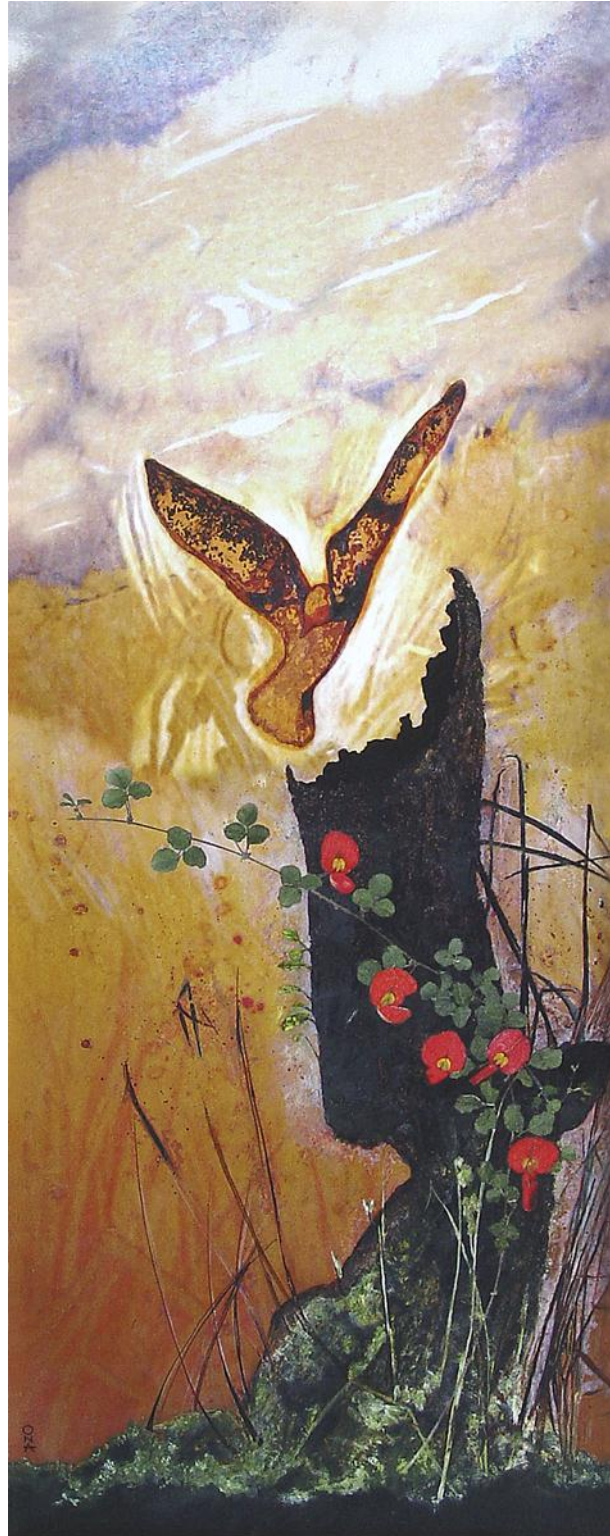


Beating the Flames

Women escaping and surviving Black Saturday





Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. PO Box 853, Wangaratta, Victoria, 3677.

Phone: 03 5722 3009 Fax: 03 5722 3020
whealth@whealth.com.au www.whealth.com.au

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My Death

My death like the sun
I cannot bear to face it
I say that it has nothing to do with me
Exists outside of me
A silence, a darkness when everything is done
Yet even now I feel it deep within me
Closer than my breathing
Moving within me
Slow as my blood
Measuring me with all I care to do
A shadow I follow or that follows me
And leads me to my centre not my edge

From ***Flame Tree: Selected Poems***, by Kevin Hart, Paperbark Press, 2002, p19. Reprinted with permission from Golvan Arts Management on behalf of the author. Kevin's latest book of poetry is ***Morning Knowledge***, Notre Dame University Press, 2011.

