

A blue-tinted photograph of a tree on a beach. The tree's branches and leaves are silhouetted against the bright blue sky and ocean. The foreground shows the sandy beach with some rocks. The text 'RESILIENCE journal' is overlaid in the center. 'RESILIENCE' is in a white, all-caps, serif font, and 'journal' is in a white, lowercase, cursive font.

RESILIENCE
journal

We would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land. We pay our respects to the ancestors that walked and managed these lands for many generations before us.

We acknowledge and recognise all Aboriginal people who have come from their own Country, who have now come to call this Country home. We acknowledge our elders—knowledge holders, teachers and pioneers.

We acknowledge our youth—our hope for a brighter and stronger future, and our future leaders.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to our members who have gone before us, and recognise their contribution to our people and community.

Thank you to the communities who were affected by the 2019/2020 bushfires, who were involved in the making of this journal.

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How to use this book

Let's face it, most of us know what to do to be well—the problem is, there's often a gap between knowing and doing.

Throughout the Resilience Journal, you'll find useful information, personal stories, practical tips and worksheets for you to help close the gap between knowing how to be well, and doing something about it.

You can read this journal from cover to cover, or just pick it up and open it randomly. We've tried to make sure every page has something to teach, inspire and (most importantly) do—it's a hands-on book!

The worksheets throughout this journal are also available to download from www.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/resilience, so you can use them over and over again.



Australian Government

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Inside

- 4 Introduction
- 5 Taking care of your mental health after a disaster
- 6 Mental health services directory

Self-Care

- 10 Self-care assessment
- 12 Set your intentions
- 13 Wellness Map
- 14 **My story:** Danielle Captain-Webb
- 16 Habits to help wellbeing
- 18 Practising gratitude
- 20 **Profile:** Greg Smith, Men Care Too
- 22 Move ... but rest, too
- 24 How do I move? How do I rest?
- 26 **My story:** Tony Garland
- 28 You think, therefore you are
- 29 Reflection Map
- 30 Journal pages

Together

- 38 Why connection is good for you
- 40 **Profile:** River Cares Incorporated
- 42 What is creative recovery?
- 44 **My story:** Bob Barton
- 46 Building community resilience
- 47 How to create a phone tree
- 48 Phone tree template
- 50 **My story:** Alison Wade
- 52 **Profile:** Shane Eastman-Wheeler, The Hub of Mangrove Mountain
- 54 Keeping connected
- 56 **Profile:** Cool Connections
- 60 **My story:** Carly Pal
- 62 A community in control
- 64 Through their eyes
- 67 First person: Leanne Dallimore

In case of emergency

- 72 Emergency survival plan: Our plan to leave
- 74 Emergency survival plan: Our home and what to take



Cover: *Wind Shapes Tree*, acrylic on canvas
By Boyd McMillan @boydmcmillanartwork

Introduction

Is it just me, or does 'the year that shall not be named' feel like a strange, surreal memory rather than the deep existential crisis it was when we were smack, bang in the middle of it?

I mean, seriously, the weather has picked up, we are (dare I say it) allowed to cuddle other people, and it's almost like we're about to hit the credits on a B-grade, dystopian teen sci-fi movie.

But the memory of it lingers in a way that makes me extremely nervous about dipping my toes in the waters of hope that is 2021. I can't help but feel a little cynical, a little gun-shy. After all, I know what it's like to get caught up in the 'magical thinking' of, "this is going to be THE YEAR! This is when it is all going to come together!" only to be rudely awakened by the harsh reality that everything has been ripped apart.

But the simple truth is that, one way or another, we did come through this. Granted, some were more battered and bruised than others. And let's be honest, sometimes our survival was as mundane as putting one foot in front of the other. But irrespective of how we dealt with 2020, we survived. And I'm here to tell you that this is something worth celebrating, something worth

honouring. Because even if we didn't realise it at the time, we drew on something very powerful (inner resources, external supports) to get through. And by simply being aware of them, we acknowledge that those resources and supports exist, and we can draw on them again in the future.

Perhaps there is hope in the fact that 2021 doesn't need to be the bee's knees, the dog's bollocks, the duck's nuts or even the Jatz crackers!

Perhaps 2021 is our opportunity to process the grief, the loss, the shock. Perhaps it is our opportunity to reflect on what just happened, take things one day at a time and bring things back into alignment.

I used to think that resilience was about just banging my head against the wall until something breaks ... usually me. But then I realised that it was actually about

People,
purpose,
place

having the energy—the will—to keep going and prepare myself for future challenges. I used to think it was the 'big' stuff that affects us the most. But then I realised it's actually the small stuff that moulds us into the people we truly are: a great result at work, an absorbing conversation, a game with the kids, that feeling of being connected to people, purpose and place.

You see, whilst big moments provide the catalyst for change, it is what we do every day that brings about lasting change ... and that's because real change takes time. So, I can't help but think that if there is anything about 2021 that does bring me hope, it's a return to valuing the small stuff—not 'sweating' it, but making it much more rewarding, much more often. And this is where I turn to Dr Adam Fraser's concept of The Third Space (that transitional moment between one activity/

experience and the next) where we focus on Resting, Reflecting and Resetting to mentally 'show up' for whatever is around the corner.

And that's where this journal can be incredibly helpful, with its guidance on how to look after ourselves and draw on our inner resources, with its opportunity to connect with the stories of others, and with its overarching message that we live in a community that cares, a community that shares and a community that recovers together. And whilst I am still only cautiously hopeful, I take comfort in that fact that I remain hopeful, nonetheless.

Dr Monty Badami



Dr Monty Badami is an Anthropologist and the Founder of Habitus, a social enterprise that gives you lifehacks to be a good human!

Taking care of your mental health after a disaster

Following a disaster or traumatic event, it's normal not to feel like your usual self.

It's important to take care of your mental health immediately after a disaster (such as bush fires, floods, storms and pandemics), and be aware of the signs to seek further support if needed. Distress, grief and emotional upheaval is common. Reactions can include:

- Sadness, fear and anger
- Sleep disturbance
- Increased anxiety
- Change in appetite
- Feelings of guilt

These will often resolve over the weeks and months following the event, as you come to terms with your experience. During this time it's important to seek support from your family, friends and workplace, and to take care of yourself physically, mentally and emotionally. This could look like:

- taking some time out (but try not to isolate yourself)
- spending time with loved ones
- journaling and meditation
- maintaining a health routine including exercise and eating well.

Be gentle on yourself—remember, it's OK if you need some time to readjust. However, you may need to seek professional help if you experience any of the following:

While most of us manage to recover well following a disaster, some will need help to get back on track.

- Recurrent dreams or nightmares
- Flashbacks/intrusive memories
- Persistent low mood
- Avoiding people, places, activities or objects
- Increased emotional distress
- Feeling on edge and alert to danger (hypervigilance)
- Irritability and/or aggression
- Exacerbation of a pre-existing mental illness
- Increased substance use
- Insomnia or sleep disturbance
- Problems concentrating
- Distress if reminded of the event
- Suicidal thoughts
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness

If these signs persist or impact your ability to function on a daily basis you should speak with your health care provider or mental health team for additional support. It is particularly important to seek professional help if you begin to experience thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Mental health services directory

Cut out this page to stick on the fridge, or download an extra copy at www.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/resilience

Face-to-face counselling and psychological services

Lifeline Central Coast:

Access free face-to-face counselling and support. For more information phone 4320 7400 or visit www.lifelinedirect.org.au

Central Coast Primary Care:

Access a range of local mental health and psychological support including 10 free sessions without needing to see a GP or having a Mental Health care plan. For more information phone 4365 2294 or visit www.ccpc.com.au

Telephone support services

NSW Mental Health Line:

1800 011 511 (24/7)

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (24/7)

LifeLine: 13 11 14 (24/7)

LifeLine Bushfire Recovery:

13 43 57 (24/7)

Suicide Callback Service:

1300 659 467 (24/7)

Health Direct: 1800 022 222 (24/7)

If you are concerned about your own or someone else's mental health contact the NSW Mental Health Line on 1800 011 511.

If an emergency response is required, call 000 or go to your nearest emergency department.

Your General Practitioner

Speak to your GP about accessing a psychologist or counsellor via the Better Access to Mental Health program (up to 10 sessions per year with a qualified mental health specialist subsidised via Medicare). Your GP can also refer you to other specialist mental health practitioners and services including a psychiatrist if needed.

