



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

# Stories are the Toolkit

Community-led Disaster Response,  
Recovery and Adaptation

## Acknowledgement of Country

The University of Sydney is built upon the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and the University Centre for Rural Health is built upon the lands of the Widjabul Wia-bal people of the Bundjalung Nation. We acknowledge that the research activity conducted for this vignette series also took place on the lands of the Dharug, Gundungurra and Arakwal people. Sovereignty was never ceded – these lands and waters always were and always will be Aboriginal – and we pay our respects to Elders past and present.

The research team expresses their gratitude to all the community organisations and individuals who participated in interviews and gatherings for this project. We acknowledge that your time is valuable and that in many respects the work in disaster recovery, preparation and adaptation in your communities remains ongoing. Special thanks go to Maddy Braddon, Rachel Hall, Mary Lyons, Serena Joyner and Jean Renouf for their guidance and contributions throughout the project.

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# Stories are the Toolkit

A vignette series that illuminates some of the community-led disaster response, recovery and adaptation actions across the Northern Rivers, the Hawkesbury and the Blue Mountains in NSW.



In recent years, communities across New South Wales have faced catastrophic bushfires and floods. These have been described as ‘unprecedented’ in their scales and as ‘the new normal’ due to climate change. In many respects, these disasters have had compounding impacts as people endure them one after another and concurrently with other crises – an ongoing global pandemic, disruptions to supply chains, inflation, and a housing crisis.

During these disasters, as systems became repeatedly overwhelmed, communities organised their own response and recovery efforts. Their actions and interventions – some which are still ongoing to this day – have been crucial in saving lives; in providing swift and targeted information, support and care to those in need; and in enacting long-term preparation and risk reduction through disaster readiness activities and systems, coordinated hazard removals and community building.

Often, these actions are informal and arise spontaneously from efforts by residents and local groups, which are regularly undertaken without official support from levels of government or formal agencies. Sometimes, they are established community practices, honed over years of living in place together and learning from past disaster experiences. In most cases, the effectiveness of these actions is rooted in the social connection and local knowledges that already exist within communities.

‘Stories are the Toolkit’ is a vignette series that illuminates some of these actions taken. The stories are based on interviews with 68 individuals who, in their different ways, contributed to community-led response, recovery and adaptation across three regions in New South Wales: the Northern Rivers, the Hawkesbury and the Blue Mountains.

The stories themselves are amalgamations. They blend and combine what people shared to highlight what is common among them all – despite the immense diversity of actions, experiences, places, people and backgrounds. The stories are not a comprehensive account of what communities did during and after the bushfires or floods. There is a whole host of interventions made that are not covered in this series but are just as important.

We are obligated to fairly and accurately represent what community members shared with us, without infringing on their right to privacy. In some cases, however, this was not possible. Identifying the work of some First Nations and LGBTQIA+ participants, for example, would have made it obvious whose stories we heard. It is also not our place, nor is it

possible or appropriate, to ‘rewrite’ their stories into amalgamated characters that removed these backgrounds and circumstances.

This means there are limits to the scope of the vignettes and the extent to which we can represent the full spectrum of the communities we engaged. These vital contributions inform our other research outputs and findings that will be shared in different formats. Rather, the stories included here focus on what seems less visible and recognised when we think of community-led disaster response, recovery and adaptation. These vignettes highlight how different contributions can be made through various skillsets, in many ways enabling those more visible actions to be taken. This is a key point that disaster-affected communities wanted others to know.

Another key point is the fundamental importance of social connection and networks. Each story demonstrates how communities often drew upon so-called ‘everyday’ social networks to coordinate support and to access skills, resources and local knowledges – from community pages on Facebook and spreadsheets on laptops, to neighbours checking in on each other and street maps drawn on butcher paper, to tapping into the networks that exist around schools and hobby groups, places of worship, activist and volunteer groups, and all manner of other things that bring people together. In this sense, what is ‘ordinary’ is powerful and has made a profound difference for many people.

The stories also highlight some of the difficulties people faced as well as how they worked around these difficulties. Having to ‘learn as you go’ was routinely cited as a key challenge. Many of those we interviewed said they now ‘feel like pros’, having had to put into practice their organising multiple times over. Others expressed a strong desire to learn from each other to improve how they respond to future challenges. This knowledge is so valuable for other communities – including, potentially, your own! We hope that this vignette series will inspire communities and reduce risk through shared experiences.

The research that informs this series was conducted by researchers at the Sydney Environment Institute and the University Centre for Rural Health in Lismore, both part of the University of Sydney. This research was funded by the NSW Government’s ‘Disaster Risk Reduction Fund’ and undertaken in partnership with Resilient Blue Mountains, StreetConnect and Plan C. Our thanks go to all these organisations and groups.

## Coordinating the Boats

*Trigger Warning: This vignette describes people stranded on their roofs due to rising floodwaters. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*Flood-affected communities do not remain idle when the need is urgent, and lives are at stake – including using boats to conduct rescues where needed. These interventions are well-known and well-documented. It is clearly dangerous work, taken at great personal risk by those onboard, as floodwaters are unpredictable and hazardous. This risk is amplified by the chaotic nature of disaster situations, where people are often acting without access to important information, resources and systems. The following vignette covers one way in which flood-affected community members organised a system of tracking and coordinating boat rescues to save lives and minimise the substantial risk taken by those on the water.<sup>1</sup>*

When Jess woke around 6:00 am on the morning of the flood, the first thing she did was reach for her phone. She had been worrying about the flooding all night, and she wanted to check the BOM app to see how much the water had risen. But she never even got to open the app, because she was taken aback to see 53 message notifications. She scrolled backward through them, trying to make sense of them, and felt her heart start thumping. What the...?! Ash and Lauren had been stranded on their roof in the middle of the night! They had just been rescued by someone, and now they were at a friend's house. James had also texted – group texts saying he was on his verandah roof with his dog. He had a kayak but thought the water was too strong. He had texted seven times; the last time at 4:14 am.

With a sense of rising panic, Jess called James's number. Straight to voicemail. She texted the group asking if anyone had heard from James, but she found she was only echoing the concerns of others. People were texting that they had been on the phone to 000 for 10 minutes to notify them of James's address, and they still hadn't been put through to anyone.

Image: Nicholas Rjabow via Shutterstock.



1. The State Emergency Service (SES) is the combat agency responsible for coordinating disaster response and rescue in New South Wales. While emergencies call for quick action, and coordination with emergency agencies are not always possible, the SES encourages community organisers to do their best to make their ongoing activities – such as those covered in this vignette – known to them in the given area during future disaster events. This would be mutually beneficial for the SES and disaster-affected communities to reduce future disaster risk.

Not really sure what to do next, Jess opened Facebook to see what was happening on the local groups. She couldn't believe what she saw. Scrolling down she read plea after plea from desperate people typing from their roofs or roof cavities, or from friends or family members who couldn't get in touch with loved ones in the flood zone. She couldn't see how they could all be rescued in time – there were so many of them! She tried not to think about how many casualties there would be.

By now the adrenalin was pumping, and Jess had decided without really thinking about it that she needed to be there to help. She grabbed what she thought she might need for a day in torrential rain and drove 15 minutes toward the centre of town. As expected, the highway was closed, but Jess was shocked by how high up the hill the water reached. Beyond was an endless expanse of grey water, punctuated by house roofs and criss-crossed with power lines. About 100 metres away, the tops of the traffic lights were just visible. The rain was driving sideways, the water was choppy, and it looked treacherous.

There were people clustered at the water's edge and a few boats and kayaks, but no one official that Jess could see. A grey-haired couple were climbing out of a boat operated by a young man, and a few people rushed to help as they struggled to lift their legs over the edge of the boat in their sodden clothes.

Where the hell were the authorities? Where was the fleet of boats rescuing everyone stuck on their roofs? Where was James?! Still no news on her phone.

As Jess was standing there wondering what on earth to do, another boat pulled up, and her friend Jen jumped out. Jen helped a man, a teenage girl and their cat onto solid ground after her. Someone had dry blankets in a car and whisked them into it. Jen sat down heavily on the medium strip. She was shaken and exhausted: the boat had hit something submerged under the water, and she had nearly fallen out. She told Jess she had been out since first light about two hours ago, spotting for the guy who owned the boat, whom she'd just met at the water's edge. She looked very cold, and when another man volunteered to jump in the boat, she gratefully handed him her life jacket. Jess grabbed the man's arm and told him how to get to James's house. The man promised to try to find him.

Wrapped in a blanket under Jess's umbrella, Jen told her a bit about her morning in the boat: about how fast and furious the water was near the river and how she was terrified they were going to hit their heads on power lines. But mostly she talked about the people still out there, hundreds of them,

**The scene was becoming more and more chaotic. People were just heading out in any direction... There was no way to prioritise who needed rescuing first or to ensure that those with the biggest boats went to the places where the water was fastest-flowing and most dangerous. Who was making sure that all the online pleas for help were being triaged and responded to?**

all stuck on their roofs or their neighbours' roofs or inside their roofs. She'd seen them screaming out and waving frantically as the boat drove past.

According to Jen, the SES hadn't been conducting rescues through the night and had only arrived on the scene at the same time as her. But there wasn't that much they could do to respond to such an overwhelming situation. SES Headquarters had been flooded, and they only had a few boats. The SES guys Jen talked to told her that if she wanted to help, she should go up the hill to the makeshift headquarters that was being set up and await instructions. But there was no way she could sit around waiting. Instead, she found someone with a boat who needed a spotter and started rescuing people. She thought they had rescued about 30 people so far.

More people were arriving at the water's edge now, towing tinnies, kayaks and a few larger boats. Jess could see an SES boat out on the water as well. But Jen was worried – it was so dangerous out there, and there was no plan for how to conduct the rescues systematically and safely. The scene was becoming more and more chaotic. People were just heading out in any direction, maybe trying to find someone they knew. There was no way to prioritise who needed rescuing first or to ensure that those with the biggest boats went to the places where the water was fastest-flowing and most dangerous. Who was making sure that all the online pleas for help were being triaged and responded to?

Meanwhile, Jess's friend Dave had called to say he was up at the evacuation centre looking for James. He said he had tried calling, but no one seemed to know who was there or not. He had gone there in person, but he couldn't see James anywhere. Jess felt her stomach tighten at the news, but another part of her mind was wondering why the system at the evacuation centre wasn't working. Surely having people wandering around looking for their friends wasn't necessary and would only add to the chaos?

‘We can send boats to check the houses street by street, and we can mark them off when they’ve been done. It might save lives, and it will be a lot safer for the people on the boats.’

Jess’s mind was racing now. She didn’t really want to get in a boat, but she was good with spreadsheets, and her laptop was in her van. Could she help to create some order in the chaos by starting a spreadsheet to streamline the rescues? She would need to log all the requests for assistance and pinpoint their locations. She voiced her thoughts aloud to Jen, who responded enthusiastically.

‘Yes, I’ll help you!’ said Jen, ‘We can send boats to check the houses street by street, and we can mark them off when they’ve been done. It might save lives, and it will be a lot safer for the people on the boats.’

So that’s what they did. They reversed Jess’s van right to the water’s edge and sat inside it, side by side, Jess on her laptop hot-spotting off Jen’s phone. Jen started to direct the boats street by street, and Jess logged it all into the spreadsheet she was creating. She also began entering all the addresses people had posted on the Facebook pages and prioritising the most urgent rescues.

Whenever a boat pulled up and unloaded more people, Jen had them line up at the van and Jess recorded their names and addresses. Each person’s address was marked on the map, and they were added to the ‘safe’ list.

Through the morning, the team grew from the two of them to five people; a friend of theirs and two strangers had come down to see how they could help out. At one point, someone handed Jess a coffee, and around lunchtime, someone else turned up with an Esky full of hot pies and cheese and spinach triangles. Jess put her laptop down for five minutes and surveyed the surreal scene around her. Somehow, she and this random team of people were coordinating the boat rescues.

As Jess was finishing her pie, a text came in from an unknown number. It was James. He had dropped his phone in the water, but he was safe at his parents’ place. Jess felt like she was letting go of a breath she didn’t know she was holding. There was still all this craziness and panic going on around her, but thank God James was okay. It bolstered her sense that they could actually do this – they were actually doing this! They were saving lives. It was working!

Later that afternoon, Dave rang back. He was still at the evacuation centre and had heard about what Jess and Jen were doing. A friend of theirs at the evacuation centre had started a similar database up there. It was live online, so people could log on to see who still needed rescuing and who was safe. Dave was helping her, and they wanted to link Jess’s spreadsheet in.

And that’s how things were for the next day and a half. Jess felt like she was living out of her van. She was in constant contact with Dave at the evacuation centre, updating the live database of people marked safe, either because they had been rescued or they had turned up at the evacuation centre. And she had established a good rapport with some of the police officers who were now working alongside them, checking in with her about the jobs she had logged.

