



VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES IMPACT REPORT DECEMBER 2020



Through the generosity of our supporters St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria received \$5.7 million in funds for bushfire recovery and rebuilding. Over the past 12 months, we have worked closely with local communities and have distributed or committed \$5.4 million – or 94% of funds gratefully received – to help rebuild these communities.

Twelve months ago, the Black Summer bushfires raced through parts of Australia, and since that time our local volunteers have been working closely with people, schools and local community groups in helping rebuild these fire-impacted communities.

Here in Victoria, we approach our role as second responders seriously, always with a long-term view.

Rebuilding homes, lives and communities can take many years and, as we have been for more than 166 years, we will continue to be here for Victorians every step of the way.

Shortly after the bushfires raged through parts of Victoria we took the very public stance of saying that every dollar raised through our Vinnies Bushfire Appeal would be used to support the people impacted by the fires – and we are proud to state that this has been the case.

In addition, Vinnies Victoria has not, and will never, keep funds from disaster appeals for any other work or cause, and that includes administration. We rely on generous donations from Victorians to support our good works and receive no government bushfire funding here in Victoria.

Our experience after the Black Saturday fires in 2009, Bunyip in 2019 and, now, the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires told us that it takes 12–18 months as people slowly return to their towns or to a new location. We will be actively assisting people in these communities for as long as we are needed.

Over the past 12 months, we have:

- Worked with local government to assist people who we had not been able to contact directly.
- Offered one-off community grants for recovery projects of up to \$20,000. Provided emergency, recovery and rebuilding payments to the value of \$3.03 million for people who have experienced loss and critical loss, including funds for land-clearing, water tanks, generators and fencing, as well as material assistance

such as food, fuel, clothing, bedding, laptops, school uniforms education fees and other ancillary expenses.

- Provided additional support as identified by the community.

We are ever thankful to the Jewish Community of Victoria for providing \$1 million towards education costs for schools and students affected by the Black Summer bushfires.

Over the past 12 months we have distributed all of this generous gift, via activity such as:

- 38 higher education grants to the value of \$304,000.
- the 12-month appointment of a trauma counselling social worker at Mallacoota P1-12 College.
- a \$250,000 rebuild of a basketball court and sports facility in Mallacoota.
- Two mini buses – to the value of \$140,000 – for regional bushfire-affected primary schools.

We are so thankful to everyone who supported our Vinnies Bushfire Appeal. We have always said that every dollar we received here in Victoria through the appeal would go towards funding bushfire recovery and rebuilding, and we have never wavered from that commitment. For an up-to-date look at where bushfire funds currently stand, see below:

| | |
|---------------------|---------------|
| DONATIONS RECEIVED | \$5.7 MILLION |
| DONATIONS SPENT | \$3.8 MILLION |
| DONATIONS COMMITTED | \$1.6 MILLION |
| ADMIN/ COSTS | \$0 |

We understand that recovery can take years and we want every person who is still struggling to rebuild their lives after the bushfires to know that Vinnies Victoria is here for them. We urge anyone needing assistance with bushfire recovery to please call us on 13 18 12.

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES RECOVERY



“IT’S ALL GONE” HENRY’S LONG ROAD TO RECOVERY

Henry Sonogan had spent 40 years building up his farm at Buchan, near Bairnsdale, but it took only one night during New Year in 2020 for a ferocious bushfire to wipe it out with the indifference only nature can inflict.

He was in Melbourne visiting family at the time and the impact of the fire on the 250-acre property Henry has owned since 1974 was confirmed in a phone call from one of his siblings who lives locally. “It’s all gone Henry, you’ve lost everything,” his brother told him. Henry had to wait a further week before he was finally allowed back to his home to view the destruction for himself.

“The roof of my house was lying in the front yard, having been lifted up and dumped there by the force of the blaze. I built the house myself in 1994. It was double brick, with all the gutters cleaned and surrounds cleared and prepped for fires, so it was devastating that it all went up,” says Henry.

Tree stumps kept burning, glowing into the distant night, for months afterwards, he adds.

Almost unbelievably, it was the second time that fire had devastated Henry’s life. When he was 19, the home he had shared with his parents and eight siblings on the family’s Narre Warren farm was burnt to the ground due to an electrical fault, and they were lucky to escape with their lives.

