

# NOTES FROM THE FIELD

*Macedon Ranges February 1983*

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These notes are from Margery Webster's experience as a Community Development Officer and local resident in the aftermath of the Ash Wednesday fires in the Macedon Ranges. At the time the fire impacted she was working in aged care services with the Shire of Newham and Woodend. In the aftermath of the fire she was funded by the State Government to work with fire affected residents of Woodend and those who had evacuated to Woodend from the Macedon area. The government funding ceased after nine months. Recognising the community recovery was still far from complete the Anglican and Uniting churches employed two community workers to continue working with fire affected people across the Macedon Ranges for a further 12 months. Margery was one of those workers.

February 16 1983 will long be remembered as Ash Wednesday. It was on this day that devastating fires, reported to be the worst since Black Friday 1939, burned across eastern Australia.

One of the worst affected areas in Victoria was the Macedon Ranges, where approximately 500 homes were destroyed and seven lives lost. A tree brushing against a power line in East Trentham started the fire which travelled through the Wombat Forest, initially avoiding Woodend and Macedon. However, a wind change resulted in the fire turning back on itself, jumping the

highway and beginning its path of destruction through the Macedon Ranges. The fire eventually ran out of fuel after reaching the 'firebreak' caused by a fire which had occurred just two weeks earlier.

## **The environment**

Early in the 20th century, Mount Macedon was a retreat for affluent Melbournians escaping the summer heat. Many of the beautiful homes and gardens were built to house the ambassadors to Australia from various countries. In those days Macedon, located on the lower slopes of the ranges, accommodated many of the staff who provided services to the residents of Mount Macedon. The popularity of the Macedon Ranges declined in the middle years of the century; however this situation was reversed in the 1970s, as the opening of the Tullamarine International Airport led to employment opportunities, and improvement of the road network. This development enabled easier access to this attractive garden community, surrounded by bushland. Pressure for sub-division together with a building boom during the 1970s and '80s led to a rapid increase in population, with people transferring from the Melbourne suburbs.

## **February 16 1983**

As I crossed the road to the bank from my workplace at the then Shire of Newham and Woodend in the early afternoon of February 16, the temperature was well over 40 degrees Celsius and there was a strong north wind. I remember likening the experience to the opening of an oven door. In the early evening fire engines rolled into Woodend from small communities in the north, from as far away as Swan Hill. Later in the evening,

following media reports of the situation worsening, the Shire switchboard was overwhelmed with telephone calls from all over the world including ships at sea, enquiring about the safety of relatives and friends. As the Shire Welfare Officer, I was asked to operate the switchboard, there was little information for me to pass on as all roads to the south were closed and telecommunications to the area had broken down.

Next morning I learned of the tragic loss of life and property, and the chaos that ensued as people tried to flee their burning homes. Some managed to escape to Melbourne via the Calder Highway while it was still passable, however as the fire came closer, others travelled north over the top of the mountain. Smoke restricted visibility, resulting in some people veering off the road. Many evacuees were directed to the designated evacuation centre in the Kyneton Shire Hall, others went to relatives and friends to the north and south of the ranges. In Macedon, the pub was packed with people (and pets) unable to escape the fire. As the fire passed through, fire fighters trained the hoses on the pub to save those inside. With such a large number of homes destroyed the pub became the community refuge for many days. The table mats in this pub still tell the story of February 16. With typical Aussie humour locals spoke of the work of the devil—three churches burned and two pubs left standing.

## **Recovery services**

The State and local governments immediately co-operated to establish an area co-ordinating committee and a recovery co-ordination centre at the Shire Offices in Gisborne. Early actions

included the sourcing of caravans to enable people to stay in the area. The football oval became packed with caravans. Gradually, people took their caravans and returned to be on their blackened blocks to begin the enormous task of re-establishing their homes, family and community life with some sense of normality. Disaster relief payments enabled this to happen. Although the burnt environment was a constant reminder, they felt comforted to be amongst people who had shared a similar experience. A psychiatric team was located in the area, in a purpose built caravan clearly marked as the “psychiatric service”. This was underutilised for two main reasons; firstly people did not want to publicly identify themselves as “psychiatric patients”; and secondly it was introduced too early. At that time people were more concerned with rebuilding their homes than focusing on their emotional wellbeing.

Following some early difficulties for people accessing resources and services, a ‘one stop shop’ was established at Drusilla, the Mount Macedon property owned by the Marist Brothers. Apart from the pub where people had sheltered on the night of the fire, this was the only community meeting place until a large portable building was located at the local sporting reserve.

The State Electricity Company first denied all responsibility for the fire but finally agreed to compensate residents. Insurance assessors were subsequently located in the area to assist clients with their claims. Visiting Rural Finance Officers assisted farmers to re-establish their farms by organising grants for replacement fencing.

## Community development

Apart from aged services and churches there were no established social welfare services in the affected communities in 1983. The nearest Community Health

Centre was some 30 kilometres away in Sunbury. Unaccustomed to welfare services, residents were not responsive to external welfare and psychiatric services suddenly appearing in their communities.