Jess and Jen stayed at the water’s edge until every last house and street had been cleared. When the boats finally stopped, they put their laptops down in disbelief and stretched their cramped limbs. There were cheers and hugs and tears. Jess suddenly felt so exhausted she could barely stand. As amazing as it had been to be a part of that, she needed everyone’s stuff out of her van right now, so she could go home for a long hot shower. ■



Image: Cultura Creative via AdobeStock.





Image: Alena via AdobeStock.

## Know Your Neighbours

*Trigger Warning: This vignette mentions bushfire events and describes the lead-up to the 2019–20 bushfire crisis. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*Disaster-affected communities frequently emphasise the need to ‘know your neighbours’ as a form of local knowledge – know who they are, what their needs and disaster plans may be and what skills and resources they have. These relationships may be informal; however, some communities create more formal structures of local warden or street facilitator networks. These are individuals who understand the lay of the land – before, during and after disasters – and can serve as a point of contact for advice as well as coordinate community-led fire readiness and preparation. This vignette covers one such example.*

Trevor stepped out his front door. It was morning, but the day was already heating up. This spring had been unusually hot, although hotter springs aren't really that ‘unusual’ anymore. He didn't want to think about what this meant for the coming summer. It was all just a little bit too familiar.

Four years since the last big fires. The fires that changed what Trevor thought ‘big’ was. He had seen his fair share of bushfires. You live in these mountains long enough, you'll see them. But those fires four years ago were something else. Everyone calls it ‘Black Summer’, but the truth is the fires burned earlier and longer than just summer. Trevor didn't like to think about it, but at the same time, it was the reason he was going for a walk. It was time to check in with his neighbours.

For most of his life, Trevor has lived in these mountains. He grew up here in the fifties and sixties before moving away for work. He returned in around eighty-five or eighty-six, with his wife, Debbie, and they have lived here ever since, on the same battle-axe street just off the main highway. They have had to leave a few times during bushfire seasons. It's never an easy choice. You always leave wondering whether your home will still be standing when you return. Trevor gets why others, like Jed next door, stay and defend, but it's just too dangerous where they live. There's only one way in and out, and it can easily get cut off during fires.

It's a risk we live with, Trevor thought as he walked onto the footpath and made his way over to Jed's place. That's what we always say.

Some of the houses here back onto the bush. It's why everyone loves to live here. But it has its dangers, and the fires may not always be there to save them.

'Heya, Trev. It's time to clear our gutters?' Jed had seen him approaching through his kitchen window and was waiting to greet him. He had a smile on his face. Jed had clearly noticed the bunch of notes in Trevor's hand.

'Yeah, gotta be done ... this summer will be a scorcher, I reckon. Debbie and I are thinking next weekend,' Trevor said.

Jed nodded. 'Yeah, I'll fix up my place then too,' he said, eyeing off the roof of his house.

Trevor didn't bother handing him a note. All it said was that he and Debbie were going to do the work around their house to prepare for the coming summer – mostly clearing the gutters and cutting back any vegetation near the house – and that if anyone else wanted to join in or needed help, then just let them know. Some bigger jobs might need to happen at a different time, like if a tree needed to be lopped, but he usually got a handful of houses doing their clearing at the same time. Jed was one of them. At the end of the day, they'd all come back to Trevor's place for a few drinks and conversation.

'Did you need to borrow anything for your place?' Jed asked.

Trevor shook his head. 'Nah, but Beryl and Vic said they needed someone to help with the ladder. I was hoping you could do that?' He chuckled. 'Vic has finally admitted he shouldn't be the one climbing that thing.'

'Heya, Trev. It's time to clear our gutters?' Jed had seen him approaching through his kitchen window and was waiting to greet him. He had a smile on his face. Jed had clearly noticed the bunch of notes in Trevor's hand.

They both laughed, although the truth was they were not far off Vic in that respect.

It was after the fires a few years before Black Summer when Trevor had first taken on this role as his street's 'facilitator'. It sounds more official than it is. He's certainly not 'in charge' of anyone. The neighbourhood centre put a call out for volunteers to become this sort of street-level 'fire-ready' network. Trevor isn't a member of the RFS or anything. But he and Debbie know most of their neighbours. They organise the street's Christmas party every year, where everyone comes over to their place, usually the weekend before. Their neighbourhood has a few younger families, but it is mostly a mix of retired folk or those approaching retirement. Coming out of that fire season, Trevor thought such a fire-ready network seemed like a good idea. Plus, he was already halfway there, given how well he knew his street and how long he had lived in the mountains.

The first meeting in their general area was attended by about half-a-dozen other volunteers. The plan was that each would keep in touch with their 10–12 houses, generally the size of a typical street or near enough to what was manageable for any one person. They would just get to know the people who lived in these houses – what their plans were, if they needed help figuring that out or tending to their homes in the lead-up to the hotter months, whether they might be at risk for different reasons – and deliver the newsletter the network produced each month. Stuff like that.

The volunteers would also share information – sometimes through doorknocking, other times through putting stuff in letterboxes or through a mailing list, whichever was most appropriate for each street and most comfortable for each volunteer. They would serve as a point of contact about fire readiness or for when residents put their plans into action. Each of them made their phone and email contact details available to be shared with anyone within their street's area.

Trevor said goodbye to Jed and moved on to the next few houses. He put a note in each letterbox he passed, except for the Roberts'. He knew they were on holidays. Their son was going to come up soon to check on their place and make sure it was ready. Their dog was already staying with him while they were away.

Of course, not everyone likes to feel they are being told what to do. It's not about being preachy about fire readiness, or assuming people don't know what they are doing. Most of his neighbours were old hands at it already. Trevor mainly just wanted to know if anyone needed help with preparing their

place. Many of them were retired and, like Vic, not necessarily in the best health. The younger families could be time-poor or need the extra hand with the little ones running around. And if asking everyone if they need help meant some of them were reminded to do it, then great!

Trevor got the idea for a street-wide fire readiness day from 'old Bill', his family's neighbour from back when he was a kid. There had been a bad fire back then, although he only barely remembers it. Afterward, his parents would always clear their gutters and tend to the vegetation when they saw Bill had done his. He never told them to do it. And, as he became less mobile over the years, Trevor's parents would help him out before spending the rest of the day tending to their own home.

Trevor made his way down the opposite side of the street. He dropped a note in number 53's letterbox. He didn't really have much to do with the Landows, having had some 'neighbourly disagreements' in the past. They never joined in the fire season preparations, but it didn't feel right to leave them out of the loop just because they weren't on friendly terms. In any case, they hadn't complained yet about Trevor's letterbox notes.

Susana was in the front yard of the next house over, pruning her garden as little Josie played with her toys on the front steps. Their car wasn't in the driveway, which meant her husband, John, was most likely out. Before Susana's family had moved in, the house had been a bit of a revolving door. Different tenants had moved in and out since the fires before

**You just don't know what is going on in others' lives, and it does become harder to engage people in preparation when enough time has passed since the last fires.**

last, and then it had sat empty for a while. The owner was largely absent, and the place had gradually become overgrown. No wonder nobody wants to move in, Trevor had thought grimly. He'd even called the real estate once to complain, using the details on that interminable 'for lease' sign that was always out the front. Despite the agent's evasiveness, some workers did appear the following week to tidy up the place.

Soon after that, Susana's family had moved in. A few days later, once they were settled, Debbie and Trevor popped over to say hello and to introduce themselves. Susana was from overseas, and John wasn't local to the mountains before moving to their street. Trevor didn't mention he was the street's facilitator at the time, though. They were greeting Susana and John as neighbours, first and foremost, and Trevor was mostly just relieved the house finally had occupants again. They seemed nice, and a few months later Josie arrived.

There were a few years where preparation did become a little lax, particularly when the fires before Black Summer became a more distant memory and the risk of future fires didn't seem that pressing. Trevor also noticed a drop-off in attendance for the facilitator meetings then, too. Admittedly, he missed a few himself. You just don't



Image: n\_u\_t via AdobeStock.

know what is going on in others' lives, and it does become harder to engage people in preparation when enough time has passed since the last fires. Given the amount of rain they'd had since Black Summer, it did sometimes seem ridiculous to even talk about bushfires. Yet, that rain had certainly helped the bush undergrowth to flourish...

'Hello, Trevor!' called Susana.

Josie waved, which Trevor returned with a wave of his own. He filled Susana in on their plans and asked if her family would need help with anything.

'No, we need to do some clearing out the back, but the front and the gutters are mostly ready,' she replied. 'It's been a very hot spring so far,' Susana added with a note of concern in her voice. 'I think we will leave earlier this time.'

Trevor nodded. He knew this was something that troubled Susana after the last fires.

Trevor had checked in on his neighbours at the last fires' peak. Some had left early and asked him to keep them updated on their street, as long as he could. There's an element of trust there, letting people know that your home is empty, which is important. Not everyone could leave though. There were a few families whose only car was often with their partner at work, which was the case for Susana and her little girl, who was still a baby back then. They were prepared. Susana had a friend she met through the local library's story time group who agreed to give her a lift to John's parents' house down the mountains if John himself wasn't around. But Susana found it difficult to make the decision to leave.

Trevor and Debbie had stayed as long as they felt they could. They eventually left to stay at Debbie's sister's place. Facilitators are not firefighters. We are not there to help defend properties or rescue people. Our purpose is to model bushfire readiness, and a core part of that is knowing when to leave. But it's a tough decision to make, even when you have experience with fires. When they made the decision to leave, Debbie went across the street to

tell Susana they were going. It was then that Susana finally decided she would do the same and called her friend.

Trevor left Josie and Susana to their play and gardening to continue his circuit around the battle-axe. The first facilitator meeting post-Black Summer was interesting. The others told stories about how they helped out-of-area fires navigate some of the streets because they can be pretty confusing to people who don't know the area. Another worked with the fires to make sure the right information was up on community pages online to help reduce the panic caused by misleading posts. It's a good idea that the emergency services should tap into our network, Trevor thought to himself. He could have passed on the information about who was left on their street to them instead of just Jed, who was focused on his own house at the time. It could save them time spent checking on already empty properties.

Some facilitators have stepped away from their roles since. Trevor understood why. It was a stressful time, and people need to take care of themselves. People shouldn't feel obligated to continue when they are running on empty. Many of them were old-timers now, too. Trevor wondered sometimes what that meant, what would happen when more of them stepped away.

People within the community will step up, though, Trevor thought. They always do. New facilitators had already joined, and folks down in the valley and in the small towns around the mountain were interested in setting up their own network now. They saw the need for something like this there, although it may need to be a bit different to suit their specific communities. But it's not like you need to be part of some 'official' facilitator network to do it. 'Old Bill' wasn't. It's really just about knowing your neighbours. And then there are people like Susana and John. They weren't locals when they arrived – but we all have to start somewhere, and, well, they have experience now. They are ready. ■

Trevor got the idea for a street-wide fire readiness day from 'old Bill', his family's neighbour from back when he was a kid. There had been a bad fire back then, although he only barely remembers it. Afterward, his parents would always clear their gutters and tend to the vegetation when they saw Bill had done his.