Contents

Introduction	1
ESCAPING	3
Nappies, vegemite sandwiches and the fire front.....	3
The women had a big job that day, making all the decisions.....	4
Seven months pregnant, a two year old, and a fire plan	5
Not without you	6
Young mum and small kids – separated by bushfires	8
Saving trucks and children	10
Evacuating – me, the three children and the pets.....	11
Three kids and a friend from overseas	11
FIGHTING.....	14
Instinct, spirituality, persistence and motivation	14
I don't want him dying through my fire plan.....	20
Facing mortality	23
Fighting fires in a back brace 4pm to 4am.....	24
Gradually you realise the fire's not going to pass you by.....	25
Getting back to save the place.....	28
A view of Mt. Disappointment.....	29
Keeping track and keeping calm	30
Feeding the crew to help save Melbourne's power supply.....	32
You don't see much past your own	33
On guard with the Fire Guard Group on 7.2.2009.....	34
Four weeks of fighting fires	36
Somehow, we worked together	38

Introduction

Women's experiences are rare in historical accounts. History is, after all, 'his story.' Black Saturday on February 7, 2009 was the worst natural disaster in Australia since colonisation. Its historic significance is clear. Equally clear is the imperative to include women's voices if we are to understand the experience and impact of disaster from more than one perspective.

In our collective imagining of disasters like Black Saturday, we see men as capable, defending vulnerable women and children, and saving property. If we imagine women at all, what image comes to mind?

This document is a compilation of women's accounts, as recounted in 2010 and 2011. Editing of their words is minimal, only to ensure clarity and enhance confidentiality.

These accounts are of women escaping the fires and fighting them, and often, their experiences encompass both. They speak of courage, persistence, and selflessness. In equal measure they speak of uncertainty, regret and terror. Sadly, some women were silenced by our society's imperative to protect the myth of masculinity. They felt the need to protect the man they love by not allowing their initial account of his actions to be published. For others, their retraction was due to fear of repercussions from that man.

Women are typically represented in history and in contemporary media as protected by men and by society. Yet, upon examination, the old adage of 'women and children first' is exposed as a myth. These accounts reveal that women were often alone, and sometimes alone with children. Almost without exception, at some stage, the women and those around them thought death was imminent.

When husbands and partners were present, some women found great solace, inspiration and practical support. Others found them an additional burden. The women reflected on their own responses with some stating that at times they were unable to function effectively. These accounts reveal that men and women reacted to life and death situations as individuals, rather than along gendered lines.

These women were active agents in their survival and the survival of partners, children, parents, friends, neighbours and strangers. The concept of the warrior woman is made flesh in each of the accounts that follow.

This document records the critical role 21 women played in the events of Black Saturday.

ESCAPING

Nappies, vegemite sandwiches and the fire front

You know when you've got young kids, you have your food, your drink, all those supplies, nappies in the car. He shoved the kids in and shoved me in the car and said, 'Go!'

RACHAEL: The day of the fires we were at home. I'd just had a major argument with my husband because someone said there was a fire down in Eden Park and he was going to go down there and help a friend's mother.

I said, 'No there's a fire around, I want you to stay.' So he went off in a huff to go and get petrol.

I was at home checking the CFA website, drew the curtains and the power went off. I thought I'd make some vegemite sandwiches for the kids and put them to bed early— my kids at the time were three and five—and I thought I might go to Mum's [in a safe town].

I got a change of clothes, their pyjamas, and started putting them at the front door.

[My husband] started yelling at me, 'Go, go, go!'

I said, 'Yeah, I'm going to Mum's. I'm planning to go.'

In 2006, the last fires, I left and stayed somewhere else. Before I knew it, he'd packed the kids in the car. You know, when you've got young kids, you have your food, your drink, all those supplies, nappies in the car.

He shoved the kids in and shoved me in the car and said, 'Go!'

We had flames over our house. I was none the wiser, because [I'd been] inside with the curtains drawn. It was only because he'd come home and started to lay the hoses around the house, otherwise I would have just sat there eating vegemite sandwiches with the kids. So I took off.

He said, 'You can't get out via Whittlesea, you'll have to go through Kinglake.'

I thought, 'OK, ring the brother, I'll go [there],' and headed out through Kinglake down onto the Melba and got turned back before I got into Yarra Glen.

The kids saw the fire coming down the hill in Yarra Glen, and with no direction from the police—they just said, 'Turn around and head back.' We turned around and headed back. I stopped at the intersection heading back to Kinglake.

A few people pulled over as well and said, 'Where do we go? What do we do?'

I rang some friends in Healesville.

