community led initiatives using storytelling and art to engendering healing after trauma or natural disaster.

It argues that there is little research relating to art, health and community resilience after a natural disaster. I

It draws attention to the gap in research related to the importance of the story. The study of community 'grass roots response through arts, narrative and story-telling reveals a valuable resource informing multidisciplinary fields of research, art, health, social science, and disaster management inform ongoing policy associated with community health, wellbeing and recovery.

The key factor to the importance of the story, told through art, poetry and the written word is that the stories and impressions are from within and community led.

St Marys community, you make me feel very proud to be an Australian. Such a fighting spirit. (Survey comment, 2008) .

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What might we glimpse in the contents of *Regener8?*

We read Rita's poem about the girls on Sunday out on a hayless hay ride; Legs dangling from the back of the truck,

The sky, the tree tops and the birds our canopy , but then we see on the horizon , the acrid smoke drifting (Rita Summers. P.20) .

In 'Not another bloody jelly bean' Gerald Aulich (p.9) who is the Fire Chief for the area describes the initial speed and rage of the flames' as a 'never before experience'; Mapping and lost, parks and wildlife officers plotting a course for the water truck kilometres away from their given target in the story ' That's not a road that's my back yard' (Dana Cox, p.17) . From a young volunteer fire fighter comes a description of fire storms that moves against normal wind patterns:

the fire made its own wind; and the wind was stronger from the fire than it was from the air. Just say if the wind was blowing south-east then the fire would want to go north because it was just building up its own momentum. It just sounds like a jet flying real low, just like a freight train (Brad McDonald, p. 43)

Peter in charge of a wildlife sanctuary tell of the loss of animals, the kindness of people most affected who respond to call for help caring for the animals, and the family pet that returned 10 days later with a definite perm. Jason the volunteer fire fighter talks about the family who when they arrived were able to fit a family into the fire truck till the fire burnt over them; later emerging from the truck to save the home. Michael the area fire chief remembers his worst experience as driving up to a property and meeting a dad and two young sons who were determined to stay. With five minutes to help them prepare, and not being able to stay longer because he was only in a ute had to warn others, he left. Unable to get back in for an hour and a half to see how they had fared he finally found them well. The Father however said nothing could ever have prepared him for the force noise, blackness. In future he would leave early. Other stories informed the experience and talked about the stay and defend policy '

Send the kids away, animals, definitely. If it hadn't had been for the people who stayed, I don't know... I mean we had 3000 fire fighters that weekend and they were everywhere you looked. Even ones that TAS fire suggested to leave with un-defendable houses with close trees, the majority stayed, fixed things and the ones that did, saved their houses. A bushfire will burn past your house in a couple of minutes. Your house will take 10 minutes before you have to get out of it even if it's on fire- (Jason McGiveron, p.42).

Bev who had a family of 5 young adult children, most in the volunteer fire service and ambulance service had to move from the area early with her youngest disabled son. What could she do to help? 40 Christmas cakes later ...

Finally we made a list and started deliveries. Driving to Dublin Town, German Town and Upper Scamander was depressing—no colour—only blackness, no life—only silence. How could the gift of a small cake have any positive impact on the people who had witnessed such destruction? We prayed that it would give each person a glimmer

of hope and some touch or normality. From the “thank you” phone calls and the happy smiles we saw we knew our prayers were answered. In return we were blessed. The lost “Christmassy” feeling returned to us in full measure—(Beverly Rucenach, p. 48).

Emma’s poem about the fire at Cornwall described the men and her father running into the flames. They survived. The fire turned at the last moment and they were spared. Her final words ‘The fire taught us how close we are- the community (Emma Squires, inside front cover page).

Presenter

Rosa Maria McManamey is a Junior Research Fellow at the University Department of Rural Health, University of Tasmania. Rosa has a background in research related to social capital and community engagement and also has a longstanding interest in the arts. Rosa recently was designer and editor of *Regener8—stories and impressions of the Tasmanian East Coast Bushfire 2006*, a book of community experiences to which over 83 members of the St Marys community and a number of organisations contributed stories, images, artworks and poems. Stories and experiences from the East Coast fire were gathered by a prominent St Marys community member Jan Sparkes. The aim of the book was to engender community healing marking an anniversary event, retain local knowledge and pay tribute to a young life lost as a result of the fires. Rosa has been involved in a wide number of research areas in rural health, including health outsourcing, diabetes, multidisciplinary education, health social entrepreneurs and currently an evaluation of rural teaching sites in Tasmania.