

Out of the ashes, a community responds: the Dandenong Ranges Bushfires, January 1997

by Helen Wositzky, Community Development Officer, Shire of Yarra Ranges

The Dandenong Ranges, situated 50 kilometres to the east of Melbourne in Victoria, is recognised as an area of high fire risk, rating among the top five in the world.

Much of the range is forested with small communities nestled along the main ridge. On the morning of January 21st 1997, a hot day with high north-westerly winds, five fires were deliberately lit along the base of the western face of the Ranges. Positioned where gullies faced a northerly direction, the steepness of terrain and the forest environment resulted in the fires quickly sweeping up to the residential-forest interface.

With fires burning in other areas of the state, firefighting resources were stretched to the limit. To fight the Dandenong Ranges fires, the Country Fire Brigade, Metropolitan Fire Brigade and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources had some 280 firetrucks and over 1000 firefighters on the ground, with three helicopters and two Canadair Super scoopers tackling the fires from above.

As the residents returned in the drizzle of early dawn the following day, the extent of damage and loss to the communities was realised. Forty-one houses were destroyed, 3 lives tragically lost, dozens of houses partially damaged, 179 private gardens burnt and 400 hectares of National and State Park burnt.

On the historical scale of bushfires these fires could be considered small, however the impact locally to the communities was anything but small. Although the Dandenongs are no stranger to bushfires, it was thirty years ago in 1968 that these particular ridge communities were affected by a serious bushfire. Apart from long-term residents, many had never experienced such an event and despite local CFA education campaigns many were unprepared for the risk and thus vulnerable. This has been described by John Schauble, a long-

Presented at the Emergency Recovery Forum, Darebin, November 27 1997

term resident involved in fire prevention for many years, as 'a lack of collective memory'.

The community, agencies and local government were quick to respond. Within days a recovery committee was established (see *Figure 1*) that involved all those responsible for the various aspects of the recovery process. Community sub-committees (to deal with material and financial aid, physical clean up and rebuilding and personal support) were formed under the umbrella of the recovery committee and a Community Development Officer appointed.

The structure developed to manage the recovery provided an integrated, coordinated approach, had clear lines of communication, involved a dynamic process of monitoring and reassessing needs and services, and involved the community.

The resources employed by government and agencies to assist the affected

residents were extensive, however it is the initiatives and support that came from within the community and the Community Recovery Projects that this article will focus upon.

Immediately following the bushfires, the community response was spontaneous—existing networks and neighbourhoods rallied together to provide support and assistance. The extent of voluntary support has been overwhelming and exemplifies the renowned community spirit of the Dandenongs. Over 150 community volunteers were so committed to assisting those directly affected that their support has continued for a full year after the event.

Within a week of the fires a core of locals in both Upwey and Ferny Creek planned and publicised a public meeting for those wishing to assist. The impetus from within these communities came primarily from the primary school in Ferny Creek and the Anglican Church in Upwey. Due to the response of approximately 100 community members attending, it was evident a framework was necessary that would ensure

