



BACK FROM THE BRINK

THE ROAD BACK FROM THE DISASTROUS SUMMER OF 2011 HAS BEEN LONG AND HARD. AS THE REBUILD CONTINUES, FEDERAL MPs WANT TO RECOGNISE THE REMARKABLE EFFORTS MADE BY THEIR COMMUNITIES, BUT ALSO ENSURE THE LESSONS LEARNT ARE NOT FORGOTTEN. **STORY: MICHELLE MURRAY**



BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE:
*Renewal continues in the
Lockyer Valley*

Almost two years have passed since that fateful January day when the town of Grantham in Queensland's Lockyer Valley was changed forever.

Out of the ruins of lives and houses swept away by a vicious torrent of water, Grantham's main street is back in business with a new store, hotel and information centre.

At the start of 2011, Scott Buchholz had just been elected to federal parliament as the Member for Wright, which includes Grantham, when he found himself dealing with distraught residents who had lost everything.

Many will remember his tearful statement to the House of Representatives as he read out the names of those who had died in and around the devastated town.

"What was experienced here in the community of Grantham was nothing short of devastating," he says today, standing in the place where the water came cascading through.

"As fear of flood recedes people will get on with their lives and perhaps won't be ready for it."

"There was an enormous loss of life, in excess of 20 community members lost their lives, and still to this day there are a number of bodies we've been unable to find.

"But for each story of horror and devastation, there are equal parallel stories of random acts of kindness, not only those from within this community but from all around Australia who gave generously. We were very lucky

as a community to be the recipients of that."

Mr Buchholz has been involved in the rebuild effort, including the construction of a community park where the old town centre was destroyed. Green grass, a playground and newly planted trees have replaced the battlefield of debris the water left behind.

Anzac Park symbolises the life that's been restored in the town: the new leaf that many have started and the growth that still lies ahead.

"Just to see the transformation from a war zone to such a beautiful environment it is now is part of the healing process," Mr Buchholz says.

"This park will ensure we never forget those that we've lost. This park will help commemorate and help the community to take the next progressive step in getting over those tragic days."



Lockyer Valley resident Elizabeth Fraser, better known as Bess, lived through the tragic events of January 10, when she lost her sister Brenda Ross and nephew Joshua Ross.

“I was doing the washing and kissed my sister on the head and said, ‘I’ll be back to finish the washing.’ That was the last time I saw my family alive,” she says.

While dealing with the trauma of her own loss and what she witnessed on that day, Bess has been actively supporting other Grantham locals in their struggle to recover.

With some flood victims still without new homes, Bess and some other local residents have been critical of the new community park’s \$1.8 million price-tag.

“Many people are still on the bottom as they haven’t been able to afford the move. There are elderly people who no one will give a loan to move, so they have to stay down here,” she says.

“The money that was spent on this [park], the community would have preferred that money to go to those who need help to move up the hill.”

But Lockyer Valley Mayor Steve Jones believes Anzac Park is a worthwhile investment, skilling unemployed locals and boosting morale in the community.

“This scheme had 45 unemployed involved. It’s given them opportunity to learn skills and move them to a position where they can hopefully get long-term employment,” he says.

“Up until now, most of the reconstruction work has been around moving families up to a safer position on the hill. Now it’s about the lower part, this central part. It is important to mark where the old Grantham used to be, that’s a very important part of the emotional rebuild of the area.”

Some 100 kilometres east, federal MP Graham Perrett says for some people in his south Brisbane electorate of Moreton it has been a long and slow recovery process.

“Sadly there are still some suburbs like Rocklea where people haven’t come back. They’re either too wary or too traumatised to rebuild in a flood plain and so they took their money and left,” he says.

The damage to local Rocklea State School was so extensive the school was forced to close down and students had to cram into a nearby school for eight weeks during the first term of 2011.

School principal Murray Branch says the whole school community was severely impacted by the floods.

“Unfortunately 13 students moved to another area and so didn’t come back when we returned. For a small school like us to go from 53 students to 40 students that’s a lot. That’s the difference between three and two teachers,” he says.

The school re-opened a term later at the original site after everything had been fully replaced. The community banded together to hold working bees and fetes and resources were kindly donated from the local community, from across Australia and even from overseas.