They said, 'You can't get through, the road's blocked.'

I couldn't get through to my husband. I went back [but] didn't make it into Kinglake. I'm sure you've heard the story about people just not knowing where the fire front was. They thought it was coming up the hill, but it was already through the National Park and going into Kinglake, so we were driving into it. Once all the fire and black was coming, we turned around and headed off to Yea.

I didn't have much petrol because I'd just picked this car up. I guess from home to Yarra Glen is probably half an hour. Back to Kinglake would have been probably 15-20 minutes, because we turned around. From there to Yea was probably half an hour [on not much petrol]. I didn't speak to my husband since I drove out the driveway.

The service station attendant in Yea was really good.

He said, 'You won't get any accommodation because the pipe workers are in town. Everything's booked. Go to the caravan park and see if you can get in there.' He could see I had young kids.

We went to the caravan park.

They said, 'Look, we're fully booked, but park your car on the lawn and stay and use the amenities. Do whatever you need to do.'

A family saw me putting the kids semi-to-bed in the boot.

They said, 'Don't do that, come in with us.'

They took us in and fed us.

The women had a big job that day, making all the decisions

Steve and I have never spoken about if this happened, what would I do. It was never an issue. We never had a fire plan. You thought he'd be here. My fire plan was him.

SOPHIE: Steve was on standby at the depot. Other family members of mine are also in the DSE. The smoke came over the hill.

I rang people and they said, 'No, no, it's from the Kilmore fire. Don't worry.'

I went down to my cousin's and then suddenly everything went dark and it was coming over the hill. I went back home. I rang Steve.

He said, 'No, you'll be fine, everything will be all right.'

The whole street was evacuating, and I was taking the washing off the line and folding it.

I went to the supermarket and did some shopping, because Steve always said to me that, if our houses were under threat, he would come home and help. He didn't.

His work have always said that if your home is under threat you can go home, but that day there was just no time. It just took me a while to realise. I was really annoyed with him.

I had people coming in my front door; they were yelling and screaming at me to get out. I was just stubborn and saying no. My next door neighbours tried to, and I said, 'Don't be silly, you're overreacting.' While the whole street is evacuating, I was in a daze.

I'm on the phone to family in Melbourne saying, 'Apparently we have to evacuate.' [They] asked what the hell I was doing on the phone.

'Go!'

I kept thinking, 'It's okay, Steve will come back.'

My cousin was trying to get me out and I was saying, 'It's okay.'

[He has a] lot of guilt that he wasn't there helping me. He's taken it pretty hard that they couldn't do anything that day. He couldn't do anything because of the enormity of the fire. Men try to put on a brave front.

I wanted [Steve] to come home, but he couldn't. We were always under that impression, because his boss had said that to him. I was really angry at his boss for a while. I don't know if he said it just to calm me down, but he said that the boss said,

'If our houses are ever under threat, you could go home and help.'

It just wasn't an option that day. But I'd had it in my head that it was.

A lot of families are hurt that they [the men] weren't there to help. It's a big responsibility for us. The women had a big job that day, making all the decisions. Nobody knew. We thought it was the Kilmore fire.

When he'd said to me that Glen had to leave the [fire-lookout] tower, that's when I knew, 'Shit, we've got to go.'

Steve and I have never spoken about if this happened, what would I do. It was never an issue. We never had a fire plan. You thought he'd be here. My fire plan was him.

After that, I drove to Alex and stayed on someone's front lawn for the night. I found out we lost that house about 11:30.

Seven months pregnant, a two year old, and a fire plan

My fire plan was always that I would leave anyway, because I can't fight fires and mind a two-year old at the same time.

MIA: I was seven months pregnant. I had a two-year old and I don't have any family living in the state. I didn't want to impose on anybody, so I stayed home on the day even though common sense told me I probably shouldn't have, considering our property backed onto the National Park.

We had a fire plan and a pump. I'd pulled out the pump in the morning, but I couldn't physically lift it onto the top of the water tank. My fire plan was always that I would leave. I can't fight fires and mind a two-year old at the same time. We had been part of a fire-safe community group who thought our house was eminently defensible; quite cleared, walls – mud brick.

On the day of the fire I got stuff ready, had the web on, was listening to the radio. I was exhausted and lay down.

