

BLUE MOUNTAINS Gazette

The following stories are from the Blue Mountains Gazette and cover the Bush Fire Emergency in October 2013 and the associated recovery.

Blaxland tip at breaking point

By *Damien Madigan* Nov. 20, 2013, midnight

Blaxland tip is struggling to cope with waste from the October bushfires with Blue Mountains mayor Mark Greenhill hoping new government funding will relieve the growing pressure.

“In the immediate aftermath of the fires I announced that the Blaxland tip would be free to those impacted. At that time I had expected that an announcement of government support would be near at hand. This is a small, regional facility and it is beginning to bend under the strain,” he said.

“It is now five weeks since the fires and I am keen to see the government’s block clearing begin quickly so that we can take pressure off our tip and move the waste out of the Mountains,” he said.

Mark Richardson of Winmalee business On-Line Excavations was a victim of confusion over the tip’s capacity last Friday when he was told to take bushfire-damaged waste to Kemps Creek after leaving previous loads at Blaxland just the same day.

“To change the goal posts half way through is a bit unfair,” he said.

In a letter in today’s Gazette, Clr Greenhill said the council will keep taking small amounts of uncontaminated fire waste for free in the short term at Blaxland.

“Working with [bushfire recovery co-ordinator] Phil Koperberg, we will seek to make arrangements in the coming days for large deliveries at other landfill facilities,” he said.

The management of bushfire-related waste saw council welcome the announcement last Thursday of additional government funding for the bushfire clean-up.

Clr Greenhill welcomed the “significant funding” announced by NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell, treasurer Mike Baird and Blue Mountains MP Roza Sage after he had attacked the government for its slow response in last week’s Gazette.

While the government has not nominated an amount, it is understood the commitment may be worth up to \$10 million. It is provided under the jointly funded federal-NSW Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements.

“To assist, the NSW Government will work with insurers and fund the clean-up and removal of all bushfire debris, including the disposal of asbestos contaminated material from destroyed homes,” said Mr O’Farrell.

“The NSW Government is determined to help the Blue Mountains community which is undertaking the daunting and heartbreaking task of rebuilding after these fires.”

He said the cost of cleaning-up bushfire debris from a site would not be deducted from a resident’s insurance payout.

Clr Greenhill said the funding announcement was the “much-needed missing link at this critical stage of bushfire recovery and rebuild”.

Labor Senator Doug Cameron, who had also attacked the state and federal governments for not responding quickly enough to the recovery effort, welcomed the announcement which he said was “long overdue”.

“The assistance being offered by the New South Wales government is a victory for common sense,” he said.

Council backs link road call

By *Shane Desiatnik* Nov. 20, 2013, midnight

Councillors unanimously supported deputy mayor Brendan Luchetti’s call to build a road from Yellow Rock to Castlereagh at last week’s council meeting, but a lukewarm reaction from Member for Blue Mountains Roza Sage indicates the proposal could struggle to gain backing.

When asked what her thoughts were about a Yellow Rock link road that would offer local residents an alternative exit route during bushfire emergencies, Mrs Sage told the Gazette on Friday while she wouldn’t rule it out, “it’s just something that needs to be thought through first,” adding it was a matter for council, not the Roads and Maritime Services (RMS).

“As to whether it is realistic or the feasibility of it, it’s a little difficult to tell — you’ve got an escarpment there, you’d need to see if it would go through any national parks, all those things,” Mrs Sage said.

“It’s very early days and you’d have to look at what caveats there are. Council can start that and I think they’d be able to quickly assess that.

“If it was [found to be] a feasible road, then they [RMS] could look at it.”

A Penrith City Council spokesperson told the Gazette that council will investigate the matter.

“A report will go back to (Penrith) council and Blue Mountains City Council staff and Penrith City Council staff will meet shortly to start a joint investigation as any links will impact both council areas,” the spokesperson said.

Blue Mountains mayor Mark Greenhill said he would write letters to the Penrith council and relevant state and federal MPs seeking their support for Clr Luchetti’s proposal.

Winmalee walkers triumphant

By Damien Madigan and Ilsa Cunningham

Nov. 20, 2013, midnight

After three days walking 50km in heavy rain, a bunch of students and teachers from Winmalee High School were in remarkably good spirits.

They’d achieved what they’d set out to do — walk from Katoomba to Winmalee High School in a fundraiser for fire-affected students — and raised more than \$35,000 in the process.

As the group neared the finish line, emerging through pouring rain, they got huge cheers and applause as they walked down the long school corridor at the end of the walk.

School captain for 2014 Sam Glazebrook said: “It’s been a great experience for our school and our community to really see us bond together. The fires devastated the Blue Mountains but we’ve all come together with this.

“Everywhere we went the support was fantastic. We had people pulling over on the side of the road and giving us \$100 notes.”

He said the rain was no deterrent: “That’s not going to stop us, we have a stronger cause than that.”

That cause was a Winmalee Community of Schools Fund set up by Winmalee High for fire-affected students of Winmalee High, Winmalee Public, Ellison Public and Springwood High schools.

The fund aims to cover education costs for the fire-affected students for the remainder of this year and 2014.

Walk organiser Julie DalSanto, the head teacher of PDHPE at Winmalee High, said eight fire-affected students completed the walk, and grew emotionally as the walk progressed.

“They grew in confidence going through the trip,” she said. “At the start their eyes were down and they were quieter, but by the end they were smiling and laughing in front of the school groups we were visiting.”

Ms DalSanto said the highlight of the walk was nearing the end when they walking down Hawkesbury Rd, picking up other school students and walking into Winmalee High.

“That journey down Hawkesbury Rd was a real celebration of what we’d achieved,” she said.

“The whole school was out when we arrived and they were so proud of every single person that did the walk.”

Rainbow kids stay 'happy' while hemmed in by fire

By *B. C Lewis* Nov. 20, 2013, midnight

A few weeks after the terrible fires in Winmalee, Joan Murray, Winmalee’s Rainbow Pre-School director, penned a letter to parents.

She felt she had to explain what her charges had been through, just in case they suffered some after effects, despite the best efforts of their carers on Thursday, October 17.

The three-page letter titled “If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands” describes the song Mrs Murray and the staff sang as 13 children, aged between three and five, were evacuated by an RFS truck and Fire and Rescue NSW officers as fires burnt on either side of Singles Ridge Road.

The children were moved another two times as Ellison Public was in lockdown so they couldn't stay there and their "slightly bedraggled little group" needed to later leave Springwood Public School's cozy library and move on to the Springwood Sports Club for the night on police orders.

Some of those children spent the night being cared for by Rainbow staff as their parents were also trapped by the fires and couldn't collect them.

"The duty of care finished at 8am," wrote Mrs Murray in the letter. "The backyard is a mess. We have lost heaps but it is only stuff, others have lost a lot more. If it was not for the efforts of Dale Wade-Ferrell, Matthew Fraser, Steve Price and the crew of Tanker 82 from Richmond, we would have lost a lot more."

Mrs Murray said she told her pre-kindy kids it was "fog and mist" not smoke, and kept the curtains drawn as the weather worsened.

They were evacuated by their regular firefighter Dale Wade-Ferrell, also a father at the school, who was off duty at the time but had come to keep an eye on the school.

"Dale came in the back door to say that the fire was in our backyard and that we were evacuating now. We lined up our remaining children and told them that there was a fire and that we were getting out with fireman Dale's friend, Captain Steve, who had just entered the door. Our children were remarkably calm. We held hands and walked out to an RFS truck," she said.

The children squeezed onto the back of the truck, some sitting on each other's laps and the floor as they drove to safety.

"I later learned that Dale had flagged down Tanker 82 from Richmond that was heading to Yellow Rock to save our beloved Rainbow building and our home."

Mrs Murray said a new chapter has started and the clean-up had begun in earnest at the pre-school.

A fortnight ago parents and friends (including several firefighters) got involved in a working bee to clear the children's charred backyard and start to restore normality to the school.

At the weekend she received a donation of 12 iPads from Telstra.

Firies determined to rebuild at Yellow Rock

By *Damien Madigan* Nov. 20, 2013, midnight

All that remains of Winmalee Rural Fire Brigade's shed at Yellow Rock is a singed sign that now hangs proudly at the brigade's station at Winmalee.

"That sign will be a hallowed relic," said brigade captain Anthony Black.

Built with the brigade's own funds on private land, the shed was among the extensive property losses at Yellow Rock in the October fires.

But like most Blue Mountains people who suffered losses in the fires, the brigade is determined to rebuild.

"Our brigade members have lost houses [in the fires], and the brigade generally is pretty shattered by the whole event," said Mr Black.

"We are determined to construct a Yellow Rock shed that will provide a better facility than the previous one and we intend to grow the brigade to include a larger number of members, and to try and get more vehicles at Yellow Rock," he said.

Already people have answered the call to help the brigade get back on its financial feet. Balgowlah RSL has donated money, as have people living overseas who became aware of the brigade's plight via its popular Facebook page.

Blue Mountains MP Roza Sage has stayed in close contact with the brigade and has urged people to help out as well.

People wanting to donate to the Winmalee Rural Fire Brigade can do so at the Commonwealth Bank, BSB 062-601, account number 0090 0310.

Heavy cost to rebuild after fires

By Jennie Curtin Nov. 20, 2013, midnight

The Salvation Army has promised long-term financial support to bushfire-affected residents, as many face the reality that their insurance payouts will not completely cover rebuilding costs.

At an information session held at Springwood last Thursday, residents were warned that they faced a shortfall in funds when it came to rebuilding because of higher construction costs required to meet bushfire regulations.

Non-combustible materials and higher-quality glass for windows are among the products that will add to the final bill.

Bushfire recovery co-ordinator Phil Koperberg told the packed gathering: “On average, if you are in BAL [Bushfire Attack Level] 40 or Flame Zone, the cost of replacing what you had will cost something between \$80,000 and \$120,000 more.

“Is the government going to make some provisions for that shortfall? The answer is no. But I will be speaking to the finance industry to see if that shortfall can be incorporated into existing mortgages.”

The 400 residents at the meeting also heard that council will waive many of the fees involved with development applications.

More than \$7.7 million has been pledged to the Salvation Army’s bushfire appeal, although only \$2.7 million has been received so far.

But \$1.7 million in retail vouchers and pre-loaded EFTPOS cards has been distributed to families and business in the Mountains, on the central coast and in the Southern Highlands.

A spokesman for the Salvos, Major Bruce Harmer, said it was normal in disaster recovery work for the most costly part of the recovery to come further down the track.

“Those affected will need support in the longer term and this will be costly as they repair and rebuild existing homes or relocate to alternative accommodation,” Major Harmer said.

“Our plan for the distribution of bushfire appeal funds reflects this.”

The mayor’s relief fund has pledged \$1.2 million and a meeting of the fund’s committee this week will determine criteria to distribute the money.

In addition a rebuild office has opened in the old council office below the library in Springwood.

Residents will be able to receive free advice on rebuilding specific to their own site as well as information about council and paperwork requirements.

The office will be staffed from 10am-4pm on weekdays but residents are being urged to make an appointment first by ringing council on 4723 5000.

Winmalee High class of 2013 bids a final farewell

By *B.C Lewis* Nov. 20, 2013, midnight

With a suit paid for by his girlfriend's mum, and in a replica Peter Brock Commodore, Year 12 Winmalee High School student Steve Willson admitted he was having a "good night".

"It's good, it's like a big load off my mind to be here," he said of the school's final farewell at the Carrington Hotel last Thursday evening.

To say life hasn't been easy for Steve Willson would be a gross understatement. In Year 7 his mum died from cancer. In his final school year, a month before his farewell and during his HSC exams, the only home he has known went up in smoke.

"I was in Penrith when I found out [about the fire on October 17] and we rushed up, but the police wouldn't let me into the street," Mr Willson, 18, said.

"But my friend's house was two doors down and we helped him. His house on the top of Singles Ridge Road was on fire and we put it out; we saved his house. When they finally let us down it [my home in Cooroy Crescent in Yellow Rock] was already burning."

