

Out of the Ashes - Bush Fire Response

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Nobody had a clue when they woke up on 7th February, just what lie ahead for so many Victorians. While we were all aware that there was significant risk of fires, the extreme tragedy took us all by surprise.

The area was hit with hundreds of bush fires which proved to be the deadliest in Australian history. 173 people died and 414 were injured. The fires destroyed over 2029 houses and over 3500 structures in total and damaged thousands more. Many towns north-east of the state capital of Melbourne were badly damaged and some were completely destroyed. While the worst damage and majority of deaths took place in early February, the fires continued burning for 9 weeks. Saturday 7th February has since been referred to as Black Saturday.

Events unfolded hourly, with seemingly endless reports of more tragic loss of lives and property. Within hours of the news breaking, it was clear that as therapists we had to do something to help.

The initial plan was just to organize a simple fundraising event, in Melbourne city centre. Many major industry associations immediately confirmed their willingness to be involved and posted a notice on their website or issued one for all their members and the flood gates opened. The following day the fundraiser had developed into a national event, to take place in Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane.

Therapist Unite – National Fund Raiser

The event was to be called **Therapists Unite** – as it would be qualified therapists from all backgrounds working together regardless of their professional affiliation, or education- but with only 21/2 weeks to organize it from start to finish, it was an absolute organisers nightmare. Apart from the logistics of getting the notice out to everyone, registering volunteers, organizing shifts, planning equipment and roles etc there was also lots of red tape and MANY forms, registration applications and formal documents to complete, with the City Councils, the Red Cross, Consumer Affairs etc. The Red Cross were so inundated themselves many workers had to work manually as their computers were required for other duties and they had been unable to keep up with demand for cash tins or receipt books and had none left. Fortunately all the afore mentioned official organizations made events for the bush fire appeal a priority and rushed things through, agreeing to give exemption on fees – a massive financial saving.

Most volunteers didn't mention where they were from with their initial contact, requiring follow up phone calls or emails. To try and keep some control on the rapidly expanding list of emails and messages a colour code was created for each state eg: blue for Queensland volunteers as they were also experiencing floods, red for Victorian ones as we were in flames, yellow for West Australia as they were having sun etc. To give readers an idea of the size of Australia, Perth would be located in California, Melbourne - New Orleans, and Queensland - New York. So logistically organizing an event to take place simultaneously in such a short time frame was huge.

The fundraiser was set for February 27, 2009 and when it arrived it was a long, hot and tiring day. Set up began at 6:30 a.m. and packing up didn't start until 8:30 p.m. Melbourne is known as the city of 'four seasons in one day' but after 11 years of drought, and a week of 45°C heat, it could safely be guaranteed that at least everyone could work outside without fear of rain.

In Melbourne there were approximately 100 volunteers all working side by side to create a positive and upbeat atmosphere. Another 60 were at work in Brisbane and 40 in Perth. Practitioners and students took turns approaching passers-by and promoting the event. Several people simply made a donation without receiving a treatment. There were 20 massage tables and chairs available for use at any given time. All practitioners were asked to commit to a minimum 3 hour shift. The initial shift of 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. was the quietest, when people were rushing to get to work, but from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and from 5 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. it was madness! In total nearly AU\$ 14,000 was raised in one

day! With an additional AU\$ 7,000 raised through other events run by Endeavour College as well as through staff and college donations. **Nearly AU\$21,000 in total!!**

APERN – Australian Practitioners Emergency Response Network

The other HUGE initiative that was created simultaneously to the fundraiser was APERN – the Australian Practitioners Emergency Response Network.

Once the initial notice regarding the fundraiser was sent out to all the associations the flood gates opened and we suddenly got INUNDATED, and I mean inundated with many requests from therapist wanting to assist out in the affected areas and also from therapists who lived in the regions and needed help. There were literally 40 – 50 calls or e-mails a day, and someone also mistakenly posted my mobile number on a website – which was not good, meaning calls came throughout the night too.

What happened next was truly magical – as several strangers spontaneously began to work together with the enormous task of trying to link the need for help with the desire to help. As the first week unfolded, some order was starting to be created, but trying to set up emergency response teams in locations that were in total shock and disarray with therapists who were badly affected by the tragedy on the ground was chaos. By the end of the week it was decided to meet face to face, at Whittlesea; the main staging area, and first safe location for those fleeing the fires so we could review the week and plan the next move.

A structure was needed to make it manageable and we came up with the name **APERN – the Australian Practitioners Emergency Response Network***.

** Similar organisations already exist in the United States, and in Europe. We made contact with our international counterparts and got guidelines sent over so we could use them as a base.*

One of our first challenges was finding out exactly where the staging areas were, so we could organise teams of volunteers, but as the fires moved, so did the sites, and it was such a chaotic time that even getting to know where the sites were, or for us to be allowed access to them was difficult, and was certainly not an option in some cases while there was risk of the fires turning direction again.