## Get Facebook

*Trigger Warning: This vignette mentions animal death caused by flooding events, as well as the loss of property and homes. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*Disaster-affected communities often emphasise how useful social media platforms – especially Facebook – are in helping them to connect with others and coordinate disaster response and recovery. Many community members tap into individual social networks online and pre-existing general community pages to identify needs, to connect with people and to source information and resources. Others create pages specifically for disaster-related purposes, such as information pages tailored to local areas. This vignette covers one such page – a ‘lost and found’ page created to return items found after floods – and illuminates some of the complexities of using social media for community organising.*

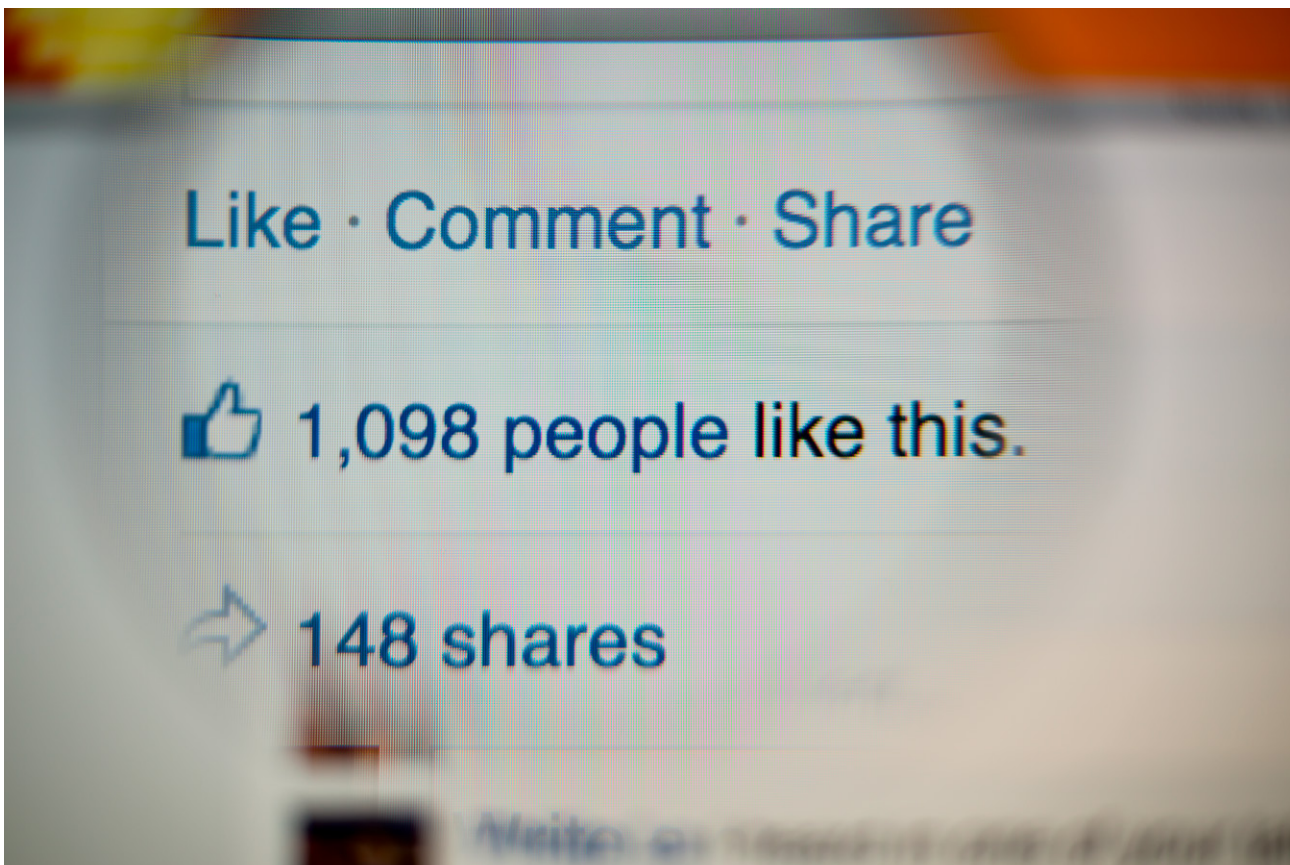
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Jack lives on the west bank of the river, safely above the 1-in-100 flood height. He doesn't need to worry about his place going under when the waters rise. However, when the bridges go under, Jack can't reach the other side. Not unless he wants to drive several hours around the mountains, hoping there are no landslips... well, it's not like he isn't used to working from home these days anyway.

It was about a month after the first flood, sometime before the second, when Matt called Jack for help. Matt is Jack's mate from soccer. He lives in a small riverside town closer to the bank, so he does have to sandbag and watch the water levels every time there's an alert. The call was about a Facebook page Matt had created. It was intended to help people coordinate the return of their things that were swept away in the waters; a sort of 'floods lost and found' page.

The way Matt tells it, he was partly inspired by the page that tracks the journey the wharf in town makes every flood. The wharf isn't well-designed, and it gets washed away down the river each time. People send in their photos and links to news articles covering the wharf's progress. It's a bit of fun, but also shows how many people have eyes on what's in the water.

Image: Gil C via shutterstock.



Matt was also inspired by the local community pages that saw a lot of coordinating and organising happen through member posts. There were a lot of posts like: 'who can help with this?', 'can I borrow this from anyone?', 'has anyone checked out those folk over there?', 'has the bridge opened yet?' and so forth. Neighbours helping neighbours, everyone pitching in and sharing stuff.

But the volume of posts meant some requests went unnoticed. There were also a lot of memes and some ranting and raving, of course. People needed to vent – Jack certainly understands that – and the posts were made by people trying to find some humour in a shit situation, like with the wharf. Among these, Matt saw the same picture being reposted, not only reposted to the same page more than once, but to a few other pages he was part of as well. It was someone's gymnastics trophy. The poster had the owner's name but just couldn't reach them.

So, Matt created a community page specifically for returning things found, just for the communities along the river. The page blew up overnight, and it went from something like a few dozen people to thousands in a matter of a day or so. That was why Matt called Jack – having over ten thousand members was great, but it also meant Matt needed help managing the page.

'I can't do it alone,' he admitted at the time, 'especially when the power and cell coverage out my way keeps dropping out, and I need to keep an eye on the water levels'.

'You also need to sleep, mate,' Jack added.

Matt asked Jack if he could join as an admin. Jack was happy to help, to pitch in in his own way. He had been a moderator back in the day for some online message boards he ran.

'Who knew that would come in handy?' Jack joked.

What Matt learned through the first flood was that a page like this needs some guidance to ensure it is effective, to keep people on topic (especially given how many people joined), and so it can remain effective going into future floods. Because, unfortunately, there will be more floods. Now the page is already up, though, they won't have to reinvent the wheel each time.

The way the community page works is people post a photo of something and say, 'does this belong to anyone?' Then others will comment, 'that's mine' or 'I know who's that is'. There has been some really meaningful stuff recovered. Someone's ashes were posted at one point, and they were returned to their family. Wedding photos, a metal box with hand-crafted quilts in it, more than a few jet-skis and boats. Some really bizarre stuff too: there was one really eye-popping statue, a fiberglass one, that took a journey down the river – each to their own!

Private groups would form once someone said something was theirs, and they'd coordinate the return themselves. Jack and Matt didn't have much to do with that. Their role was basically to moderate the page to ensure it was being used properly. Neither of them was concerned with the potential for theft. It's a risk, of course, but they hadn't heard of any claims that someone stole someone else's property. In any case, the floods brought people closer together in ways that fostered trust. That said, some of the possessions could be valuable, like jewellery and jet-skis. Jack suggested they add a guideline for posting that encouraged withholding an identifying feature – such as an engraving or something, if the item had one – so it could be used by people to ensure they were speaking with the rightful owner. That's not always possible to do, but it can sometimes help.

They introduced other guidelines too. Where Matt lives is downstream from some caravan parks, and the sight of whole caravans rushing down the river and smashing to pieces against trees was not uncommon. Locals know some of these caravans are illegally built as permanent homes, and the comments under those pictures could be really judgmental. Stuff like: 'why would you choose to live there, with that risk?' But that's what people say about them living on the river and the floodplain or in the bush! Home is home, y'know? The rules and regulations about building should be left aside for a moment; that wreckage is still someone's life and home. People need to remember that they are posting images of things that are potentially meaningful for their owners.

**So, Matt created a community page specifically for returning things found, just for the communities along the river. The page blew up overnight, and it went from something like a few dozen people to thousands in a matter of a day or so.**

They tried to keep the page ‘quiet’, so to speak, between floods. Matt thought about opening it up for discussion about how to protect and secure valuables, but they decided against it. Allowing it to become another general discussion page would risk losing members, and it would be difficult to rein in when the next flood hits.

This was never clearer than when the page had images of dead animals posted. It happened a few times, not a lot. A pet cat and some cattle. The photos were confronting, and the comments got angry. Others insisted that people needed to see the floods’ consequences, as there were non-locals and probably some media in the group. They didn’t remove the posts or set one of those blur filters for confronting imagery; Jack supposes he and Matt agreed with those who wanted them to be shown. It was an angry time, and they felt it too. Jack’s still not sure if it was the right decision though. What if a kid saw their dead pet, and then saw strangers bickering over it? It’d be really upsetting. Again, he’s not sure what the right call is there.

They did have to intervene – and even ban some local members – when they started posting angry rants and political memes. It’s not like Jack didn’t agree with some of their sentiments, but the page was set up for a particular purpose. Matt wanted to keep the focus on reuniting people with their lost treasures, and not have the attention move away to wider issues. So, Jack had to ban a few repeat offenders, which was not pleasant. Matt knew some of them personally, but that’s where Jack could help; he didn’t know them, making it less awkward than for Matt. They did create some posting guidelines after this to try to prevent it happening again, and to clearly explain why they would enforce these guidelines. It was about ensuring the effectiveness of the page, and it couldn’t be effective if it was being used in ways that either diverted attention or made people leave because they felt the page was aligned this way or that way politically.

They tried to keep the page ‘quiet’, so to speak, between floods. Matt thought about opening it up for discussion about how to protect and secure valuables, but they decided against it. Allowing it to become another general discussion page would risk losing members, and it would be difficult to rein in when the next flood hits. And they already had a lot of spammers to deal with.

The membership surge was amazing. By necessity, the page needed to have non-locals, but this also became tricky. With that mass attention came members who did not have the best intentions: ‘disaster tourists’ (your voyeurs wanting to peek in at others’ misfortune), media, some trolls and victim-blamers. The worst of them were the spammers looking to earn a buck – selling crap like ‘flood proof’ plastic coverings and other things. It’s not like a screening process (say, a set of questions before people can join) would help either. You don’t want to accidentally screen out those out-of-area folk who genuinely want to find the owners for something that has washed up somewhere far away. Some things were turning up all the way out on the coast. And, even with a team of admins, you can’t carefully comb through everyone that joins.

After the second flood, Matt and Jack asked another soccer mate to be the third admin. Dave wakes up pretty early to go for morning runs, so he’s usually around when Matt and Jack are asleep. Between the three of them, there’s usually someone there moderating during the floods, and the in-between times are a little more manageable, as less things are turning up to be returned. It helps them keep on top of the spammers.

We have it down now, Jack thinks, what we want this page to be, and how it will be run.

It’ll be useful when they face future floods. ■

## Everybody Pitches In

*Trigger Warning: This vignette mentions flooding and bushfire events. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*Key strengths of the community-led responses to disasters are their ability to draw on local networks, skills and knowledge and their ability to respond swiftly and flexibly in times of crisis. Due to being embedded in place, the community's response is often the first to spring up and sometimes the only help available when emergency agencies are overwhelmed. This vignette describes how a family drew upon their 'everyday' networks around work, school, sports and their neighbourhood to organise response and recovery support across multiple floods.*

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Annette has lived in a semi-rural village on the river for 30 years. She is married with two kids; her son (Jaime) is in Year 8, and her daughter (Rachel) is in Year 5. Annette works in the office at a primary school in the next village over. Before that, she was heavily involved as a parent-volunteer with her children's primary school, running the canteen once a month (usually with Sandra, the mother of Jaime's best friend) as well as during the sports carnivals. She also helped organise and run the yearly disco dance and various fundraisers. Both Annette and her husband, Mark, also run the canteen during home games for Jaime and Rachel's junior cricket and soccer clubs.

Annette remembers her parents were always members of this association or that group – she supposes their community-first attitude rubbed off on her. Mark is supportive, although he knows better than to try and stop her. He has his own community spirit, though, with the sports clubs. Mark knows every child's runs and goals and averages for the season and often shares this knowledge when he crosses paths with other parents during groceries. The family often makes fun of him for this (they say he 'corners people'),

Image: MMD Creative via shutterstock.







Image: Alisaaa via AdobeStock.

but for Annette the experiences with the fires, the floods and even COVID has really underscored how important these connections with people in the community are.

Not long after Black Summer, the first flood hit, and the bridges went under, meaning they were cut off from the other side of the river and from town. This was when Annette began assisting with disaster response. Thanks to work, her school volunteering and just being a mum with two kids at different schools, Annette knew many of the parents and children in the local area, as well as everyone from local principals and teachers to the cleaners. Her kids also know a lot through visiting friends' houses; Annette swears her daughter has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the pets and their owners on their street. And this gave her some insight into the families that proved useful during the floods. It was through Rachel, and her friendship with Emily, that Annette learned that Emily's mum, Hayley, was expecting. Through Jamie, Annette learned that his friend's father Dan is a single parent and works night shifts.

**Annette will never forget the emotion on Dan's face when she knocked on his door and handed over several cooked meals, two loaves of bread, a few litres of long-life milk and a pack of toilet paper. She realised he was becoming quite desperate, and others would likely be in a similar position.**

When the bridges go under, it can be a matter of days and even over a week before they reopen again, so food and other supplies can go scarce. In the floods that followed the fires, the local supermarkets were cleared out in a couple of days. It had been quite a while since the last flood, and Annette thinks a lot of people – herself included – were caught off guard. As the days dragged on, Annette started calling some of the families she thought might need help. She called Hayley herself, and asked Jaime to check in with his mate to see how Dan was getting along; both fridges and pantries were starting to get bare.

Annette asked around her street for some ingredients to cook up (along with some from her own cupboard) and other supplies like toilet paper to put into a hamper. Sandra, who lives nearby and has worked in hospitality as a chef, came over to help cook the meals. It was like working at the canteen, but with more home cooking and less kids asking for Zooper Doopers! Annette will never forget the emotion on Dan's face when she knocked on his door and handed over several cooked meals (pasta bake and a potato salad), two loaves of bread, a few litres of long-life milk and a pack of toilet paper. She realised he was becoming quite desperate, and others would likely be in a similar position. Some might also be unwilling to ask for help...