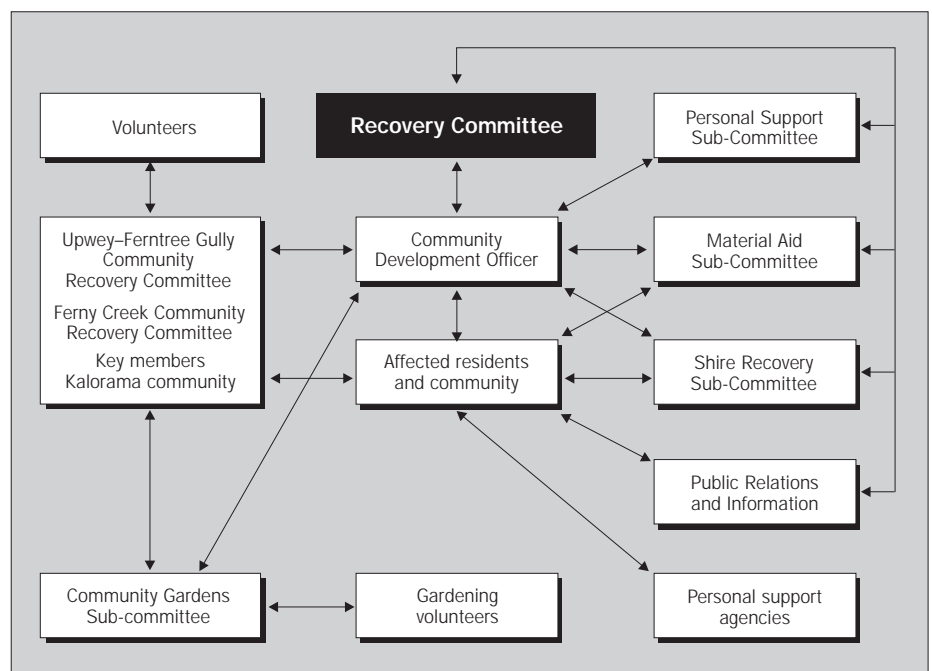


Figure 1: Recovery Committee structure

volunteer efforts were coordinated, communication was quick and effective, the needs of the community were sensitively met and privacy of those affected was taken into account. The volunteer framework was thus developed by myself in my role as Community Development Officer (see *Table 1*).

Those that had indicated an interest in playing an ongoing and organisational role were invited to a further meeting at which they nominated to take on coordinating roles. It was through this process that the coordinators formed the Ferny Creek and Upwey Community Recovery Committees.

Volunteers were registered on a database according to the type of assistance they offered, and coordinators were provided with the appropriate list to call on volunteers as required. About 200 volunteers became involved.

Individuals and groups offering assistance (sorted via databank into areas of interest)

In Kalorama the community approached the recovery process in a more informal way. Two key community members and neighbours organised help as needed without being 'registered volunteers' as part of a formalised structure.

This informal response could be due to a number of factors. With fewer community groups such as the CFA and tennis club, existing networks were not as developed and largely focused on the

primary school and pre-school. The impact of the bushfires was less in terms of houses destroyed, and those who lost their homes did not have young children and thus school links or links to community groups. Kalorama residents appear to be more independent and have fewer socialising opportunities to consolidate the community. Each community being individual has its own way of approaching their response to an event and its recovery, the informal response suited the Kalorama community and the needs of those directly affected were met.

As Community Development Officer, my role included informing the affected residents of the types of assistance available to them and how to access this assistance. Many residents had difficulty in coming to terms with being in the position of needing to accept donated goods and volunteer help. During the first month following the fires I visited all those who had lost homes and spent time on the affected streets making contact with those who had partially-damaged houses and burnt gardens. Particularly for those who did not previously know the coordinators or myself, this personal approach contributed to allaying shyness or embarrassment. Once help from volunteers was accepted, an easy comfortable relationship developed that kept the volunteers very busy and at times unable to keep up with requests.

The clean up of building debris was offered to residents free of charge by the Shire of Yarra Ranges and for safety reasons did not involve volunteers. However the Shire's service of supplying arborists to assess burnt trees and crews felling or trimming dangerous trees was complimented by a mammoth effort by volunteers helping to split and clear away the felled timber blocks.

Due to the amount of work required to tackle the wood and burnt vegetation of the typically large gardens, many of some hectares, a Community Gardening Sub-committee was formed that included the gardening coordinators and community members from all of the affected areas.

This committee planned and coordinated the garden cleanup across the whole ridge, shared resources and ideas, and motivated groups such as the Masonic Taskforce, Greencorp, Rovers, Guides and Apex to become involved. A fair estimation would be over one hundred garden working bees held with up to twenty volunteers attending each one. This gives an indication of the commitment of the community to organise and help itself in the recovery process.

A wonderful initiative that came from the Community Gardening Committee was the organisation of a 'Plant Day'. Wholesale nurseries throughout Victoria were approached for plant donations, all the affected streets were