Jim came home. He didn't tell me when he got home that he had seen the fire, the big plume of smoke – because he'd driven home from Fitzroy – and that he was worried about it. He went to lie down too, which is gobsmacking, but anyway.

Our neighbour, who is one of the park rangers, knocked on the door at about 2pm. Jim spoke to him.

He showed him the map of the fire and said, 'You've got about two hours. Do what you want to do, but I'd get out if I were you.'

We packed, dealt with a screaming two-year old who had been woken up from an afternoon nap, got the fire pump, showed Jim how to use it, because even though he was staying, he'd never really practised at all, despite my nagging him to do so. We made sure it all worked, tried to convince Jim that maybe he should come. He didn't. Talked to my neighbour, told her to leave with her young kids. Tried to convince her husband when he returned that it was actually serious and not a joke. Then I left.

Don't know what time, but I think around 3pm, and for reasons that are only becoming clear to me now, I drove out through Whittlesea. I was going to Jim's mum in Watsonia. Jim had told me the fire was in Clonbinane, which I took as being quite a lot further north than the fire indeed was. When I drove out past Toorourrong Reservoir there were probably spot fires on either side of the road, but I didn't know that.

My car got shaken by the wind as I came past the Jacks Creek Road turn-off. It was actually, now I realise, being sucked into what was the fire front, which wasn't terribly far away. I just drove off.

Not without you

She'd driven down and she had turned right up our drive. I think that's a real act of bravery, that she did that. She came up to warn us.

ELISE: Christopher had been laying a little blue stone wall and he felt that it was too hot to have the power on. I persuaded him to come and lie on the couch and watch an old movie on the telly. When he retells the story, he keeps saying that he was aware there was smoke in the distance.

By about 2 o'clock, the teletext came on the TV saying, 'Listen to bushfire warnings.' I think we were aware that over at Clonbinane there was a plume of smoke. We don't have Internet where we are so [Christopher] kept looking outside at the weather. We could see behind Mt Disappointment. The plume of smoke was like a choo-choo train just moving slowly and getting greyer and then blacker and huge.

He said, 'Elise, if the wind changes we're stuffed. I'll prepare the outside, you prepare the inside.'

From that moment the first stages [of panic] start to set in. I'm wandering up and down the house. It's only a very small house, thinking, 'What to take? What to take? What do I take?'

He came in every now and again and gave me directions. 'Pack an esky. Put the bottles of water in the fridge. Take that which is important to you.'

I'm thinking, 'Oh what's important to me? What's important? Everything's important! Oh, hang this!' I thought, 'Oh, I could take that. Why would you take winter hand knits in a bushfire? Why would you do that? I'll take some summer. No, no. Why would I take mine over preference of his?' I'm wandering up and down, 'What's important, what's important? Jewellery, photos in my bag. Okay, that's ready to go. Water's in the fridge. Make some sandwiches.'

I filled up the sinks with water. I remember the 2006 fires in Kinglake when the power went out at that time I realised we had no water and we didn't have the radio. I had been a little bit prepared, that I had a radio with batteries; so I felt very proud. [The] power went off. I've got water. I thought, 'Oh, that's good.'

It was so hot I wet my t-shirt down. By then the panic was starting to creep. Christopher got the hoses out, but the [pressure] wasn't strong enough to fill up the gutters.

He was telling me, 'Find the tennis balls to block the gutters.' We throw them around the yard for the dog.

'Where's the tennis balls?'

'There's one up the drive.'

Up the drive is [big]. We're seven acres.

There was never time for any of [the things we'd planned]. All of a sudden that wind change had happened, and black smoke just came rolling down our hill. It just came rolling down.

At that point it was full on go, you know, the adrenalin kicked in.

He screamed at me and said, because the car was packed, the dog was in there, he said, 'You get the fuck out of here!'

I said, 'Not without you.' You just have that tense moment where you know it's a bad time for an argument.

You know you can't argue. He reckons I said, 'You get that fucking chainsaw, boy!'

I must have, because he said, 'Meet me by the gate.'

In that instant too, [my friend] Cheryl had been. She'd driven down and she had turned right up our drive. I think that's a real act of bravery, that she did that. She came up to warn us. At some point my memory must have wiped that out, but now I always see that, clear as anything.