Annette knew of several other families at both her work and children's schools who lived pretty hand-to-mouth and could probably do with some help. She called a few more people she knew to check-in. Mark did the same for some of the parents they knew through weekend sports. For some of the families she knew from work, Annette asked others to check in on them instead. She thought it would

be better for someone with closer connection to reach out, rather than the lady from the school's front desk cold calling. Maybe that would not have mattered, but Annette was already checking in on a lot of people by then.

She also put some callouts on a few of the local Facebook pages – the ones usually reserved for people bickering over council pick-ups and the like. She asked for donations of food ingredients and other supplies, as well as if anybody else needed help. The response surprised her. People seemed to rally around the call, and were generous with what they gave, despite the panic buying in the area. People really shifted from a focus on themselves, and their homes, once the reality of the flood set in and the need for help became clear around them; it was genuinely a collective effort. Mark was soon driving around collecting donations, and Jaime helped him so he could get out of the house. They ended up using the empty granny-flat next door as a makeshift pantry. Their neighbour, June, said it was fine. Nobody was living in it then.

Hayley also suggested contacting a local social support service who would have an even better sense of who may be in need. As it turns out, their team members were split across both sides of the river, so they welcomed the extra help in producing supplies that they could then distribute further. Annette and Sandra were cooking so much. Hayley and Emily joined Mark, Jaime and Rachel with packing the hampers. Mark ended up delivering more as Annette simply did not have time, and Sandra did a delivery or two when she went home.

The next flood hit a few months later – and the rains caused a landslip that took out the road around the mountains. That road is the only other way supplies get to the western side of the river, besides by helicopter or by boat. Annette knew that they would have to do it again, and for longer. Fortunately, those who helped last time were keen to contribute again, and others joined in too.

She would get random knocks on her door, and it'd be one of Rachel's school friends who had asked her mum to bake ANZAC biscuits to be given to people, or Jaime's friend's older brother and his mates popping around in their cars to help to deliver food. They had their P-plates and were going a little stir crazy, not being able to drive their cars anywhere. Annette gave them some of the hampers to deliver in the nearby streets, places

By the fourth or fifth flood, they felt like pros at it. The people they knew they could count on just grew with each flood too; the strangers became friends... It was amazing to see how people came alive in their times of need

where she knew the conditions weren't too bad. Sometimes it would be a local she had never met, someone who didn't have a direct connection to anyone in her family, like the gentleman who lived further up the hill. The word had spread about what they did last time, and everybody wanted to pitch in. Annette sure knew a lot more people now!

Annette put the calls out on Facebook too, immediately this time. She even posted further abroad, in some of the pages for remoter communities that get even more isolated during floods. She told people to share her mobile number, and she received calls from these communities. The SES were overstretched, and, although Annette had worked with them to bring some food to the really cut-off people, Mark knew someone who lived on the river (a grandparent of someone on Jaime's soccer team) who had a boat and knew how to navigate the waters to reach some of these places. A few of the other cricket dads had utes, so they could transport the fuel they had coming in – the donations were more than just food at this point, due to the landslip. Annette wanted to make especially sure the fuel was distributed by someone she knew she could trust.

There have been more floods since, and each time Annette and her community did the same thing. By the fourth or fifth flood, they felt like pros at it. The people they knew they could count on just grew with each flood too; the strangers became friends. Of course, it was exhausting work, and there were definitely times when Annette felt like collapsing. She also knew she was blessed to have as much help as she had. It was amazing to see how people came alive in their times of need. And, for this reason, Annette would do it all again. ■



Image: Michal Kowalski via shutterstock.

## Stuck in the Mud

*Trigger Warning: This vignette describes events in the lead-up to bushfires and floods, as well as the impacts of and recovery from flood damage. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*In this vignette we follow a long-time resident as she navigates the evolving landscape of her community during the floods. Lyn's story highlights the challenges posed by rapid urban development in flood-prone areas and attempts by longer-term residents to educate newcomers about the potential dangers they face. We use this story to explore the complexities of community responses to disasters, shedding light on the strengths of community knowledge despite the stark reality of climate change and the limitations of formal emergency agencies.*

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### ACT I

Lyn used to be a public servant, but that's in the rear-view mirror now. Teaching part-time at TAFE keeps the bills paid. Life isn't glamorous, but it's comfortable, and glamour, Lyn would say, is overrated anyway. She's lived along the river for the better part of 30 years, though she's been in and out once or twice. Two of her kids have moved away, but her youngest son, Nick, is still home for now.

Things have changed a lot over the years. What was once a working-class area with farms here and there is starting to look more like urban sprawl. New developments have sprung up between the old houses and market gardens. It says a lot that among the original residents, she stands out as one of the youngest.

Neither Lyn nor the other long-term residents are opposed to change. It's good to see kids and families around again. Not long ago, the local school looked like it might close; now it's overflowing. Cafes and shops are springing up all over. In many ways things are changing for the better.

At community meetings, you hear a lot of, 'they wouldn't let us build here if it wasn't safe', 'they told us it won't flood here, not again', 'they have it under control'... But Lyn's not so sure. She's seen her fair share of floods.

But there have been challenges. Developers are building out the flood plain, and most of the new residents haven't got a clue about the risks. It's easier to trust that someone else has it all worked out. People who remember the floods have tried to educate their new neighbours, the council and the state government, but most people are dismissive. The dam is so low that the government has turned on the desalination plant, the soil is bone dry, and bushfires are raging across the state. A flood is the last thing on everyone's minds.

At community meetings, you hear a lot of, 'they wouldn't let us build here if it wasn't safe', 'they told us it won't flood here, not again', 'they have it under control', etc. But Lyn's not so sure. She's seen her fair share of floods. There's a reason she and the other older residents didn't build out those paddocks. It's not safe. The local SES brigade is not what it used to be either. Most of the decisions seem to come out of Sydney these days, and many of the experienced volunteers have packed up and moved away. But no one wants to hear any of that – they just want a home with a yard for their kids. Lyn can't blame them – that's why she moved here, after all.

Each night Brent, Lyn's partner, calls her from the frontlines. He's in the local RFS brigade and has been deployed to the nearby fires. They're starting to call it the 'Black Summer'. These are the worst fires he's seen, and the state is covered in smoke – they say on the news that the plume will eventually make its way all the way to South America. Brent tells her that they've saved most houses, but it's tough going. Tree changers weren't prepared. Most of them are panicking or have left. Even the experienced residents are overwhelmed. The government is scrambling. No one predicted the fires would be this bad.

'The new homes, the Airbnb's, they're sitting ducks' Brent says.

The two of them can't help but reflect on the parallels between the newer communities in the fire zone and their community along the river.

'Thank God we don't have fires down our way,' Lyn says. Her thoughts turn once again to how unprepared they were for floods. 'If we had to evacuate in a flood, I'm not sure what we'd do.'

After the call, Lyn and Nick agree that if it floods, they'll need to stay and help their neighbours Elene and Bryan. They're too old to fill sandbags, and there's no way they'll be convinced to leave. The two of them hope that day never comes.

But Elene thinks a flood will come sooner rather than later.

'There's always a washout after a big drought,' she says. 'It's not a matter of if but when.'

She'd be laughed out of a meeting with the government, of course. Lyn catches up with Elene for tea once a week when she's not at work. Sometimes Bryan from two doors down joins as well, but he's no spring chicken, and lately he's been holed up at home. Lyn tried to get him over last week, but he said he would catch up with them when he's feeling better.

'The bushfire smoke is no good for my lungs,' he said. 'And anyway, I paid two grand for this aircon. I need to enjoy it.'

Lyn has come to rely on Elene and Bryan for advice about what to do if it floods again. They've seen it all, and they're as prepared as they can be.

'In a heavy rain, once the soil and dam are full, it all rushes down to the narrow neck of the river and build ups,' Elene says. 'It's like a bathtub: all of a sudden the water is lapping at your doorstep.' She points over to some of the newer houses. 'I've seen that paddock underwater three or four times. I hope they've got a plan, too.'

## ACT II

Usually Lyn can see Elene waving from her kitchen window, but today you can barely see beyond the verandah. Sheets of rain have replaced the thick smoke between them. There won't be any popping over for tea for the next few weeks. It's a bittersweet moment for Lyn – she's glad the fires will be out soon, but there's no time to celebrate. After two days packing sandbags and checking in with the older residents, she's exhausted. Nick has spent most of the day moving machinery and animals to higher ground while Lyn trawls Facebook for people with trailers and dry paddocks to spare. Everyone's doing okay for now, but with the

river rising higher each day, no one really knows if their preparation will be enough. She wishes her partner was here, but he's a way off yet. They're still putting out stumps and spot fires in the hills above their valley.

Elene has been keeping in touch over the phone. Today her voice is more concerned than usual, and there's no time for her typical wisecracks.

'Once they open the dam gates it's going to come down thick and fast,' Elene says. 'I've been watching the telly. They don't realise how quickly it backs up.'

She's right. The powers that be can't say when the river will peak or how high it will get. Road closures and evacuation advice come and go. People across the river are confused. Should they leave? What's the safest way to get out? The closest thing Lyn has to accurate data is a community Facebook page run by some anonymous brainiac. A few local SES volunteers are even using it, though of course they can't admit that publicly.

Today Lyn is calling through her lists, checking in on people she can't reach online. The SES aren't keeping up with the number of questions. They don't know where everyone is or who they need to check in on. The home phone is ringing off the hook with frantic questions: 'Is the road open?' 'Is the dam spilling?' 'Are you okay?'

Most of the calls are with the older residents. The new developments are eerily quiet. At a distance, Lyn can see a few people trying to sandbag their homes, but most of them don't really know what they're doing. There are gaps between some of the bags; several of them are overfilled, and there aren't enough to go round.

'They should probably leave,' says Nick. 'Maybe we should leave too?'

Lyn thinks for a moment and then turns to Nick. 'But if we go, what happens to Elene and Bryan? What happens to all the people calling our phone? If we go, they'll be on their own, that's the reality.'

Nick grimaces and gestures towards the new houses. 'Alright, well, we should at least go down and see how they're doing. I don't think the SES have the capacity to take care of them all, and it looks like they need a hand.' They both agree to drive down and doorknock a few houses. 'Worst case, we'll get a sense of who we need to add to our list of people to call for check-ins.'

The water hasn't come up to the main road yet, but their driveway has turned into a creek.

'It's not too deep', Nick says as he starts the car.

Lyn cracks a smile. 'Nice and slow, please.'

Of course, he doesn't listen, and the two of them laugh as they plough through the ankle-deep water.

'Let's just make sure we're back soon,' says Lyn.

'If the driveway goes under much further, we won't be able to get back to feed the dog. Two hours max. And keep an eye on Facebook in case they open the dam.'

After a few minutes, they arrive in one of the newer streets. It's strangely quiet. Most people seem to have left already. There are sandbags stacked around a few of the houses, but most of the cars are gone. Lyn and Nick take one side of the street each, handing out their phone number and making sure everyone is okay. Lyn encourages a few people to leave. Half of them are worried, the other half dismissive. A handful even seem to think that Lyn is up to something.

A few people just say, 'not interested' and slam the door closed. Others have more faith in the formal response.

'The government will come and get us; they'll tell us when to leave.'

'This is the city after all, not some rural town or developing country.'

No one decides to leave, but Lyn gives them all her number. That's something.

Today Lyn is calling through her lists, checking in on people she can't reach online. The SES aren't keeping up with the number of questions. They don't know where everyone is or who they need to check in on. The home phone is ringing off the hook with frantic questions: 'Is the road open?' 'Is the dam spilling?' 'Are you okay?'

‘Give me a call if you have any questions! My name is Lyn, I live up the road.’

She can hear Nick calling from the end of the street, though he’s hard to make out through the heavy rain. He looks concerned and gestures towards the car. She runs over, thinking he’s found someone who needs help.

‘They’ve just opened the dam. We should get going.’

Lyn hesitates for a moment. ‘We should tell them all first if we can,’ she says.

‘Don’t worry,’ says Nick. ‘It’s on the news, and the SES is going door to door. We need to get home and make sure that we’re ready.’

### ACT III

The floods have passed now, but Lyn knows that the clean-up will take months. Sodden chipboards and muddy garbage bags line most of the streets in low-lying areas. No one minds about the furniture too much, but it’s heartbreaking to see people sobbing over lost pets and mementos. Some things can’t be replaced.

People are tramping in and out of houses trying to salvage what they can. There are volunteers from all over – family members, neighbours, and community

groups have formed a ‘mud army’ of sorts. Despite the challenges, there’s a feeling that everyone is in it together. New residents are brushing shoulders with older ones. They’ve probably passed each other dozens of times in town, but it was the flood that brought them together.

Lyn’s house was spared the worst of it – the floors and walls were saturated, but it’s fixable. Nick and Brent have already replaced most of the skirting boards and torn up the carpet. Most of the important stuff was safely up high in a watertight box, but they did lose a photo album with pictures of all the kids when they were born. Lyn hasn’t had the heart to tell Brent yet or throw it away – there’s too much to do.