As the community gained strength they became frustrated with perceived inequities and a lack of action from government. Feelings of “them [the authorities] and us” emerged leading to the first of many public meetings. At the first public meeting two women were elected to co-ordinate an action group staffed by community volunteers who would work out of a caravan supplied by a service club. The role of the group was to ensure the correct information and resources were shared. The action group became a “watch dog” for the community and the voice of the community when difficulties arose with service providers, government officials and professionals. All of the action group meetings were held in the pub, a place of solidarity which had protected so many people on the night of the fires.

The needs of the community in the early days after the fires was of a practical nature—clothing and household goods, assistance with clearing blocks, locating and positioning caravans, restoration of income, gum boots and tools to commence re-establishment of gardens, and advice from local authorities regarding planning and building regulations.

Following criticism of external service providers, local residents were employed as “frontline” workers providing information and support to meet these needs. They built trusting relationships with the community, which enabled them to facilitate psychosocial support if required. A number of skilled professionals were available to support the “frontline” workers and to accept referrals. These workers recognised the importance of the action group to community recovery and began to work closely with

them. A Community Development Officer initiated street meetings, identifying a community leader from each area, and developed a weekly newsletter to share information with other residents.

Just prior to the first winter of living in caravans I was introduced to a community theatre producer who had worked with a number of UK communities that had been impacted by social and economic change. He convinced me of the value of working with a community to interpret their experience and express it through community theatre. I felt this approach could be a cathartic experience for the affected community but needed to speak with community members to get their reaction. The reaction was positive and following a community meeting, funds for the project were secured. Throughout that long winter, the community theatre group met in the portable building. Children were encouraged to recount and act out their experience at an after school program. This reduced the time spent in the caravans and relieved the pressure on parents. The community theatre project culminated in a parade to the top of Mount Macedon, where the children slayed a “fire eating dragon”. A documentary film, *Phoenix Rising*, was made of the project and shown on the ABC. Following this event many parents reported their children were more settled and sleeping better.

As people began to rebuild their lives, connections were made with other fire affected communities. In 1984 the cricketing fraternities of Macedon and the fire affected coastal community of Aireys Inlet decided to play for “The Ashes” (ashes were collected from both areas). Each year around February 16 these two communities still come together to play for “The Ashes”, rotating the location between the two communities.

## Resilience

The role women played in supporting both their community and their families throughout this time left me with great respect for their care and resilience.

At the family level, it was most often the women who expressed the pain, encouraging the rest of the family to seek professional help. Organising the rebuilding and other re-establishment issues were often left to the women, especially if the male of the household was rendered ineffective due to unexpressed grief. This situation sometimes caused friction between partners.

I remember hearing an older member of the community recount her story of the night of the fire. Unable to leave, she sat alone throughout the night as the fire raged around her house. She could hear her young next door neighbour entreating her children to sing. When the young woman stopped singing the children once again became afraid and started crying, the mother would encourage them to continue singing. This went on throughout the night. The following morning, the elderly woman discovered that the woman had tried to escape with her children in the car, however a large burning tree fell across the driveway, blocking her exit. The mother led her children into the dam, grabbing the car rugs to cover them and commenced the singing routine. This story is reminiscent of wartime England when women sang to their children in the air raid shelters in an attempt to drown out the fearful sound of bombing. Many war experiences were recalled at this time, such as the intensity of this recent event on survivors' lives.

Another elderly woman had moved to the Macedon Ranges with her retired husband shortly before the fires. She subsequently discovered her husband was suffering from dementia. She did not have family support. Her husband's dementia worsened with the disaster experience, but she protected his dignity in the most extenuating circumstances. She explained that he was a very proud man, not accustomed to seeking outside help. Mutually agreed strategies were used to support this woman in ways useful to her.

Many parents spoke of their children "knowing what to do" because of what they had learnt at school. They described how children urged them to wear stout shoes and dress in natural fibres rather than synthetics as they planned their escape. Some of these parents spoke of feelings of guilt as their children were better informed than themselves of the actions they should take in such a crisis.

## Lessons learnt

Many lessons were learnt from the *Ash Wednesday* experience, contributing to the growing body of knowledge about the recovery process. While there are broad community development principles and guidelines to assist community recovery workers and professionals, each community and its experience is different. There is no blueprint. However, supporting existing services in the community will lead to a more sustainable community recovery.

Lessons learnt from the Macedon fires include:

- effective recovery is best achieved when the process is managed by the community itself with

community leaders and members being supported by relevant professionals.

- recovery services need to be co-ordinated and located in the affected area/community in a 'one stop shop'.
- community recovery is akin to grief and loss, it is a long-term process with ups and downs and takes longer than many people expect.
- people can generally make good decisions about their recovery if they are given appropriate information and resources.
- introducing well meaning and often mandated external services requires good sensitive management.
- the early stages of disaster recovery provide golden opportunities for change, particularly for introducing mitigation strategies. This is often unrecognised as people yearn to replace what they had before.
- planned press coverage over an extended period can support recovery. Affected people are often comforted to know they are not forgotten.

Lessons learnt from emergencies such as *Ash Wednesday* have contributed to a range of national resources to support community recovery including:

- Recovery Manual;
- Guidelines for Psychological Service Practice;
- Guidelines for Disaster Management Practice; and
- Community and Personal Support Services.

These can be found at [www.ema.gov.au](http://www.ema.gov.au).