He jumped in the car.

He said, 'I'm driving.'

There was a stream of traffic coming down our way, and so he had to push his way into the traffic. At the pub, which is only a kilometre and a half up the road, there was a policeman on the road.

He [Christopher] was cursing and saying, 'Oh God, don't tell me they're doing breathos at this time!' But he wasn't.

He just said, 'Yea Sports Ground. The road to Yea is clear.'

We zoomed off. The policeman left after us.

We see people. Their car has broken down on the side of the road. You just feel, 'Oh, should we stop? No-one is stopping and we have to keep going in the traffic and what's going to happen to them?'

You could see from the side there were fires and smoke and flame and it was dark and everyone had their headlights on.

I wondered why he was thumping the steering wheel [saying], 'Come on, come on, move it!' [when] really [we were] doing 80 kilometres an hour. But he said he could see in the rear view mirror it was just behind us. It was just behind us. And we escaped to Yea.

[The] smoke was so choking. I had my bottle of water and kept sort of just breathing into it. I didn't realise that that gives you oxygen. I didn't realise, I thought it was just filtering the smoke and it felt more comfortable to breathe because it was choking. I don't know how people who smoke cigarettes could still have wanted to have a smoke [but] that's what happened.

We were listening to the radio all night. [We] didn't know what was true and what was not. At some stage in the night the army and the fire brigade all came into the Sports Ground.

I'm thinking, 'What are they doing here, shouldn't they be out fighting fires?' But it was reported on the radio it was up [to] the Yea cemetery [and] that the fire had jumped five kilometre firebreaks, 10 kilometre firebreaks! It was unbelievable.

Well, I didn't know where the cemetery was. I know the cemeteries are always on the outskirts of town, but I thought, 'They couldn't possibly let Yea [burn]. They would have to protect Yea because all the people were here.'

That was my reasoning. [We] know what happened to Marysville, but that was my reasoning.

Young mum and small kids – separated by bushfires

My kids were in [another town] and I was in Marysville. Between us was this fire coming and work said, 'You should stay ... but then I had this other massive feeling, 'No, I have to go to my children.' So I pretty well decided to take a gamble and drive to [them].

KATIE: I started work that day probably at 6.45 in the morning and we had a full day till 7 that night. We were pretty flat out. There was about four of us. One of our managers had to leave about 1pm that day because her family all lived in [a town under fire threat]. We kept working [until] we found out about the Murrindindi fire. I've grown up in the area and I could see the smoke, I could see what was going on.

Anyway, we [closed up]. I rang my mum and dad, who were in Melbourne, and said that I'm going to evacuate and advised guests to leave. We were slowly getting a bit more news. All our news was coming from people that we knew in the community; people ringing [in], friends of friends ringing in and saying there's massive ember attacks in Narbethong and such and such house was on fire.

I was standing at work and this was happening 10 km away, in a place where I've grown up. I couldn't believe it.

My kids were in [another town] and I was in Marysville. Between us was this fire coming. Work said, 'You should stay.'

I went to Marysville Primary. It was always drummed into kids, 'If there's ever a fire, go to the oval.'

I had that feeling in me, but then I had this other massive feeling, 'No, I have to go to my children.' I pretty well decided to take a gamble and drive to [them].

I was told at work to get to Buxton. We were told there were [only] a few fires in Buxton, but I just said, 'No, no good.' And, 'I'll come back if I can.' That was happening between 4 and 5 o'clock.

As I left there were a couple of small fire crews coming in, passing me. I remember the smoke was blowing directly over Marysville. I couldn't see any fire, but I could see the glow over the hill. I remember the wind that day was really unpredictable. One second it would be whirly winds; it was fierce at times; and the next minute it would be dead, no wind at all.

I remember when I left work, three or four females coming running up to me in tears saying, 'We drove through fire in Narbethong, what do we do? Where do we go?'

I said, 'We've got the Internet in [at my workplace] so they've got information. Otherwise, I've been told to seek refuge at the oval when I was little.'

I said, 'I'm going to leave, I don't feel comfortable with all this, and I'm going to go via Alex.' [I] told them which direction to go. They ended up following me, anyway.