He had no notes and "couldn't focus" on his HSC, but he has an interview lined up with the ferries as a deckhand or may go to uni to study construction management.

Mr Willson was one of 119 valiant Year 12 students who had a night to remember at the Carrington Hotel on November 14 — the final official gathering for Winmalee High's class of 2013.

Donated cars, dresses and make-up were the order of the day for the many students affected by the bushfires one month earlier.

Year 12 co-ordinators Greg and Kayleen Dutton said it was the first year in a long time that a farewell had been held in the Mountains. Principal Katrina Middlebrook said she thought it "appropriate".

"We've really reconnected with our community through this experience," Ms Middlebrook said.

Ms Middlebrook said she couldn't be prouder of her "troopers" who had handled themselves with aplomb during the evening.

"This night has been like a giant group hug, I'm so proud of them, they can let go of the last month," she said.

The school had been inundated by gifts since the fires. One Year 11 parent had insisted on spending \$1000 on glassware for the students to take home that night as a memory of their tough year.

Towards the end of the evening, teacher Julie Sherden announced to raucous applause that one of the students, 'car nut' Lucas Magennis, had a secondhand Saab donated to him to make up for

the one burnt in the fires. He was one of six Year 12 students who had lost their homes who were presented with new year books at the farewell and promised new school jerseys.

Steve Willson said his difficult experiences had made him stand taller.

“It’s definitely made me more mature, more responsible as well,” he said. “It’s been pretty hard, but as time goes on it gets easier.”

Plenty to smile about after Wiggles visit Winmalee

By *Shane Desiatnik* Nov. 20, 2013, midnight

The past month may have felt like an eternity for many St Thomas Aquinas School students and staff hit hard by the Linksvie bushfire disaster, but it only took a matter of seconds for their spirits to soar during a surprise “morale-boosting” visit by The Wiggles last Wednesday.

The arrival of the band loved by millions of children around the world generated an instant roar and sea of smiles in the school hall — their on-stage energy proving infectious during an hour-long show that got everyone up and wiggling, including proud principal Sergio Rosato.

The Wiggles donated a new hand-made guitar to Mr Rosato to replace the treasured one he’d lost when his home was destroyed in the bushfire on October 17.

Sadly, 11 other staff and students at the school also lost their homes.

Clearly touched, Mr Rosato said the children were “absolutely thrilled” by The Wiggles’ visit.

“It’s a real morale booster for the community and the parish because there’s still a lot of angst as what happened sinks in,” he said.

“There’s a few elements to all this, there’s the people whose homes burnt but there are also the children who are living next door — and some have a sense of guilt about these neighbours’ and friends’ homes not being there anymore.

“This is a kind of resetting (process) for them that shows a hard thing has happened, but it can get better. This will help.”

The Wiggles arrived in Australia just two days before from a show in Dubai and were due to tour New Zealand within 48 hours, but made it a priority to fit in the visit to the school, which lead Wiggle Anthony Field has a family connection to.

In fact, the band had already packed and sent their best uniforms and stage equipment over to New Zealand, but their media officer told the Gazette she'd luckily kept some spare Wiggles skivvies for them to use.

"My sister Maria is part of the Blue Mountains community — her kids went to this school — and she told me about what happened here so we decided to come," Mr Field said.

"With all their troubles, it is good [for the children] to go back to some fun — it's a kind of comfort."

Red Wiggle Simon Pryce said "we just wanted to put a smile on their faces".

Up to \$10 million to fund bushfire clean-up

By Sean Nicholls Nov. 14, 2013, midnight

The NSW government will fund the clean up and removal of debris and asbestos from bushfire-affected properties in the Blue Mountains.

Premier Barry O'Farrell, Treasurer Mike Baird and Blue Mountains MP Roza Sage have announced the commitment, which will be provided under the jointly funded federal-NSW Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements.

While the government has not nominated an amount, it is understood the commitment may be worth up to \$10 million.

More than 200 homes were destroyed and 120 properties damaged in the bushfires that tore through the region last month.

The funding comes on top of the \$1.4 million previously provided by the state government to "make safe" bushfire-affected sites.

Mr O'Farrell said the government would "work with insurers and fund the clean up and removal of all bushfire debris, including the disposal of asbestos-contaminated material".

"The NSW government is determined to help the Blue Mountains community, which is undertaking the daunting and heartbreaking task of rebuilding," he said.

Ms Sage said residents would not be charged for water used to defend their homes during the crisis and fees had been waived to replace lost official documents such as drivers' licences and birth certificates. The waste levy for dumping bushfire waste in tips had also been waived.

She said a campaign to encourage tourism in the Blue Mountains had been announced.

Locals in limbo over govt 'dithering'

By *Damien Madigan* Nov. 12, 2013, midnight

The federal and state governments have come under fire for the slow pace of the bushfire recovery in the Blue Mountains with the clearing of blocks lagging behind similar bushfire disasters in Victoria and Tasmania.

Blue Mountains mayor Mark Greenhill went on the attack last week, frustrated at inaction on the issue.

“I’m really troubled that three weeks has passed and no government-sponsored clearing of blocks has occurred. I don’t understand why the residents of Blue Mountains are being treated differently to the residents of other parts of Australia who have been through similar things,” he told the Gazette on Friday.

Three weeks after the Victorian bushfires in 2009 the state government had appointed a contractor, Grocon, to co-ordinate the clearing of bushfire devastated blocks. A clean-up contract was also announced shortly after the Tasmanian bushfires this January. No such action has occurred in the Blue Mountains.

Acting opposition leader Tanya Plibersek expressed concerns about the bushfire recovery progress last Thursday.

“Recovery and clean-up is being hindered by a lack of action from the government that simply does not understand the issues facing the community and businesses as a result of the most devastating bushfire seen in the Blue Mountains for decades,” she said.

Ms Plibersek called on the Prime Minister to take “urgent action on the recovery of bushfire affected areas by immediately adopting a clean-up strategy consistent with that implemented following the Victorian 2009 bushfires”.

But Blue Mountains MP Roza Sage defended the pace of the recovery, saying “every disaster and the clean-up operations that follow are different”.

“Taking a cookie-cutter approach will benefit nobody, least of all affected families. Safety is absolutely paramount and is the number one concern for me, the NSW Government and all the hard-working agencies involved in the effort,” she said.

“NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell has been quick to act on the advice of the Bushfire Recovery Committee, led by Phil Koperberg. I don’t accept any comments implying that Mr Koperberg is not leading this recovery in the safest and most timely fashion possible.”

But the mayor was quick to point out his concerns were never about Mr Koperberg's handling of the recovery.

“Phil Koperberg has my complete support. What disappoints me is the inaction from government,” he said.

He said clearing the blocks was important for two reasons.

“It is obviously a key step in the reconstruction effort but it's also an important emotional step because it tells people we're moving on,” he said. “But while those blocks remain as they are people are emotionally stuck and physically stuck, moving nowhere. I'm concerned about the residents who have lost their houses but also those who are left behind in the streets with the rubble of the fires around them as a constant reminder of that terrible day.”

Blue Mountains-based Labor Senator Doug Cameron said he was “appalled at the dithering and delays between the Abbott and O'Farrell Governments at a time when immediate assistance is required by the Blue Mountains community”.

In defending the federal government's handling of the recovery — including calling in Defence Force personnel to work with SES and RFS volunteers — Federal Member for Macquarie Louise Markus said the different levels of government were working together co-operatively.

“I am and will continue working with my federal and state colleagues to obtain the assistance required for recovery and will not be drawn into political point-scoring by Senator Cameron,” she said.

For his part, recovery co-ordinator Phil Koperberg said the NSW Government was “committed to making this [recovery] exercise as painless as possible”.

“At the moment it is moving as quickly as it can, in negotiation with the federal government, to see whether or not there can be a ‘one-stop shop’ approach to... the clearing of all sites. It is nevertheless a complex issue.”

Mr Koperberg said he continued “to keep the government advised on the urgency of this matter” and was hopeful a funding announcement would be made imminently.

He also praised the mayor and Blue Mountains City Council for their part in the recovery effort.

“We would never have got as far as we have without the resources they've made available and the co-operation they've extended to us,” he said.

Call for alternative Yellow Rock escape route

By *Shane Desiatnik* Nov. 12, 2013, midnight

Blue Mountains deputy mayor Brendan Luchetti has called for a new road connecting Yellow Rock to Castlereagh in the wake of the bushfire devastation at the isolated Mountains township.

The lack of an alternative route other than Singles Ridge Road exiting at Hawkesbury Road prompted Clr Luchetti to make the ambitious call last week.

The ward three independent councillor told the Gazette now was the time “to start agitating for this, because the wheels of bureaucracy turn slowly and there are only three or four years before that level of bushfire threat we’ve just seen will come here again”.

“What if it happens next time on a Saturday when everyone’s home and you’ve got to get up to six kilometres to Hawkesbury Road as the only way out?”

“You’d have to have a good look at the gradient and you’d need to allow for a few turns, but based on distance there are options — and [extending] Illingworth Road looks like the most obvious.

“Yes, the river crossing will add an expense to it and it’s going to take the involvement and desire of all three forms of government to make this happen, but I would challenge any of them to come here and tell them [Yellow Rock residents] it’s not a priority.”

Despite being the chief campaigner for another link road proposal (Springwood to Valley Heights) which saw council not proceed with the plan after conducting a \$90,000 study, Clr Luchetti said he wouldn’t let that dissuade him from acting on behalf of Yellow Rock residents.

“I don’t want to be the councillor for lost causes, but what I’d say is this link road is more significant and a much higher priority than the other one, due to the bushfire threat.

“Everyone I’ve spoken to in Yellow Rock so far is in favour of it, but I’m a realist and I know some people will object to any increased traffic in Yellow Rock — that’s a given.

“But I would say the safety aspect outweighs that concern.

“I think we’ve got to do something about this and I’m not doing my job if I’m not going to stand up for my area.”

Paul and Lucy Feros’ home is still standing on Purvines Road, Yellow Rock, but most of their neighbours’ homes are in ashes.

The young couple fully support Clr Luchetti’s call, pointing out while nobody in the village died “this time, what will happen next time?”.

“The fact 40 or 50 people got trapped at Yellow Rock Lookout and had to quickly take shelter in a house or be evacuated by police that day is a prime example of the need for a through road,” Mr Feros said.

“Not only that, but emergency services vehicles and personnel could get to this area in a bushfire situation directly from the Penrith side.”

Clr Luchetti was due to present a notice of motion at last night’s council meeting which, if backed, would result in a report detailing the link road plan, including the costs and funding opportunities.

Bushfire recovery centre on the move

By Jennie Curtin Nov. 12, 2013, midnight

The bushfire recovery centre is taking to the road this week, heading to the Upper Mountains tomorrow and Friday to help residents there who have been affected by the fires.

Eight houses were destroyed in Mt Victoria and two others lost along the Darling Causeway which connects the highway to Bells Line of Road.

Phil Koperberg, who is leading the bushfire recovery team, met a number of the home-owners during a visit to Mt Victoria last Wednesday.

He was surprised to learn that many of them did not know where to find help.

“They are now on a mailing list and will receive regular updates,” he said.

Mr Koperberg also said Mt Victoria local Michael Paag had been appointed to the recovery committee and would provide a direct line of communication between Upper Mountains residents and the recovery team.

He also emphasised that, while the level of losses was much smaller than in Winmalee-Yellow Rock, it would make no difference to the amount of assistance his team could offer.

“A number of people at Mt Victoria will be grossly under-insured,” Mr Koperberg said. “We will deal with state and federal governments to try and ensure these people will be able to rebuild where they want to.”

But he warned that rebuilding costs will be more onerous because of the need to comply with requirements for bushfire protection.

“These people face a challenge in terms of getting the same level of accommodation if they are entirely in flame zones. The stark reality is the new bushfire codes may mean they need to bear additional costs.”

He hoped that government would approach the banking industry to see if loans could be increased or mortgage payment periods extended, he said.

Mr Koperberg also recognised the losses incurred by tourism operators as visitors stayed away from the Mountains. He foreshadowed an advertising campaign to reassure people, particularly weekend tourists, that the area was open for business.