And now at 72, losing his own farm under similar circumstances seems a punishing way to bookend his life. “Yes, I’ve been through it all before,” he says, his voice cracking.

Starting from scratch again at his age is a profound challenge of physical and emotional perseverance, but one year on from the horrendous fires that ripped through eastern Victoria and so many other parts of the country, Henry’s resilience is something to behold.

“I put so much into the farm, it was my life’s work, but there were people worse off than me. I’m still here. I’ve still got the land, there’s grass growing everywhere now,” he says. “I’ve got no major health issues. The physical work keeps my mind active, so I just keep going.”

Along with his home, he lost a shed with a lot of machinery, but one shed survived that fortunately housed his tractor, so he was able to begin the clear-up himself soon afterwards. “I think I would have collapsed if my tractor had gone too,” he says.

Henry received a recovery grant from Vinnies, along with kitchen supplies and clothing, including all-weather gear. “The Vinnies grant was marvellous because I’ve needed so many bits and pieces, like a microwave, washing machine and then fencing material,” he says.

Henry hopes to return the farm to income generation at some point, but for now he’s focused on rebuilding sheds and accommodation, although his insurance claim has not been enough to rebuild something comparable to his old home. “The fencing was the first priority, so I can get the animals back.” He now has two paddocks ready to restock, when livestock prices get a bit lower, because demand is high while other affected farmers in the area are also trying to restock.

“The small grants have really helped because I’ve had to put in a septic tank and do lots of plumbing. It’s taken most of the year to get a plumber in to get a shower and toilet going,” he says. “But the donations have made a real difference, especially knowing they came from the public who wanted to help.”

Progress on building new accommodation has been slow, because of the high demand for builders and the impact of COVID-19 on supplies. Henry, who is still living in a caravan, has finally been able to contract a builder who will begin on his accommodation in the new year, now that planning and building permissions have been recently finalised. Before that though, tradesmen have to extend the existing shed that will be used to house building supplies.

There were only two horses on the property at the time of the fire, which amazingly survived, but unfortunately the same cannot be said for wildlife, including a 20-strong colony of koalas that lived on Henry’s farm. “There was total destruction of wildlife. For a long time, I’ve seen not one lyrebird, not one wallaby, not one kangaroo,” he says.

But there are glimmers of renewal, Henry adds, having sighted a couple of kookaburras in recent weeks, and he is expecting to receive a government biodiversity grant to rebuild the koala community’s habitat. Meanwhile, the zucchinis in his new vegetable garden “are going mad”.

Henry says he is fortunate to have support from siblings in the area, and the help of a family friend’s son. His determination and spirit is an inspiration, but Henry’s story shows what a long road recovery is for people affected by the fires. “I don’t think it could have been done any sooner with the wait to get builders and the pandemic. It’s the volume of work that’s creating the delays because there is so much infrastructure that has to be replaced in the area,” he says.

Having been a regular customer at the local Vinnies Shop over the years, Henry was aware that our volunteers have long been part of the town’s fabric. “Oh yes, I know Vinnies Bairnsdale,” he says – and that we will continue to be here for the community as the recovery continues.



VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES RECOVERY



VINNIES HAS MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE

It is impossible to convey the toll that a bushfire takes on individuals, but you would soon get a sense of it were you to speak to farmers Ingrid and Norm Sharp, whose voices are still thick with emotion one year on from the Black Summer fires of early 2020.

They choke up describing the bushfire that ripped through their Cudgewa farm in north-eastern Victoria, perhaps because the primary subject of the carnage in their case were the animals that they had spent their lives tending to – about 240 beef breeder cows.

Only 100 acres of the couple's 1000-acre property did not burn. They spent a harrowing night trying to fight the fires to protect their stock and farm in an area that had previously been in drought. "The fire kept coming at different times and from different places. Some areas in the valleys just exploded," says Norm.

Ingrid and Norm locked up the cattle that they could in yards before the fire, but they couldn't get them all in time. The cows were difficult to reach as they were spread around the property, which is split into numerous blocks separated from one another. "The cows out in the open and near the boundaries of the national park were the worst affected," he says.

