

THE STRENGTH of 'One Team's Spirit'

AS THE ENORMITY OF THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY THE BUSHFIRES WHICH SWEEPED MELBOURNE IN FEBRUARY BECAME APPARENT, A NUMBER OF HIGHLY INFLUENTIAL AND MOTIVATED LEADERS ON THE DEER PARK BYPASS PROJECT REALISED THERE WAS A NEED TO DO MORE THAN JUST RAISE FUNDS. THE URGENCY OF THE SITUATION NECESSITATED IMMEDIATE ACTION.

The team leaders called a Toolbox Meeting for all site members where they identified that although money would certainly be needed in the long term to re-establish homes and communities, some hands-on, tangible assistance could be offered at once by the site staff.

The true depth of the tragedy was brought home to the team by Foreman John "Poss" Watson. He, his wife Marlene and their two boys live in St Andrews at the top of a mountain with a single access road. On Black Saturday, Poss could see the smoke, but believing the fire was still some hours away, he was yet to make the decision to stay or leave.

Without Poss knowing it, the fire was forging its way up the side of the mountain and had it not been for a sudden wind change, Poss and his family may not be here to share their story.

Sadly however, the wind change sent the fire towards Strathewen where it took the lives of Poss and Marlene's close friends and their daughter. Their other daughter, twelve year old Maddison, only survived by fleeing to a dam. Despite avoiding the flames, the sheer force of the heat inflicted radiant burns to much of Maddy's body and she remains in hospital where she is slowly recovering after spending her first six weeks in an induced coma.

Maddy recalls peeking out from under a tarp as the fire passed by – when she first looked, she could see ducks flying above her and horses grazing in an adjacent field. Moments later when she looked again, those same ducks were lying dead and yet the horses continued to graze, completely unaffected, so random and rapid was the fire's path.

When she's released from hospital, Maddy will live with her grandparents, Verne and Val. The site has put \$2,000 into a trust for her and will continue to consult with Verne and Val to ensure Maddy's needs are met, such is the team's commitment to her on-going care. As Storeman Mick Huxtable observed, "We can't save everything or everyone, but we can try and make a difference to some people's lives".

An integral part of Maddy's recovery was a bedside visit from her St Kilda football heroes Nick Riewoldt and Lenny Hayes who had been told of Maddy's plight by John Moncrieff at Monjon Security. Through his connections, John was able to cut through the club's red tape and help with the co-ordination of the players' visit.

The fires also took the home of Deer Park's Plant Operator Andrew Sexton, more affectionately known as Puppy. As the fires approached his home in Callignee, Puppy grabbed his horse and made to escape towards the road. However the horse sensed that they were actually heading into the path of the fire and nudged Puppy over a guardrail and into a creek before bolting away. After the fire had passed, Puppy's injured horse returned to check on the man whose life he'd saved.



The message began to spread beyond the site that the Deer Park Bypass team was rallying forces to help. Sub-contractors and business associates stepped up, realising that help was needed now and that this extended team was determined to offer it. Speaking to Southern Connections about the sequence of events that followed, Mick Huxtable and Community Relations Manager, Joan Bulpit, remain in awe of the generosity and camaraderie shown.

One of Leighton's Project Managers, Matt Westaway, told Mick and Joan that the Plumbers' Union had asked for assistance in Kinglake. Through 'Curly', a rep with the union, Leighton provided ablution facilities to help address the sanitation problem at Flowerdale, where portable toilets were proving to be inadequate and posed a serious health risk. In consultation with Craig Membrey from Membrey's Crane Hire, delivery was arranged at no charge and Mick Griffin supervised the construction of steps for easy access to the ablution areas.

Foreman Alan Bobbera heard on the radio that a four wheel drive vehicle was urgently needed to help fight fires at Diamond Creek and with the green light from Leighton Contractors' management, one was immediately despatched.

Superintendent Ray Wall and Project Manager Gary Briggs were integral in facilitating approval for requests to help. A wildlife carer at Rawson was treating 30 injured koalas in her home - including the world-famous Sam, whose much documented interaction with a CFA fireman had captured the

attention of the international media. She had requested the use of a shed, but unfortunately access to her property was too narrow. Not to be deterred, Ray arranged for the shed to be transported to the Morwell Veterinary Clinic where it could house the animals until they recovered enough to be released back into the wild.

The site also heard that the community of Arthur's Creek was in desperate need of tools to assist in their clearing up efforts. From funds raised, the site was prepared to make a large purchase before DBF Tools stepped in and offered to match Leighton dollar for dollar. Thousands of dollars of equipment was subsequently donated to the CFA for distribution amongst those who needed it.

Mick Huxtable heard from his son, Brett, that help was needed for people in Pheasant Creek who had lost their essential stock fences. Mick organised fencing, posts, gloves and wire through their regular supplier, Brian Duggan at Cascade and Ray, Mick, Brett and Joan delivered it the next day.

On another occasion, Mick was talking to the children at the local primary school in Arthur's Creek who were worried about the homeless and injured possums and birds that had taken up residence in the school roof. The team asked how it could help and the principal of the school showed them some possum boxes and bird houses that had survived the fire. Mick spoke with Alan Bobbera who asked Phil Prime from Lime Contractors, if he could help. Phil quietly set to work and presented the school with 12 possum boxes and 8 bird houses to keep the injured wildlife from further harm.



On top of all the practical assistance, there were cash donations rolling in with the amount raised by site staff being around \$13,000.

Most importantly, the Deer Park Bypass team has pledged its on-going support to the bushfire victims. Understanding that over time there will be other causes or charities which capture the public attention, the site team's individuals are staying in touch with those they've helped, ensuring that there is continuity of friendship and trust as those affected seek to rebuild their lives.

Most recently, the principal of Flowerdale Primary School, which was lost in the fire, contacted the team, seeking its assistance. The school had planned an outing for the children and decided on a performance of the musical *Wicked*. Lacking the finances, the principal asked for assistance and between Leighton and the generosity of Darley Stud, the cost was able to be shared, so 45 children and 15 adults are off to enjoy the show and continue on their path to recovery.

Mick and Joan acknowledge that there will be so much more assistance needed as the communities struggle to recover and rebuild and so they continue to stretch the remaining funds and generate more to ensure that as problems arise, this committed team is able to help.

They would particularly like to highlight the outstanding efforts of the foremen who were seconded to the clean up company - Trudi Magill, Mick Griffin, Chris Hope and John Watson - whose extraordinary commitment had such a significant impact on so many people - and to Ray Wall and Gary Briggs for their full support and encouragement of the entire team's efforts.

The ruins of a community hall in Calignee are a reminder of the horrific events of Black Saturday. The community has vowed to rebuild and reclaim their lives, paying tribute to those who perished. The chimney is being dismantled brick by brick, with each brick numbered before it is restored to its place in the chimney to stand strong and proud as a testament to the enduring human spirit.

The Deer Park Bypass team members should also stand proud for the dedication they have shown to community and family.