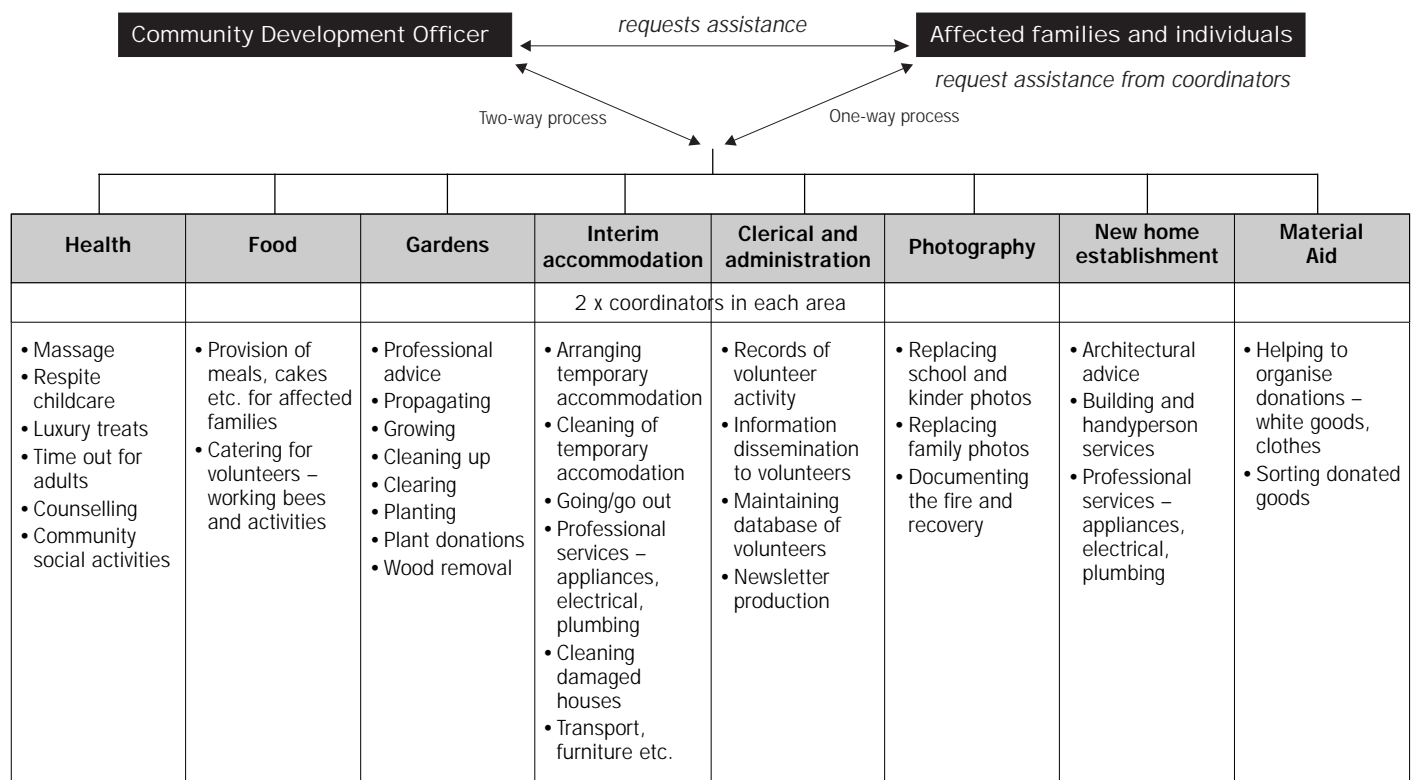


Table 1: Volunteer framework

doorknocked to determine damaged gardens and vouchers to attend the Plant Day were distributed.

On a Friday in early May nursery trucks rolled into the Ferny Creek Recreation Reserve. The plants were sorted into species and size, and counted to determine how many plants each property could take. The grand total was 10,000 plants (ranging from small cottage plants to established trees seven metres high) and 20,000 bulbs!

On Saturday the reserve was a mass of plants and smiling faces. The morale boost the Plant Day gave to the 130 property owners who collected plants was obvious and overwhelming. Community volunteers were on hand providing advice on plant selection, carting plants in utes and trailers for those without suitable vehicles to transport them home, and feeding all the workers.

Another community initiative was organised by the Dandenong Ranges Music Council, who commissioned two composers to work with the children of Ferny Creek Primary School. Through workshops, the children explored their emotions and experiences both verbally and through the creation of sounds. The song 'Island in the Sky' was thus created. The value of this project and its process in the healing of the community cannot be under-estimated, both for the children involved and the wider Dandenong Ranges community who witnessed the moving and powerful performance of Island in the Sky.

Community recovery projects

In April the Department of Human Services and the Shire of Yarra Ranges committed funding to the development of Community Recovery Projects.

Recovery projects should aim to provide the community with opportunities to come to terms with the experience, to express emotions related to their personal and collective experience and to assist the community in linking the past event to a changed environment and a new future.

An essential part of any healing process in that they provide an important alternative and addition to the traditional counselling and personal support services available to those affected by a traumatic event.

