

Black Saturday Fires: Then and Now

The Rotary Club of Whittlesea

The morning of Black Saturday saw the Whittlesea Rotarians assembling at the Whittlesea Showgrounds, ready to man the gates and park the cars at the Whittlesea Country Music Festival, as we do every year. But this year was not going to be like any other year. This was going to be a time of such horror, it would change our lives forever.

As the morning wore on, watching the progression of the fire towards us and listening to constant updates from the CFA, we realized the seriousness of the situation. Some members left to fight for their own homes and some to evacuate their families. Some stayed because they couldn't go home, and were left wondering if they still had a home. Early Saturday night, the stories were flooding in, indicating just how disastrous the situation really was. As the Whittlesea Country Music committee members were leaving the Showgrounds after evacuating their patrons, the CFA were moving in to set up a huge staging area. A small mercy was that the WCMF already had in place many of the things the CFA would need, such as portable showers, toilets, marquees and a vast amount of prepared food. This made the set-up of the staging area a wee bit easier.

By Sunday morning members of our Club and their partners were in at the Emergency Response Centre, which was set up at lightning speed at the Activity Centre and both the tennis and cricket clubs in Whittlesea. As more and more affected people came, most with nothing more than they were standing in, the extreme need for traffic control was evident and so taken over by Rotarians, ably assisted by others from the community. For many, these were the first faces seen after their ordeals. The need for patience and understanding was quickly recognized, even when fire survivors saw someone they knew and rushed over for hugs, leaving their cars in the middle of the hugely busy gate! Other Rotarians were inside sorting clothes, assisting fire survivors with the gathering of basic necessities and listening to the horror stories of the many, many traumatized people who needed to talk. Other members were helping out with the catering for emergency relief staff and for volunteers, as well as fire survivors. Still others were running up and down the mountain to Kinglake and Flowerdale, taking food, water, generators, boots and indeed, whatever else was needed. Our Ambassadorial Scholar was working with members of the Shelterbox Committee and was delivering Shelterboxes to people on their burnt-out properties, some of these people having only their cars to sleep in before the arrival of Rotary staff with the boxes. Yet another member, assisted by fellow Rotarians, was working very closely with one of our local primary schools, sorting donations that had literally arrived by the container load. Our Rotarian pharmacist was working round the clock to see to medical requirements.

It was a huge effort from everyone in our community and beyond, among them Rotarians, with people working up to 14 hour days, seven days a week for a protracted period of time. While there was a need, whatever the time, people were there to assist in whatever way they could. (The end of April, saw some of our members still working six or seven days a week at the Relief Centres.) The Rotary Club of Whittlesea members had a quiet but strong presence during a time of dreadful grief and loss, of total bewilderment and numbing horror.

Eight months down the track the work is continuing and our Club is still heavily involved in the rebuilding after the fires. One team is cutting and delivering firewood up to Kinglake. Another team has been working with Freedom Relief in an outreach program, taking supplies to the remote areas of Clonbinane, Strath Creek and Wandong, as well as Kinglake. Other members continued to help run the Material Aid Centres in Whittlesea

and Wallan. One member is still working two days a week at Wallan and is on call for other projects. We have recently set up a book exchange in the hub in Whittlesea and are helping to replace the family libraries with books such as cook books, gardening books, dictionaries and atlases. Recently we have added house and garden magazines. We are also facilitating book collections from outside sources and have assisted our local churches with books and games for children for their drop-in centre for fire-survivors. We are proposing to supply fruit trees to those moving back into their new homes. We have been able to help a family repair the shed where they are living, making it water-proof and ensuring a water supply by repairing downpipes. Our Club arranged, with much-appreciated funding from District 9790, to supply three new chainsaws to the local CFA, replacing chainsaws that expired with continued use. The Rotary Club Whittlesea is providing the funding for a new piece of communication equipment for our local CFA.

Our Rotary Club has been a conduit for other Rotary Clubs, organizations, businesses and individuals. Donations included Janome sewing machines, wheelbarrows and new underwear. You can imagine how welcome the underwear was in the first days! These items were delivered to our Material Aid Centres or delivered personally to fire survivors. It also included donations of large sums of money. One of our members quickly found a needy family for the caravan donated by an interstate couple, and stocked by a Rotary Club enroute.

Our then President, met with many other Rotary Clubs and organizations, trying to assess needs and provide support. He continues to be a member of the local Reference Committee set up to provide ongoing support for fire-survivors in the longer term. Their latest project was setting up a small village in Whittlesea, temporary housing for those displaced. Our Club has been entrusted with money from all over Australia, including from other Rotary Clubs, and we are taking very seriously the responsibility of ensuring it gets to those who are truly in need. Some of our donations came from overseas.

Black Saturday has left its mark on all of us. The loss of a much-loved, former member and his family deeply impacted us all. Many of us lost friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances. Many had friends who lost parents or children. Not to mention those who lost houses and businesses. But in the midst of all this suffering, wonderful things happened. Ordinary, everyday people stood up (and continue to stand up) and did truly amazing things. In a hugely emotional, chaotic situation, where no-one seemed to be in control, these people saw what needed doing and just did it. And the unbelievable generosity of people and businesses and other Rotary Clubs was a joy to see. Almost everything anyone could possibly need was provided. By Sunday, we had clothes avalanching off the tables, fully set up kitchens, generators, portable cool-rooms, access to medical supplies and much, much more.

The generosity continues to this day, but the needs are changing as time progresses. The members of the Rotary Club of Whittlesea know this is far from finished and will continue to take on tasks and projects to assist our fire survivors. Our Club is especially keen to find those who are slipping between the cracks and ensure they get a fair go, too. We are aware that we need to be quite pro-active in finding these people as many are not coming forward themselves for a variety of reasons.

Our Club would like to take this opportunity to thank our District 9790 for all its support, and to thank all the Rotarians and Clubs across Australia that rang to offer their support and much needed donations. In times such as these, it really hits home how special it is to be a member of such an amazing organization as Rotary International. Together we can and do make a difference and with the help of many, we will continue to rebuild our community.