Each staging area hosted up to 500 CFA **volunteer** fire fighters, people of all ages and backgrounds - with tents for some of the lucky ones to sleep in, but in some cases in the early stages of the fires, the volunteers slept rough in an open field in between shifts. There were many sights, noises, and experiences during this time that were moving, for example seeing so many people from such different backgrounds all working together supporting each other – there were no boundaries – no distinctions.

Representatives from the Police, the Army, the CFA, the Red Cross, TV reporters or film crews, Animal Rescue workers, APERN practitioners, or pastors from the Salvation army – all working together, sharing support, strength and stories, while the volunteers from the Victorian Country Women's Association provided meals and toiletries 24 /7. It was as though we all stood in a circle – with some one – from somewhere watching our back.

The Animal rescue teams worked tirelessly around the clock searching for any wildlife that may have survived the fires. Millions of animals and birds perished in the fires and many were injured. Only a handful could be helped. A young Joey kangaroo was found and brought back to the site one afternoon – it had taken refuge in a dam to avoid the flames and had been in the water for days now suffering from hyperthermia – many more weren't so fortunate. For the animal lovers it was soul destroying.

In order to work at the sites we had to get permission from the people in charge of each staging area so we could set up a space to work. This varied from site to site, as it could be a Government official from the Dept of Sustainability, the CFA, the army, the police, or the fire brigade. It did get easier as time passed and word spread of who we were and what we were doing, but the initial fortnight was pretty tough. Sourcing equipment was also initially an issue, and communications were very difficult due to the locations and situation.

We were trying to set up rosters and a structure of some kind and act with credibility but many people were just turning up with their equipment ready to work and we had no idea who they were, or what skills they had. People spontaneously left their lives and families at home and stayed on site for a week at a time, many travelled 12 – 15 hours from interstate, no idea what they could do just wanting to help. We even had people from overseas contact us offering help. At times it was quite overwhelming – surreal and numbing - it didn't take long to realise we were all operating on automatic. Everyone was.

The peak times volunteers were required was 8pm – 1am and 6am – 9am, when the fire fighters were changing shifts, so people who wanted to help had to be committed to doing those hours. Spontaneous interviews were given with several international and national TV crews, radio shows and newspapers – it was really overwhelming.

Initially our focus was on supporting the emergency service personnel only as the needs of those acutely affected by the fires was vastly different and would require a very different service. It was preferable that only experienced practitioners who had experience of working with those in severe trauma worked on the local community members, but that kind of practitioner was in short supply – we just had to learn on the ground and support each other.

We also had to ensure that the services being provided were credible, as there were several 'do gooders' and religious groups whose intentions were totally inappropriate. There was also the issue of looting - even at the staging areas this was a problem. Initially we asked our volunteers to wear orange or at least tie an orange ribbon on their arm to distinguish them as a therapist as there were so many different groups or organisations at the staging areas.

Several regions were cut off from the public as they were either still a crime scene with the army undertaking the harrowing recovery task of trying to locate missing people or they were still unsafe. Special permission was required from the police to enter these areas, which involved an interview to ascertain the reason for going, providing formal identification, signing a register with an expected return time and wearing a special wristband.

King Lake was one such area, but as some locals were still living there, so a small group of APERN therapists were allowed access. The first group of practitioners came back after several hours in an acute state of shock prompting us to rethink the viability of this – we had to make sure we had support mechanisms in place for those needing to debrief afterwards.

Marysville was another such site. But Marysville was an experience all of its own. People in Marysville stood no chance when the fires hit and many just combusted due to the radiant heat – which was twice the strength of an incinerator in a crematorium. The fire ball came down one side of the mountain, through the town and out the other side in minutes travelling at 180 kms per hour. Nothing survived in Marysville, the silence, smouldering and lack of any life was powerful – even flies didn't exist – there was nothing. Hell really left its mark on Marysville that day.

Each trip to Marysville consisted of 5 1/2 hour journey each way due to road closures and fallen trees – this was on top of an 8 hour shift. But how could you complain – your home and life wasn't under threat, and these brave volunteers were risking their lives to help others – the least we could do was help their aching bodies, to enable them to continue.

When we were invited in, it was still a crime scene, so only the army, paramedics and police had access there but a Sergeant had heard what we were doing and requested we had access to work on his men – a real honour – even if he initially had to order his men to receive a treatment. Unfortunately, but I guess in part the nature of our work involves people getting things off their chest – which many paramedics and army personnel did as we worked on them. The difference was the things they were sharing were beyond normal comprehension and ever so often – and often a little too late, the sergeants would pull them up reminding them we were 'civies' and this stuff was not suitable for our ears. Some of it wasn't suitable for anyone's ears. A psychologist came to address some members of APERN and commented what he was seeing and hearing from survivors and people affected in some way by the bush fires (including the volunteer therapists) was worse than his 6 month stint in Afghanistan – says quite a lot doesn't it!