As Lyn pulls into her driveway, Nick is carrying out the old couch. It’s barely recognizable.

‘At least we have an excuse for some new furniture now,’ Nick jokes. ‘Maybe something from this century?’

Lyn forces a smile, but the cost of replacing everything and fixing the house is playing on her mind. She’ll have to go back to four days a week at the TAFE for a few months. She’s thought about charging Nick a little rent, but she doesn’t want to give him a reason to move out. It’s nice having her youngest around, especially now.

Image: Maythee Vora via shutterstock.



People are tramping in and out of houses trying to salvage what they can. There are volunteers from all over – family members, neighbours, and community groups have formed a ‘mud army’ of sorts. Despite the challenges, there’s a feeling that everyone is in it together. New residents are brushing shoulders with older ones. They’ve probably passed each other dozens of times in town, but it was the flood that brought them together.

‘Once you’re finished with that get out of those muddy clothes and hop in the car. We’ll go and pick up Elene before the meeting,’ Lyn says.

Nick nods and drops the muddy couch in the skip. ‘What’s on the agenda?’ he calls back.

‘We need to sort the road out. That evacuation was a shemozzle, and the rains will be back soon enough,’ Lyn replies. ‘Let’s go see what everyone has to say’.

The beer garden of the local pub is a bit damp, but there was no damage. You’d hardly know that there was a flood – the pub is up nice and high. There are about 40 people or so milling around before the meeting. Everyone looks exhausted, but there are smiles too. Lyn is relieved that all the calling and door knocking has brought a decent group of newer residents into the fold. That feels like a small victory.

‘Well, who’s going to chair this bloody thing?’ Elene shouts jokingly over the crowd.

The older residents who know her laugh – it goes without saying that Elene will convene the meeting. She isn’t afraid to cut people off if they’re on their soapbox, and she is careful to ask everyone to contribute. Everyone ties up their conversations and sits down.

‘Right,’ Elene says. ‘First of all, thanks to Lyn and Gary for doing a ring around. We all know why we’re here. Something needs to be done about that goat track before the next flood. Any ideas? I’ll take a speaking list.’

For the next hour or so everyone takes turns speaking and listening. There are a few minor squabbles, but everyone agrees that the road isn’t up to task – not with all the new houses. It is too narrow, too potholed and too prone to flood for a hasty evacuation. Some people have some choice words about the government, but most concede that the problem has crept up on everyone.

Gary pipes in to suggest that they approach the government as a group: ‘Now I see why Lyn and the rest of you have been banging on about this for years. We should have taken it up before the new houses went in. Susie and I will write up letters to all our reps – councillors, parliament, all of them.’

A younger woman puts up her hand cautiously and begins to speak. ‘Hi everyone. I’m Simone, and I moved in a couple of years back. I’m a civil engineer, so I would be happy to contribute. The problems with the road are relatively cheap and easy changes that will give us some extra time. Better drainage and signs will go a long way. It’s a no-brainer really, and I’d be happy to say so if we can set up a meeting with the people in charge.’

Elene takes a vote, and all but a couple of people vote in favour of Gary, Susie, and Simone drafting up a letter.

‘Fantastic, let’s get onto it then,’ says Elene. ‘We’ll meet here in a couple of weeks with a letter to fire off, and maybe we can talk about some other practical things – sandbags and the like – once everyone has cleaned up a little. Lyn will give you a call or email if you want to come, and please do. She’s got a signup form over there.’

Lyn smiles and holds up her clipboard.

‘Here I am,’ she laughs. ‘Come and see me, and please stick around!’ ■

## Rough Sleepers

*Trigger Warning: This vignette describes events in the lead-up to and during bushfires, including descriptions of driving through thick smoke. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*It is well known that local connections and social networks are invaluable for disaster-affected communities, who use them to share information, to help each other out and to draw on local resources and knowledge. However, there will always be some people who are not well-connected, for a variety of reasons. This vignette highlights how some community members are attempting to navigate these issues with a focus on absentee property owners, short-stay holiday homes and rough sleepers. It also draws attention to the distressing choices that the bushfires thrust upon community members.*

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Meet Jordyn, a social worker who has been coordinating her local neighbourhood centre for the better part of 20 years. It's a no-frills operation. They get by with some funding from the council and some top-up grants here and there. But for the most part, the neighbourhood centre relies on the community to keep it going.

Over the years the funding has waned a little. It's also become far more administratively burdensome. Jordyn has to spend a lot of time keeping up with compulsory reports and funding applications. Sometimes it's hard to carry on with the human side of the operation. The government doesn't want to see a dollar wasted or unaccounted for, which is fair enough. But over the past few years more staff time has been dedicated to paperwork. There are only so many hours in a day, after all.

It wasn't always like this. Jordyn and some of the older social workers she works with started their careers in a different era. In the late seventies and eighties, almost all their resources were focused on building connections in the community and linking people together. They can't quite put their fingers on when 'community development' fell out of favour. It's all about 'service delivery' now.

Image: Mastersky via shutterstock.





‘Development’ still gets thrown around in academic circles, of course, but it’s a distant memory for people on the ground. It’s become a bit of a joke.

‘What are you doing today, Jordyn?’ a colleague will ask.

‘Oh, sitting at my desk, delivering services... those hampers will have to wait until I get home.’

Anyway, as Jordyn often says, ‘it is what it is’.

If it wasn’t for the close-knit community, she would have retired years ago. No one is sure exactly how the centres up here have maintained a grassroots approach. It seems quite different down in the city. Jordyn speculates that it could just be inertia from the old days, or something about the community itself. Maybe it’s just hard work, though she’d be loath to say so.

But the community is changing, and that’s been tough. Houses are out of reach for most young people, and there’s nowhere left to build. That’s a long-term thing, but the big shift to remote working brought it on much faster than anyone could anticipate. The exodus of people from the city – ‘tree changers’, they call them – has strained the centre. Some of the locals have sold up and cashed in on the boom. They tend to say the same thing – ‘I just want to be closer to my grandkids, I don’t see enough of them.’ Who can blame them? There’s only so long you can justify a big empty nest. Especially when your family is miles away.

The problem isn’t the change per se, it’s just happening faster than anyone can keep up with. It’s one thing to build and maintain communities that change here and there; it’s quite another to incorporate hundreds of people at once. To make matters worse, a lot of homes have been converted to short-stay homes. It’s hard to tell who’s a new face worth speaking to and who is just here for a holiday. Jordyn has tried to organise letterboxing and doorknocking to reach new people and map the short-term rentals, but it’s an uphill battle.

Kurt runs a local warden network out of the centre with a few other residents, and they’re struggling to keep up with the changes. They started it years ago to keep everyone together during bushfires. It’s not compulsory, of course, but it’s really part of the culture here because the area is so fire-prone. Everyone gets together to make sure their houses are prepared with water, clean gutters, sprinklers and an escape plan. In her capacity at the neighbourhood centre, Jordyn helps Kurt to find local wardens to coordinate each block of houses, usually a dozen or so in each group.

‘I need people with people skills and a practical mindset,’ Kurt always says. ‘No sense having the most skilled firefighter in the world if they can’t convince their neighbours to trust them.’

Of course, finding reliable people who are willing and able to take on that responsibility is easier said than done.

Building and maintaining the network has been especially tough in recent years, and they’ve had to change tack to keep up with the pace of change in the community. The community centre has focused more on high-visibility events in the area where they’re likely to interact with some of the newcomers – barbecues, Facebook events, and street stalls have all helped, but they’re not foolproof. It’s hard to pick who is a resident and who’s just passing through. The warden network has kept up their doorknocking to fill the gaps, but it’s a big ask, and most participants are too busy to keep up. Sometimes Kurt comes into the centre looking a little dejected, which isn’t like him.

‘Half the houses are empty during the week, and some of the newer residents haven’t got a clue,’ he complains. ‘It is what it is’.

Now the fires are here, and everything is coming to a head. It’s all hands on deck preparing hampers for residents and the fire crews. Jordyn has people on the phone checking on some of the higher-risk houses near the escarpment. Kurt is out trying to clear the gutters of some of the empty houses. He can’t reach most the owners, and even if he could he doubts that they’d drive up from the city to lend a hand. To be fair, it’s a hairy drive through the smoke, and – much to Jordyn’s relief – a few holiday homeowners seem to have done the right thing. Kurt’s work seems to have paid off somewhat.

Jordyn spends most of her time acting as a conduit for information. Between the RFS and the warden network, she has a pretty good handle on things. Things were a little awkward between the fires and locals at first, but they’ve come to know each other reasonably well over tea and coffee in the neighbourhood centre hall. Keeping people on

**Jordyn spends most of her time acting as a conduit for information. Between the RFS and the warden network, she has a pretty good handle on things.**

## There hasn't been much time to build connections with the rough sleepers. The RFS volunteers have seen a couple on their way out, but it's hard to know if they're all safe.

Facebook calm and informed is half the battle. The other half is keeping everyone well-fed and -rested. The RFS volunteers are exhausted, and there's no sign of relief. Things just keep getting worse.

'Unless there's a miracle and it rains for weeks, we'll never put this out,' says one volunteer. 'It will keep burning until it's all gone.'

There's a lot of crying in the hall, a lot of exhausted and terrified people. The scale of the fire is overwhelming. Aside from the staff and RFS, most of the people that come and go don't 'need' to be at the centre. They could stay at home, but there's something about the space that is comforting. It's reassuring to have some company, not least of all the RFS. Jordyn sees why they hang around.

Of course, it's not all doom and gloom - there are smiles too. Speaking and working with old and new faces has reminded Jordyn why she's stuck around. They're all in the same boat and doing their best.

Donations are coming in from all over the state to fill hampers and to let them know that people are thinking of them. There's a lot of junk too, of course, but that's a problem for later.

'They must think there's a children's hospital in this village,' says Kurt. 'I count 90 packs of nappies in the driveway.'

The most testing part has been dealing with the 'rough sleepers' out in the bush. Jordyn's not sure exactly how many people are living out of their cars, or in tents and caves in the National Park, but it must be dozens, probably more. Some of them have been there for years. In the past, it was more of a lifestyle choice thing, but the housing crisis has added a couple of hundred 'involuntary' homeless people into the mix.

If you live out there, you must be 'invisible'. It's unlawful to live permanently in the park. Some of them are young families with kids, and they can't afford to get caught by the rangers. A few come in for food once a week, but they're skittish. No one knows exactly where they are or if they know how bad the fires have become.

Shirley tries to keep an eye on them. She lives at the end of the street before the main campground and recognises their cars coming and going. One night she confides in Jordyn that she has trouble sleeping, too.

'If the mobile towers get burnt out and they lose their internet while they're asleep,' she says, 'they won't even know the fire is coming. What will we do then?'

They've thought about maintaining an anonymous register, but Black Summer crept up on them. It's hard enough keeping the centre and warden network afloat. There hasn't been much time to build connections with the rough sleepers. The RFS volunteers have seen a couple on their way out, but it's hard to know if they're all safe.

One morning, Shirley comes in very distressed: 'The fire has jumped the lines and it's heading down to the campground. The phone line is out. What do we do?'

Jordyn tries to console her, but what can she say?

'Some of those people might not want to let the fires know who might still be out there, not if it means that someone catches wind that they're living out there at the campground,' Shirley mutters.

Jordyn knows what she means. People out in the bush have to keep a low profile. 'Surely, with the fire, they won't be so cautious?' she replies.

Shirley pauses for a moment. 'Probably not, but we can't be sure unless we go. They trust us.'

Shirley and Jordyn agree to drive down to the campground to satisfy themselves that everyone has gotten out and is okay. The head honcho of the RFS says 'no', of course, as there is an evacuation order.

'We don't think the fire will come through until tomorrow, but there's a lot of smoke about,' she says. 'You two coming down would be unlawful and dangerous. I can't formally condone it.'

Shirley and Jordyn take the hint. They follow the trucks at a short distance, and no one seems to mind. Whoever is driving the truck seems to make sure their car stays in sight. Jordyn knows them quite well by this point anyway. The RFS have been set up in the centre most of the day and can see she knows what she is doing.

Even with the windows wound up and masks on, the two women struggle to breathe. They are coughing a lot, but they carry on all the same.

'I never want to do this again,' Shirley says. 'We shouldn't have to come down here. It's not safe. No one should have to do this.'

About 10 minutes down the trail, the fire truck pulls over and grinds to a halt. Jordyn can't see what's ahead. The smoke and ash are too thick.

'What's going on?' Shirley asks anxiously.

'Maybe a tree is down,' Jordyn replies. 'They'll have to clear the road.'

Moments later, two tiny headlights peer through the smoke. Jordyn can see that the car is packed tightly with camping gear. A young woman is driving. She has her face pressed against the glass, trying to see through the ash that blankets her windshield. There are two kids in the back.