With new buildings, a new basketball court, additional resources and increased student enrolments, Mr Branch says the school is now looking better than ever.

But not everyone has been able to bounce back so quickly. Just a few streets away, Rocklea resident Gary Lobley is still restoring flood damage to his home after it was virtually wiped out when the Wivenhoe Dam was opened.

While the water may have receded, for many victims like Gary the horror of the floods will be stained in their memory forever. “I lost everything I owned,” he says.



“This park will help commemorate and help the community to take the next progressive step in getting over those tragic days.”

STEP BY STEP:

Scott Buchholz (above right) says the recovery has come a long way

But losing even his most precious possessions was nothing compared to the pain he felt losing people he loved.

Mr Loble's grief was soon replaced with frustration as he began a drawn out battle with his insurance company to try and get the assistance he needed to rebuild his life.

“The company I was insured with said I wasn't covered for flood. With the help of legal aid I fought and won a small proportion of the money from them,” he says.

Mr Perrett chairs the House of Representatives committee that investigated the operation of the insurance industry during disaster events. The Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee investigated processing times for claims, the impact of third-party consultants and dispute resolution procedures.

“It was a case of putting the spotlight on insurance companies and how they behaved,” Mr Perrett says. “I should say that some insurance companies got a big tick, but some were found wanting.”

While recognising that the insurance industry faced an unprecedented workload at the time, the committee report called on the industry to plan and resource itself effectively so that it can deliver to its customers in times of need, concluding that consumer protections needed to be increased, particularly in the claims handling process.

Mr Loble says dealing with his insurance company was just the start of the challenges he has faced since the flood.

“Our neighbourhood is getting on, but it's still devastating. There are a lot of health issues. There seems to be a lot of respiratory infections, even before winter. I believe it's from the water,” he says.

“My health has not been the best. Depression comes and goes, it's been tough. There are days I feel wonderful and days that I just find it very difficult to get out of bed. But I do think of my friends and try to move on.”

As life return to its normal patterns, flood victims like Gary are keen to ensure the lessons learnt from the tragedy are not forgotten.

Mr Perrett says the reality is knowledge fades so it is the responsibility of good government at all levels to remind people how to be prepared.

“Some people have made adjustments to build up property and be prepared, but not others. As fear of flood recedes people will get on with their lives and perhaps won't be ready for it,” he says.

“There are things we've learnt from the 2011 floods that I hope will always be a part of this community. If we are not prepared then we can suffer more than we need to.”

In the Lockyer Valley, Mayor Steve Jones says one of the most important things to have happened is the opportunity people have had to move to a safe environment up the hill.

“I think people can have every confidence now that we won't see again the loss of life we did,” he says.

Grantham locals John and Kathy Mahon were some of the first to take advantage of the land swap which has enabled residents to exchange their low-lying blocks for lots on higher ground well above the flood line. Since the move to higher ground Kathy says life is looking up.

“It's great. We feel safer, our grandkids feel safe again too. When they visit they play in the park – they love it,” she says. “And we sleep a lot better,” John adds.

Moving five times since the floods from one temporary accommodation to another, the couple say they've felt lost at times, but now they're starting to find their feet.

“It's been nearly two years in limbo, trying just to get back to something we own,” John says. “For me it's hard because I felt like nothing. But now I've been feeling better because the house is being built. I can see something is happening.”

While the couple say they'll never forget the tragedy of the past, like many others in their community their sights are firmly set on the future.

“Our focus now is our new house, to finally feel settled again and have a family Christmas in our own home,” Kathy says.

“Our slab went down the other day, so I know that something's finally started. We're getting excited. Kathy's been a bit tense picking colours,” John chuckles. “I hope she's picked the right ones. I'm still waiting for my shed. I'll get it and I'll be right one day.”

Good humour is one of the enduring qualities at the core of communities like Grantham. The floods may have taken away things they love so dearly but it didn't dampen their spirits.

While the flood recovery is in no way near complete, Scott Buchholz says the community has come a long way.

“It's important that we remember the community of Grantham will take many generations for the deep scars to heal. But as a community and as a nation we're resilient. Things like this make us stronger, that's Australia.” •