Online counselling and information

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Digital tools & Apps, fact sheets and an online clinic.

www.headtohealth.gov.au

A range of support options and information including recovery-specific and COVID19 support.

www.beyondblue.org.au

Support information, online forums and online chat support.

www.lifeline.org.au

Information on disaster recovery, Bushfire recovery program and mental health support.

Produced by the CCLHD Mental Health Disaster and Adversity Response Team

“It is not the strongest
of the species that
survives, nor the most
intelligent that survives.
It is the one that is most
adaptable to change.”

Charles Darwin, 1859



Self Care

(is not a dirty word)

The art of self-care is not a wishy-washy, feel-good thing (although it does feel good).

It's simply taking time to do things that maintain good health and improve wellbeing ... and you'll find that many of these things are already part of your normal routine.

Throughout this journal we'll share some simple (and best of all, free) ways you can practise self-care, starting with the self-care assessment over the page.

Self-care assessment

The goal of this assessment is to help you learn about your self-care needs by spotting patterns and recognising areas of your life that need more attention.

Track your progress: Try completing this assessment using one colour, then in a few weeks fill it out again using a different colour so you can see how things are changing over time. Use the progress tracker at the bottom to record the colours and dates. You can re-take this assessment as often as you like. Download additional copies at www.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/resilience

There are no right or wrong answers on this assessment. The list of activities is not comprehensive but serves as a starting point for thinking about your self-care needs.

Circle the number that best represents how often you perform self-care activities:

1: Rarely or not at all

2: Sometimes

3: Often

4: I'd like to do this more often

Physical self-care	1	2	3	4	Eat healthy foods
	1	2	3	4	Take care of personal hygiene
	1	2	3	4	Exercise
	1	2	3	4	Wear clothes that help me feel good about myself
	1	2	3	4	Eat regularly
	1	2	3	4	Participate in fun activities
	1	2	3	4	Get enough sleep
	1	2	3	4	Go to preventive medical appointments
	1	2	3	4	Rest when sick
	1	2	3	4	Overall physical self-care

Lifestyle self-care	1	2	3	4	Spend time in nature
	1	2	3	4	Meditate
	1	2	3	4	Recognise the things that give meaning to my life
	1	2	3	4	Act in accordance to my morals and values
	1	2	3	4	Set aside time for thought and reflection
	1	2	3	4	Participate in a cause that is important to me
	1	2	3	4	Appreciate art that is impactful to me
	1	2	3	4	Overall lifestyle self-care

Psychological or emotional self-care	1	2	3	4	Take time off work, school or other obligations
	1	2	3	4	Participate in hobbies
	1	2	3	4	Get away from distractions
	1	2	3	4	Learn new things, unrelated to work or school
	1	2	3	4	Express my feelings in a healthy way
	1	2	3	4	Recognise my own strengths and weaknesses
	1	2	3	4	Go on vacations or daytrips
	1	2	3	4	Do something comforting
	1	2	3	4	Find reasons to laugh
	1	2	3	4	Talk about my problems
1	2	3	4	Overall psychological or emotional self-care	

Social self-care	1	2	3	4	Spend time with people who I like
	1	2	3	4	Call or write to friends/family who are far away
	1	2	3	4	Have stimulating conversations
	1	2	3	4	Meet new people
	1	2	3	4	Spend time alone with my romantic partner
	1	2	3	4	Ask others for help - when needed
	1	2	3	4	Do enjoyable activities with other people
	1	2	3	4	Have intimate time with my romantic partner
	1	2	3	4	Keep in touch with old friends
	1	2	3	4	Overall social self-care

Progress tracker

Date _____	Colour <input type="checkbox"/>	Date _____	Colour <input type="checkbox"/>
Date _____	Colour <input type="checkbox"/>	Date _____	Colour <input type="checkbox"/>

Set your intentions ... and Just Do It

Most of us think motivation is a feeling of 'wanting to act' that suddenly, magically materialises. But here's the thing: motivation is not a feeling! It's an action.

Human beings are hard-wired to avoid suffering. Research suggests that it only takes five seconds of hesitation from the moment we think of doing the 'thing', for our body to send a signal to the brain that the 'thing' is going to be hard.

That same hesitation allows us time to think of excuses avoid hard things—giving ourselves permission to NOT do them.

Here's a trick borrowed from Mel Robbins, from her book *The 5 second Rule*: as soon as you think of acting on an intention, count backwards, '5, 4, 3, 2, 1' and then (to borrow a phrase from a certain brand of sportswear) Just Do It!

Setting intentions/goals

Now you've got a way to 'avoid avoidance', it's time to actively set some intentions. Use the 'wellness map' on the right, grouping your intentions under each heading, following the SMARTS formula:

Specific: What exactly do I want to achieve? where, when, how, with whom?

Measurable: Identify what exactly you will achieve, for example being happier is not measurable. But itemising the things that make you happier is.

Achievable: Think about how to accomplish a goal and if you have the skills needed.

Realistic: Keep things simple and make sure goals are within reach

Time-limited: Put a specific time frame on reaching your goals.

Stated in the positive: Often people talk about what they don't want, instead of what they do want. Keep your goals positive!

And remember: there's no such thing as perfection! You'll have good days and bad days. No matter how perfect we aspire to be, it's not realistic. Go for 'good enough' and remember that this is a practice.

Wellness Map

Use this template to set your intentions/goals for specific areas of self-care. Use the SMARTS formula to help.

My intentions/goals for TODAY:

Overall:

For physical:

For psychological/emotional:

For lifestyle:

For social:

Something I'm grateful for TODAY:

My story: Danielle Captain-Webb

Community member

In December 2019 the Three Mile fire swept through the Central Coast and had a significant impact on the Mangrove Mountain district and on me personally.

Once the fire actually hit us, it sounded quite dangerous. It sounded loud and painful. Painful for Mother Earth. Painful for Country. The screaming sounds from Mother Earth, from nature, from not only the trees but from wildlife that were injured as well.

I remember quite significantly—and this is something that has impacted me—on that night of the bushfires an animal was screaming out because it was being impacted by the fire. This was really horrible.

Our property was in the middle of the fires and surrounded on three sides, all around the main road. We had set up hoses around the property. We pretty much had the hoses running all night. There were points in time when my father was on the tractor putting

our spot fires that had popped up where the hoses couldn't reach.

The smell of the smoke was overbearing. I remember when we were fighting the fire we had masks on to cover our faces, but it was so intense that you could breathe better without the mask on. Not that you could really breathe at all to be honest. It was very overwhelming. The fire itself, it's nothing that I have ever seen.

It was a big decision to stay and fight the fire. But I think when you have a piece of land that you love and care for so much and you know it means so much to you and your family. I think in that point in time you don't really question whether you are staying or not. It's more, this is what I have to do and this is what I am going to do.

I don't think that it is something that you can describe to people to allow them to actually understand without them being there and witnessing it themselves. The only way I could explain it was to have hundreds of thousands of shooting stars going over you at one time. That is what it was like with the embers of the fire.



I have a deep connection to Country, to look after Mother Earth.

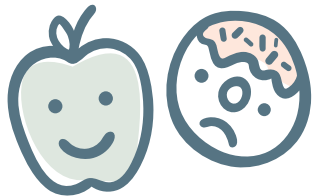
You don't actually realise how serious and deathly these bushfires can be until you are in the moment. When the fire came up the ridge line, the fire literally came around us within a matter of seconds.

Country is my being. For me, making sure Country is treated in the right way and looked after accordingly is very important.

I'm an Aboriginal woman, a Wiradjuri and Gomeroi woman. I've lived on Darkinjung Country my whole life. I have a deep connection to Country, to look after Mother Earth. Especially given that I've lived on Darkinjung Country my whole life. I am a mother of four and I'm a lawyer and Mangrove Mountain is my home. It's where I belong.

Habits to help wellbeing

Our lifestyle habits impact our wellbeing—how we feel, how we heal and process our feelings. Healthy habits like sleeping well or simply getting outside are simple, effective, and best of all—free!



Food affects mood

Chemicals in the brain such as serotonin and dopamine send messages around our body which influence how we think, feel and behave. What we eat affects the levels of these chemicals. To maintain a healthy balance, a general rule of thumb is to increase your fruit and veggie consumption, reduce your carbohydrates, eat high quality protein and drink plenty of water.



Have a good cry

Bottling up emotions can lead to unhealthy ways of coping. Crying is just the physical process of responding to emotions and releasing them—so let it all out.