He said he had spoken to one operator who had cancellations at Christmas.

“If you have cancelled your booking, then ring them up and re-book,” he said.

There is a rebuilding information evening at the Springwood Sports Club tomorrow from 7-8.30pm to educate residents, builders and/or designers about the bushfire protection rules and council services available to help people with rebuild applications.

The recovery centre, which can offer help on anything from replacement drivers licences to pension queries, insurance issues and rebuilding efforts, will be at the Anglican Church on the Great Western Highway at Mt Victoria tomorrow and Friday from 10am-4pm. The centre also offers help to any small businesses adversely affected by the fires.

Singing stars pen song for fire appeal

By *B.C Lewis* Nov. 12, 2013, midnight

He’s been in the music business for 30 years, now long-time Yellow Rock resident Geoff Robertson from internationally-famous Blue Mountains singing group The Robertson Brothers, has finally had his “Live Aid moment”.

Mr Robertson’s home was under threat during last month’s firestorm at Winmalee, but was saved by firefighters Trent Evans, Darryn Moalem and others from Springwood Fire and Rescue NSW. He’s “eternally grateful”.

Twelve homes were lost in his street — more than 200 homes were destroyed and another 191 are damaged. Moved to pen a new song, *You Saved My Life*, his tribute to all the emergency services will see all the proceeds go to the fire appeal.

The lead singer of The Robertson Brothers, Mr Robertson, with younger brother Ben, performed at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics and for many years was the voice behind the

Home and Away theme song. But the harrowing fire experience of his community made him determined to give something back.

“The words and song came easily — Ben and Adam Reily were happy to be part of it [the songwriting] and renowned video clip producer Ross Wood lent a hand,” he said.

“We just want to raise some money. There’s nothing in it for us. We just want to help in any way we can to those who have lost everything.”

Springwood Fire and Rescue NSW’s Trent Evans told Fairfax Media soon after the bushfires that the event was “catastrophic”.

“It happened so quick. You can’t put out a fire that large,” he said.

The song and video (with Channel 7 footage) is being released by Sony and is now available on iTunes. All proceeds to firefighters.

To buy the song (for \$2.19) go to <https://itunes.apple.com/au/album/you-saved-my-life-single>.

Fire outlook improves

By *B.C Lewis* Nov. 13, 2013, midnight

RFS Blue Mountains Superintendent David Jones said the Mt York fire in the Blue Mountains was now “declared out” and the immediate threat at Links View had “reduced significantly”.

The State Mine fire at Lithgow however was not likely to be declared out for “another week” said RFS Lithgow Superintendent Greg Wardle.

With continued cooler temperatures and more rain predicted, Supt Jones was hopeful by the end of next week the Linksvie Road fire which was “on patrol status” would be out.

“It’s a day by day proposition but by early next week that fire could be out, by then we should be in a good position,” Supt Jones said.

“The rain is helping to extinguish the last remnants of these fires but it will take a couple of days of this weather to fully extinguish everything,” he told the Gazette late Monday.

“All brigades are still on standby, as is the National Parks and Wildlife Services remote area fires team and of course it is all weather dependent if the weather changes and we get another long hot spell... but I’m feeling confident about the weather, there’s the potential for a little bit of rain, Monday, Tuesday and Thursday next week,” he said.

The State Mine Fire at Lithgow has burnt a total area of 56,590 hectares. The Linksvie Road fire, where more than 100 homes were damaged and 200 destroyed, has burnt out 3623 hectares and the Mt York fire has burnt 9076 hectares.

Lithgow Superintendent Wardle, whose focus is now on the Howes Swamp fire in the Hawkesbury, said rain over the past 24 hours had “greatly assisted us in Lithgow and allowed us to put the fire ‘on patrol’ but it is so dry in our neck of the woods, 15 to 20 mm of rain won’t last long and the next hot and windy day we will be back to where we were, but it’s looking good for the rest of the week.”

He said, “we’ll monitor the State Mine fire for another week before we declare it out”.

By Monday night, Katoomba has received 61mm, Springwood had 38mm and Lithgow 22mm.

Bushfire clean-up underway

By *B.C Lewis* Nov. 13, 2013, midnight

Eighty army engineers are part of the “make safe” team working alongside State Emergency Services, NSW Public Works, Rural Fire Service and contractors at Yellow Rock and Winmalee demolishing buildings, felling trees and treating polluted soil.

The Australian Defence Force has been working with the Blue Mountains Recovery Committee for more than a fortnight knocking down buildings, with owners’ permission, that have been destroyed by fire.

Homes covered in blue PVA glue — identified as having asbestos — are being managed by asbestos experts.

The Army is in place on a week-by-week basis, being briefed by Blue Mountains bushfire recovery co-ordinator Phil Koperberg, and includes those who have worked on the Victorian bushfires, the Wagga floods and the cyclone relief operation in Queensland.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Lording, the commander of Taskforce Waratah Red, said the Australian Defence Force would not be involved in the rebuilding process — “our focus is the immediate stage”.

Silt remediation is one of their jobs — it involves “very minor earthworks”, building one- metre wide pools to trap polluted sediment to protect water systems.

Defence apologised in late October for starting the State Mine Fire in Lithgow, sparked at an army range, which burnt through 56,590 hectares. But Colonel Lording said his crew was being warmly received in the community.

“It’s been pretty positive. While we were rendering one property safe the guys found some jewellery at Yellow Rock Road and the lady was so appreciative; she was quite emotional when the boys found it.”

MP for Macquarie Louise Markus said it was “wonderful that our defence personnel always stand ready to assist in times of disaster and crisis and I am certainly personally very grateful for their efforts in the bushfire clean-up and recovery”.

Donations helping to rebuild lives

By *Harriet McKay and Lillian Lack* Nov. 13, 2013, midnight

The Salvation Army Relief Support Centre at Springwood Baptist Church has been overwhelmed by the generosity of donations to locals impacted by the recent Blue Mountains bushfires.

The contributions from not only the local community, but from around Australia, have helped affected people begin to reclaim their lives.

In addition to providing initial necessities, The Salvation Army aims to offer long-term help to people who have suffered.

Their focus extends to counselling, legal and financial aid and supporting people who have been psychologically impacted.

“The Salvation Army is about helping people in their moment of need and helping them reclaim the control the fires took out of their lives,” said Major Darrell Slater, the NSW Bushfire Response Co-ordinator for The Salvation Army.

The Salvation Army Relief Support Centre at 133 Macquarie Road is a joint effort between Springwood Baptist Church, The Salvation Army and the community.

The Salvation Army said they were appreciative of how accommodating the church had been in sacrificing their hall and library.

“I think those who have been affected by the fires are hesitant to come to us. Also, we are still getting the word out that we are here, and that we are able to assist people,” said Western Sydney area manager Ted Greenaway.

The relief support centre at Springwood will continue to support the community through this difficult period and encourages people in need to seek their assistance.

People needing assistance can contact 1300-551-030 or call into the support centre.

For all other enquiries about The Salvation Army phone 137-258.

The battle to save Mt Wilson

By Jennie Curtin Nov. 12, 2013, midnight

It was a two-week battle to save Mts Wilson and Irvine. At times, the only access road was cut, leaving them completely isolated. They endured periods without water, power or phones, sometimes all three simultaneously.

In the end, the toll was two lost properties at Mt Irvine, various sheds and a horse float.

Mt Wilson RFS captain, Beth Raines, said not only was the fire-fighting effort impressive, so too was the way the community banded together for those 12 days.

“I can’t speak more highly of our community,” she said. “We are incredibly close-knit and it became an instant management team.”

Some fought the fires, others ensured emails were circulated to everyone, still others were involved in catering, feeding anything from a dozen to several hundred people every day.

“We got breakfast, lunches and dinners from the Brethren from Lithgow and it was supplemented with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables,” Captain Raines said,

The area can be difficult to defend because so many of the residents don’t live there permanently. But a large number of the weekenders came up from Sydney to fight the fires.

“One even cut short a holiday in Istanbul to come back,” Captain Raines said. “Our community rocks.”

Sarah Howell, one of the team who served as station officer for the duration, said the local response had been “heart-warming”.

“It was really amazing just the way things swung into action,” she said. “But we’re all highly trained - it doesn’t happen by chance.”

Mrs Howell and her team manned the office 24 hours a day, monitoring phones and radios, in charge of rostering crews, making sure people were available and ensuring they were getting enough rest between shifts.

When the Gazette found her, she was just clearing up the tiny office quarters, which had been the nerve centre for so long. She took delight in recalling a phone call from the United States in the midst of all the drama.

“They said, ‘this is CBS in New York. Can you put me through to your media room please?’ I looked around and just laughed.”

Mrs Howell was full of praise for Captain Raines and the other firefighters. “They’re just so competent, so unflappable,” she said.

Reminded that the peak fire season is yet to come, she said: “You’ve got to look on the bright side. It’s black all around us - there’s nothing left to burn.”

Up on Mt Irvine Road, dozens of trees have been marked with a cross or tied with tape, a sign that they will have to be removed. Already crews have worked steadily to chop down and mulch many of those which pose potential danger to motorists or pedestrians.

The Darling Causeway was closed the whole 12 days, as was the road to Lithgow. Access was available intermittently along the Bells Line of Road east to Richmond.

Richard Beattie, head of the Mt Wilson Progress Association, said he was proud of how everyone pitched in to help.

“The thing that everybody’s talked about was what a tremendous turn-out there was, whether it was firefighting or doing all the support work,” he said.

Small steps forward at Wimmalee High

By Ilsa Cunningham Nov. 12, 2013, midnight

It’s a long, slow process of recovery for the 46 Wimmalee High School students who lost their homes during the recent bushfires, but the school is doing everything it can to support its students.

Principal Katrina Middlebrook said they had put in place several initiatives to help staff and students. Thanks to numerous fundraising initiatives including a concert and 50km walkathon which finished on Tuesday, none of the students whose homes were destroyed would pay any costs associated with their education for a full year.

“The fund-raising is going directly to the kids – any cost will be covered, be it year 8 camp, leadership camp, textbooks, sport etc,” Ms Middlebrook said.

She said several public schools had already donated thousands of dollars to assist the high school students, and Penrith South Public School had funded a morning tea last Friday where Ms Middlebrook thanked her staff for their hard work during the bushfires. She was particularly proud of her staff when the school was in lockdown for five hours when the fires began on October 17. “They kept the calm and did it in an orderly way,” she said.

But now they’d moved past “survival mode” the trauma students and staff experienced was being fully realised. Counselling was ongoing at the school.

To give the 119 year 12 students an opportunity to “debrief” about the fires after sitting their HSC but before they all got together again for the formal next week, the school organised a morning tea last Wednesday, where students were given a little pack of goodies, which included a pair of Havaianas thongs.

“It was so they can all party at the formal without having to have to talk about losing their home,” Ms Middlebrook said.

Now the school was working on helping the students move forward, building resilience, self-worth and confidence through positive psychology. They held a meeting last week with parents to start this process.

Reliving a 'nightmarish' rescue at Yellow Rock

By Jennie Curtin and B.C Lewis Nov. 6, 2013, midnight

They were stranded. With fires raging around them, a group of Yellow Rock residents who had fled to the lookout thinking they would be safe wondered if they would survive.

As they grew increasingly desperate, even considering hiking down the cliff to reach the Nepean River, suddenly out of the smoke emerged a Fire and Rescue NSW truck.

Headed by relieving station officer Tony “Gutters” Gutteridge, the four-man team from C Patrol at St Marys took control.

“It was hectic, we had been going from job to job, doing snatch and grabs [rescues of people trapped in the fire] and the guy driving my truck, Phil Holdsworth, got a call from his wife saying his sister was trapped down there.

“We were on a mission, we drove through flames to get to the people, ran over trees with the truck, we had to get out there,” said Mr Gutteridge.

“I said to them: ‘You can’t stay here, it’s not safe’.

“It was a little bit of a nightmare, I thought, ‘I don’t like this’, with the amount of smoke coming through and the heat, a few spotfires under the cars and they would have been in trouble.”

