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FIRESTORM

Interview with bushfire victims

“It was a pretty horrific time, it was like trains coming, the noise and just the black smoke. It just goes completely black, you can't see your hand in front of your face when that first initial front of fire hits.”

“It really happened, it wasn't a nightmare or a dream. I thought that you close your eyes and go to sleep and wake up the next day and everything would be normal again but it doesn't happen like that.”

“Our house was totally wiped out, lost everything that we possess.”

“We so relate to the burnt cars because that's how Judy and the children died.”

“You look at all the things you worked for, virtually gone.”

“For us the thing was what else has happened, who else has lost their home and you couldn't find out.”

“It's all black and clouds of smoke boiling and she said is this going to be the end of the world?”

“You can't understand how it takes one and leaves one.”

“The physical things can be replaced, the mental scars are still with me.”

“And four years later if you meet someone the fire is still something you talk about.”

“These fires will happen again. It's not a matter of if, but when.”

Announcer: These days it seems that every summer will bring devastating fires to somewhere in Australia. For those of us who watch on from a distance, the stories of those who have lost property, livelihoods and lives burn lasting images into our memories and hearts. But what about the people who experienced the loss first hand. Today you'll hear stories from people who have lived through a major fire event. Those who fought the fire, lost homes and property and worst of all lost friends or family members, will share what they experienced the day the fires hit and how they've coped years down the track. Can you recover from events like these and look forward with confidence? Our guests begin by talking about their feelings and memories from the day of their fire disaster.

“Sheer panic because you don't know what's going on back here. My concern wasn't for the house, the house was the least of my concern, that can be replaced. My concern was for my husband who I left behind.”

“The worst part of it was we lost our identity. After we came to our senses and understood what had happened, the wife and I didn't really know who we were because we had no identity, we had nothing, not a thing. All we had was what we stood up in.”

“I heard a voice in my mind and it said don't look back. I straight away remembered the story of Lot and his wife and two daughters and the angel said don't look back when Sodom and

Gomorrah were being burnt. I really heeded that, I thought if I look back I could panic, I could stall the car and be stuck here. I'd be in the road and someone else's life might get lost."

"On the black Tuesday one of my workers actually pranged the fire unit on the fence line and the fire was on him. We had to pick him up and there's so much fire and smoke around that you have a lot of difficulty seeing. He rang me on the phone to tell me he was in trouble and I told him that I'll be coming down the fence line and to stand away from the fence because he wouldn't be able to see me and I'd run him over. I was sounding the horn on the car as I was driving along and I said you'd be able to hear me as I go past. I actually drove straight past him. He would have been less than five metres away from me and he couldn't hear me because of the roar of the fire coming in. These big fires are actually a rolling front of just embers flying through the air that hit anything and they light up any exposed wood. They just light up particularly when you've got a wind. The wind is the killer."

"I can remember the amber light and it was really eerie. Then once it went over you came outside and you just couldn't believe it was like a nuclear bomb had gone off. There was smoke coming out from all sorts of things and debris everywhere and it just didn't look like the same place. It looked like somewhere else in another country."

"The next morning we had family turn up, and to have family turn up first thing the next morning and the hugs and the tears; it just allowed you to let out a lot of emotion. You need to be able to talk about it."

Announcer: What are some of the struggles you face in the months after the fires and were there any surprises?

"The real world, outside of that event, keeps rolling on. It doesn't slow down and give you a chance to catch up. So that's still boiling along like it is and it's difficult knowing what you've got to do because all of a sudden it's ten times more than what you'd normally be doing but you've got to do it."

"Because of losing family members I became really quite ill. I actually moved into depression, panic attacks, fear. I couldn't even cope with mail. It takes your energy in the most terrible way. I thank God for all my friends who kept tabs on me so well. It actually kept my heart going."

"From a faith point of view, the why question rears its head. There's no real answer but the hope that our saviour gives us, we know that irrespective of if we lose our possessions he is always there. That hope, that security has certainly helped us to pull through the terrible events."

"I mean we had some funny times in all of the situations. The morning our cattle got trucked out we got up about half past four because the truck was going to be there at six o'clock. We had Angus cows which are black and we got them in. Kevin gave David and I a pair of shears and said dock their tails. I went what does that mean? We couldn't see and we were in the cattle yards and he said just grab their tails and cut their tails straight. Well it was dark, black cows, there was ash everywhere. I was laughing, I was crying. Cursing because I just couldn't do this. When daylight came and we loaded the cattle my face was black and all I had were these marks where I'd been crying and laughing so much. So amid the tragedy and the devastation there were some times with my family and my boss that I'll never forget."