Just ... breathe

Sounds simple, right? We do it all the time just to stay alive, but how does it impact wellbeing? When we're stressed, we often hold our breath—creating tension and stopping the flow of oxygen around the body. Noticing when we do this and telling ourselves to 'just breathe' helps us re-set, allowing oxygen to flow to our brain, so we can figure out why we're stressed in the first place.

Try it now: Take three deep breaths and focus on the physical sensations in your body as you breathe—the gentle rise and fall of your chest and belly, and the sound of your breath. Write down what you noticed during your breaths, and how you felt.



Go on—smile

Even if you don't feel like it, smile. Studies show that even fake smiles can help decrease stress.

Try it now: Look at yourself in the mirror and do the biggest, cheesiest smile you can. How do you feel? At first you may feel awkward and wonder 'WHAT am I doing?' (which is perfectly normal!) But chances are you'll end up really smiling at yourself—and perhaps even having a laugh!



Get some fresh air

Time spent outdoors in nature recharges and invigorates us. Try bushwalking, gardening or strolling around the block. Even just sitting in the sun for 10 minutes will give the body a hit of Vitamin D—which helps regulate calcium and phosphate, essential for keeping bones, teeth, muscles and the immune system healthy.

Tips for a tops sleep

A good sleep-wake routine is one of the most important strategies for sleeping (and feeling) better.

Unhealthy daytime habits can lead to poor sleep, taking a serious toll on productivity, mood, and even weight. If your sleep could be better, here are some things to try:

- Practise going to bed and getting up at the same time every day.
- Turn off devices 1 hour before bed (the blue light emitted by devices blocks the 'sleep' hormone melatonin). When you get up, expose yourself to sunlight as soon as you can.
- Exercise during the day—studies show it can improve both the amount and quality of sleep.
- Limit caffeine, alcohol and large, heavy meals before bed.
- Follow the same sleep routine every night, as this acts as a cue to the body that it's time to sleep. Make sure your bedroom is dark and comfortable, and reserve it for sleep—keep the TV and gadgets out of the room.
- Practise meditation or relaxation exercises before bed, giving yourself time to mentally process the day before you lie down.



Practising gratitude

Studies have shown that people who actively practise gratitude are more likely to view challenges with optimism. Recognising what you can be grateful for and then sharing that with others makes the effects go even further.

Three things I'm grateful for **today**:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Three ways I can share my gratitude with someone else:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Try writing a 'gratitude letter' to someone, based on the below format:

Dear: _____

I've been thinking about the time you ... _____

I'm thankful for what you did because ... _____

What you did helped me by ... _____

What you did helped me by ... _____

I think about you when ... _____

From, your friend: _____

Letter template based on greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain. Download additional copies at www.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/resilience

Profile: Greg Smith Men Care Too



During my late teens and early 20s, a continual run of challenges within our family meant that life was never smooth sailing.

A rare cancer diagnosis with a grim outlook, multiple mental health diagnoses, surgeries and hospital stays—it seemed like another challenge was always just around the corner.

At the time, I didn't know how to talk with mates or anyone else in my life about how things within the family were affecting me and so, like many other young men dealing with difficult life circumstances, I used alcohol, drugs and risky behaviour as a

way to cope and thereby avoiding the reality of what was going on.

Thinking about those years now, I believe I did what I could and helped out where I thought I was of use, however, at that point I didn't truly understand the things that were happening or how they were changing our family. Like many who live with constant challenges or continual change in their lives, the focus was on doing what needed to be done to get through day to day, week to week.

Whilst this period of my life was far from a happy one, I learned from these experiences that each challenge you face, no matter the outcome, makes you a stronger person. Resilience is something I believe is developed over time and becomes part of who we are. A belief and confidence in yourself to find a way no matter the situation.

A few years passed by and when my parents divorced I found myself as my mum's main support person, her full time carer. She lives with a degenerative spinal condition causing chronic pain

along with other ongoing health issues. Taking on this responsibility to be there for mum proved to be a turning point in my life because it slowed me down, shifted my priorities and opened my eyes to a whole different world.

Caring for a family member or friend who lives with an illness or disability is rewarding and significant but not without its emotional and mental challenges.

A few years back I started to recognise that physically and mentally I was not heading down a good path and the lack of social connections and purpose outside of caring for my mum was fuel on the fire to all these negative ways of thinking so I decided that things had to change.

Part of that change has been building purpose and connections in my life through volunteer work.

I have used my own experiences to develop Men Care Too—a grassroots initiative for other men who are in family caring roles.

Whilst this period of my life was far from a happy one, I learned from these experiences that each challenge you face, no matter the outcome, makes you a stronger person.

I have also become involved with national Men's Health initiatives Mr Perfect and The Man Walk that help me stay connected socially whilst also providing an opportunity for other men in the community to find or offer support and mateship to others.

Life is rarely smooth sailing and our world has changed a lot over the past 12 months. I've come to appreciate that whilst change may be uncomfortable or troubling, given time, we gain strength and resilience which are valuable tools used to adapt and find our way through difficult times.



www.mencaretoo.org
www.mrperfect.org.au
www.themanwalk.com.au

Move ...

Regular movement helps to protect against chronic disease, improves sleep, memory and brain function and helps to reduce feelings of anxiety and depression. If you're not the sort of person that loves getting up and active, here are some ideas just for you.



It's not 'all-or-nothing'

You don't need to spend hours at the gym or force yourself into monotonous or painful activities that you hate. A little exercise is better than nothing. Studies show that after 20 minutes of exercise, the brain starts releasing endorphins and dopamine (feel-good hormones). Start small—with a walk around the block, a HIIT workout or just dancing to the radio for 10 minutes, and build yourself up from there.



Be kind to yourself

Studies suggest self-compassion increases the likelihood that you will succeed in your fitness goals. Beating yourself up about your body or lack of fitness is demotivating. Also be mindful of what you say to yourself—your brain will come up with a multitude of excuses to prevent you from doing something that is perceived as hard. If you tell yourself "I hate exercise", or "I'm too busy", it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Be accountable

Enlist a friend to join you in an exercise regime, or get involved in a team sport where you have to turn up. Engage a personal trainer or ask a friend or loved one to hold you accountable.



Laugh out loud

As well as giving you a good core workout, did you know that laughing has a similar emotional impact to being hugged? Try it! One study addressing the benefits of humour, music, and aerobic exercise to combat anxiety among women indicated that the greatest effects of the other activities were experienced by women who also had a healthy sense of humour.



Think outside the square

Almost everyone can find something they enjoy that involves moving, like rollerblading, dancing, bushwalking, paddle-boarding, kayaking, martial arts or rock climbing to name just a few.

... but rest, too

Seeing opportunities to slow down during the day helps calm our nervous system.

When we are well-rested we can think more clearly, be more responsive to situations and be better able to access our intuition and creativity.

Some ways to intentionally rest:

- Meditation
- Caring for an indoor plant
- Soaking in the bath
- Having a massage or foot rub
- Wearing an eye mask while listening to music
- Cuddles with a pet
- Engaging in a quiet activity, like reading, fishing or knitting
- Looking at a beautiful photo in a book or magazine
- Journaling (not necessarily keeping a diary, but more free-form writing to release whatever is knocking about in our mind).



How do I move? How do I rest?

Use this template as a place to record what you do now, and what you'd like to be doing.

How often do I get outside during the week? _____

Is this more, less or about as much as I'd like? _____

How often is my time outside spent in nature? _____

Is this more, less or about as much as I'd like? _____

What sort of physical activities have I enjoyed doing **in the past**?

What sort of physical activities do I enjoy doing **now**?

Which **one** activity can I start (or resume) doing **now**?

What do I do in the hours before bed, to prepare for **sleep**?

What things could I do to **improve** this routine?

What things do I do **now**, to **rest** during the day?

What things can I **start** doing, to **rest** during the day?

My story: Tony Garland

Community volunteer

1994 was bad, but last year was something else.

I've got anxiety, depression, PTSD. For me, the bush is an escape. Growing up as a teenager I was out bush camping in caves and drinking out of streams and jumping in water holes.

I just love the bush. I wish I understood a bit more about it, but I definitely like looking after it. Whenever my son and I go bushwalking there's this particular butterfly and it follows us. To me, that's my Grandfather. The funny thing is we were up here doing a patrol when the Three Mile fire was threatening and that same butterfly landed on a log right beside us. To me that was my grandfather saying you are doing a good thing, you're doing what you are meant to be doing. I took a lot of pride out of that. My grandfather took his own life in 2000. He was special to me.