There were tourists standing in the middle of the road when I was leaving, looking at the smoke coming, just standing there. There were no cars driving around, no police, no SES. There was no one. It was dead; it was like a ghost town. Considering it was bustling at lunchtime when I was on my break.

There's no one who knew where to go. No one knew what they were doing.

I went straight to my house where my kids were. Literally, probably about 40 minutes after, the smoke hit. It was black and that's when it all hit me. I was trying to be positive and be strong and make good decisions in the heat of the moment, and then when that all came in, I didn't know what to do.

Saving trucks and children

‘Get the trucks out because the wind’s just changed and it’s blowing the fires towards us.’ I rang a friend in Seymour, took one truck in and he took me back out, then I took the other one in.

Jessie: I went over to Diamond Creek to pick up my husband’s two boys; we have them every second weekend. I was on my way back when my mum rang me. She’s in Heathcote and her neighbour has a scanner. She’s always been worried about us living up in the bush because we were in the Ash Wednesday bushfire.

She said, ‘There’s a fire at Kilmore.’

By the time I’d got from Diamond Creek to Whittlesea, I could just see this massive cloud of smoke. By the time I got home you could almost see the flames. I quickly got my husband and went to the lookout on our hill.

A few neighbours were there as well. It wasn’t coming towards us, but we knew there was a wind change going to happen. That’s when I said to my husband that I was going to get the kids away, our two, plus his other two.

I said, ‘I don’t want them anywhere near it,’ (because of what happened to me in Ash Wednesday). I rang Mum. She met me in Seymour to take the kids.

I got back to the house. By that stage you could see flames. It was on the second hill behind the lookout and had well and truly jumped the highway. We had two interstate trucks; both were home because my husband, Tom, was doing service on them. I said to him that we had to get these trucks off the mountain. They’re our livelihood. A neighbour said he’d follow us and bring Tom back because he wanted to stay and fight. I said I’d stay with the trucks. I didn’t want to be anywhere near the fire. He wanted to stay. That’s his choice. I didn’t want to try and stop him, so I stayed with the trucks.

At about 5.00 pm Tom rang me. I was at the twin Mobil petrol stations just outside Seymour.

He said, ‘Get the trucks out because the wind’s just changed and it’s blowing the fires towards us.’

I rang a friend in Seymour, took one truck in and he took me back out, then I took the other one in. I spent the rest of the night there at the weighbridge.

The kids were still in Heathcote. Tom had rung me at 6:30 pm to say the house is gone. Then I lost contact with him. I didn’t know where he was or what was happening until about an hour later [when] he rang me from another friend’s mobile. He said he was going to try and help [friends save their house]. Then the phones cut out. I couldn’t contact him after that.

The worst thing for me was just sitting there, not being able to do anything. I wasn’t with the kids, and I wasn’t with Tom.

Evacuating – me, the three children and the pets

I made the decision to leave. It was always my plan to leave. There's no way I was sticking around in an old house with three kids through any sort of fire, let alone the fire that came over the ridge.

CATHIE: I had to drive Rick up to the depot at 3 pm. There was a big column of smoke.

I said to him 'I'm gonna pack the car, babe. I'll call you if I decide to leave.'

He said 'Do that.' He gave me a big hug and I burst into tears. I was just so scared. That was the last time I really saw him.

We evacuated, myself and the three children and the pets. We evacuated to Alexandra. I made the decision to leave. It was always my plan to leave. There's no way I was sticking around in an old house with three kids through any sort of fire, let alone the fire that came over the ridge.

We were in Alex by the time the fires impacted our town. It was always the plan to bugger off.

I didn't know whether he was alive or dead that whole night. At about 12 o'clock that night he called and was OK, but the town was on.

Me and the kids were safe in Alex and thought their Dad was safe. We just felt grateful that we had all survived. It wasn't until 1 o'clock the next day that Rick and all the survivors from Marysville all came out in convoy together.

Rick was deeply shaken by his experience, very shut down. He managed to give me a hug, but there was nothing behind it. That was pretty much the status quo since the fires.

Three kids and a friend from overseas

When I was driving away from it I can't even remember seeing the fire because all I was focused on was the little red car behind me and my daughter in the red car with my friend.