'I recognise them,' says Shirley.

Jordyn nods, 'Me too. She comes in for a food basket from time to time, but I didn't realise she has kids.'

She waves the car over. Both women roll down their windows an inch or so – any more would let all the smoke in. The young woman is trying to stay calm – for her children presumably – but Jordyn can tell she is distraught.

'Don't worry, we're the last ones,' the young woman says. 'Everyone is out, I just checked. The fires are going to follow us out to make sure we're safe'.

'Oh, thank God!' exclaims Shirley. 'And how are the kids doing?'

'They're hungry' the young woman replies, 'and a bit tired'.

Jordyn smiles, 'Don't worry, we can fix that.'

The three women share a look of quiet relief as the fire truck turns around and leads them back to the highway. Jordyn turns to Shirley.

'We are never doing this again. Imagine if we'd got stuck, or if we'd found...' Jordyn trails off. 'Something has to change.' ■

Image: Cole via AdobeStock.





Image: Parilov via shutterstock.

## Spontaneous Flood Recovery Hubs

*Trigger Warning: This vignette describes people stranded by floodwaters and landslides. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*With the intensity and frequency of disasters increasing due to climate change, communities cannot always rely on authorities to come to their assistance immediately when disaster strikes. In these circumstances, community members go to extraordinary lengths to help one another. This vignette highlights the importance of local connections, local knowledges and a strong sense of community as critical resources communities can draw upon when they are forced to help themselves.*

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Amy didn't sleep much on the night of the flood. The rain was so loud, how could she? The torrent coming down the hillside and under the house looked like it could wash the building right off its stumps. And she was worried about Annalise, and everyone who lived along the road next to the creek. Annalise hadn't responded to Amy's texts, and she hadn't turned up on their doorstep sopping wet either. Was it really possible she was sleeping through this? Or had her phone already died? The power had been out all night.

At the first crack of light, Lee was up and out, meeting up with a couple of other local RFS members to check on the low-lying houses. Amy helped him get the kayak in the back of the ute, which seemed ridiculous, but they both knew the houses by the creek would be flooded by now, and they didn't have a boat. Amy watched him go and tried to stay calm. Her phone battery was flat now, and she needed to stay with the kids.

An hour later, Lee was back with Annalise and her kids, plus their elderly neighbours. At first Amy couldn't make sense of what they were telling her. They had all spent the night on Annalise's roof, trapped by the rising floodwaters, and their dog was missing.

While Amy absorbed this news and did her best to make them comfortable, Lee was straight back out the door to see if he could get to the other flooded houses.

Amy's mind was racing as she tried to grasp the enormity of the situation. She mentally walked the road along the creek to see who else might be stranded. She knew the Rowlands had left yesterday. She had met them driving out, heading to Paul's mum's place. But what about David right down the end? David was having chemo, and his house was probably one of the lowest-lying. When Lee next came back, with news that three families were safe with friends in the village, she grabbed his arm and told him to urgently check on the last house on the road, where David lived. Lee said he would if he could, but with only a kayak it really depended on how fast-flowing the water was.

While Lee headed out again, Amy left the kids with Annalise and made her way up to the community hall to see if she could find other people and get news. Helen, a local woman, who was on the hall committee, was already there and had opened up. Within minutes, Lee arrived with David, and two other families arrived soon after. They all sat in a line along a wooden bench, blankets around them, clothes dripping onto the floor, looking shellshocked. A couple of other local women arrived as well, and they took over making sure everyone was dry and fed.

Amy was starting to feel panicked, questioning David and the others about who they had seen, trying to work out who was still missing. Helen took Amy aside.

'The road is cut in both directions. No help is going to be coming in for a while,' she said. 'We need to make sure everyone is safe and accounted for. You know everyone in this valley – help me make a map.'

Helen ducked home for some butcher's paper, and they began to draw a mud map of the village. Amy had lived there all her life, and not much had changed even since she was in school herself. She could remember the layout of some streets, and how many houses and driveways were on each, just by closing her eyes. But she couldn't do it for every street. By now, more people were turning up at the hall looking for information or to see if anyone needed help. Amy grabbed each person she saw and got them to add their knowledge to the map. They scribbled in corrections and additional details. Some confirmed that houses were about the waterline, or families had evacuated, while others marked those that needed to be checked for people. The map got pretty messy, but it served its purpose.

Helen sent people off in both directions to see exactly where the water had risen to, and she sent others doorknocking around the village to see who was safe with friends. Amy worked with Lee to make sure every flooded house was checked to make sure no people or pets were stranded.

By the end of the day, everyone in the village was accounted for, and the floodwaters were starting to recede. But by then it was dawning on Amy just how big this disaster was. Twelve houses flooded. Road cut in both directions, so no one could get in or out. And no word from anyone up the valley yet because communications were still down. She realised that, as soon as the dead-end valley road was passable again, they would have people arriving at the hall needing help. Amy and Helen spent the night gathering supplies.

The next morning there was still no word from anyone up the valley. Lee and a small team set out on foot and were back by mid-morning. The road up the valley was still cut in at least two places by the floodwater, but that wasn't the biggest problem. About five kilometres up, the road was gone. Obliterated by a landslide. The photos on the only working phone they had between them were mind-boggling.

Amy, Helen, Lee and a few others put their heads together again. The whole valley needed to be mapped so they could figure out which households were trapped and out of contact. Amy and Lee, with their school and RFS connections, knew who lived where as well as anyone. Gina, who had grown up riding her horse around the valley, helped to mark property boundaries, creek crossings and access trails. Eventually, they had a second map of the valley and surrounding hillsides that showed who lived where, with basic details about each household and possible access ways to each property marked out.

Over the following two days, news trickled in from up the valley. A few people managed to walk cross-country to the village, and a couple more teams went in on foot with supplies. Petrol was the

'The road is cut in both directions. No help is going to be coming in for a while,' she said. 'We need to make sure everyone is safe and accounted for. You know everyone in this valley – help me make a map.'

## Amy's focus was tracking who needed what, getting help and supplies to people and organising helpers to do welfare checks.

most urgent demand, because people needed to power their generators and fuel their tractors to shift the rocks and mud. Amy and Lee contacted everyone they knew who might have a bit to spare. The teams also took in some basic food supplies and medicines – whatever people had been able to pool together from their own houses – and they brought back specific requests, like cat food and batteries. Each time a team went out, Amy and Helen got them to pass on messages about who hadn't yet been heard from, and each time a team returned to the hall, they were able to mark more families as safe on their map.

By now, the clean-up of the flooded houses was in full swing, although there was still no access to the outside world and therefore no help getting in. Neighbours helped neighbours, and Amy's map was now being used to keep track of who needed what supplies or what assistance. The hall had become an impromptu 'recovery hub', with people cooking meals, dropping off cleaning supplies and bedding, and packing supplies for folks up the valley. Others dropped by throughout the day, covered in mud from head to toe from cleaning out houses, for a bite of lunch or a cup of tea. Someone had brought in a generator so people could power their phones and laptops (there was still no communications though). Someone else had set up a freezer and fridge so people could try to save some of their perishable food.

On day four, the road connecting their village to town reopened, which meant Amy could drive up the hill, get phone reception and call close family and some friends in town she had been worrying about. It also meant help started to arrive from outside – and with it an avalanche of donations and well-meaning volunteers, mainly fellow locals just turning up to help. Some came from up the hill and others as far away as the interstate, bringing carloads of donations, meals, brooms and pressure cleaners. Their presence was heart-warming but overwhelming. It was so good to know that they weren't forgotten, and people's generosity was incredible, but all the chaos made three times as much work for Amy and Helen and the others in the hall. Donations had to be sorted and stacked at the back of the hall, volunteers needed to be greeted and sent out to families who needed help, and there were suddenly so many more mouths to feed.

By now it felt like Amy's whole world was the recovery hub. Their days had settled into a strange routine where each morning she and Lee would drop the kids off with friends and head to the hall. Amy's focus was tracking who needed what, getting help and supplies to people and organising helpers to do welfare checks. Helen had taken on coordinating the endless stream of meals, donations and volunteers, and Lee was organising help for the properties up the valley that still had significant access issues.

Two days later, the guys who had been working on the landslide up the valley got it cleared enough to get 4WD's in and out, which allowed movement up and down the valley again. This was a huge accomplishment and cause for celebration. But it also brought yet another wave of people to the recovery hub, this time people who had been stranded on their properties for days and were thirsty for news, a hot meal, a shower and a chat. It didn't seem possible for the hall to get any busier, but it did.

It was evident to Amy and the others that the recovery hub was going to be needed for weeks yet. It was six days since the flood, and everyone was still in survival mode. So many community members were still relying on the hall for basic things. It was obvious that they were pretty much on their own. No one official was going to arrive to take over coordinating the recovery effort in their little valley. Lee and Amy discussed it, but they didn't have much choice; they both needed to return to their jobs, and they couldn't leave their children with friends indefinitely. Helen was planning to stay on at the recovery hub, and a couple of other women had started turning up regularly to help, so they knew they could pass on the baton.

Reflecting over it, the whole thing felt utterly surreal. Amy and Lee were amazed by what the community had achieved without any outside help. No lives were lost, everyone was accounted for, and everyone was connected into a network of support, either through the welfare checks around the village or the remote teams walking up the valley on foot. And they'd done it all with no phones, no internet and no radios. It had been chaotic, exhausting, stressful and at times dangerous – but they'd done it.

It would have been so much easier if she had known what to do from beginning, but at least they were now better prepared for next time. One of the most important ingredients was the strong sense of community that existed in their valley. Without these connections, they could never have achieved what they did, and they now knew how valuable that would be for the next time. ■

## You Build Resilience by Building Community

*Trigger Warning: This vignette describes events during and after the 2019–20 bushfire crisis. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*Community connections and social networks are the basis of strong communities, and it is well-documented that they are critical ingredients in a community's ability to respond to disaster and to recover afterwards. This vignette demonstrates how community-building can happen in all kinds of ways and does not have to be disaster-focused. It is as simple as getting together with other people in your neighbourhood to share activities you enjoy.*

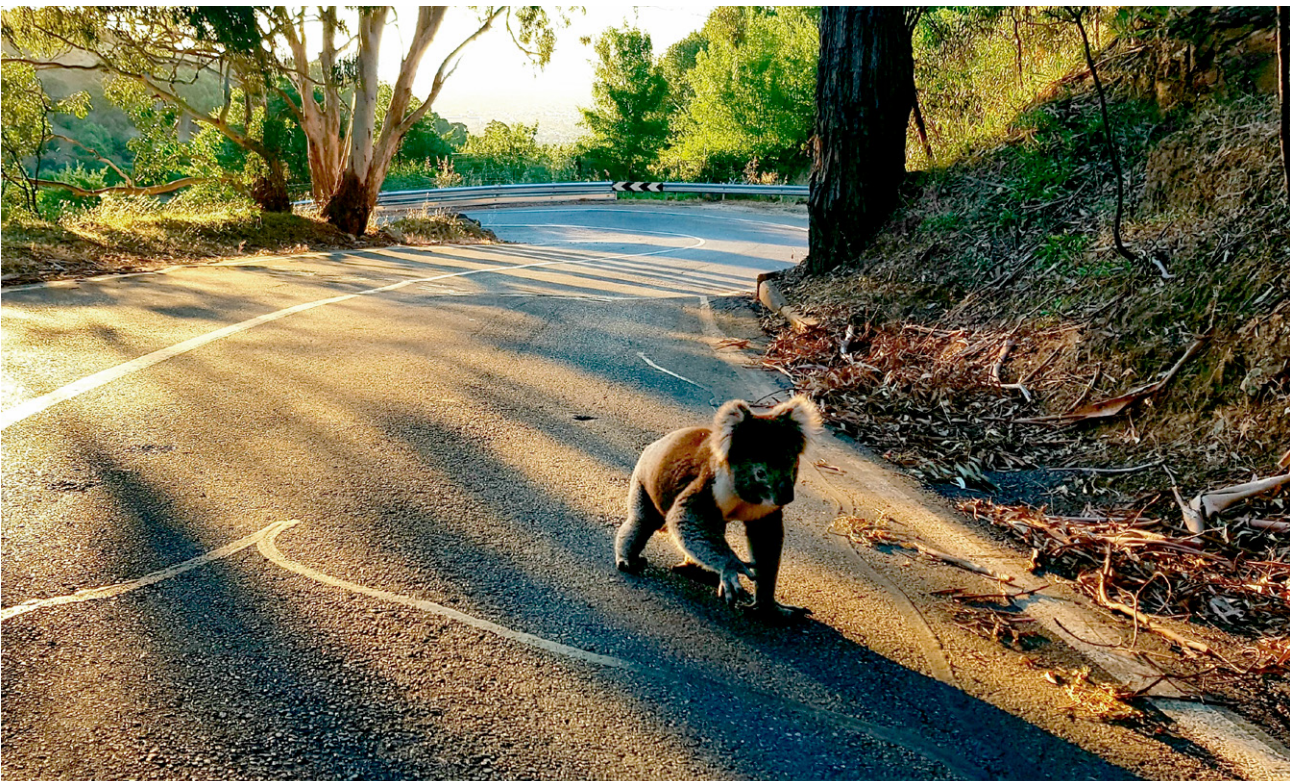
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Everyone is here, thinks Kim, pleased. She looks around the table as eight ladies unpack their sewing machines and materials. Natalie is still working on her puff quilt for her soon-to-arrive grandson. Maureen's materials, as usual, take up more space than the others. Nobody minds. It's an amazing piece; she's almost finished stitching the intricate floral pattern on another square. Ros and Lilah are at the kitchen counter, chatting away, coffee mugs in hand. They always start half an hour later than everyone else. Kim wonders who Ros will corner once Lilah moves away.