During the Gaspers Mountain fire I saw that the Wildlife Park needed help evacuating animals because the fire looked like it was coming over here. I've got 27

years' firefighting experience, so I volunteered to help prepare the site. I hit up a couple of mates who came up with me. We cleared around the exposures.

I've been through the 1994 bushfires, 2002, 2006—all those big fires. I've got plenty of experience that I can bring up here to help defend this area.

But it wasn't just me acting alone. We had an emergency plan should things go pear shaped—if the weather went wrong no one would be in here. So we had all these different contingency plans in place depending on temperatures and humidity and things like that.

My skill set is hazard reduction burns and dry firefighting. I just bought that up here so that they could defend it. I was actually one of the volunteer fire-fighters involved in burning the park just after the electric fences went in. We burned the whole park just before the animals came in. It's sort of part of my fire brigade history too if you like, its come full circle and I'm back here helping. I just like helping the community.



I just love the bush. I wish I understood a bit more about it, but I definitely like looking after it.

I spray paint my own ute with fire awareness murals. I joined the RFS in 1989 just after I got out of school and it's just been a passion. School visits, preschool kids and fire safety has just been a real passion for me. To the point when I'm pretty much spamming my

Facebook page with photos. Some that I took up here and then I turn them into fire safety memes. I did a lot of work up here but to me that's just me being me. I raised 10 grand for the Vinnies Bushfire appeal with my mates and another 10 for the family of a volunteer firefighter who was killed fighting the fires. Helping at the park and the two lots of \$10,000 I raised are my most proud moments.

You think, therefore you are

Every single thought creates a chemical reaction in the brain, which then triggers an emotion. How we engage with our thoughts determines how they affect us.

Research suggests we have between 70,000–100,000 thoughts a day, with 20% being conscious (that is, thoughts we are aware of). As we acknowledge our thoughts, a neural circuit is created that sends a signal to the body to react in a certain way. And as we keep thinking the same thoughts, a pattern of 'think–feel–do' encodes a blueprint onto our subconscious minds.

We then continue to follow that blueprint, resulting in the same thought patterns and experiences. Interestingly, around 95% of our total thoughts follow the same pattern over and over again.

Popping negative thought bubbles

Negative thoughts equal negative emotions. When you experience an intense emotion, there are few things you can ask yourself:

- What were you thinking that lead you to feel the way you do?
- How true was that thought? Is there any evidence?
- What is the worst that can happen, and how likely is it that the worst will happen?

And of course, like any other process, practice some self-compassion and kindness if you make a mistake.

Soothe yourself

There are numerous ways to self-soothe, but here's a list of one for each of the senses.

- 1 Touch:** Take a warm bubble bath, have a massage or a back or foot rub.
- 2 Taste:** Drink a cup of hot herbal tea or suck on a piece of hard candy.
- 3 Smell:** Light a scented candle or use an essential oil or reed diffuser.
- 4 Sight:** Watch comedy on TV, or lay down outside and watch the clouds.
- 5 Sound:** Listen to music or a relaxation/mindfulness app with headphones.



Reflection Map

Use this template to reflect on the intentions/goals you set using the Wellness Map.

My intentions/goals I've put into practice:

For physical:

For psychological/emotional:

For lifestyle:

For social:

What I'm doing well:


What I'd like to improve:

How I'm going to implement the changes:

“In a forest of a hundred
thousand trees, no two
leaves are alike. And no
two journeys along the
same path are alike.”

Paulo Coelho





“Invisible threads are
the strongest ties.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

We're all in this

Together

By definition, a community is a group of living things sharing a common environment, values, interests, or identity.

Communities can be geographical or virtual, organised or organic, passive or purposeful. In times of hardship, new communities can be forged within an existing one, from a shared need and a shared goal.

The following pages share some stories of the power of community, and how you can be a part of it.

Why connection is good for you

Being part of something larger than ourselves—through our families, friendships and other social groupings—is a key element of good mental and physical health and happiness.

Humans are, to a greater or lesser extent, social beings. We like to feel seen and to be valued for who we are and what we do.

It can be challenging to prioritise connection, especially in the context of a global pandemic that quite literally has forced us apart. Yet research consistently shows that maintaining stable relationships boosts our resilience, which is the ability to recover effectively from crisis, trauma and other significant setbacks. Our response to circumstances outside our control determines their long-term impact on our lives.

The courage to reach out

Social pressure is often exerted on people—especially men—to ‘soldier on’ alone through difficult times. But emotionally isolating ourselves is counterproductive, often leading to more distress in the long-term. Instead, drawing on existing networks such as family members, friends, colleagues and medical professionals can help us navigate hard times. Being honest about who we are and what we need is not always easy. But being vulnerable with other people

brings us closer together and deepens social connections.

Here on the Central Coast, there are plenty of opportunities to meet new people with shared interests through sport and hobby-related clubs and other social groups. Visit community organisations or head online for recommendations.

Even if you don’t have a lot of close social contacts, you can generate a sense of connection within yourself. Research shows that self-care activities like meditation, yoga and journaling yield some of the same health benefits as social interaction.

The same goes for chatting with neighbours, staff in shops and other people who cross your path every day. Simply sharing a smile can help you feel happy and connected to the people in your life. It costs nothing, but the rewards can be tremendous.

From the Iris Foundation, a grassroots charity aiming to reduce suicide risk on the Central Coast via facilitating and supporting awareness campaigns, programs and partnerships which enhance community connectedness and well-being. www.irisfoundation.org.au



SPEAK OUT!

How to communicate what you need

Ever assumed that people who know you well will automatically know how you’re feeling ... only to be met with the words, ‘I can’t read your mind’? If you want to tell someone how you feel but you’re unsure how to bring it up, try these:

- Spend time doing something active with the other person (not focussed exercising, but perhaps a leisurely walk or playing a game of cards)—just anything that

encourages you to participate together, without being focused on what you are trying to say.

- Spend some time alone journaling and reflecting on what you would like to speak to the other person about beforehand.
- Talk to a third party—someone neutral who can just listen without necessarily giving advice. This might be a helpline (see page 6 of this book).

2019/2020 posed some challenging times for our beautiful, remote and isolated communities—first the drought, next the fires, followed by storms, floods and now COVID-19.

Events like these can highlight the lack of communication, services and awareness of the needs of our communities from various service providers, and all levels of government. While many lessons have been learned, there are still more that continue to be.

But we also need to acknowledge that one of the reasons many of us choose to live these communities is for the remoteness and privacy. It's about finding the balance between safety and seclusion, so all of us, young and old, can enjoy our unique lifestyles hopefully well into our senior years!

In July 2020, a local group of like-minded people came together to form a new community group, River Cares Incorporated, whose focus is to improve community infrastructure, build resilience,

strengthen community cohesion and provide appropriate support to residents and visitors of the Lower Hawkesbury River District.

Creative recovery afternoon

We've had some great meetings—planning and prioritising what we think our community needs.

One successful initiative was a Creative Recovery afternoon—a simple get-together where participants created a piece of art which asked the question, 'Why Spencer?' River Cares worked with Central Coast Council and local artist and facilitator, GauriMa, to set up a space that welcomed members of the Spencer community to come together, have some afternoon tea and reflect on what they like about Spencer, and then put these thoughts to paper.

As well as providing a creative outlet, the afternoon gave people a chance to come out of our houses and connect after a year that has seen most of us more isolated than we'd like.

Using art as a medium of expression didn't mean people had to be artists—it simply gave



people something to do while having a chat; to use what they were creating as an opportunity to ask why ... 'why did you move here?' ... 'Why did you stay?' ... 'Why did you paint/draw that?' ... 'Why did you come along today?' The artworks that were produced will also continue to be used in further activities.

Moving into 2021 we'd like to be able to include even more voices, so we can really get our teeth into what issues affect our community. During 2021 we will be conducting a community needs survey, going door-to-door to interview our neighbours, friends and community—to better inform our direction for 2021 and beyond.

Of course we always want to hear from you! So if you know of or are receiving services that you think would help others, we'd love to hear about them (email below).

And if you provide services to our communities (including river-access-only areas)—such as handyman/maintenance, gardener, plumber, electrician, carpenter, builder, Justice of the Peace, hairdresser, cleaner, masseuse—we'd love to hear from you too.

Like to know more or become a member? Email us at rivercaresinc@gmail.com

What is creative recovery?