SUZANNE: On the day of the fire we got up and we did things. I didn't have air conditioning here, so I put up wet sheets on the windows. [My little boy had to have his immunisation so that he could go to kindergarten. We took him to get immunised. After that we hired some DVDs so we could just get down low, and be cool and still, in case he had a reaction to it. That day it was so hot we ended up opening up that window and sticking an air conditioner in.

We had the radio on. I was on the Internet watching the CFA website. We made some piles of [documents] in preparation.

[A friend] called me from St Andrews and said, 'Suzanne there's smoke everywhere, be careful.'

I called up my girlfriend in Yarrambat and said, 'There's a possibility I have to enact my fire plan. My fire plan is to come to your house. I'll have a tent and things like that.'

One of the girls from a Mum's Group lives in Yarrambat on five acres. I thought we'd take a tent, a camp stove – if we have to stay a few days, at least we can set up a tent.

She said, 'What are you talking about, there's no fire. Don't be stupid.'

I said, 'Evie, the fire's at Wandong and I'm not sure what's going to happen, but I need you to know to keep an eye out for me.'

She said, 'Oh my God, I've got friends in Wandong! I'm going to call them.'

I went outside, put sprinklers on the roof [and] cleaned out the gutters. I was working on my own. My friend and the kids were all in the lounge room trying to keep cool. There was too much for me to do, and I couldn't do it all.

I was watching the sky and the sky just kept getting lower and lower and lower. I thought, 'This is not good.'

I ran inside and said to Tess and Megan, 'You need to help me, I can't do it on my own. You need to come and help me clear these leaves.'

We cleared around this side of the house and that side of the house. I don't know what possessed us to do that area, but we did. I had these bamboo blinds on the outside of the window. I got those off and threw them into the shed. We just put anything that could be burnt away from the house.

We worked until 5 o'clock.

Megan said, 'You need to go in and rehydrate, you've had nothing to drink. Go and get a drink.' So I walked inside the house and the electricity just went flicker, flicker, flicker, flicker. Then it went off.

And I went, 'It's time.'

I reversed one car up to the garage and threw in a tent, a stove, woollen blankets, water, bananas, stuff for the kids, box of toys, their teddy bears. While we were packing, we said to the kids, 'Make up a pile of your favourite things.' That way it kept them entertained. The dog just followed me and knew there was something going on. By 5.30 we left here.

We into town. Megan and Tess were behind us in a car.

I said to the girls, 'Don't get out of the car. Keep the kids in here. I'm going to go and find out what's happening.'

I went to the CFA. It was chaos. Just chaos.

People were coming in. Cars were just parking all over the place, running into each other. People were hysterical. There were no trucks; nobody knew any information. I was there for, I would say, 30 seconds, and someone said, 'If you're gonna go, get out now!'

In the meantime, my phone's going off. My girlfriend from Yarrambat is now freaking out, saying, 'Get out of there! Get out of there!'

I said, 'Look Evie, keep it calm. I'm getting out, I'm making my way to you. I can't go via Whittlesea; I can't go via St Andrews; I've got to go through Yarra Glen.'

We got to the St Andrews turnoff. It was just chaos. It was like an atomic bomb had gone off here. The sky was coming down on us and as far as you could see was orange and red and getting darker and it was getting lower and lower. I just wanted to try and get a tarred road that had wide access that we could travel quickly on. So we took Mt Slide Road.

I sort of knew what was happening, but in your mind you tell yourself not to think about that. We just sped to the Melba Highway. I had my older daughter and a friend from Germany in the car behind me and had to slow down on a bend so my girlfriend—she had never driven on the left-hand side before – so she didn't lose it on this sweeping corner. I was trying to get to Yarra Glen to go back to Eltham, but we couldn't. I couldn't even get out onto the road; there were so many cars that were fleeing.

This woman just put her head out the window and said, 'Get out of here!'

We looked over and the fire was there. All of a sudden I had four lives that I was responsible for, and my own. I shook uncontrollably. I had the little ones with me and Megan and Tess were in the car behind me. I drove with the masses – 140 kilometres per hour.

When I was driving away from it, I can't even remember seeing the fire. All I was focused on was the little red car behind me and my daughter in the red car with my friend. Every now and then I'd get away from them and I'd have to slow down a bit to wait for her to catch up.