Implicit in the development of the Dandenong Ranges Community Recovery Projects was the recognition and acknowledgment the wider community had been affected, and had needs to be met in the recovery process.

The Community recovery projects thus aimed to engage imaginatively with the whole community and not only those directly affected who had lost homes, gardens and loved ones.

Process of developing recovery projects

The involvement of the community in developing recovery projects was essential, and was based on the premise that the Recovery Committee, local government and the CDO should play a facilitative and guiding role but the drive and control of the recovery projects should rest within the community.

The first step of this process was to establish a community working party including community members and representation from the Shire of Yarra Ranges Leisure, Aged, Community, and Youth Services. *Figure 2* illustrates the process undertaken by this working party.

The criteria the community working party felt needed to be met by proposed recovery projects individually or collectively was to:

- bring together and encompass all the communities affected by the bushfires
- provide opportunities for all ages to participate
- engage imaginatively with the community
- provide a vehicle and a therapeutic outlet for the expression of emotions
- allow for a full range of expression, both abstract and recognisable
- encompass a variety of expressive mediums
- integrate social opportunities and community events
- provide opportunities for those not actively 'creating' to participate in events
- incorporate a commemorative project to the event, loss and recovery
- reinforce and express the strengths of the community
- focus on elements of community recovery, natural regeneration and rebuilding of the human environment
- contribute to a sense of a positive future for individuals and the community.

The recovery projects

Five Dandenong Ranges community recovery projects were designed. These projects were a bid to draw out the strengths, experiences, humour and hope of a community rebuilding its environments following the crisis.

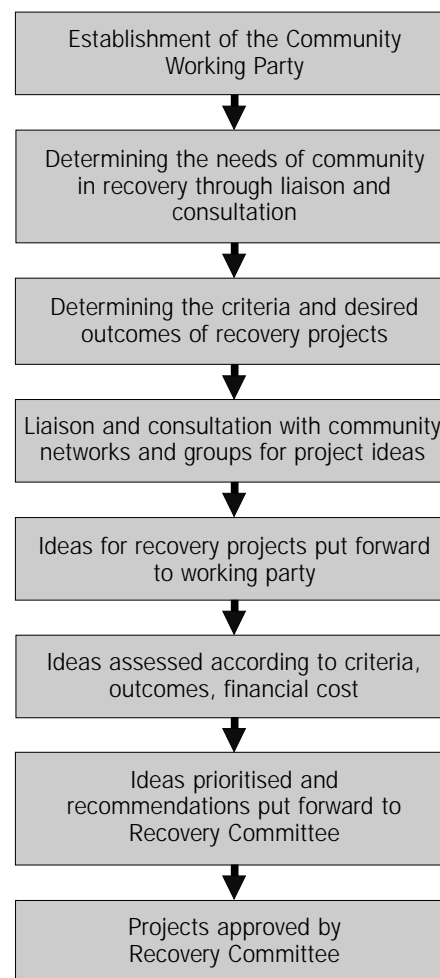


Figure 2: Recovery project development process

The bushfire event itself, although a part of these projects, was not the main theme. Rather the projects focused on the positive process of recovery the forest and community was experiencing—the regeneration of the natural and human environment, the community strength and spirit of care, love, and hope that was illuminated in the actions of neighbourhoods following the fires.

Phoenix art project

This was named after the mythical Phoenix, who every 500 years builds a pyre of the sweetest spices on which it sits and sings a song of rare beauty to the sun to restore its youth and vigour. The sun shakes his locks and from his golden head, shoots one bright beam, which smites with vital fire, ignites the nest and the Phoenix is consumed to ashes, a new Phoenix rises rejuvenated and pulsating with new life. Gathering the ashes of its parent, it flies to the Temple of the Sun where it buries the ashes with great ceremony.

The Phoenix Art Project invited the Dandenong Ranges Community to create artworks with the theme of recovery, regeneration, rebuilding and community spirit. All mediums were invited, including collage, photography,

sculpture, painting and textiles and 160 artworks were exhibited locally for three days. From this exhibition, judges selected 21 entries to illustrate a calendar for 1998. In addition one entry was selected for the cover of the 'Rising from the Ashes' CD and one for the cover of 'Out of the Fire' stories and poems.

Rising from the Ashes music project

Entries of original compositions and were invited for inclusion in a recovery CD. A panel of community judges were given the difficult task of selecting twenty compositions to be recorded for the CD. A wonderful medley of all musical styles the CD was launched at the beginning of December. This music will also form the score for the Video Documentary.