Creative recovery is an approach that creates physical, mental and spiritual spaces—where stories are told, decisions are worked out, dreams come into being, and where people feel safe and connected to one another.

At its finest, creative recovery projects express community hopes and dreams for the future, becoming a steady hand through rocky emotions, helping life find some semblance of order after the chaos of disaster.

The arts play a deep, real role in supporting communities and individuals to tackle disasters and the potential of reframing life, landscape and connection beyond the impact. An arts/cultural response can mean many things—care, comfort, reduced feelings of isolation, increased community cohesiveness, empowerment, reimagining, celebration, memorialising, new personal and creative skills, strengthened connections to place, and a sense of shared optimism. And ultimately, it's about building stronger communities and richer, more meaningful lives.

The Creative Recovery Network

Established in response to the growing recognition of the value of the arts in preparing for and recovering from disaster,

the network enables the arts to play a deep, real role in supporting disaster resilience and connections amongst communities and individuals.

The Creative Recovery Network seeks to enable and empower communities to take action and look after themselves and others in times of crisis, whilst ensuring strong local, regional and national leadership and support through:

- Providing access to impact evidence of community and artist-led recovery activities across disaster-affected areas
- Sharing knowledge and understanding of preparedness and recovery planning
- Connecting people to a network of specifically trained creative practitioners available to respond and work in communities impacted by a disaster
- Supporting creative practitioners responding and working in communities impacted by disasters through training, mentoring, supervision, and self-care initiatives.

“I don't believe it is art as a spectator activity ... but it is the participation, the involvement in the creative process that makes the difference.”

Bruce Esplin

Emergency Services Commissioner, Vic 2011



My story: Bob Barton

Deputy Commander, Fire & Rescue NSW

There's a comradeship with firefighters.

On New Year 's Eve we started at 11 o'clock in the morning. The fire started at Blue Haven and went down the Central Coast Highway into Charmhaven. We had crews battling those blazes all afternoon.

We thought everything was under control, then a southerly come through and it blew the fire back onto Birdwood Drive. That was one of the most harrowing positions I've been in. You could not drive down the street without the fear of maybe running someone over.

It was just that black.

It was just a matter of pulling over, making sure I could find out where all my crews were, and then going back along Birdwood Drive to make sure we were actually defending the houses that were at the far western end of the street.

That day I finished at about 3am.

A bushfire, a large one like this, can sound like a jet engine or a train. A steam train coming through a town.

The smell is nothing like you have smelt before, it's unique. Especially when it comes through bush, it's a very, very strong smell and the heat can be quite intense. It goes right through your uniform, all through your hair, your skin—you can still smell it on yourself two days after.

It is very hard to decompress after seeing fire like that. You go back to the station, sit down, have a drink of water or a cup of tea, write down a few notes in case you do need to go to court, and just get ready to switch off when you knock off that morning.

It's also the time to talk.

There's a comradeship with firefighters. If one of our firefighters is hurting or going through a hard time, we feel that as well.

It is a tight knit community. What makes it good though is that the firefighters can speak to each other. It's like a debrief to get those anxieties and stresses out. We also have peer support and employee assistance programs to help with that.



It is very hard to decompress after seeing a fire like that.

You need to have the support of your family too. I went away for weeks on end around the state last year helping coordinate the efforts of Fire and Rescue with the RFS in places like Wauchope and Glen Innes. My wife is amazing. She looks after the kids while I'm gone. It can't be easy for her.

The community was fantastic too—everywhere the firefighters went the community was giving out water, refreshments, food—anything that people needed.

They took heed of what we had to say. They listened to the emergency warnings and when they had to relocate, they did. So the community was really, really good on the Central Coast last summer and that was great to see.

Building community resilience

Community resilience is more than the combined resilience of individuals, families or organisations, although they all play an important part.

A community is resilient when its members are connected to each other and work together, to sustain critical systems (even under stress), adapt to changes in the physical, social or economic environment and be self-reliant if external resources are limited or cut off. Resilient communities learn from experience to improve themselves over time.

People in resilient communities are open to learning and adapting, they have a 'can-do' attitude and they take care of each other. Organisations in resilient communities co-operate—sharing common goals, and are proactive in engaging people and building capacity to advance those goals. They ensure that essential resources such as land, food and water are protected and available locally. They work to increase local control of other resources too—like community finance and infrastructure. Resilient communities take a positive and sustainable view of change, paying attention to how change can bring about long-term benefits, instead of focussing on the vulnerabilities that change can expose.

“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

Margaret J. Wheatley

Resilient communities are:

- Well-prepared, with a high level of social capital (shared values and strong relationships between its people) helping to address emergency situations
- Aware of how the community functions as a whole, including what it depends on to thrive, and the potential weaknesses and challenges it may face
- A continual work in progress
- Able to anticipate risk, limit impact, and bounce back rapidly through survival, adaptability, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change.

me & you

Creating a phone tree

A phone tree is a simple system used to help spread a message quickly to a large number of people—for instance to warn of bushfire threat. Here's how to set one up.

At the moment, with unpredictable periods of social distancing, quarantine and isolation, we also want to make sure all of our community are connected and we are looking out for each other.

Setting up a phone tree

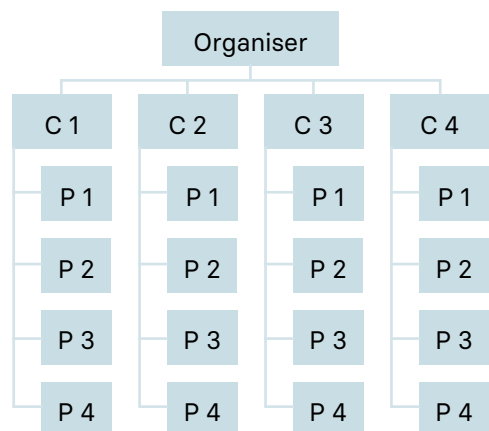
- **Gather contact details:** The organiser makes a list of people who want to be included. The aim is to make sure everyone in the community is involved. Ideally, collect at least two contact numbers for each person (including one with voicemail, or a mobile with text messaging). From that list, recruit reliable people to be coordinators, who will be responsible for calling the other people on the list or making sure that group calls take place as agreed.
- **Create call groups:** Divide the list into small groups (between 3–8 people) and allocate each group to a coordinator.
- **Create a structure:** Draw up an organisation chart (a sample template is over the page). You can set up a phone tree in any way that suits your community. The key is to ensure that everyone is contacted by at least one person regularly, and there is a way to check in on this. In general—the simpler the better!
- **Create some ground rules:** Consider if you need a few points for guidance for people when calling. For instance: what happens when you can't get hold of someone? What do you do if someone needs help? Or simply to clarify the purpose and scope of the phone tree—what are the key questions you might want to ask and be asked when talking to each other?
- **Communicate:** Make sure all coordinators have copies of the organisational chart and the master contact list, and are clear on how it works. You could also circulate the organisation chart and/or contact list amongst the entire tree if appropriate.
- **Collaborate:** Whilst the idea of a phone tree might be one person's, the way it's structured works should ideally be a collaborative effort between the organiser, coordinators and others in the community. Every community is different, so see what works for yours.

Phone tree template

Use the template at right to set up the organisational structure for your community's phone tree, and use the examples below as a base for how it might work.

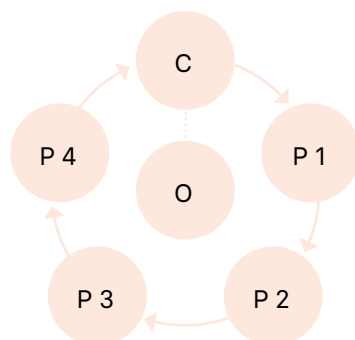
Linear:

The organiser calls each coordinator, who in turn each call a small group of people.



Circular:

Coordinators start a chain where people take turns calling the next person in their group, until the call is returned to the coordinator (there may or may not also be a central organiser).



Tips for activating your 'tree':

- When groups are first established, the coordinator should check in with the group and make sure they agree about when and how people might like to call each other, and how often.
- Coordinators should notify the organiser when they are not able to make the calls, or something changes in their ability to participate. The Organiser should also check in regularly with coordinators.
- You can be as inventive as you like! As well as phone, you could use Skype or Whatsapp or even FaceTime.
- Remember, the phone tree is mainly to ensure everyone has someone looking out for them, especially those who might not use the internet or who live alone. Everyone in the community can still contact each other however and whenever they like!