Every fortnight, Kim holds a quilting class at home. She has done so for years. She charges a little per lesson, but it's not really intended to make money. The 'entry fee' covers the material orders Kim puts in for the ladies, as well as morning tea. They all call it 'class', but Kim doesn't do much teaching. They all know what they are doing. The class is just a way for them to come together, catch up, and work on their projects side-by-side.

This is the first time everyone has been present since the fires. Kim cancelled the last classes in December. She felt bad – they usually work on various Christmas presents during that time – but she didn't want people coming out in the smoke. Maureen's lungs are not in the best shape, and some of the other ladies are asthmatic.

Image: Boy Mercury via shutterstock.



‘What it is that brings people together is not that important,’ Elliott said before stopping. ‘Well,’ he corrected, ‘it matters that it must come from the community. But the importance is in the building of connection between people.’

Then the fires grew scarier and scarier. Kim remembers leaves falling in her backyard, some still burning. The sky had been a fearsome orange that day, as it had been for days on end. Kim’s home did not come under direct threat, but the fires were getting close to where some of the ladies lived. Kim had used the calls she made to cancel class as an opportunity to check in on them. Ros and Nat had already evacuated, which was a relief. Both stayed with family down in the city.

Kim looks around the table and appreciates the sound of conversation. The first classes in January were some of the quietest she’s experienced. It’s good to have everyone back. Conversations interweave with each other and the hum of sewing machines as the women get to work. They pause every now and then to watch a video of someone’s grandchild or to look at another’s holiday photos. Discussion turns to the bushfires when Ros shows videos of how close the fire came to her home. The bush at the back of her place was alien, all charred and twisted trees, no leaves or green anywhere. Kim recalls what the scenery was like before. It will take a long time to recover.

‘They found a koala in the valley,’ Brooke murmurs. ‘First time since European settlement.’

An excited chatter cuts through the group.

‘The animals are coming back,’ Maureen smiles. ‘The land is recovering.’

Kim agrees. She has noticed the lack of bird calls lately. She misses them. But Brooke shakes her head roughly.

‘No,’ she says, a little loudly. Tears well in Brooke’s eyes, and Kim notices they are fixed on the imagery still showing on Ros’s phone. ‘It means their habitat is gone, in the national park.’ Then she starts sobbing.

Stunned silence falls over the group. Kim doesn’t know what to do. Some of the ladies try to console Brooke. Eventually, she calms down and starts apologising.

‘Sorry, everyone, I don’t know what came over me.’ She gives a weak chuckle.

The class continues, but the mood is a little more sombre. It lifts again when Maureen finishes her square, and everyone takes turns to admire it. It really is a lovely design. Kim notices Brooke smile and join in, but she soon packs up and leaves early.

\* \* \*

Kim’s church is organising another clean-up day for next Saturday. Paul’s street was damaged by the fires. The houses were untouched, thankfully, but the same could not be said for people’s yards and gardens. It’s a shame. Kim’s been to Paul’s place before. It was a beautiful street, especially when everything was in bloom. The residents clearly took pride in their gardens. Members of her church are going to help clear the debris and plant new bushes that people donated. Kim decides she will join them this time.

Elliott is going too. It is morning tea after the service, and they are enjoying a cuppa together in the sun. Kim has known Elliott for many years. He works at the neighbourhood centre.

‘It’s not just about physically rebuilding people’s gardens,’ Elliott says. ‘It allows us to see how people are doing, just to sit down and chat about anything.’

Not for the first time, Kim thinks back to that moment in class with Brooke. It completely caught her by surprise. If anything, Kim expected Ros to be emotional, given she came closest to losing her home. Brooke’s home was nowhere near the fires. But that’s not how people work. Kim knows that these experiences impact people in different ways. And we have all been through something extreme.

Kim tells Elliott about her class, and Brooke, and how helpless she felt. He gives an understanding nod.

‘I have been in that position before,’ he says. His work brings him into contact with many people, often at vulnerable points in their lives. ‘There’s a course I completed for work that I found really helpful with unexpected moments like that,’ Elliott continues. ‘It’s called accidental counselling.’

Maybe I should take it, Kim thinks.

‘I love that you run a class like that, by the way,’ Elliott enthuses. ‘Things like that help us stay connected with each other.’

Talking to him makes Kim feel better. That moment in class was awkward, and Brooke was probably embarrassed. But we are living in the ‘new normal’, they say. Fires that are more frequent and ferocious. Given what they’ve all just been through, Kim can’t imagine how it could get any worse. We will need to look out for each other.

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Kim sits at the table and starts to unpack her sewing machine. They are setting up in the dining room at Lilah's new home down in the valley after having a tour of the place. Kim looks around the room. Four of Lilah's new neighbours are there. Kim is sad that Lilah has moved, as it means she can't attend class regularly anymore. But she is also excited. This is going to be the class that Lilah will lead.

Kim has started a second class back home, and she floated the idea that Lilah start her own when she moved. The others joined in to encourage her. Kim is here today for moral support – she'll do the same for the first few classes, and then it will be fully up to Lilah. Ros, Brooke and Nat are all going to travel to attend Lilah's class every now and then, too. Ros even joked she might move there herself.

Kim first proposed expanding her classes a few months after her conversation with Elliott. That was almost two years ago now. Not long after the fires, they had bad rains, and then COVID. Kim missed her classes terribly during the whole pandemic. It's not something you can do together online. Not easily, at least.

Kim was anxious about everyone throughout lockdown – especially Maureen, with her health. And, just like with the fires, the stress of the pandemic would not end once the lockdowns lifted for good. Kim took the course that Elliott mentioned online. It doesn't qualify you to be a 'counsellor', and it's not like first aid training with a certificate at the end. It just gives you some strategies on how to approach those moments where you find yourself talking to someone in distress. It also advises you on how to take care of yourself, and how to refer people if necessary. Kim hasn't had to use this training yet for anything like with Brooke. Everyone seems thrilled to be back in her classes. But Kim is glad to have the training, just in case. She even finds herself drawing on it in normal conversations.

During lockdown, Kim also reflected on what Elliott said about her classes. It was a lonely time. So, Kim decided to start some new groups, once they could. Elliott thought it was a great idea. He likened it to some of the community programs he was involved with through his centre: lead lighting workshops, woodworking, a community garden, even beekeeping.

'What it is that brings people together is not that important,' Elliott said before stopping. 'Well,' he corrected, 'it matters that it must come from the community. But the importance is in the building of connection between people.'

Elliott then asked whether Kim wanted to apply for funding through one of the recovery and resilience grants going around.

Resilience? It felt strange to have that word associated with her classes. Wasn't resilience about being fire-ready and stuff like that?

'It is,' Elliott replied, 'and many people understand it that way. For good reason, too. That's all important. But you also build resilience by building community.'

It wasn't as though Kim disagreed with this. The stories from the fires, and more recently the floods elsewhere certainly prove it. And yet, it all seemed a bit bleak, to frame her quilting classes as being about disasters. Elliott must have sensed her hesitation.

'Competitive grants can be tough,' he admitted.

Writing a grant application itself can be onerous and stressful, although Elliott was happy to help. Then there's the reporting, the checks and balances. Elliott's centre could auspice the grant. But what gets funded and what does not can be a tense affair, especially at a community level. We have all been through a lot. And, as with anything, not everyone sees the usefulness of this or that idea. Some people want to see more directly practical and material resourcing for facing future fires.

Elliott was firm though; community-building programs are just as important and have every right to be considered for funding through resilience schemes.

'However,' Elliott added, 'that is all just one avenue. You are already doing this work, Kim. You don't need permission or a grant to keep doing it. You can just do it.'

\* \* \*

'What are you working on, Kim?' The lady next to her, Caroline, is taking in the quilt Kim has laid out on the table. Lilah had the idea that they co-design a quilt to be sold to help raise funds for the local market festival. Lilah is thinking of setting up her own stall, with some of her other creations to sell, as a way to meet people in the area. Kim is working on her quilt segment today. Caroline is Lilah's new neighbour next-door. She seems nice and has a granddaughter the same age as Kim's. Caroline admits that she hasn't sewn anything in years but is keen to pick up the skill again and learn. Lilah will actually have to teach someone, Kim muses.

Six sewing machines begin to hum. Kim smiles. It's a good start. ■

Image: Dinh Pham via Unsplash.



## Six Months On...

*Trigger Warning: This vignette describes flood-affected homes and communities. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*During and after disasters, social media platforms become critical communication tools for individuals and communities, enabling the sharing of information, spontaneously linking donations and volunteers with those who need assistance, and helping local groups to coordinate recovery activities. This vignette highlights the way that social media can help small or remote communities who find themselves beyond the reach of government, emergency management and social service agencies and in need of external support to connect with individuals and groups from outside their communities and bring in what is needed.<sup>2</sup>*

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On the six month anniversary of the flood, Ben slept in. He hadn't slept well since the disaster, so it was good to feel a bit more refreshed than usual when he opened his eyes. He stretched, feeling how sore his body was, and leaned over the side of his mattress to grab his phone and begin the day's business. Connor had sent a message an hour ago to say he was on his way down and expected to arrive in about an hour and a half. He lived in the city and was one of a group of guys who had been helping locals strip and rebuild their houses for months now. The plan was to start gyprocking Ben's walls today.

Kylie from the community recovery hub in town had sent a message too – would Ben like to do an interview for local radio about the flood recovery six months on? Not really, Ben thought to himself. He was tired of telling his story. It felt like he'd repeated it hundreds of times by now. But he texted Kylie straight back to say 'yes'. If it brought more attention to their situation, then how could he refuse?

Image: Zakhar Mar via shutterstock.



2. The State Emergency Service (SES) is the combat agency responsible for coordinating disaster response and rescue in New South Wales. While emergencies call for quick action, and coordination with emergency agencies are not always possible, the SES encourages community organisers to do their best to make their ongoing activities – such as those covered in this vignette – known to them in the given area during future disaster events. This would be mutually beneficial for the SES and disaster-affected communities to reduce future disaster risk.

The other message was about a delivery that would be arriving tomorrow. Another truck of donated goods! They were still arriving, six months on. And somehow, without really meaning to, Ben had become the local point of contact for it all.

It had started on the very first day, when he'd been trying to get hold of a boat so he could get to his place and check on his neighbours. Ben had been staying with his mum in town on the night of the floods, helping to make sure her house was prepared. When he saw how high the water had come the next morning, Ben was certain his own place and many of his neighbours' houses would be flooded. Some of them might be stranded. Ben doubted the emergency services would be able to get out to all of them in time. He needed a boat.

Ben ended up meeting a woman from the city, Leah, who had a big Facebook and Instagram following. She used her social media networks to not only source a boat but to crowd-fund the petrol and other supplies needed to run it for several weeks until people were no longer flooded in. She set up a GoFundMe page, and Ben couldn't believe how the donations had just poured in from hundreds of strangers!

When the boat had arrived from the city, Ben had used it to get to home, checking on several neighbours and other properties along the way. His house had flooded up to the windowsills on the second storey. It still hurt just to think about. Everything inside was ruined. He had lost everything he owned, apart from what was in his car.

Ben had stopped in at more properties on the way back. Some houses were deserted, and he presumed the people in them had got out early, although he knew a few had had to be rescued by helicopter from their roofs. But lots of people whose floors were above the waterline were still at home and refused to leave. His neighbours, John

and Sarah, were two of them. They wanted to sit tight and wait it out so they could look after their dogs, but they were trapped in their raised house until the water went down. They had asked if Ben could get a script filled – John's medication was running low.

Ben ended up taking the boat out daily until the water was gone, delivering supplies and just being a point of contact for people. It wasn't exactly what he wanted to be doing. The days were long and tiring, and it was frankly bloody dangerous, with submerged objects everywhere. You needed someone up front as a spotter to make sure you didn't hit anything. But he didn't feel he had a choice. Emergency service resources were stretched too thin, and he was the only lifeline to a lot of people out there.