The fire truck led the convoy of cars a kilometre back along Yellow Rock Road, between burning trees, to the home of Susan and Bob Pearson. There, for the next five hours, the residents sheltered as 30-metre flames surrounded them: 54 people, 23 dogs, three cats, a bird and a diabetic horse on a float parked outside the front door.

The youngest was just 13 weeks old; the oldest, Mrs Pearson’s 90-year-old mum Maud.

Outside, Bob Pearson joined the fireies in battling the blaze, using water from the pool as the fire truck had run dry.

Inside, Mrs Pearson and her daughter Christie grabbed every tea towel they could find, wet them in the pool and handed them out to drape over people’s heads.

With the power gone and the house on tank water, the pumps didn’t work, but some had bought supplies of bottled water and handed those out.

Mrs Pearson did a loaves and fishes trick, managing to keep everyone fed on just four packets of biscuits and three packets of Jatz crackers.

Ice-cream containers full of pool water were passed around for the dogs who remained surprisingly calm, Mrs Pearson said. Buckets of pool water also saved the toilet situation, which had threatened to get out of control.

Catherine Robley, who was with her elderly father, said they sat in the house and “watched all the area around us burn”.

“It was a bit of an eye-opener as the fire came out of that valley,” Mr Gutteridge said.

“We didn’t know the fire wall was coming until it was on top of us.”

At around 8pm, the Riot Squad arrived.

“They said we’re going to leave,” Mrs Pearson said. “Everyone will drive out, single-file. Whatever you see along the way, even if it’s your house burnt down, you can’t stop.”

Mrs Robley said she had no idea of the damage that had been wrought until they left with the police escort. “It was absolute hell on earth,” she said. “They said you are going to be shocked by what you see, but ... you can’t pull over, you just have to follow us out to Springwood.”

Twelve houses were lost in the street.

Robyn Gillies Tabrett, who brought Rosie, her border collie, and Rumble, her horse, said she headed to the lookout because it had burnt just weeks earlier and “I thought it was the only place I stood half a chance”.

But as time marched on, “I thought, great, we’ve got to the lookout and now we’re going to die here”.

She called her husband who couldn’t get through to the RFS but managed to call ABC radio, which broadcast where they were.

Renee Jenkins had her 21-month-old daughter Poppy with her. “She didn’t even know it was stressful. She was just having a ball with all the kids around.”

At an informal “reunion” this week, where the residents thanked their saviours, several people revealed they had lost everything, including Nicole Molony, who had been at the lookout with her son and two grandchildren.

Jennie Hall, from Yellow Rock Road, also lost her house and car. Incredibly, on the weekend the replacement car she had had for just two days was written-off when a motorist distracted by the army trucks outside the Springwood Country Club ran into her.

“But I’m still here,” she said.

Mr Gutteridge, who said “you couldn’t give me a home in that area”, hopes he never has to revisit the bushfire “nightmare” outside generous Bob’s place — a 14 hour shift with fellow firies Phil Holdsworth, Andrew Sarson and John Bugelli.

“It was a first for me and hopefully the last. Your training cuts in and you do your job. We just did what we had to do.”

Firies feel the love at Blackheath Rhododendron parade

Nov. 6, 2013, midnight

Led by the NSW Police Band and brought up by the Rural Fire Service, Blackheath’s 61st Rhododendron parade on Saturday was its usual riot of colour and movement but also paid credit to those who had helped save the town in the recent bushfires.

The biggest cheer was reserved for the volunteers from the RFS, who continued to help on the day by handing out bottles of water to wilting spectators accustomed to watching the annual parade in rain.

One long-time resident remarked it was perhaps the fourth time in 61 years that the sun had shone on Rhodo day.

In front of a crowd of several thousand, local primary schools and pre-schools, dance clubs, sporting groups, roller skaters, community groups and anyone with a penchant for dressing up joined the parade, accompanied by music from the Lithgow Pipe Band and Blue Mountains Pipe Band.

And afterwards, as people headed for the stalls in the park, very few failed to dig deep to find some change to throw in the RFS fund-raising buckets.

Jim Crowther, captain of Shipley RFS, said the reaction from the crowd had been “fantastic... they really loved us”.

University of Western Sydney's bushfire gift

By *B.C Lewis* Nov. 6, 2013, midnight

It was the best type of news for fire-affected Mountains HSC students — a guaranteed berth to their local university.

The University of Western Sydney usually only admits about 150 to 200 Mountains students but next year they are hoping they all come — all 712 of them from the Blue Mountains and Lithgow areas. Eight high schools were forced to close during the bushfires. Some students were evacuated in the middle of sitting tests, other students were out fighting the fires in volunteer brigades and many lost homes, possessions and all their HSC study notes.

UWS Vice-Chancellor Janice Reid said when the university body looked after the 31 students and four staff who had lost homes at their uni — through a \$50,000 fund-raising grant — they wondered what else they could do to help the region.

“We thought we would give them [the HSC students] a guarantee, one way of contributing after the fires,” Professor Reid said. “The UWS is very much part of the Blue Mountains and Lithgow community. A large group is suffering, when there are fires raging around you it’s very traumatic [to try to study],” she said.

Professor Reid told the group of assembled journalists at the announcement on Monday she wasn't aware if historically another university had ever made an offer like it.

“Not that I know of [but] this is our community it's something we can do. We want to ensure no Blue Mountains or Lithgow HSC student faces a setback to their plans to go university.”

Blue Mountains mayor Mark Greenhill called it an amazing gesture. “We're a community who has had a lot of bad news,” Clr Greenhill said. “For a wounded community it tells us we don't walk alone, we haven't been forgotten.”

Three HSC students said it was a great relief to hear the news. Josh Zolfel, of St Columba's at Springwood, hopes to become a PE teacher and said the news has “taken all the stress of my shoulders”. Also from St Columba's Ben Falchi had picked UWS's Bachelor of Business as his first choice and said the news has taken away “the uncertainty of our results ... just knowing there's a spot for us at uni”.

Antonia Vial, who lost her homes during the fires said one minute she was studying for exams, the next she got a call about a fire in her area and left home. “When I came back my house had burnt down, it's been really hard.”

The University will talk to all HSC students and high schools and parents to work out the best courses for the students. There are 150 courses to choose from over six campuses.

“We have all the systems set up, foundation courses .. they might decide to go to TAFE and get credit towards a degree, there are multiple pathways it's a matter of talking to their schools, their parents.”

The University is also offering \$2000 scholarships for students whose homes were destroyed or damaged to pay for study materials.

Some specialist UWS programs, such as medicine, midwifery, physiotherapy, paramedicine and music, require additional selection criteria.

Bondi residents help Winmalee bushfire widow

By *Damien Madigan* Nov. 6, 2013, midnight

Blake Worrall-Thompson is the first to admit life can be “pretty cruisy” at Bondi beach.

But the Sydney personal trainer made sure the bushfire devastation in the Blue Mountains was the top priority for its beachside residents last Friday when he helped organise a fund-raiser for Emma Parade's Evangeline Love.

"Things that we complain about are laughable in comparison. It's good to have a reality check and help out where we can," he said.

Sixty people took part in the Bootcamp 4 Bushfires event from 6-7am, raising more than \$2000 for Mrs Love who lost her home and two-year-old ridgeback in the fires.

Mr Worrall-Thompson drove to Emma Parade after the bootcamp, along with event organisers Keri Kitay and Emma Esslemont, to hand over a cheque and other donated goods.

"We had no idea what to expect when we drove up so it's definitely sunk in more now," he said of the bushfire devastation.

Ms Kitay, a public relations director, said the beachfront community had rallied together to support Mrs Love's plight when they heard about it on Sydney radio.

"We have a really good community of people that train together and we wanted to help out," she said.

Mrs Love, who has lived in Emma Parade for 14 years, said she was touched that people outside the Blue Mountains were reaching out.

The bushfire loss was a cruel blow for the mother-of-two, whose husband Andrew died of cancer this April. She wasn't home when the fires struck and the family dog was trapped in the blaze.

"She was my connection to my husband," she said.

Other irreplaceable items, including a video of Mrs Love's nine-year-old and 14-year-old sons saying goodbye to their father, were also lost in the blaze.

Mr Worrall-Thompson, the founder of personal training organisation Ministry of Wellbeing, knows their contribution is only small — but it is one that has connected Bondi to the Blue Mountains.

For more photos visit:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.566620026743163.1073741913.279640655441103&type=1>

NSW treasurer Mike Baird visits bushfire devastation

By *Damien Madigan* Nov. 6, 2013, midnight

NSW treasurer Mike Baird visited bushfire-affected areas of Springwood and Winmalee on Saturday, pledging new money for the recovery effort.

“With the immediate threat from the bushfires now over in the Blue Mountains, bushfire victims are faced with the heartbreaking task of trying to rebuild their lives,” said Mr Baird.

“This is an incredibly overwhelming and emotional period, as many residents are wondering where to begin.”

The state and federal governments have allocated initial funding of \$300,000 to the Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Services. This money will help provide services including financial and legal advice, counselling, and assistance with dealing with insurance companies and other service providers.

It comes on top of an extra \$1.2 million for the asbestos clean-up announced by the State Government on Friday. This money will cover a “comprehensive clean-up of any asbestos contamination that has resulted from the bushfires” and will be co-ordinated through the Department of Public Works.

Mr Baird told the Gazette that seeing the bushfire devastation first-hand was crucial for the government’s response.

“One of the challenges in government is you’re [constantly] covered in paperwork ... but when you have a disaster like this, coming to see first-hand the impact on people’s lives is a stark reminder why you’re in government — it’s actually to help those most in need and to help those communities that need a range of services,” he said.

Mr Baird visited the bushfire recovery centre in Springwood with Blue Mountains MP Roza Sage, recovery co-ordinator Phil Koperberg and Blue Mountains RFS district manager David Jones.

He said the Blue Mountains community should be proud of the way it has responded to the fires.

“We don’t celebrate enough how special our communities are,” he said.

“Everyone in the Mountains should be very proud of what is amongst them — and what’s before them. It’s often missed in the day to day life. In some respects out of the tragedy it becomes a celebration of all that is wonderful about the Blue Mountains. It’s much more than the Three Sisters. It is an incredible group of people.”

Winmalee students struggle with losing it all

By *B.C Lewis* Oct. 30, 2013, midnight

Buena Vista means pleasant view in Spanish, but today the Winmalee road is anything but.

“It’s crazy, everything has just gone,” Emily Colman, 18, said, whose home at number 55 Buena Vista Road is now an empty shell. The family’s three dogs are safe but she lost her two cats during the mad dash out of her home to safety during the Linksvie Road fire of October 17.

“I hope they [the cats] just went to sleep,” she said. Emily said most of her Year 12 friends “haven’t been able to concentrate” since the fire.

“It was so sad when we found out about our home later [at Coles shopping centre] everyone was breaking down. It’s the enormity of it. We want to help other people but we’ve got nothing to give.”

It’s the same story for Sarah Thompson, also 18, formerly of 282 Singles Ridge Road. Sarah, with her Dad and twin sister Chloe sheltered at Oasis Nursery with a menagerie of animals, a Noah’s ark of birds, cats and a rabbit.

“The street was already locked down, we saw the fire and we had to go to Oasis, where there is open land and we had a chance ... For 20 minutes the sky was just black. We called Triple O and couldn’t get through, I thought ‘crap we might die.’”

Winmalee High School has fielded many generous offers from the community but Springwood real estate agents say there is a drastic shortage of homes available for the fire disaster victims with 193 homes destroyed and 109 damaged. Those who can help with a rental home for Lucas or Sarah’s families can contact lucas_2648@hotmail.com

Bushfire charity boxes targeted

By *B.C Lewis* Oct. 30, 2013, midnight

It brings out the best in most people, but sadly in some cases, disaster also brings out the worst. Just ask Anita Ritchie from Michel’s Patisserie.