Phone tree for:

Community title: _____

Organiser:

Name: _____

Tel 1: _____ Tel 2: _____

Coordinator 1:

Name: _____

Tel 1: _____

Tel 2: _____

Coordinator 2:

Name: _____

Tel 1: _____

Tel 2: _____

Coordinator 3:

Name: _____

Tel 1: _____

Tel 2: _____

Coordinator 4:

Name: _____

Tel 1: _____

Tel 2: _____

Coordinator 5:

Name: _____

Tel 1: _____

Tel 2: _____

Coordinator 6:

Name: _____

Tel 1: _____

Tel 2: _____

My story: Alison Wade

Captain, Spencer Rural Fire Brigade

Last season is still a bit of a blur. It was a pretty hectic time for all of us.

It got to a point where we knew that the Three Mile fire was coming. Eventually it did jump Western Commission Track and came onto Oyster Shell Road at Lower Mangrove. So it was very much in our community then. It was a constant couple of weeks of property protection and back burning. That's all we did basically day and night.

It was exhausting. It was like Groundhog Day. You get up, you go out and you do what you had to do during the day and most of the night, you go to bed, have few hours' sleep, you get up and you do it all again.

I would assess what was happening out on the fire ground and have a look at what resources were available.

I did a lot with the group officers and managing what we call strike teams and placing them in different positions within the community. Then making sure

my crew were out there and they had a task to do. Then a lot of the evenings were patrols and checking on members' welfare, then grab a few hours' sleep and do it all again.

We had the community well prepared, we had meetings at the community hall and said that this fire is coming, we knew it was coming. It wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when.

We wanted to make sure the community was prepared. Nobody expected it to escalate, to be such a large massive fire, but we knew it was coming.

For me, the things that sort of stuck out the most were the ember ashes and blackened leaves. The leaves, the gumtrees around here were just pitch black.

I live in a really old farmhouse. Some of the embers actually managed to make their way into part of the house, so that was a little bit confronting.

I look back now and I think, how did I get through that time? You live on adrenaline. I didn't get a



I look back now and I think, how did I get through that time?

great deal of sleep, I didn't eat a great deal, I lost 4kg, but it's the adrenaline that really keeps you going. But unfortunately, when it wears off, that's when the physical and the mental tiredness really hits you. I spent 21 consecutive days on the fire ground. I haven't done that before.

For me though, the Brigade, it's a family connection. My relative was a founding member of the Spencer Brigade. He was the Captain for 23 years. When he was dying of cancer and I was looking after him, I promised I would join the brigade. So, here I am. I know whenever I'm on the front line, I know he is there with me. I guess that's why I always feel safe. I carry his name badge in my pocket.

Profile: Shane Eastman-Wheeler The Hub of Mangrove Mountain

After living on Mangrove Mountain for 12 years (often alone as my partner travelled away for work), I was aware that I didn't really know anyone. I believed in the importance of community and I loved where I lived, but I felt isolated and needed to reach out—to get involved.

I'm not really a group kind of person, and am quite comfortable spending time alone, getting absorbed into whatever project I've taken on. But perhaps conversely, I do enjoy the creativity and excitement of working with a few close people, sharing ideas and passions and creating something special.

Fortuitously, I saw a role that married my skills, my personality and my desire to connect to my community—volunteering to promote and publicise the local Mangrove Mountain Country Fair. It wasn't long before I saw that I could make a difference—and I found it very rewarding.

The relationships I made doing the fair strengthened my ties to the Mountain, but left me noticing that there wasn't really a central place with a modern, comfortable, yet appropriately 'rustic' feel, that people could go and have a coffee and a chat. So I decided to try and fill that gap.

Creating The Hub wasn't just about having a successful business or providing somewhere to stop in and get bread and milk (although the Mountain definitely needed that!). It's about so much more. I aimed to create a place for community to connect, for friends to meet up and enjoy a slice of cheesecake and enjoy a variety of fresh, homemade delicious food at fair prices, where the atmosphere is always welcoming and warm. A place that locals can take visitors, to show them why they love living on the Mountain. A hub where people share ideas, stories and laughter. A place that builds community pride. A place that I would have gone to, all those years ago.



**The Hub of
Mangrove Mountain
1 Waratah Road,
Mangrove Mountain**



Creating The Hub wasn't just about having a successful business or providing somewhere to stop in and get bread and milk ... it's about so much more.

Keeping connected

It's important to make time to connect—with family, friends, community ... but most importantly, yourself.

This week, how have I connected with the **people in my life?**

This week, how have I connected with the **people in my community?**

This week, how have I connected with **myself?**

What will I try to do **next week?**

Profile:
Cool Connections workshops

In 2020, Central Coast Council partnered with the Iris Foundation to deliver 'Cool Connections' workshops, for school students in bushfire-affected areas.

The workshops were designed to increase students' resilience—building confidence, developing social skills and creating a sense of connectedness with others in their school and community.

The workshops (based on Dr Ken Ginsberg's *Seven Cs of Resilience* encouraged open discussion and sharing, using creative-based activities like artwork, visual storytelling, creative journaling, groupwork, sharing circle and relaxation techniques.

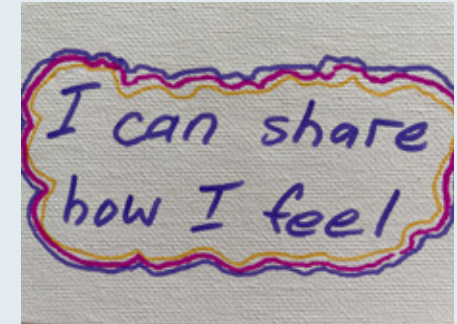
Being able to express themselves in a safe and supportive space assisted in building the students' confidence, connection, coping skills and gratitude.

Here are some examples of the students' activities, thoughts and artwork. These make good conversation starters to check in with children about how they are feeling and what they think.



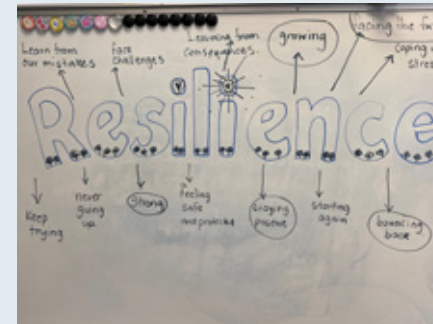
We are all different
and have different
traits and choices.

Student from Kulnura



There are lots of ways
I can de-stress.

Student from Wyong Creek

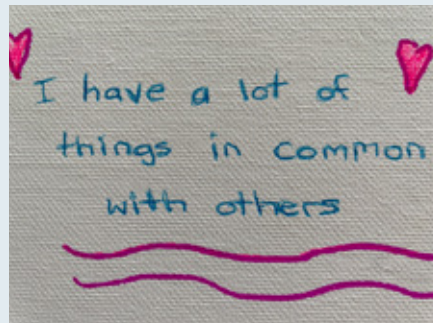


I have learnt
new things about
my friends.

Student from Somersby

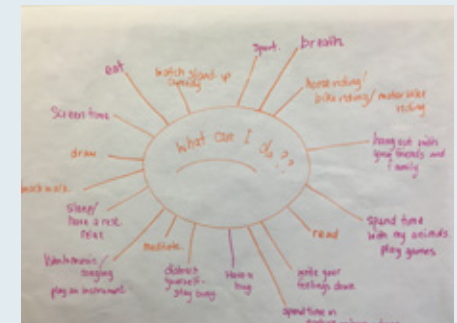
You can always
manage your anxiety.