Out of the Ashes writing project

Stories and poems of personal experiences of living through fires were invited. Older residents who had lived through cycles of fires and recovery were encouraged. Thirty-four entries were selected by a panel of judges for publication in book form. Quotes from some of these entries were included as text in the Phoenix art calendar.

Commemorative Pathways project

A series of four community commemorative paths were designed for sites at Fern Tree Gully, Ferny Creek, Sassafras and Kalorama.

Pavers were bought in an unfired state and community workshops were held to decorate individual pavers by carving, engraving and painting either an image or message. Ceramic artists designed and painted a series of large picture medallions along the paths.

Video documentary

The production of a documentary to show the journey of a community recovering, community generated initiatives and the extent of collaboration between the community, organisations and government has been commissioned. It will be a social document in hope, love and strength of a collaborative imagination, of a community healing itself, of how disaster can often lead to unexpected joys and the discovery of hidden strengths.

It would probably be an understatement to say that these five recovery projects were ambitious. With a budget of \$25,000 and one CDO as coordinator, these projects would not have been possible without the tremendous support the community gave in an organisational sense and by donating their

time and skills. Each project had a core of community members, and many other people helped as the need arose.

Graphic artists designed flyers, volunteers distributed them around local shops, a local restaurant donated their venue for the art show, judges for the projects gave their time, a recording studio was donated, as was the time and skills of sound engineers and a producer, ceramic artists designed the pathways and assisted with facilitating workshops and sorting out the fired tiles, local estate agents erected signs for events, a cinematographer, and script writer are volunteers on the video project and the local cinema has been donated for its launch.

Community participation

Phoenix Art Show

- One thousand primary and secondary students participated from five local schools. Each school chose 15 entries to enter into the Phoenix Art Show.
- One hundred residents created art for the show.
- Six hundred residents attended the show over three days.

Rising from the Ashes

- Thirty-five entries of original songs and compositions were received.
- Entries chosen for the CD have involved 120 musicians and singers, including children from two local primary schools singing.
- Three hundred residents attended the CD launch.

Out of the Ashes

- Ninety entries received from residents.
- Students from two local secondary schools participated and 15 entries from each school were chosen by teachers.

Commemorative Pathways

- Six hundred residents attended the workshops to decorate a tile.
- Five hundred students from four local schools decorated tiles as part of art classes.
- Three hundred and fifty people have attended the pathway openings.

The projects were designed to include community events that gave everyone an opportunity to come together. For those not actively creating, these events and the end products—book, art show, calendar and CD—provided an opportunity to partake in the projects as viewers, listeners and readers as part of their personal recovery.

The community recovery projects did stimulate an outpouring of emotion, with many in the community being surprised by their emotional reaction at the community events associated with these projects. Through feedback from those who have purchased the recovery items, the value and personal importance of the communal sharing of feelings and experiences was evident.

The community supporting each other

The community also recognised the need to support each other in an emotional sense, by holding social activities to simply get together, have a good time and reaffirm the support and friendship of the community.

Only one week after the fires, large gatherings were seen at Ferny Creek Reserve and Kalorama Oval. Thousands of the community came together, listened to music, talked (and talked and talked!) and expressed their thanks to the CFA, DCNR, SES and all those involved in fighting the fires and, in their own words, 'saving our mountain'.

In the middle of winter an event was organised that had many of us wondering if the community had 'lost its marbles—a 'Beach Party'. Industrial heaters were brought into the Ferny Creek Hall, the floor covered with sand, appropriate decorations of beach balls and colourful bathing boxes added. The result was a night of great fun and dancing, the community attending in shorts, bathers and sarongs.

It has been a real pleasure to work as a Community Development Officer. The Dandenong Ranges communities have shown that a traumatic event can strengthen a community, that recovery and a future is possible, and that such an event need not result in a 'disaster'.

The author

Helen has been a long time resident of Sassafras. She trained as a teacher and worked in the Adult Migrant Education section. She has extensive links and networks with both the older community and newcomers to the area. This has been developed through involvement in a wide range of school, sporting groups and community projects in the local area. At the time of the January bushfire she was at home with young children. However, in her role of Community Development Officer she was able to draw upon her personal organisational skills, local knowledge and networks in responding to the needs of the local residents.