On Monday night, two teenagers turned up to the popular cake shop on Macquarie Rd, Springwood and distracted her parents who were closing up and cleaning, and stole a bushfire

charity donation bucket which may have contained up to \$300. It's claimed they had earlier tried to rob a charity box at the Springwood Newsagency.

"It was about 5.10pm, the doors were shut and we had some people walk through the door," Ms Ritchie said. "They were acting suspiciously and Mum asked them to leave; we didn't realise at the time it [the box] was missing."

Ms Ritchie said shortly after the incident her mum saw the teens in the street and confronted them — "we rang the police but they were out saving houses," she said.

By 10am the next day, police believed they had nabbed the teens – aged 13 and 15 – at a Parramatta shopping centre. Police allege the pair matched descriptions from a TV news report and CCTV from Springwood newsagency.

"My main thing was to let everyone in the Mountains area know that there are people out there that are stealing the charity boxes, that's why I posted it on Facebook so that everyone was on alert," Ms Ritchie said. "I don't want anyone else to get targeted. They were on a mission."

Police said the pair were "arrested, cautioned and their support person contacted to attend".

The 13-year-old Arncliffe male was charged with shoplifting up to \$2000 and breach of bail. They appeared in a children's court last Wednesday.

The 13-year-old will be issued with a Future Court Attendance Notice for the alleged theft of the charity box and will appear in court December 10.

The 15-year-old Hurstville male was charged with possessing a prohibited drug and larceny-steal from a retail store. He was granted conditional bail to appear in a children's court on December 9. He will be issued with a Future Court Attendance Notice for stealing regarding the alleged theft of the charity box. Investigations continue.

Comments about the incident on the Gazette's Facebook pages were swift. Teresa McGlenchy said: "So appalling ... they should get those boys fighting the fires"; and Rebecca Helm posted: "What scum".

Governor-General lifts local spirits

Oct. 30, 2013, midnight

The Governor-General Quentin Bryce made a morale-boosting visit to the Blue Mountains last Friday.

Ms Bryce was accompanied by Blue Mountains mayor Mark Greenhill on a tour of bushfire ravaged streets in Winmalee and Yellow Rock before visiting the bushfire recovery centre in Springwood Presbyterian Church hall.

Emergency relief co-ordinator Phil Koperberg gave Ms Bryce a briefing on the recovery operation before she met with aid agency workers and affected residents.

Speaking to the media in Springwood, Ms Bryce said it was a “wonderful experience” to witness the co-ordinated relief effort.

“To see our volunteers, our government sector, our non-government sector, the Red Cross, the Salvos, working together in such fantastic collaboration is having a very uplifting effect on people who have a long road to recovery ahead of them,” she said.

“I feel so proud of the community here and Australians from around the country who are contributing in every way that they can.”

Winmalee High students getting by together

By *B.C Lewis* Oct. 30, 2013, midnight

They are the faces of very brave young adults.

Some have lost homes, pets, everything they had — others are just trying to support their close friends and still concentrate on finishing their HSC examinations.

Winmalee High School principal Katrina Middlebrook calls them “troopers”.

“The stress of losing their home and sometimes animals is distressing for them,” Ms Middlebrook said. “There’s no expectation if they’re not emotionally capable of sitting an exam that they would be expected to and there’s no way the Board [of Studies] expects that either,” she told media last week.

Last week’s worsening fire conditions caused closures to all Mountains schools on Wednesday with those HSC students sitting exams all over NSW.

School captain Daniel Squires evacuated with his family on Wednesday and sat his exams in Glenwood in Sydney’s north-west.

“Everyone was kind of looking at me strangely when I walked in,” Daniel, who sat the exam in his Winmalee High uniform, said. He lives in Bullaburra, so hasn’t been directly affected, but four of his mates who turned up to meet with The Gazette on Friday for these photos have. He

feels to date he has done okay, despite finding it “incredibly difficult to concentrate” while so many of his friends are suffering.

Emily Colman lived in Buena Vista Rd at Winmalee, but this week will move into a rental house in Mt Riverview with her family.

Lucas Magennis’ family has found a place in Warragamba but he wants to stay in the Mountains. He is couch surfing and Sarah Thompson is doing the same. Sarah still has her notes and a laptop but cannot concentrate. The others have no study notes.

“Everyone is sort of freaking out,” Emily, who hopes to be a primary school teacher, told the Gazette last week “and we are still worried about everyone else”.

Winmalee High has applied to the NSW Board of Studies for misadventure forms for the entire HSC group of 120 — at least a dozen have lost their homes.

Year 12 co-ordinator Greg Dutton said “even the best kids have really struggled to maintain a great focus,” with some experiencing survivor guilt.

“They are obviously not okay,” Mr Dutton said. “Apart from those without homes, we’ve got one girl who lives near a row of 10 houses in Yellow Rock that have all gone, that’s what she sees when she looks out the window.”

He said the group were carrying each other through the tragedy.

“It’s definitely brought the year group closer, firmed up the friendships – they’ve had to hang in there for each other but its been very disrupting for their preparations. Most are still asking ‘why did it happen?’”

Why we love living in the Blue Mountains

Oct. 30, 2013, midnight

Warrimoo residents Matthew Rufus and Melissa Borgen joined hundreds of families in choosing to leave the Blue Mountains last Wednesday when the fire threat was at its peak. They shared their reasons with the Gazette:

Among the heartwarming messages and offers of help during the recent bushfires, friends and work colleagues have struggled to understand why we would live in the Mountains.

We were born and raised here, both all too aware of the extreme conditions that make our surroundings so vulnerable to bushfires. We have family who watched on helplessly through the

smoke as homes either side of theirs were reduced to rubble in Hawkesbury Heights, and friends who lost everything in the Cross Street fires of 2001. Suffice to say, two years ago when we bought our first home in Warrimoo — with a backyard that drops away into never-ending bushland like a waterslide — we were aware of the risks.

But of course, knowing the risks is one thing; being prepared is something else entirely. Even from the relative safety of our home, the Linksvie Road fire put us on edge like no other blaze before it. At times it seemed the only thing moving faster than the firefront were people posting about it on Facebook. The influx of phone calls and messages from loved ones quickly gave way to heartbreaking stories of friends who had lost their homes.

With a toddler who has got an early start on the “terrible twos”, and a baby due in a matter of weeks, if the threat of fire became more immediate, we would leave.

In the lead up to the catastrophic conditions predicted for Wednesday, we nervously joined the throngs of people spilling out of the Warrimoo Citizens Hall for a community meeting. Despite the nearby highway traffic doing its best to drown out the speaker, his message was clear: get out of the Mountains unless you are prepared to be here for the long haul. This sentiment was echoed by the RFS commissioner at the national press conference that evening, though like many others, we didn’t need to be told twice

The night before abandoning our home — the home in which our daughter took her first steps and spoke her first words — our silence said it all: this could be it. We took photos of the house as though they would be the last, and planned the logistics of moving our family (oversized dog included) and possessions to Penrith, where we would stay with friends.

On Thursday morning we returned to find our house as we had left it. With all the terrible losses that so many in the community have suffered, it almost feels wrong to write that our story had a happy ending.

But we know that if the outcome had been different for us, it is with the support and kindness of those around us that we would be able to rebuild our lives and our home. And that is why we live in the Mountains.

Firefighters efforts applauded

By Ilsa Cunningham Oct. 30, 2013, midnight

NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell popped into the Winmalee rural fire brigade last Friday to thank firefighters for their hard work in attending to the bushfire emergency.

“This is what community is about; people coming together in times of crisis. Members of this brigade have lost homes and they’re still out fighting fires. They’re putting the interests of the community first,” Mr O’Farrell said.

Young firefighter Michael McClean is a typical example of this. He has been sitting his HSC and doing 12-hour shifts fighting fires, so he hasn’t had much of a chance to study.

But he takes it all in his stride.

Mr O’Farrell also said the State Government would be waiving fees to replace driver licences and other documents lost in the fires, as well as the waste levy for people taking bushfire waste to the tip.

There would be no charge for people who need to replace birth, marriage and change-of-name certificates, and he said Sydney Water customers would not be charged for the extra water used to defend their homes during the bushfire crisis.

He said the fire emergency had reaffirmed the need for hazard reduction burns in NSW.

“We got it up 2.5 times, but there’s still much to be done,” he said.

People seeking bushfire help can call the new Service NSW line 24-hours-a-day on 13 77 88, or visit the website: www.service.nsw.gov.au/assistance-bush-fire-affected-communities

Crew halts fire's deadly path

By Jennie Curtin Oct. 30, 2013, midnight

They were just a small team but together they clambered into bush near the Blue Gum Forest in the dead of night to save the Mountains.

Carrying chainsaws, rake hoes and brush cutters, they negotiated their way down almost vertical drops into some of the most inhospitable terrain to ensure that fire in the upper Grose Valley could not spread to vulnerable villages lower down the hill.

By the time they were airlifted out at 10am last Tuesday morning, many of them had been on duty for 28 straight hours.

The drama began at lunchtime on Monday, October 21, after the State Mine fire crossed the Darling Causeway and it became apparent that desperate efforts to keep it out of the Grose Valley were proving fruitless.

Kim de Govrik, deputy operations manager overseeing the National Parks crews on the fire ground, decided his men should pull out and other options be considered.

“We didn’t think we could rein it in... We wanted to see if we could keep it west of Victoria Creek but it had an active edge of about 12 kilometres.”

Mr de Govrik told the Gazette previous experience showed the importance of keeping the fire under control.

“Historically, if you get ignitions in the upper Grose, they tend to head from west to east with the potential to move right down the Grose Valley and impact on villages down the Mountains,” he said.

By late afternoon — less than 36 hours before the Wednesday that RFS commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons had warned would be “as bad as it gets” — authorities gave the go-ahead to start a backburn behind the villages of Blackheath and Mt Victoria.

“The RFS was burning on top of the cliff edge on fire trails from Perrys [Lookdown] up Hat Hill [Road] to Mt Victoria,” said Mr de Govrik. “But this was the missing link.”

It was a two-kilometre stretch from Perrys Lookdown, around the Blue Gum Forest to Frank Hurley Head. The only way to tackle it was on foot. And it had to be done that night.

Mr de Govrik asked for volunteers “because it was quite a risky night operation”. He put a piece of paper on the table and 20 men wrote their names down. One left his baby daughter’s birthday party to join in. Another had finished his shift “but he knew what we were up to, he got a whiff and said I want to be a part of it,” Mr de Govrik said.

“As you can appreciate, those people have families and basically they were given an hour or two to make up their minds. They obviously were torn between their own safety and the safety of the Blue Mountains, particularly the villages, and the national park.

“We had a really good range of experienced people and less experienced ones. They are all arduous level of fitness, which means they have to have a fitness test each year. They also had a range of qualifications, like senior first aid or chainsaw skills.”

They were to be joined by 19 men from the RFS’s Remote Area Firefighting Team.

With little time to spare, it was fairly hectic at the NPWS office at Blackheath, Mr de Govrik said.

“All sorts of things had to be organised quickly to insert that many men into the Grose Valley.”

Backpacks, food, water, chainsaws, hoes, rakes, fire lighting gear and hoses were assembled. Some equipment was airlifted in to a helipad at Acacia Flat, south of the Blue Gum; other stuff was carried on the men’s backs.

Mr de Govrik insisted on having an air ambulance nearby in case anyone was injured and had to be evacuated. A chopper was duly dispatched and the pilot and three paramedic crew waited that night at the NPWS helipad. In the event smoke or weather conditions grounded the chopper, two remote area paramedics who could walk in to difficult areas were also on standby.

The men needed water in case the wind took the fire over their heads and behind their line so a kilometre of hose was trailed from Perrys Lookdown into the valley, with an RFS tanker up the top pumping water into it all night.

At the other end of the operation, pumps which had been dropped down by chopper were sucking water from Govetts Creek to supply those on the western edge.

Mr de Govrik spent the night between the NPWS at Blackheath and the top of Perrys Lookdown. As his team worked from the top of the ridge down into the valley, he sat and watched the fire line travel.

“It looked like a big, fiery red snake, just slowly making its way down. It was quite amazing to see.”