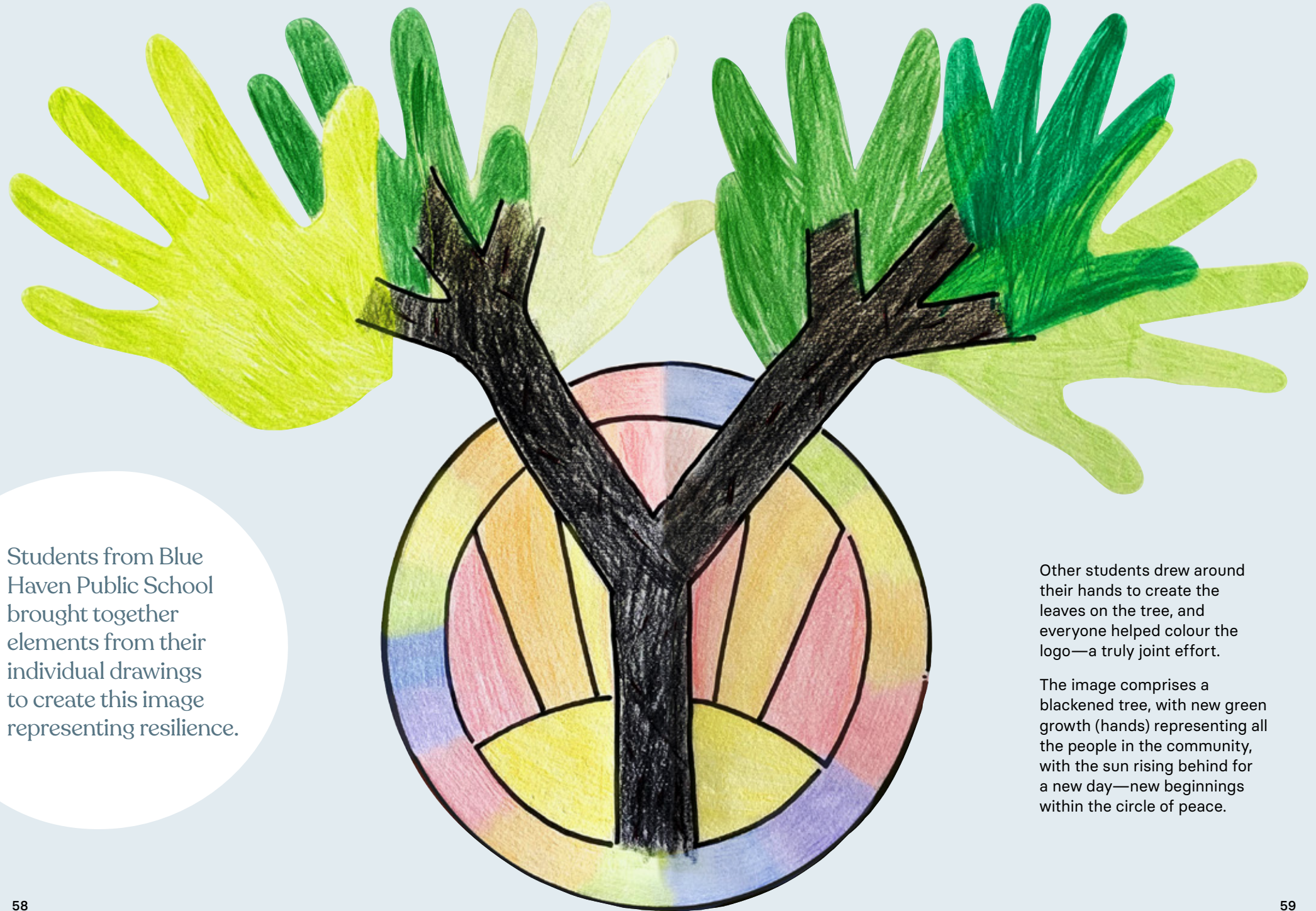
Student from Somersby



I learnt more about
Kids' Helpline and not
be scared to use it.

Student from Central Mangrove
& Peats Ridge





Students from Blue Haven Public School brought together elements from their individual drawings to create this image representing resilience.

Other students drew around their hands to create the leaves on the tree, and everyone helped colour the logo—a truly joint effort.

The image comprises a blackened tree, with new green growth (hands) representing all the people in the community, with the sun rising behind for a new day—new beginnings within the circle of peace.

My story: Carly Pal

Central Coast Disaster Relief

This initially started with one box and a bag of clothes donated by my family.

Within days the support had just been incredible. We were inundated and it's just growing exponentially. I had never thought we would ever get to this spot. I didn't. And it's only thanks to our wonderful community that we have been able to.

When the fires hit, I sat with my children to see how we can best help them. The Salvos were tasked with the relief efforts. I contacted them, put a word out to our community via Facebook and within days, we were inundated with members of our community wanting to help—local businesses, members to support us, as well as other organisations.

When the fires hit our region, it was dreadful. We made up food hampers as well as snack packs. In the snack packs we have juice and water as well as muesli bars, tins of tuna, spaghetti. All of our donations are sourced by members of the community or other businesses who offer

their support by donating their products. We also provided cooling neck ties and launched a fundraiser to raise money for fire-rated socks.

We distribute these packs ourselves. We pack them up at our storage facilities and then deliver them to every fire brigade, RFS unit. We actually spent Christmas day 2019 delivering bulk water and much-needed supplies to the RFS around our local areas. Even on Christmas day they were hard at work. Some of them were doing up to 20-hour shifts at a time.

Seeing first-hand the devastation—Aussies at their very worst, where they'd lost everything. Their homes, their properties, their much-loved pets. It was devastating to see. We cried with them, but we were also humbled by their resilience and their sense of community and mateship.

Delivering to regions that had been fire affected was awful. Whole roads had been decimated. Either side, all trees gone. Signage had been burned. There was no GPS, no satellite. It was really hard to navigate around most areas.



There's a lot of things you can aspire to be but if you choose to be anything, choose to be kind.

Then when we got there it was deathly silent. It was an eerie feeling. You could still smell the smoke, see the smoke. There was a constant haze that permeated every fibre of you. Even after washing your hair and showering, you just couldn't get rid of it.

We have wonderful volunteers, we probably have around forty volunteers. There is a dedicated team that supports me incredibly. I think the greatest gift you can give anybody is your time and understanding. There's a lot of things you can aspire to be but if you choose to be anything, choose to be kind. I ask that you please don't forget those fire affected communities. The fires may be out, but the suffering hasn't stopped.

A community in control

The catastrophic events of the 2019 bushfires have had a lasting effect on families and communities. San Remo Neighbourhood Centre (The Epicentre) staff and volunteers have responded to disasters for many years, supporting people in times of need.

The Blue Haven and Charmhaven areas did not escape the fires, with more than 150 homes directly impacted. Whilst some evacuated, others stayed to fight the blaze and burning embers that threatened their lives and homes. Flanked by water and with flames approaching, a sense of fear and shock accompanied the realisation by many that they were caught off guard, and unprepared.

Many who stayed helped elderly neighbours, rescued pets that had run away and checked in on those around them for days and weeks after the blaze. Some streets rallied together to clean roofs and gutters, and many people met their neighbours for the first time.

The full extent of the fires was unknown, until staff from the Epicentre started door-knocking and listening to people's stories. There was fear in people's voices as they recounted stories of survival and sheer devastation. Whilst we could see the damage to homes and surrounds, the

personal and emotional impact was less obvious—but still needed to be addressed. Many people described the fires as they unfolded: "Suddenly everything went black ... the sound was roaring ... it was terrifying and I couldn't sleep for weeks ... listening out for the sounds of the crackling trees".

Time after time, families spoke about their loss and fears. There was a definite sense of community, yet resilience (and preparedness for any future disasters) was low.

The community started to rebuild—mental health services were brought in, local businesses came on board and the work began; supporting families, fixing fences, roofs, gardens, sheds, trampolines, air-conditioners, solar panels, water tanks, bedding, carpets and many outdoor items.

It's clear that Blue Haven, Charmhaven and the surrounding areas have a strong



Photos left-right by:
Danielle Chivas,
Wendy Ballard,
Karen McDonald

sense of community and care for each other. During the last community event, we could see that the shared stories had shifted from fear to survival, from strangers to neighbourhood, and from panic to preparedness.

Conversations revealed there was a general sense of relief as people had started to organise their homes, their lives, and were feeling more prepared for any future natural disaster events.



San Remo Neighbourhood Centre
28 Brava Avenue Nth, San Remo
sanremo.org.au

As well as the many photos, we were blown away by the personal stories that accompanied them.

Alison Upton from Blue Haven describes the scene in her backyard: "Everything was eery ... hosing our house down while my partner was saving his parents house. It was intense."

Justine May of San Remo writes about her sister Lee: "For many weeks she went into what was left of the bush to leave food and water for any animals that may have survived. She lives with my father ... I will never forget driving through the embers that night to get them both safe to my place."

And Danielle Chivas puts it simply: "Still have no words, but deep respect to the fireys who saved our home."