After the fire passed and morning broke, on no sleep, they made a wretched journey round the farm to find scores of their livestock either dead or dying. Around 100 died as a result of the blaze, and 60 of those the couple had to euthanise themselves in what Ingrid calls "the worst, worst, worst day of our lives". "We had to take photos of each one for the insurance company. It was just horrendous and heartbreaking," she says.

Norm talks about the care he had for the stock, some of which he had reared himself. "It cuts really hard that they suffered," he says. "The fire was so fierce, we did all could. When it's coming down the hill chasing you, you've got to fall back and defend what you can."

The fire also destroyed a significant amount of hay and infrastructure, so they made the decision to destock some of their remaining cattle because they couldn't manage so many in the immediate aftermath. Fences were gone on all nearby farms and it took weeks to get back all the cattle that had survived. All in all, the beef farm went from having stock of around 240 cows and 100 calves to 60 cows. "We went from being viable farmers to pretty much nothing," says Norm, a fifth-generation farmer in the district.

Although it was smoke-damaged, the couple are thankful their home survived. But they lost around 15kms of fencing and a significant amount of equipment, including a hay baler and wrapper machine that Ingrid says was Norm's "favourite toy". Norm explains that the price of insuring all the machinery

needed on a large farm is prohibitive, so working out what to insure becomes a game of roulette, common to many farmers. "We had \$100,000 worth of stock insurance, but then we lost a \$100,000 of machinery that wasn't insured," he says.

The immediate impact of the fire cut off the couple's water for a few days and the electricity for three weeks, during which time they relied on a generator. They had to alternate turning appliances on and off, which promptly led to their fridge packing up.

And this is what they spent their first Vinnies Victoria grant on, funded by Victorians' kindhearted donations to our bushfire appeal. "Vinnies was very generous. We ended up with a better fridge than we expected," says Ingrid.

The second round of funding from Vinnies helped Ingrid and Norm pay to look after two backpackers who stayed with them for four months helping to rebuild fencing, sheds and work the cattle, as well as another couple who stayed for two months.

"What impressed us was that Vinnies came back to us after the first grant to see if there was anything else they could help with. We didn't have to approach them, and that was really appreciated. There was no red tape either, which was important because our heads were not in the place to deal with that," says Ingrid. "And the money was in the bank very quickly.

"Vinnies was very understanding and proactive about getting back to us and checking up on how things were going," she adds.

The couple feel that they are recovering fairly well and have gradually restocked to 170 cows, but they say that the pandemic has slowed rebuilding because many government and volunteer workers who would normally be on hand after such a disaster had to leave the district.

The fires have made Ingrid and Norm, 59 and 60, take stock of their health and their future because they have seen the heavy impact it's had on others in the community. "We've made sure to take regular breaks away from it this year. We've got our plan, and we're working on our own personal recovery, as well as that of the farm."

Ingrid says that she has often visited her local Vinnies Shop in Wodonga – which she loves – as a shopper and to donate goods. "So I just think, this was our time to have little help back that will make life easier for us and hopefully sped up our recovery.

"Vinnies has made a really big difference to us, knowing that we weren't forgotten."

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES RECOVERY



New bus causes excitement for the students at Tambo Upper Primary School

KIDS JUMPING FOR JOY WITH NEW MINI BUS

The Tambo Upper Primary School is at the heart of the close-knit community it serves in more ways than one – not only does it educate the Upper Tambo’s precious little ones, but because the local hall is situated in the grounds, it is the place where residents turn for support and friendship.

The fire season started in November of 2019 and around Bruthen and continued to burn all through December and January with families having to evacuate their homes and move livestock to safer places on a number of occasions.

The principal of Tambo Upper Primary School, Carly Miller, said: “The bushfires impacted our community so deeply and immeasurably. We endured many years of drought, which has still not been broken, followed by the fires, and with the fire season almost upon us again, the community is already highly anxious.”

Ms Miller said it is estimated that more than a third of the Tambo Upper students were directly affected by fires at their own properties, or had extended family who lost houses, shedding, fencing and livestock.

“This includes some children who were not able to leave their properties in time and experienced the fire firsthand. This trauma has put incredible pressure on our families and some have been finding it very difficult to get their children to school,” added Ms Miller.

At the time, the school only had a small and aged 12-seater bus with tears in the interior and rust appearing on the exterior.

“We feared that one day we wouldn’t be able to offer the service and, therefore, children wouldn’t be able to get to school. With the clean-up and stress on families, some parents were finding it really difficult to get their children to school,” said Ms Miller.