Scott Colefax, one of the ground support crew, asked the team before they left how they felt. “They said, ‘well, not great, but we need to do it.’”

By morning, after all of the men had been airlifted out, they wound down with some liquid refreshments at the NPWS workshop in Blackheath.

Mick English, who was in charge of the Hurley sector, said the Perrys Lookdown trek had been “particularly dangerous but our side was relatively straightforward. And if you’ve got experienced people, you’re OK.”

Mr de Govrik said: “When the bosses rang that morning saying ‘how did it go, how did it go’, I said, considering the short time frame to get that operation going, it was pretty much a text-book exercise.”

He continued: “There is a camaraderie in the Blue Mountains National Park, that we are a can-do region and we felt it was important in the big picture to do that to protect the townships of the Mountains. We all live up here, we know fire but we know the issues, we know people and we felt it was a response that we were happy to commit to.”

Princess Mary's visit to Winmalee boosts morale

By Rachel Browne Oct. 27, 2013, midnight

Blue Mountains residents have described a visit from Crown Prince Frederik and Crown Princess Mary as an enormous morale boost after the week from hell.

The Tasmanian-born royal and her husband took time out of their official schedule to visit fire fighters and locals affected by the blaze.

For Emma Parade residents Julie and Michael Magennis, who watched their street go up in smoke, the royal visit was a much-needed lift.

"It's the first time I have seen my wife smile in more than a week - we're still trying to come to terms with it," he said.

Mrs Magennis said she was thrilled to meet Crown Princess Mary.

"It's been wonderful to meet someone like that even in such terrible circumstances," she said.

Crown Princess Mary spoke to the couple at length, telling them: "I am so glad I can bring a smile to your face. I can't imagine what it must have been like."

The royal couple spent more than one hour at the Winmalee rural fire station with NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell and Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons.

A few hundred residents lined the street to welcome the Danish royals.

Winmalee resident Amy Clink gave the Princess a note she had written on Saturday night, thanking her for her support.

Mrs Clink, whose husband is a firefighter, was forced to flee her home with her seven-month-old baby Mikayla when embers showered the property.

"The fire came 100 metres from the house," she said.

"I just took Mikayla and ran for it. I would rather leave than die being a hero."

Another resident, Heather Wilson, said the visit meant a lot to the close-knit community.

"This has been the morale boost we all need," she said.

"It's just so unexpected and such a lovely gesture for our community."

Princess Mary look relaxed in faded jeans, a white top and blue cardigan. She and Prince Frederik stayed for a casual morning tea of fruit, sandwiches and scones at the fire station.

They then toured Buena Visit Road, Winmalee, one of the streets hit hardest by last week's bushfires.

NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell, NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons and RFS Blue Mountains District manager David Jones accompanied the royal couple on this tour.

Speaking to the Danish and Australian media afterwards, Crown Princess Mary said:

"We're extremely pleased we could come up and see the situation and hear about the efforts that have been done, which are commendable on all fronts. The work of all the firefighters, the volunteers, the people from the community all doing their bit, is just incredible and such a testament to the spirit of this community."

For more photos visit the Blue Mountains Gazette's Facebook page:

https://www.facebook.com/bluemountainsgazette?hc_location=timeline

- with Damien Madigan, Blue Mountains Gazette

Tales of loss and luck on Sunny Ridge Road

By *Shane Desiantik* Oct. 23, 2013, midnight

At first they could only stand and stare at what was left of the cul-de-sac end of Sunny Ridge Road in Winmalee and much of Emma Parade, while attempting to comfort loved ones and later trying to salvage anything left.

A small but steady stream of residents returned from first light on Friday morning to the place they call home — some for their first glimpse since the fiery hell of the afternoon before.

The lifeless shades of black and grey ash enveloping the landscape proving cruelly hypnotic, the eerie silence almost deafening.

But at least they were alive to tell the tale.

Seven adjoining homes that back onto bushland were destroyed on Thursday along Sunny Ridge Road, yet others in the fire's path were completely untouched.

Andrew Byrnes, his wife Alysha, daughter Jaz and the family's kelpie, Bray, returned to find their home was a statistic.

“I was at work on Thursday and my wife heard about the fires at 2pm when she was coming to pick up Jaz from her school in Penrith,” Mr Byrnes said.

“She made it to Hawkesbury Road but had to stop where it got blocked. I drove towards here from the other way.

“We couldn’t get to our street and we didn’t know if our homes were still there or not at that stage.

“We’ve lost the house but we are okay and luckily so is our dog.

“Our neighbour, Joanne [who also lost her house], was able to save our dog before she evacuated — she was only one of a couple of residents who were at our street when the fire came.

“That really meant a lot to us.”

Mr Byrnes said his family is now staying at his mum’s place in Penrith.

“Hopefully the insurance company will do the right thing with our house.

“It’s too early to make any decisions yet, but I don’t think we’ll go anywhere else to live — we love it here in Springwood.”

Anthony and Helen Walton’s home at number 20 was spared by the fire — but only by two metres.

Mr Walton felt for his neighbours and said “you couldn’t be prepared for a fire like this.”

“We’ve been here for three fires and this is by far the biggest and the quickest moving I’ve ever seen.

“I could see the fire front coming down the slope at about 15 knots.

“By 12.30pm I had a sense something was not right and well before 2.30pm we were right in the thick of it.

“We left after this tree was alight, about two metres from our back deck, and we and a neighbour drove up the hill [towards Hawkesbury Road], looked back and saw two houses already alight.

“We were able to have 14 large trees removed from our property with council’s approval in February and March and that might have contributed to saving our house.

“Although we had our son’s car in the drive, a tyre stack and two gas cylinders in the yard, luckily they didn’t go up, they weren’t even touched, yet the house directly next door went up and most of our backyard.

“The most scary thing was listening to the sound of the fire, the crackling and the loud explosions popping at regular intervals.

“You just knew something bad was about to happen and you knew there was absolutely nothing you could do. I was thanking all my gods.”

NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell and RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons met the Waltons and Byrnes on Thursday afternoon, alongside Member for Blue Mountains Roza Sage, Member for Macquarie Louise Markus and Blue Mountains Mayor Mark Greenhill, after delivering an update of the fire situation to a large media scrum.

Mrs Sage said the Blue Mountains community “is so resilient — this has already been shown by so many people offering to welcome others into their own homes.

“As an MP who has lived in the Blue Mountains for so long, my heart goes out to everyone affected by these fires.

“There are many people I know in the community who have lost their homes. It’s heartbreaking.”

Counting the cost of the Mt Vic fires

By Jennie Curtin Oct. 23, 2013, midnight

It’s the unluckiest street in Mt Victoria: St Georges Parade, once a secluded cul de sac, meandering through pristine bush near Mt York Road, now a patchwork of blackened ruins interspersed with the survivors, the untouched log cabins or weatherboards which somehow, against all logic, withstood Thursday evening’s firestorm.

On Friday morning, outside one such cottage, a cute weatherboard at number 21, Susan Jeffery stood with Bob Colman, whose estate agency handles the rental property. Both were dumbfounded the house had survived.

“I didn’t expect to see this here at all,” said Mr Colman.

Ms Jeffery felt the same. She had fled at the sign of the first fire engine in the street, taking her chooks and heading to Blackheath Oval. Some of her neighbours stayed but Ms Jeffery explained she was from New Zealand “and I’m not used to this”.

When she returned she had prepared herself for the worst so was surprised to see barely a sign of fire. Her neighbours, however, were not so fortunate.

Right next door was a rammed earth home where the fire-resistant walls stood tall but the inside was a mish-mash of melted furnishings and appliances, peppered with shattered glass.

And across the road lay the remnants of four homes. “That’s the saddest thing,” said Ms Jeffery, “seeing our neighbours’ houses just gone.”

She said one couple had been trying to save their pet chickens and ducks and had loaded the cage into a van. But the fire, whipped up by violent winds, came so quickly they had to flee. The burnt-out van stood in the driveway, the cage still in the back.

Two doors further away from Ms Jeffery, Wai-Ling told the terrifying story of sitting out the fire. “It was too late to leave,” she said. Her housemate stood on the roof, hosing it down, as she shoved soaked towels under the doors.

She said the fire came over the ridge, took out the houses across the street, then seemed to almost part in the middle and travel down either side of her house, leaving the brick building unscathed.

“It was surreal and I’m still walking around in a daze,” she said.

In all, seven houses were lost in St Georges Parade and one, in adjoining Closeburn Drive, lost two cars and the garage.

Further north and north-west, at least one property on the Darling Causeway was destroyed and two properties at Mt Irvine.

President of the Mt Wilson Progress Association, Richard Beattie, said police were providing an escort on Monday to help residents who wanted to evacuate to Sydney via Bilpin. He said the Thursday fire had been “very, very dramatic and scary” and the situation was still volatile, although there had been much back-burning in recent days. He did not know if residents would have another opportunity to leave the area. “It depends on conditions, particularly on the Bells Line of Road, whether it becomes easier to get out or not.”

One thing Mr Beattie was certain of: the annual fund-raiser for the Rural Fire Service, the Mt Wilson/Mt Irvine art and photography show due to be held this weekend, has been postponed to a future date.

First an election loss, now a home for Susan Templeman

By *Damien Madigan* Oct. 23, 2013, midnight

Susan Templeman has lost an election and lost her home in less than two months — but she has no doubt which setback is more devastating.

The Labor candidate for Macquarie in last month's federal election was one of the first Winmalee residents to lose their homes when fire swept through Emma Parade on Thursday afternoon.

“I got back [to our destroyed home] on Thursday evening. It was like walking through a scene from Kosovo being bombed out. People were really feeling shell-shocked,” she said.

Ms Templeman was working in Sydney when she first heard news of the fires, quickly deciding to head back to her home of 23 years with her husband Ron Fuller. Their 19-year-old son Harry was home alone.

“We hit the road from the city by 2pm. By 2.24 we were saying to Harry ‘get out of the house now, just go,’” she said.

When she arrived at Winmalee Shopping Village a friend broke the news that the last time she saw her home it was in flames.

“A lot of us have lived in this street for a very long time and none of us had seen the speed of this,” Ms Templeman told the Gazette on Sunday.

Despite the swiftness of the devastation, Ms Templeman said the community spirit of the Blue Mountains was at its best during those tense moments. Their neighbour Paul Hollier helped another resident to safety while other residents also thought of others before themselves.

“People in the street were looking out for each other. The guy across the road doorknocked the street with a mate because no-one got evacuation warnings. My first text came through at 4.55pm — my house was gone by then. It just happened so fast,” she said.

While a few coffee mugs and pieces of pottery were the only items to survive the Thursday inferno, Harry was able to save photos and the family cat, Sass, before he fled.

“Sass is now very comfortable at my mum's place,” said Ms Templeman.

The loss of other items was harder to take. Blue Mountains artist Leo Robba had given Ms Templeman a painting before the federal election “to hang in her office when she won”. She lost and hung the painting in her home. It's now gone.

But the mother-of-two is determined to rebuild in Emma Parade, as are many of her neighbours, despite the shock of last week's events still looming large.

“Who would have thought that in October, in spring, we would be facing this?” she said.

Tales of terror as bushfire disaster unfolds

By *B. C Lewis* Oct. 23, 2013, midnight

Leanne Brown fought the good fight. But in the end it wasn't enough.

"It was like an inferno, it was massive," she told the Gazette last Friday, the day after the fires ravaged her home at 42 Moray Street.

Tossing aside the garden hose, she escaped with her two dogs and the clothes on her back, forgetting her handbag in the process as she ran down the street for help in absolute terror.

"The water pressure was down, it came so quick the caravan was alight and I started running up the driveway with the dogs."

Her husband, David Brown, Glenbrook Public School's principal, was away on school camp and unable to return until the evening after the fire.

"We sheltered across the road in the garage of a house that as a street we have determined is the safest place to make as a meeting point, the big concrete one across the road," Mrs Brown said.

"We watched the fire burn up between the houses, everywhere, begin to burn our caravan then ignite the vacant block which was full of low shrubs and undergrowth," she said.