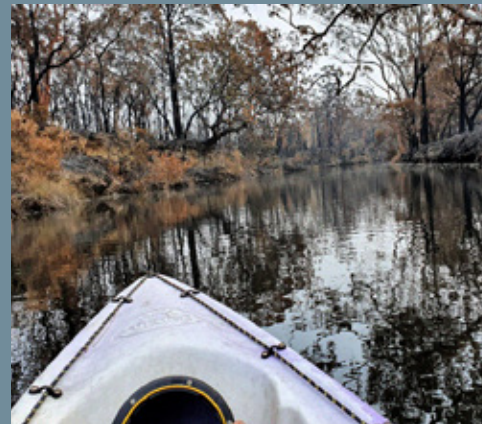
THROUGH THEIR *eyes*

As part of community recovery, The Epicentre ran a photography competition for local residents to share their experience of the fires. Here are the winning photographs.

Matt Hogben



Alison Upton



Jimmy Dehaney



Jimmy Dehaney

Michelle Deacon Shaw



Matt Hogben

Leanne Dallimore



First person: Leanne Dallimore

The Dallimore family were among the few to remain and defend their community during the Charmhaven bushfire. Leanne tells her story.

New Year's Eve 2019 started out like most summer days, hot with still air, brown and crispy dry.

It was around midday I first saw the plume of smoke emanating from the bush. Checking the 'fires near me' app I saw there was an out of control fire.

Panic set in—we watered the back lawns, trying to plan what to do, checking the app again and again looking for updates and advice, but it stayed the same throughout most of the day. My parents (who were at our house) returned to their home, our daughter got back and we cancelled plans. Flying low over the house and the bush were air tankers and helicopters; it was an awesome experience but for the worst reason. My husband was on the roof of our house, phone in hand, scanner app running, listening to the RFS updates coming thick and fast. Most were good, but some were concerning; the retardant had blocked the fire front and done the job, but if the wind changed, we were in trouble.

Later, I went for a drive around the Charmhaven bridge and I remember thinking it was over.

We were confronted with an orange glow from the bush, realising this could be the end of everything we'd worked for.

How wrong I was...

At sunset there was an eerie calm. The wind had changed to a southerly—the exact direction we did not want. The street was thick with smoke, it had descended in a matter of minutes. I screamed for my husband to come out.

We were confronted with an orange glow from the bush, realising this could be the end of everything we'd worked for—facing this unstoppable force willing to consume all it confronts, raining a torrent of embers fueled by the ferocious wind. My husband hosing the roof and the grass, looking for spot fires, frantically running from the front of the house to the back, breathing in the choking smoke.

We realised this was just the beginning and thought, "we can't fight this, we need to leave ... NOW". →

First person: Leanne Dallimore

“Grab the three kids, the two dogs and head for safer ground”.

It was at this point a rural fire serviceman, who asked us what our plans were, said to us, “if I were you I would stay, continue doing the great work you have been doing. The fire will be hot, loud, but quick”.

My daughter was in amazement at his statement, pointing to the fire and crying out, “can’t you see that?” He reassured us we would be OK—words that to this day still resonate with us. What if we had left? Would we still have a house?

Once the fire front hit, it was like hell being unleashed—the flames were twice the height of the trees, and the southerly was pushing them directly over the top of our house. The trees are 15 metres away from our house, but the wind was pushing the flames over our roofline. The heat was intense—torrents of embers washed across the road and through the air, coating every inch of the roof and the lawn. The noise was phenomenal. The roar is like nothing I can describe, but I know if I hear it again it will bring me back to the moment with a thud.

The fire storm lasted for around 15 minutes, but the embers continued to rain down for hours.



My husband was extinguishing spot fires, all the while getting showered in embers and choking on rancid smoke. I gave him a wet towel, his eyes were red and watering uncontrollably, his t-shirt had holes burnt into it. It was around 2am when he collapsed on the floor in exhaustion, wheezing and struggling to breathe, trying to close his eyes but unable to do so—they were bloodshot, stinging and watering like mad. Our efforts had not been in vain, we had survived, and the house was still standing—a little battle-scarred with embers and burnt leaves covering it, but it was still there.

My son and my husband are asthmatic; my son being in the severe category. He had been out alongside my husband and they were both struggling. I called for an ambulance to see to them—their stats were OK, and the paramedics left seemingly oblivious as to what we had just been through.

Waking to a new day, it was a moonscape; barren and lifeless. The smell of smoke was still in the air, and as the morning progressed, neighbours started to emerge and see just what had gone on. There were tears, and amazement at the fact that we had no property loss—a couple of fences and a garden shed were the local tally.

Through all this, we were not alone. The kids filled the bathtub with water (something I would never have thought to do), my daughter rang her grandmother to hear a reassuring voice, and we were getting messages and phone calls. The sense of community spirit was heartwarming, and something that was needed after such a traumatic event.

Some called us crazy for staying, some called my husband a hero for fighting. We were not the heroes—the RFS and the fire service were the heroes ... when we wanted to turn and run away, they were driving toward it.

If I never see such an event again in my lifetime then I will be content with that. The events of the night will forever have an effect on me and my family. Did it make us stronger? Absolutely—it gave us a resolute purpose to always fight for what we have achieved.

The RFS and the fire service were the heroes ... when we wanted to turn and run away, they were driving toward it.

It was a nightmare, but it taught us so much about ourselves. Things we never thought we could achieve, we achieved. Strength and purpose we never thought we had, we had in spades.

There is a lingering consciousness of what happened on the night, but the ongoing support of local community groups, the RFS, and family and friends is there too. Just a voice to listen to you is enough some days—that reassuring shoulder to cry on can be a panacea for a gloomy outlook.

Closing out my thoughts on the night, I am truly thankful to my family for fighting with everything they had, the RFS and fire service for being there and reassuring us that we were going to be alright despite what we were facing, family and friends, and the local community group that sprang into action to help in any way they could. We could not have done it without this support and are forever in their debt.



“Let your hopes,
not your hurts,
shape your future.”

Robert H. Schuller

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

Everyone in your household should be involved in preparing your emergency Survival Plan so they know what you have agreed to in the event of an emergency. Keep this plan somewhere prominent in your home.

Blank copies of this template can be downloaded at www.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/resilience

Emergency survival plan: Our plan to leave

We will leave if

- We are aware that there is an emergency in our area
- For bush fire:** The danger rating is severe, extreme or catastrophic
- For flood:** The risk is high or access may be cut
- A Watch and Act or Emergency alert has been issued

Where we will go

A meeting place that is safe and away from the emergency: (could be a friend or relative's place, shopping centre, community centre)

How we will get there

The road we will take:

Alternative route in case the road we want to take is blocked:

When we leave we will call

(and when we have arrived safely)

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Alternative leaving plan

If our original plan is not possible, our nearest neighbourhood safer place is: (Find locations at rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/neighbourhood-safer-places)

The road we will take:

Alternative route in case the road we want to take is blocked:

If we cannot leave

The safest close location to shelter is:

Emergency survival plan: Our home and what to take

Blank copies of this template can be downloaded at www.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/resilience.

For more detailed plans visit myfireplan.com.au or ses.gov.au, or download the Red Cross **Get Prepared** app.

About our home

Risks:

- We live in fire, flood or storm prone area
- Our home has not been designed and constructed to withstand its risks
- Our property could easily be isolated by flood, fire or storm
- We have animals we need to care for

Someone lives in our home who:

- Is a child
- Has a health condition that may make it harder for them to survive in an emergency (asthma, movement restriction)
- Lives with a disability
- Is elderly

What we will take

A list of essential items we will take:

- Our emergency kit (see right for what to include)
- A 'go bag' with essential clothing and personal care items
- Prescription medications
- Important documents and cards eg insurance papers, medicare cards, passports etc
- Money
- Pets and their needs
- Irreplaceable items such as photos
- Portable power bank and chargers
- Other items

Emergency Kit

An emergency kit can help save precious time in a emergency situation, with items you might need if you lose power or need to leave your home in a hurry.

Keep your emergency kit in a waterproof storage container.

Update your emergency kit on a regular basis, and check use-by dates and restock items if needed.

- For COVID safety:
Face mask, hand santiser, soap
- Portable radio with spare batteries
- Torch with spare batteries
- First aid kit (with supplies necessary for your household)
- Candles and waterproof matches
- Important papers including emergency contact numbers
- Copy of Emergency Plans
- Waterproof bag for valuables

Other important notes

We care

We will check in with these neighbours to make sure they are preparing also:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Name: _____

Phone: _____

“Life throws challenges but with patience and resilience you can convert every challenge into a new opportunity to grow.”

Amit Ray