After realising that the Victorian DET school bus program didn’t meet the needs of the school, because “we also needed transport to ferry students to swimming lessons, camps, cross-country and other events throughout the year”, Ms Miller said the situation was growing ever more desperate.

“We estimated that a new mini-bus would cost

approximately \$70,000, which included on-road costs, and we really wanted it to also proudly display our school name and logo,” said Ms Miller. “While we could contribute something, the entire cost was completely prohibitive.”

That’s where Vinnies Victoria – and the Melbourne Jewish community – stepped in. Upon hearing the school’s plight, Vinnies Victoria, with thanks to the \$1 million donated by the Jewish community towards education costs in fire-affected Victorian communities, provided the entire \$70,000 needed to purchase the mini bus.

In November 2020, the bus, with Ms Miller behind the wheel, took to the road. “During that first road trip you couldn’t take the smiles off the faces of both the students and the teachers,” said Ms Miller. “I took shuttles until each of the 103 students and 13 staff members all had a trip around Tambo Upper on the new bus. The boost to the community at Tambo Upper is immeasurable.”

As one young student, Ruby, said: “All of us were affected by the bushfire in my house and a lot of others. The new bus has made going to school so much easier, and for the parents it is easier to go to work and not worry. Most parents did not let their kids go on the old bus because they were worried about it breaking down.”

As another student, Nicola, said: “Thank you for giving us the best school bus. We love it so much. I used to travel on the old bus regularly, but now the school bus ride is not so bumpy, clunky and unsteady. The ride is actually enjoyable. If I could, I would give you an eternal ‘thank you’ and a great big hug (if it was not COVID-19).”

As Victoria marks the first year anniversary of the bushfires, Vinnies Victoria is so happy to see that Tambo is getting on with doing what it does best – ferrying students from A to B (and sometimes C and D), supporting each other through thick and thin and ensuring that, as a community, Tambo keeps moving forward.



VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES RECOVERY



Thank you for the bus!!! We love it and the people on the bus home enjoy it as well. We all got a ride out of school on the bus grade by grade.

We put the song 'Pump it up' on and partied. We went into a property with a for sale sign and Jo had no idea.

We are so grateful for it and love the air flow in it because the other one had no air flow in it at all.

We are going to use the other one still and I asked Mrs Miller/ my mum if I could keep it.
WE LOVE THE BUS!!!!

From Iris, year 4

THANK YOU FOR THE BUS. IT'S MUCH BETTER THAN THAT OLD ONE BECAUSE THE NEW ONE ACTUALLY HAS AIR CONDITIONING SO ON ALL THE REALLY HOT DAYS WE CAN BE COOLED DOWN. IT ALSO HAS A CORD THAT YOU CAN PLUG INTO YOUR PHONE AND PLAY MUSIC. AND IT IS COMFY UNLIKE THE OTHER BUS. AND WE HAVE BEEN WANTING ONE FOR AGES SO THANKS!

Thank you for the bus it is great and the whole school now likes the bus and most people like the bus more than the old bus because the old bus has windows that can open. But almost the whole school like 95% of the new school bus and 5% of the school likes the old bus.

All of the teachers like the new bus and all of the teachers appreciate it.
From Harry, year 4

Thank you soo much!
We really appreciate all your kindness, we all love the new bus. Now we all want to go on it! I love the new bus we really need it. Now we can have more people on the bus.

We all went on the bus one grade by a time. We listened to many songs, we love our new bus.
From Isla, year 4

Thank you for donating the bus to Tambo Upper Primary School. You guys are so amazing and caring to want to help a bush fire affected area.

We are grateful that we can get to school in a better way and safer.

It is so lovely to have a new bus so when we can decide we want to go on an excursion, we don't have to rent a bus because we have a bus that can fit a whole class room. Thank you SOOOO much. Maybe next you can arrange a swimming pool.

By Tas, year 4

Thank you for the new bus we really appreciate it also it's a lot better than the old bus I even feel safer on the new bus than the old bus.

Thank you again for the bus it's a bus that has an air con and a navigator which I think is pretty cool.

By the way is it alright if you can sort something out with Miss Miller to get us an inside swimming pool?

From Tyler, year 4