"It just took off. We were there until the police told us to get out. I couldn't get to my transport. My great neighbours, Liz and Malcolm Moore, took me and my dogs in their car to Whitecross Road shops. When we left the street the fire was in the gutters of their house - their house still stands."

Jo and Neil Richardson stayed and battled the fire at Moray. "I was hysterical but I knew Neil wouldn't leave," Mrs Richardson said.

Their house at no 12 still stands, but homes have gone at 20, 22, 24, 26, 30 and beyond. One confirmed they had no insurance. Noel Willis called it "total devastation". He spent Friday searching the street for his cat Maisie he is hoping "shot through" to safety. His neighbours Joe and Lillian Andrade saved their photos but little else.

Pets were on many residents' minds. Lorette and Andrew Seckold's 23-year-old son Karl drove into the fire zone to make a dramatic rescue of their German shepherd, Bronx, at 28 Moray.

"He said the house was black with smoke, the windows were glowing red," Mrs Seckold said. "He got Bronx but couldn't find Chi Chi [their other dog]."

“He wanted to go back but the police got him out, thank god he didn’t.”

Their granddaughter Andi-Marie, holding hands with mum Crystal the morning after in the rubbles of Granny’s home, was visibly shaken by the carnage. “It smells bad,” she said.

Many people are “landing at Granny’s place” or other relatives, but by midnight on Friday more than 26,000 people had read a post on the Gazette’s Facebook page with offers of free temporary accommodation by a Wentworth Falls real estate agency.

Some have been able to see the lighter side of things. At 156 Hawkesbury Road where the house is for sale and the owners were on the verge of signing contracts. The home has completely gone.

“Do you think I should still do an open home on Saturday?” owner Pat Minney joked.

That gallows humour was apparent everywhere, the best defence in harrowing times.

Belinda ‘Bee’ Thompson whose home is standing but damaged in Buena Vista Road, found it hard to find the right words.

“My mother-in-law’s [house is gone], half the street is gone, I can’t find words as we walked down our street, we said nothing but cried in bewilderment.”

The Blue Mountains community has rallied behind fire victims. Deputy Mayor and Winmalee resident Brendan Luchetti said “that’s the thing with this disaster — every person in Springwood knows a handful of people who have lost homes”.

At Paget Court, donations were being dropped to Amanda Beckett’s house on the corner for the three houses that were destroyed by the fire. Jenni and Rod Webster were grateful, posting on facebook “we will be humble and take anything... we have nothing... thank you for all your generosity and kindness, we’re a little numb”.

At 21 Paulwood Avenue, Lonza Shiels, 70, “had lost everything,” said son Craig, who had grown up there. She was at his home now and too upset to visit the flattened site.

How St Thomas Aquinas principal Serge Rosato saved his flock

By *B. C Lewis* Oct. 23, 2013, midnight

Serge Rosato, whose Buena Vista home was razed to the ground last Thursday, was at pains to explain that this was not a story from the Book of Job.

The principal of St Thomas Aquinas, who led his students on a 2.5km walk to safety last Thursday afternoon while flames closed in around the school, said the bible story of Job [about a man who lost everything] was one of despair and this was one of hope.

“We’re banding together, we’re a community that’s why we live here.”

Mr Rosato, who led children past flames, lost everything in the fire and when The Gazette caught up with him at Sunday mass he was wearing newly purchased clothes “K-mart specials” that his niece had rushed out to buy him that frightening night.

His 17-year-old twins, a daughter and son in Year 11, were in lockdown for five hours at St Columba’s during the firestorm, taking shelter from the fire which came through a valley between the two schools, believed to be started by power lines of Linksvie Road.

“I had complete trust in their teachers that they would be safe.”

Leading his young flock of 550 to safety after numerous head counts along first Paulwood [where three homes burned] and Hawkesbury Road [another three gone] , he said “it was done in a really calm way, we had a walkathon three weeks ago and it was the same walk”.

“It was like a dress rehearsal,” St Columba’s acting principal, Phil Stewart added, “you wouldn’t believe it.”

Three children had asthma attacks and one disabled child had to be carried by a teacher almost the entire way during the exodus out to the shops where donuts and other goodies were offered while they waited out the firestorm. It was there he and another teacher learned their homes had gone.

“The kids I suppose knew something was on, they talked about kids things and supported each other—I think they were listening to their teachers, they were really looking to the teacher to the teacher’s demeanour.”

While a message from the Vatican was read out during Sunday’s service, Mr Rosato, who usually plays guitar and sings at the mass, chose instead to meet quietly with sombre parishioners who hugged him and thanked him for his bravery.

“Serge is a great man,” said school parent and Deputy Mayor Clr Brendan Luchetti. “A hero.”

“This week St Thomas Aquinas and St Columba’s College had planned to bring in 28 counsellors to assist shocked children. Fifteen families, including four teachers, lost homes.”

The school planned to re-open today but by Monday as residents were back on high alert, the school management admitted they needed to close for the entire week.

Mr Rosato said the “routine of coming to school, catching up with mates, it’s a big part ... It lets the child know that their world hasn’t turned on its head[but] it’s going to be different.”

As for his own loss, Mr Rosato was reflective. “Like all families who have lost a home we will deal with [this] in our own way ...we are lucky, we have a bed, others in my street [in Buena Vista where more than 40 homes were destroyed] were renting and have no insurance, nothing.”

Both principals said they were proud of their students and “so grateful” to emergency services who bussed them all to safety. “These guys are amazing,” Mr Rosato said pointing to NSW Fire and Rescue who have set up a command post in his school hall, “they do it without any fanfare”.

Family pets survive bushfire disaster

By Ilsa Cunningham Oct. 23, 2013, midnight

He’s lost his family home, but Yellow Rock resident Luke Curtis’ number one priority was his 11-year-old cat Oliver.

When the fire emergency hit around Springwood, Winmalee and Yellow Rock last Thursday afternoon, he and his parents were at work, his mum miraculously surviving at Oasis Nursery in Singles Ridge Rd while fire swirled around the nursery, trapping staff inside.

With road blocks in place, the Curtis family weren’t able to see what was left of their home in Singles Ridge Rd until Friday morning.

“This morning [Friday] we were looking for him and gave up for a little bit. I went down the back of the house near the dam and everything was gone, there was nothing there,” said Mr Curtis’ partner Megan Gaudiosi.

“There were branches everywhere and we had to climb through them.

“And there he was sitting in the mud trying to keep cool and he started meowing for us.”

Mr Curtis was clearly relieved to find his cat.

“I’ve never run so quickly to get him,” he said.

They pulled a singed, shaking Oliver from the mud, suffering smoke inhalation and rushed him to PetFriends Vet Hospital at Winmalee where pets injured during the fires were being treated for free.

Owner and vet Chris Blair said he had been treating a lot of injured pets, suffering burns in particular.

Another case was dog Buddy, who’d been found by a good Samaritan who bandaged his paws and brought him into the clinic. Buddy has now been reunited with his owner.

“Yesterday [Thursday] was like a refuge. In the waiting room there was even a lady with a goat,” Dr Blair said.

“And on Thursday night the car park [at Winmalee shopping centre] was choc-a-block full of people holding their pets.”

Lost and found pets were also being accepted at the clinic and at the PetFriends Faulconbridge clinic which was also treating injured pets for free.

For injured wildlife inquiries contact WIRES on 1300 094 737

Have my car . . . a community opens its heart

By Jennie Curtin Oct. 23, 2013, midnight

It was perhaps the ultimate offer in the plethora of generous gifts volunteered by complete strangers moved by the destruction of the bushfires: Illawarra resident Bev Ashton was giving away her car.

Mrs Ashton, with her daughter, Jacinta, drove her station wagon to Springwood on Monday, handing over the keys to the chairman of deacons at the Baptist Church, Clive Dillen. Mrs Ashton’s father, Barry Miller, also made the trip so he could drive his daughter and grand-daughter back home.

When asked why, the mother of nine — including her sister’s six children — said simply: “We’ve got everything and there’s a lot of people who don’t have anything at all. And everyone needs transport, particularly if you’ve got kids.”

She said she and the children — aged five to 13 — were up early to wash the car and also raided their toy boxes “and threw a few things in the back” for whoever will benefit from her generosity.

Initially Mrs Ashton was going to give the car to Paul Hollier, whose house in Emma Parade, Winmalee, was destroyed, but when Mr Hollier saw that the car was a station wagon he thought it should instead go to a family with greater needs than him.

Mr Hollier’s young adult children, Joel and Elly, were on hand to thank Mrs Ashton for the offer and to witness the handover of keys to Mr Dillen. Joel said although they had lost their family home, “we’ve got enough for us to keep going” so were happy for someone else to get the car.

The deacon said the church was working with a number of clubs and associations in the Mountains to help bushfire victims.

“We’ve all grown up in Springwood and know everyone. We want to pick up people who aren’t getting the level of attention of others,” he said. “We’re trying to identify people in need ... and the minute someone says they need transport... well, we’ve now got it!”

The offers started coming in on the Gazette's Facebook site on Thursday, almost as soon as news spread of the extent of the devastation. From clothes and linen to toys and pet care, they flowed thick and fast.

Many offered free accommodation in their own homes. Some volunteered caravans and owners of holiday cottages were happy to let people stay free for up to a week while trying to sort out where they would stay longer-term.

One of the biggest reactions came with an offer of formal dresses for girls whose own had been destroyed. Others topped that by offering to do free make-up and hair styling, buying them shoes or even transporting them to the dances.

Countless local shops and shopowners gave away free food, not only to those left homeless, but to the firies and other emergency personnel battling in horrendous conditions.

There were offers of puppies, yoga classes, kitchen appliances, musical instruments, tree removals and towing services.

Blue Mountains MP, Roza Sage, said: "It's just been so amazing, the generosity of people."

Mrs Sage also praised the work of the fire-fighters, who had come from Victoria, South Australia and the ACT as well as from NSW.

Blue Mountains Mayor, Mark Greenhill, said other councils had reached out to help. "I had a call from Mayor Paul Pisasale in Ipswich – he was the mayor that led the city through the floods and he's offered financial and practical assistance. I also had a wonderful call from the Mayor of Penrith – he's offered Penrith council's resources. So has Blacktown City Council."

Power company warned of cable

By Tim Barlass with B. C Lewis

Oct. 23, 2013, midnight

The Blue Mountains bushfire that claimed more than 200 properties might have been prevented by a \$100 tree maintenance job. A tree with cables running through its branches is believed to be the seat of the fire that jumped a road then engulfed houses in Springwood, Winmalee and Yellow Rock.

Fairfax Media has established an order to prune the tree was issued by a power company in July.

On Friday the tree was surrounded by police tape and was photographed by inspectors from Endeavour Energy.

Resident Marilyn Stubbs said she heard noises on Thursday, which sounded like cables arcing, before the fire jumped to bush across the road.

Ms Stubbs' property adjoins the property with the tree in Linksvie Road, Springwood, the site used to identify a fire that has burned out more than 2000 hectares and which once again reached emergency status on Saturday afternoon.

Earlier in the year, Ms Stubbs said, she had received a notification from Endeavour Energy asking her to cut back foliage near electrical cables, which appeared to relate to a straggly grevillea. She said her neighbour, a tenant, told her he had received a similar document relating to the large tree at the front of his landlord's property.

Ms Stubbs said: "I was lying on my bed and heard a twanging and zinging. The crackling was right outside my bedroom window towards next door.

"The document from Endeavour was headed 'Customer Vegetation Report' and dated July 9. It stated the electricity service supply had been recently inspected to ensure sufficient safety clearance between cables and nearby vegetation."

The document added in red type in block capitals: 'NOTE IF YOU ARE NOT THE OWNER OF THIS PROPERTY PLEASE FORWARD THIS REPORT TO THE PROPERTY OWNER OR YOUR AGENT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

'We have noted tree/s adjacent to the overhead service line/s located on this property are in contact with the lines. A minimum clearance of 500mm from the lines is required. You need to make arrangements to have the tree/s trimmed to maintain this specified clearance as a matter of urgency.'