"I suppose what happens is you sort of go through this rebuilding stage and we put our crops in and you're busy about what you're doing but you really don't know what's going on inside of you because you are busy outside of you. We put some crops in and hit about October and we had beautiful crops. The season was very favourable for us after a bushfire. It was amazing how we went from black to some quite nice crops. I couldn't get why I didn't feel

right. We had these nice crops and everything, and I was still hollow. There was just nothing there and if anything went wrong on the property I tended to get angry and that sort of thing. Then we'd go out and if I bumped into someone that I hadn't seen for awhile and they started talking about the fire I'd get quite a bit of anxiety and break out into a sweat. It's important that if you have any symptoms like that, see a doctor. Don't let it destroy you or your family."

Announcer: In any tragedy there's the initial shock when you're almost in a daze. Then there's dealing with the immediate necessities and picking up the pieces. Our guests go on to share about their physical recovery and emotional healing.

"You've lost who you are. Everything that you are is in your home. Your home is you. Your books, your pictures, your photographs, all your family history, it's all gone. There's just nothing left. It doesn't matter whether you've got a lot of possessions or very few. Even the shirt I'm wearing now, someone has worn it before me. It's still a donation from the recovery. I've got a cupboard full of donated clothes. I don't even think of it now anymore as donated clothes and belonging to someone else. Now it's part of who I am, part of my new identity."

"I still have trouble driving out and up the main road. I made a comment to Kevin a few weeks ago saying I hate that trip. All you see is black sticks. He said I don't see them, he said I see the green bush underneath. That really made me stop and think. You can't look at what was but look at what's coming."

"They did a lot of studies within the fire ground. They were worried that things wouldn't grow back because of the heat and the grade of fire that it was. But the trees have come back and the natives have come back and we found Pygmy Possums which were fairly rare over there. So it's amazing how nature looks after itself, it's got a process of rebuilding itself. Just like the land has got to heal, the human spirit has got to heal."

"I could be so bitter and angry about everything that's happened but I've had to learn that it doesn't do you any good. You've got to look forward; you've got to go forward. Go forward with love, not with hate."

"You can have a grieving period but don't base your life on grief. If you stay bitter it will drag you down."

"I know suicide was mentioned a number of times in our family because the loss was really too difficult to bear. But for me, because I was anchored to God, you come to the end of that and think where else am I going to go? There is nowhere else. He hangs onto you; it's not the other way around. I guess I wasn't angry at God; I was wounded when the children had died. I think I learnt a number of things out of the Bible. One that came to mind was the scripture when King David had lost his little son. He'd actually fasted and prayed such a lot and then the boy died. He said he cannot come back to me but I can go to him. That was a really healing thing for me because I realized that my grandchildren were fine. The struggle was left behind for us to try and get through and we are and we will."

Announcer: What would you say to others who have, or will experience a tragedy like this in the future?

"One of the difficult things for me being an independent farmer was accepting help. It was a very humbling experience and we were very, very, very grateful for the volunteers that came. Accept them and be very thankful that they are there."

"It mightn't look very good at this time but be as positive as you can. You'll come through the other end. We've come from a small community, you stick together as your community and share your good times and your bad and you'll be ok."

“You might not rebuild what you've lost but you will get there.”

“Don't at any time ever say 'time you get on with it, get over it' because that really hurts. Unless you've been through it don't ever say that. The past will haunt you for I don't know how long. Ours is four years behind us. It still haunts us and I don't think there's any shame in looking back. It will be natural but then again you must look forward as much as you can. Try and establish your new life wherever it may be.”

“The thing they've taught me is to stop and have a look at things every day. The old cliché of smelling the roses. Just really look at something and learn to appreciate it. Whether it's a rose, a flower, a bird or the sun that comes up. Everything becomes really important. It's absolutely beautiful and you look at life differently.”

“I think it's also important to take time off and reflect. It was very easy to just work but it's important to catch your breath. Don't wear yourself to a frazzle. It's important to keep body, mind and soul healthy.”

“It's like the old biblical scripture that Paul said. 'I look not back at what's behind but I go on forward'. That's been in my mind a lot. Every time I find myself going backwards I go downhill. I become depressed, teary and emotional. Then I think of that little scripture, regardless of whether you're Christian or non-Christian, and try and turn around and think no, I'm going ahead. I've got to keep going forward. You can allow yourself to go back but don't stay too long and don't linger.”

“The physical things can be replaced, the mental scars are still with me but they do heal. Don't try and do it all this week. Pace yourself and set realistic goals. There is life after a fire.”