But there were some small positives too – and we all needed to look for anything that could remotely be considered a positive at this time. Many new people were introduced to reflexology and massage from this experience. One, a 70 year old CFA volunteer had never had a treatment of any kind in his life; another fire fighter wanted to check that the oil used in the massage wasn't flammable – it's better to ask I guess!!! Many people were initially reluctant to allow themselves to be touched, not wanting to bear their feet or feeling it wasn't the 'manly thing to do' Too humble to allow another to serve or help them – they had to stay strong and focussed.

However eventually word spread, and once someone had received a treatment they were more likely to come back for another. During the first week alone at Whittlesea over 500 treatments were given.

It was unquestionably one of the most humbling, moving, challenging but rewarding experiences ever. The fire fighters and emergency service personnel were so grateful and appreciative of what we were providing for them and although some took a little 'coaxing' to have a treatment.....

“Enough of this Aussie bloke stuff – You get yourselves over to the massage tent, get in the chair, you're having a treatment –it's not an option” (Might need to brush up on my bedside manner a bit) ☺ - I was told I sounded like their commander - but it worked, word soon spread and reluctant clients nervously stepped forward.

The comments of appreciation and gratitude were moving; being told that 'knowing they could get a treatment at the end of a 12 hour shift had kept them going that afternoon' was choking.

Being a part of the tent city with over 500 **volunteer** fire fighters camping there for days, watching them being briefed at 9pm before climbing aboard an army of fire trucks to head off in the dark - in silence - for another 12 – 15 hour shift or seeing a group return again at dawn is one of the moving sites I will never forget, it really felt like they were being waved off and welcomed back from war and even now evokes emotion. It was TRULY HUMBLING.

Many of those who received treatments shared their thoughts on the 'Therapist Unite' blog at <http://therapistsunite.blogspot.com> – check it out.

The effects of the fires were far reaching, with many therapists needing debriefing and counselling both during and after the fires. It was not unusual to smell smoke during dreams, and be walking around 'wired up' and frazzled for several days after volunteering, to react strongly upon hearing a siren – or to remove items from the car 2 months later and still be able to smell smoke on them.

The work in Victoria is far from over, the people who survived the fires still need on going long term support, so APERN practitioners are still volunteering their time. Unfortunately 21/2 years on, many survivors are still living in caravans or make shift homes, lots of families have separated due to the massive stress, and so many who were involved in any way are receiving counselling.

Writing this article last year was incredibly challenging, and created the release of lots of hidden emotions and physical reactions; feelings of nausea, shaking, and quite a few buried tears. I was very surprised at the impact thinking about some of the experiences once again stirred in me. Many sights, events, stories and experiences that took place during that 9 week period are not appropriate to mention in this article, and were real 'behind the scenes' stuff – things that for political or general health and wellbeing of the greater community were not made public, things I never want to hear about, read, see or experience again. I still have all the newspapers from that period, but they are packed away in the shed somewhere – still unread. Marysville continues to be a place I need to return to, it has started to be rebuilt, people have moved back there again, plants are starting to grow back, and maybe next summer I'll visit it again - maybe.

Update:

I have since returned to Marysville, 2 years after the fires. It was just starting to rebuild, with one or two houses appearing, but the physical reaction that spontaneously occurred in my body while there took me by surprise. I guess it's proof how we store our emotions in our cells.

As a consequence of the bush fire tragedy, something good is 'Rising out of the Ashes.' APERN is being formally created and will continue to build and grow so that teams of practitioners around Australia can register and be deployed to support our emergency service personnel at future times of need. It will come under the umbrella of Hands on Health and is already getting much support from

the Dept of Sustainability, Country Fire Association (CFA) and Governor General Quentin Bryce. One of the goals of APERN is to be the CFA equivalent of the therapist's world to assist in times of emergency. It is obviously still in the infant stages of development, and will take time to build, but everything has to start somewhere and Australia is an awfully large country – but each mountain starts with a simple step, and with enough support and backing it will happen.

The Red Cross state that over \$375 million was raised in total for the Bush Fire appeal making this the largest ever fundraising events.

Profile:



Emma Gierschick is the past National President and Honorary Life member of the Reflexology Association of Australia. She has taught and presented in many countries spanning across 3 continents, appeared on National Australian TV and Radio and featured in numerous National and International Journals, magazines and other publications. Emma is a current serving Director on the ICR board – International Council of Reflexologists. She can be contacted direct on info@7keys2freedom.com.au www.7keys2freedom.com.au