"My neighbour, he said he got a letter," Ms Stubbs said. "He said he passed it to his real estate."

No homes were lost in Linksvie Road, saved by emergency services, especially low flying helicopter water bombing.

"We just can't thank those fearless helicopter pilots enough," she said.

Another witness, Louise Forrest, believed she witnessed the fire before starting work in Springwood at 1.25pm.

She heard an explosion while walking to her car in Linksvie Road, then saw a thick stream of black smoke rising before she rang Triple 0.

Within the next five minutes, due to strong winds, the fire appeared above the trees at the end of Thomson Avenue.

Ms Stubbs added it was all "just too quick, the wind just went so quickly ... We feel terrible for all these people on the other side [the east], it's just horrible."

Rain has not improved fire situation: RFS

Oct. 22, 2013, midnight

Information on fire activity in the Blue Mountains.

Issued at 22nd October 2013

NSW RFS is urging local residents in the Blue Mountains area to remain vigilant and prepared with hot, dry and windy conditions forecast. People right across these fire affected areas that live in or near bushland should take the forecast conditions seriously, be on alert and complete a Bush Fire Survival Plan or review their current plan. Please note; the rain today has not improved the fire situation and fire weather conditions are forecast to deteriorate.

Current Situation

A bushfire is burning in the Mt Victoria, Bell, Springwood, Winmalee, Falconbridge areas. The fire is currently over 48,000 hectares in size. Over 2000 firefighters from the NSW RFS, FR NSW, NPWS, Country Fire Authority – Victoria (CFA), Country Fire Service – South Australia (CFS) are consolidating containment lines in milder conditions today and are being assisted by water bombing aircraft. Other agencies are assisting with various roles.

The fire is burning in Very High fire danger conditions and is currently within close proximity of residential properties. Under these conditions, fires can be difficult to control. Embers may be blown ahead of the fire, creating spot fires. These spot fires may threaten your home earlier than the predicted main fire front.

Advice

Put your Bush Fire Survival Plan into action. If you do not have a Bush Fire Survival Plan, know what you will do if the fire threatens your property by accessing www.nsw.rfs.gov.au or ph; 1800 679 737 .

Well prepared and actively defended homes can offer safety during the fire, but it is always best to prepare to leave early.

Evacuation Centres

Evacuation Centres have been established at:

Springwood Sports Club, 83 Macquarie Road, Springwood is OPEN.

Lithgow Workers Club, 3-7 Tank Street, Lithgow is OPEN.

North Richmond Community Centre, 33 William St Nth Richmond is OPEN.

Road Closures

Due to bush fire activity there are numerous road closures. Please also be aware that road closures may occur without notice. These closures will continue to be assessed across the day, however, there is no forecast as to when these roads will reopen. Motorists are urged to avoid all bushfire affected areas.

For the latest traffic information, visit www.livetraffic.com or call 132 701.

Public Transport Closures

For the latest public transport information visit 131500.com.au or call 131 500.

Other Information

If your life is at risk, call Triple Zero (000) immediately.

If you are concerned about the welfare of family and friends, please contact the Police Information Centre on 1800 227 228 .

Continue to stay up to date with the bush fire situation by checking <http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au>, listening to your local radio station.

You can contact the NSW RFS Bush Fire Information Line on 1800 679 737.

You can also stay up to date via <http://www.facebook.com/nswrfs>

Follow on Twitter; www.twitter.com/nswrfs

If you live in the area but are away from home, it may not be safe to return to your property.

If you have a mobile device such as an iPhone, iPad, Android, tablet or smart phone, current fire information is available in a number of ways.

Fires Near Me NSW - Mobile App

Providing fire information on bush fire incidents in NSW, as well as participating Australian and NZ fire agencies.

firesnearme.com - Mobile Site

To access our mobile device site, visit www.firesnearme.com.

While these applications and services can be useful sources of information on fire incidents and conditions, they are reliant on having access to data services. Therefore, the NSW RFS encourages you to not rely solely on these applications and services and use a range of sources for information.

Disaster Welfare Assistance Line (1800 018 444) provides information about disaster relief grants for content and structural repairs, available to low income earners with no insurance.

Authorised by Incident Controller

Rob Rogers Blue Mountains

Fire Control Centre.

Issued by the Incident Management Team on behalf of the Commissioner of the NSW Rural Fire Service.

Firefighters brace for Wednesday as forecast worsens

By *Megan Levy* Oct. 21, 2013, midnight

Firefighters battling the worst NSW fire disaster in nearly half a century have successfully prevented spot fires from jumping a major road in the Blue Mountains overnight, but they are now facing the prospect of stronger winds on Wednesday when conditions are expected to be their worst.

NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons praised the "extraordinarily good work" of firefighters who prevented spot fires along several kilometres of the Bells Line of Road in the Blue Mountains from crossing to the southern side of the road overnight on Sunday.

If the fire jumps that road, firefighters fear it could merge with two other fires in the area to form one massive blaze.

But the good news was tempered by an updated weather forecast for Wednesday, which is expected to pose the most challenging conditions for firefighters.

The forecast for temperatures into the mid 30s, low humidity and high winds had already been assessed as much worse than predicted last week.

Residents come to terms with the loss of their home at Winmalee. Photo: Wolter Peeters

But on Monday morning, Mr Fitzsimmons said that forecast had been updated overnight with worsening wind conditions.

"The challenging aspect of the forecast is that they're forecasting a strengthening of the winds for Wednesday now, only by another 10km/h, but that's still going to be quite problematic," he said.

"We've got quite a few days ahead still before we see the weather culminate in the most challenging forecast weather day, which is expected on Wednesday."

Premier Barry O'Farrell on Sunday took the extraordinary step of declaring a state of emergency across NSW for the next 30 days, which will give special powers to all emergency services to deal with what could be a catastrophe.

On Monday morning, there were 56 fires burning around the state, of which 12 were not contained.

The Rural Fire Service has one emergency warning in place for the 38,000-hectare State Mine fire, which started on defence land near Lithgow. An investigation is yet to determine whether it was ignited by explosives training.

The RFS said the fire was burning near the township of Bell, as well as Dargan, Clarence and Bilpin.

An emergency alert telephone warning message was sent late on Sunday to residents in Bell, who were advised to leave their properties immediately if not prepared and travel west along the Bells Line of Road towards Lithgow. The Lithgow Workers Club is open as an evacuation centre.

Three "watch and act" warnings - one level below an emergency warning - were in place for fires at Springwood and Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains and Balmoral in the southern highlands on Monday morning.

Mr Fitzsimmons said more than 2000 firefighters out battling the blazes achieved good results on Sunday evening and into Monday morning.

"We saw some spotting activity of some kilometres up along the State Mine Fire burning near Bell, but fortunately that spotting activity went in behind the backburning that was occurring on the ground and has not breached the south or south-eastern side of the Bells Line of Road at that location," Mr Fitzsimmons said.

He said the fire did flare up around Bell and Hartley Vale on Sunday afternoon, where some sheds, a boat and a trailer were destroyed by fire.

But he said firefighters managed to save a house that came under direct threat.

"Firefighters will remain very busy today trying to consolidate as much of that containment as they can, and similarly down in the fire near Wingecarribee, just to the west of Bargo and just south of Buxton. They were dealing with some break-outs overnight where that fire was breaching containment, but at this stage it looks pretty positive in relation to wrapping that up, but it will require a lot of concentration and effort ongoing today."

He said there was potential for that fire to breach the south-eastern corner or eastern edge, which could end up posing some risk to the Illawarra escarpment and possibly the Illawarra.

Mr Fitzsimmons said there was still a chance the three fires in the Blue Mountains could merge to form one massive blaze.

Those fires had the potential to burn to the eastern end of the Hawkesbury, down into the north-west area of Sydney including Richmond.

"The reality is, the modelling indicates that there's every likelihood under the forecast weather conditions that these two fires particularly up in the back end of the mountains will merge at some point," he said.

"The worst case scenario in the fire run, with the expected weather, is that they could ultimately reach down to the fire at Springwood and Winmalee, but with the continued success of the firefighting effort, let's hope that it doesn't extend all that far eastward."

If that happens, the worst fire disaster in NSW for at least 45 years could lead to evacuations from high-population centres such as Katoomba and Leura.

The state of emergency powers gives emergency services authority to deal with "whatever eventualities may arise", Mr O'Farrell said.

This included the right to order the public to leave or to enter an area and the right to demolish a building.

It also prevents people from disobeying an order given under these powers, making it an offence to obstruct or disobey these orders.

Bushfire destroyed homes toll more than 200

Oct. 20, 2013, midnight

More than 200 homes have now been destroyed in the Blue Mountains bushfires as firefighters prepare for potentially worse conditions today after a relatively calmer night.

Fires threatened St Columba's High School in Springwood yesterday, for the second time, and Nepean health service said Springwood Hospital was evacuated "in advance of predicted worsening weather conditions over the coming days". Twenty six patients have been moved to Nepean Hospital until at least Wednesday.

Blue Mountains mayor Mark Greenhill has announced a mayoral relief fund will be established by Monday to support the recovery effort.

A new disaster recovery centre should also be established at the Legacy offices in Raymond Road, Springwood by Monday.

Despite the severity of the bushfires, Clr Greenhill said the Blue Mountains community would come through the disaster.

"It's going to be alright, we're going to get through this," he said. "We're a strong and resilient community. They breed us tough up here."

For the latest updates visit the Gazette's Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/bluemountainsgazette>

81 Blue Mountains homes destroyed, toll to rise

Oct. 18, 2013, midnight

Eighty-one homes have been destroyed by bushfire in the Blue Mountains and this will number will only rise, officials have confirmed.

Assessment teams, led by the NSW Rural Fire Service, inspected areas around Springwood and Winmalee today.

"At this stage, 81 properties have been destroyed, with 37 damaged," a NSW Rural Fire Service spokesperson said.

"Approximately 30 percent of the fireground has been assessed. The number of properties destroyed or damaged will rise."

Some of the worst hit areas included Buena Vista Road and Emma Parade, Winmalee and the township of Yellow Rock.

Homes have also been lost in Mount Victoria.

More than 280 firefighters continue to work on containing the Linksvie Road Fire in Springwood which has now burnt more than 2100 hectares of bushland, the RFS reported at 8.45pm on Friday. The fire was listed at Watch and Act.

Former Rural Fire Service chief and Blue Mountains MP Phil Koperberg has been appointed by NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell as the Emergency Relief Co-ordinator for the Blue Mountains.

He told the Gazette on Friday afternoon he is in the process of setting up his office for his new role in Springwood, most likely within council's offices, and envisages his role lasting at least two or three weeks.

"My first priority is to ensure that all the people who have lost everything are, in a very co-ordinated fashion, given access to assistance that they will need," Mr Koperberg said.

"For example, providing accommodation for those who don't have it, granting of cash grants being offered through the Commonwealth and state governments, making sure people have access to clothing and basic items like that, especially for children.

"Many people will be able to provide those things themselves, but we just want them to know that services are available should they need them.

"I'll be talking to the welfare agencies like the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul and also the Insurance Council of NSW, because we need to get people's claims quickly assessed.

"I'll be also liaising with state authorities like gas, electricity and water (agencies)."

For more updates, photos and information visit the Blue Mountains Gazette's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/bluemountainsgazette>

Homes destroyed in Blue Mountains bushfires

Oct. 17, 2013, midnight

Homes were destroyed in Springwood, Winmalee and Yellow Rock today in severe bushfires that flared up about 2pm.

The worst loss of homes was at Springwood, where at least 30 homes were lost.

Ferocious winds fanned the blaze that destroyed the dream home where Joe Moore, Springwood Country Club's golf professional, had lived with his wife and seven children, including four foster children.

"This reminds me of what happened in Melbourne a couple of years ago," Mr Moore said.

"Whichever way you look, it was the impossible fire to fight."

Homes were also destroyed in Emma Parade, Winmalee including the home of former Labor candidate for Macquarie, Susan Templeman.

For more details, updates and photos visit the Blue Mountains Gazette's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/bluemountainsgazette>.