Then came the next phase – the so-called 'recovery'. This was when the people whose places had been flooded, Ben included, could get back in by road and begin the long and exhausting task of piling all their possessions into stinking, muddy heaps outside their homes, blasting the mud off the walls and floors with pressure cleaners, and prising the sodden innards out of the houses – walls, ceilings, kitchen cabinets – until they were stripped down to their bare bones and ready to be rebuilt. It was tiring and filthy work, and in between they somehow mustered the energy to drive into town and wait in the queues to lodge their applications for recovery grants. For many of them, it was the only money they would get to help them rebuild their lives. Most people Ben had spoken to weren't insured, or, if they were, they didn't think the insurance companies were going to pay out.

Just getting into town was so difficult in those early days. Lots of people had no vehicles because they'd lost them in the flood. A couple of the volunteers Leah had sent down to Ben from the city started ferrying people to town and dropping them home again afterwards. The money raised through the GoFundMe page had helped pay the petrol. More and more locals heard about it and asked if they could get a lift to town too, so after a few days Ben used his Facebook page to organise an impromptu carpool roster.

Ben didn't use Facebook much before the flood, but now he was on it all the time. In the early days he had dozens of new friend requests every day – often people from around the country, even overseas, who had seen the GoFundMe page or other things Leah had posted. People wanted to send money, food,

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furniture, hay. They drove from all over the place – sometimes overnight – with their cars packed full of stuff or a trailer full of cooking equipment so they could set up a makeshift kitchen for a week or two and provide everyone with hot meals. People really were amazing.

And they did need the help. Around here wasn't like the towns and the villages closer to the coast. Ben lived on the floodplain, mainly farming country, and people out here often kept to themselves. In fact, that was why many of them had moved here in the first place. But it did mean that at times like this they weren't really on the radar. They didn't have all the services running around organising things, like the towns did. They were used to being forgotten.

But they had managed to connect with the outside world in unexpected ways, thanks to social media. They were getting heaps more help from strangers than from the government, Ben mused. Take Connor and his mates, for example. They drove up from the city every weekend, and sometimes on their days off, to help out with the rebuilding. Most of them were tradies. They heard about Ben's community from Leah's GoFundMe page and had turned up a few weeks after the flood with a ute-load full of tools and pressure cleaners.

People around here liked it better that way, thought Ben. They didn't much like strangers turning up at their houses, but most thought it was better than someone from the government. They had a pretty low opinion of the authorities even before the flood, and it certainly hadn't improved since. What worked best, Ben reflected, was when people stayed around long enough to get to know the community. Like Connor and his mates. They were trusted now – people would invite them over for some food if they saw them around. At the start people were suspicious of their intentions, but over time, they proved themselves to be good blokes.

Ben's phone pinged again. It was the guy on his way up with the truck, full of fridges and washing machines apparently. He wanted to organise a meeting point. Ben wasn't really the type to be putting himself forward and organising everyone else, but somehow he'd become the guy everyone

called. It was good, he supposed, because it gave him something to do. There wasn't much he could do around his place until the grant money came through. Some of Connor's mates had helped him strip his house a couple of months ago, and since then he'd just been waiting, living in his mum's caravan next to his house.

They had organised a second GoFundMe to raise money for building materials, and that had been pretty successful, too. It had raised over \$15,000 in the past month or so, with some donations even coming in from overseas. But Ben wouldn't feel right using that money. It was for the people who were higher priority than him – like the family up the road who were living in a tent. They needed to get some walls up inside their house before winter hit.

Now that Ben's grant money had finally come through, he could order the materials he needed for his own rebuild. He was going to have to pretty much start from scratch, and it did seem quite daunting. He'd built the house himself twelve years ago, but he didn't know if he had the energy to do it again on his own. Thank god for blokes like Connor who were happy to help out.

By now he'd made himself a coffee on the little stove in the caravan, and he wandered up the front steps of his house to sit on the verandah in the sun. He had a camping chair up there, and on this sunny morning it was peaceful and warm. His phone rang and it was Kylie to tell him that she had passed on his details to the local radio station. They would be calling him soon. Ben told her about the truckload of stuff. He was going to meet the truck in a carpark in town the following day, and he needed to get the word out for anyone who needed a fridge or washing machine to be there with a ute or a van. She thanked him and reminded him to drop by the recovery hub when he was in town tomorrow to pick up some frozen meals for himself.

Ben could see a whirl of dust on the horizon now, coming in between the sugarcane fields. A vehicle was coming down the road, and now he could make out Connor's ute, which was slowing and turning off onto his potholed driveway. Ben reached over to pull on his boots. Next job: rebuild the house! ■

**They had managed to connect with the outside world in unexpected ways, thanks to social media. They were getting heaps more help from strangers than from the government, Ben mused.**



Image: Black Duck Style via shutterstock.

## Grassroots Resilience

*Trigger Warning: This vignette describes the aftermath of catastrophic flooding. It may be distressing to some readers, so please take care. If you need to talk to someone, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.*

*Experiencing a disaster is often the catalyst for communities to realise the importance of being prepared, particularly when people have been forced to rely on each other in the absence of outside help. In the aftermath, some local communities have formed grassroots resilience groups to ensure that recovery, climate adaptation and preparation for future disasters occurs at the local community level. This vignette highlights the critical role such groups can play in community resilience and the extraordinary power of communities to address their own issues through collective action.*

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As she turned out of her driveway and onto the potholed road to the school, Claire realised that she felt exhausted. It wasn't just the restless night's sleep, the early morning with the kids, and preparing the lunchboxes. This was a tiredness that seemed to have settled in her bones. Where the road dipped down to cross the creek, revealing the cliffs of mud sheared off by the torrent of floodwater and the tangle of broken trees and hills of boulders that the water had slain and sculpted, she felt the tears welling. It was nearly a year since the flood, and so much still felt so broken. In moments like these, it was good to drop the kids at school and have the 10-minute drive to the community hall alone in the car to cry.

By the time she got there, the feeling was passing. She needed to get it out of her system every once in a while. But seeing all the other cars already parked on the side of the dusty road lifted her spirits. She hoped there was going to be a good turnout today.

Inside, the rest of the team were already busily at work setting up the room. Maybe there hadn't been any breakfast tantrums in their homes this morning, thought Claire. She put down the box she was carrying and began to unpack the projector she had borrowed from work. Today was another step in consolidating their community flood plan, and

she was excited by the program. Someone Sharon had organised was coming to talk to them about UHF radio networks, and then Mandy was going to lead a meditation and yoga workshop. They had all recently agreed that they needed to make some space for self-care.

People began trickling in and filling up the plastic seats. All the usual members of the resilience group were there. Most of them had been regulars since the first weeks of the flood, Claire mused. But there were plenty of others too, which was great to see. Everyone was much more aware of the need to be prepared after what they had been through. The hall was respectably full when Sharon got up to introduce the radio guy.

Sharon opened with a brief background about the resilience group, which had evolved out of the recovery hub they ran for about six weeks after the flood. Cut off from the outside world by a washed-out bridge, the community had had to help itself. Claire had joined them about a week after the flood – once the landslide on her access road had been cleared and she could actually drive out of her property. She knew there was no way she could just go back to work, so she took a month of unpaid leave and turned up at the community hall every day instead. Sharon had been there since day one.

Over time, Claire and Sharon had become co-coordinators of the group. Well not ‘coordinators’ exactly – Claire thought that sounded too official and suggested some sort of formal process. It was more that she and Sharon were just around the most. They were the first ones there every morning and the last to leave at night. ‘Community weaver’ was a term she had heard recently – maybe that’s what she and Sharon were doing, helping the community to weave itself together into something stronger and more resilient?

The UHF radio stuff was fascinating – not something Claire had any prior knowledge about. Over lunch the team discussed the possibilities. They had earmarked some of their grant money to buy some radios, and they were much clearer now about what was needed.

There was an air of excitement, and together they marvelled at all they had been able to achieve in nine months. They had held a community debrief and undertaken a community mapping exercise. They’d also managed to get a tiny grant to put towards training and resources, which they were going to use on things like radios and first aid supplies, as well as some accidental counselling and grant-writing training. And next month they were going to have a Christmas party at the hall, which would be an opportunity for everyone to come together, let their hair down and celebrate community spirit.

Not that it hadn’t been without its challenges. The early weeks had been intense, Claire recollected, with so many needs and so much chaos. One of the most difficult things had been realising that they really were on their own. The authorities were overwhelmed and under-prepared, and it became clear pretty quickly that they weren’t going to come and save the day. So, the community got on with the job. Despite several people having prior experience with community organising, no one had ever lived through a disaster of this scale, and everything had to be invented on the fly. So many systems had to be created simultaneously in the early days: maps for welfare checks, managing the influx of donations, preparing and distributing the cooked meals, setting up volunteer rosters, the logistics of sending remote teams up the valley delivering supplies on foot. In those first days, it had all happened organically, with people gravitating towards the task that best suited them. And, since everything was equally urgent, it more or less worked out.

Six weeks, it had taken, before it felt like every family in the valley had found their feet enough for the recovery hub to wind down its operations. By then, nerves were frayed, the adrenalin rush was ending, and everyone needed a good, long sleep. For the most part they had done well to avoid schisms or conflicts from bubbling up, but it got to a point where people needed a break from one another, and from the relentlessness of it all. Lots of people were quite traumatised by what had happened, and when they turned up to help, they could sometimes be quite tricky to manage. Sometimes, Claire felt that managing people and their big emotions was her main job at the hall, one she shared with another woman in the group, who was a psychologist.

Things got a bit less intense when the recovery hub wound down, and Claire returned to work. But the group had formed a solid bond by then, and they were thinking about the longer term. Not just the long-term recovery, but preparation, resilience, adaptation. The looming threat of the climate crisis.

**‘Community weaver’ was a term she had heard recently – maybe that’s what she and Sharon were doing, helping the community to weave itself together into something stronger and more resilient?**

The absolute necessity that the community be able to look after itself the next time around.

So, they formed a local resilience group and started meeting fortnightly at the hall. There were other groups like theirs springing up in the area, too, and they shared ideas. In fact, Claire reflected, sharing information and resources with other organisers – mainly via a resilience group Facebook page that had been created since the flood – had been the best support they'd had. It was through that network that they'd got in touch with the UHF radio guy and had learned of opportunities to advocate for themselves to the local council, which was overhauling its emergency management structure. Next time a disaster struck, they wanted their skills, preparation and deep knowledge of the local community and conditions to be taken seriously by the authorities.

They had also got the idea of a community debrief from one of the other groups. There was so much trauma and grief and simmering community conflict – not to mention the anger people felt towards the authorities for not being there, for not having their backs despite the huge load the community was carrying. Even though it had been overwhelming to organise a big event just five months after the floods, it had given people a chance to get things off their chests and had been an important marker in their healing journey, Claire thought.

The question of how to sustain the group and access resources had been a tricky one. Naturally, the energy waned once the recovery hub wound up, and it was always the same faces turning up to the resilience group meetings. Everyone was so stretched! A couple of members of the group, like Sharon, were retired, but most were parents with jobs and mortgages or rent. Well, most were mums, Claire corrected herself wryly. There was a most definite and unsurprising gender imbalance in the group. They had so many good ideas but a very limited capacity to get things done.

They had heard that a couple of other groups had become incorporated associations and managed to access some small grants to set themselves up. They discussed this at length among themselves – should they get incorporated too? Some people wanted to stay grassroots and were worried the 'magic' of their organic organising would be lost if they formalised. Others were all for it if that meant getting access to funding. Others were cynical of the government's willingness to recognise their work, whether they formalised or not. The absence of any meaningful support from the state government or local council in the six weeks they

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were operating the recovery hub left a bitter taste in many mouths.

In the end, it was the sheer burden of the task that turned them off. No one had experience with this sort of thing, and no one had the time to sit up at night and do the paperwork. They opted for being auspiced by the community hall and decided they would review things in a year. It was working well so far, meaning their time was free to pursue the small grant, which had been successful. The grant was only a few thousand dollars though, and it wouldn't stretch far. They would love to go for something bigger, but most of the grants around seemed to be aimed at larger organisations. Besides, it was very difficult for them to find the time for grant applications, being all unpaid volunteers as they were.

With or without funding, here they were, nearly a year on, getting on with the job. In three weeks, they would be hosting a workshop on regenerating the banks of the creek. And yes, they were tired, and all had moments like Claire did this morning. A couple of people got really burnt out and had to step back to look after their own wellbeing. And yes, they would be able to do so much more with some money behind them, or a few more people to share the load. But they were doing it, and those that had stuck around all knew that they were involved in something very important. Something quite precious, in fact. Community coming together to help themselves, meeting their own needs in the way that only community can.

As the lunch break ended and Sharon and the others wandered back inside for yoga and meditation, Claire had a sudden realisation about how much these people meant to her. They had been through so much together, and now they felt like family. She felt so much more embedded in this community than she had a year ago. Despite the hard work and craziness, she wouldn't change any of it. But she was looking forward to unrolling her yoga mat and lying down on it for a bit. ■



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