And then for a moment I didn't know where to go. I didn't know where to go to Healesville; I didn't know where to go to Yea. The only thing I could think of was that in 2006 the fires came through the Glenburn area and there were bare paddocks where it had burnt out. Plus they put in the pipeline, so I knew there had to be a flat spot, maybe even a tunnel ditch, which we could shelter in. So we drove there.

We drove; it was windy. We had our high-beam on, hazard lights. We had the air conditioner on because we couldn't breathe the air, it was just too thick with smoke. Everyone was running for their own life. You didn't get time to stop and think.

We got to Yea. It was like entering the twilight zone. People had already set up on the nature strips. There were horses, cows, dogs, sheep, goats. Cars were a kilometre down the road queued up for fuel. The Red Cross was set up—how they knew I've got no idea—it was just like walking into the twilight zone.

We walked into the football field clubroom, whatever it was, and the Red Cross ladies were there. They gave us drinks and kind of just took control. They registered us so that if anyone was looking for us they knew where we were. They fed the children, because by then it was six, six thirty.

They were talking about building containment lines around Yea. It was terrifying. Once the full front of the fire hit here in Kinglake and St Andrews and Hazeldene and that area, the sky turned black. We were all in the clubrooms and the blackness was upon us very quickly. We couldn't breathe. We couldn't breathe inside the clubroom; it was too hot and it was too smoky.

The kids were wound up. They stayed that way until about 2 o'clock in the morning when they fell in our arms and we sat out on the oval. It started to get a little bit cooler, but ash fell on us. People just 'meeted and greeted' and told stories. We grieved, because by now we heard about people that had died.

FIGHTING

Instinct, spirituality, persistence and motivation

Something told me, and I didn't even think about it, something said, 'You've got two-stroke in the back and it's in a pump can.' I've never been in the bloody back ... I don't know how I knew that, I don't even know if two-stroke works in a normal petrol pump, I have no idea. As it turns out it worked for three and a half hours or more.

GINA: I kept taking photographs, kept checking the website, constantly doing that, because I kind of like the weather. It's one of my bookmarks on my toolbar. I'm always checking the temperature, not through any caution, I'm just very interested in it and I kept checking.

My eldest daughter and my son-in-law and two grandkids dropped in. They lived off the mountain, but were going to be moving up here fairly soon. They've called in on the way to his mother's 60th birthday and she had the cake she'd made in the boot of the car, all packed in ice because it was so hot, of course. We'd taken it in and put it inside. They stayed for a little while.

They said: 'We heard on the radio that there was something in Yarra Glen, some spot fires or something in Yarra Glen.'

I thought that was very weird. My grandson glued himself to the telly. They (the grandkids, a girl and a boy) were 12 and 14 at the time. The power went out at about twenty past four. In the meantime, I'm taking photos of the sky looking red, 'cause there's nothing on the website, no one said anything about this area. It's in Kilmore and then later in Wallan. That's when I kept checking.

When the power went out I had a battery radio.

My daughter said, 'This is probably a good time to get Zach away from the telly. We'll go now just in case they close off the road to Whittlesea.'

As you might know if you're only on tank water, and if the power goes out, you don't have power for your pump, so you need your generator pump, your petrol driven pump. I said to my husband, 'I don't think (the petrol pump) is full enough. What if a fire does come from embers or something? I should go up to the garage and top it up a bit more before they shut at five o'clock.'

As I was getting in my car to follow my daughter and son-in-law and grandkids up the road, the neighbour ran to the fence and started yelling,

'There's a fire coming up the hill from St Andrews!'

I said, 'How do you know?'

'My mate from the CFA radioed through on the CB.' And he jumped in his car and raced up the road to get his horses. I found out later he'd gone to get his horses to bring them down closer to home.

I said to my daughter, 'Don't worry about Ted, he's a drama queen,' because there was no evidence there was fire anywhere in the area.

I looked at the sky, no smell of smoke. Yes, there was red, but it was down from St Andrews or Strathewen way. I thought I had my bearings slightly wrong. I remembered in previous years that even in Melbourne the sky was red and the sun was red coming through when the fires were up northern Victoria.

I said, 'No, I'm wrong, I'm wrong.'

I took photo after photo every five minutes to see the change, 'No I'm wrong.' I decided to trust my instincts from then on.

I jumped in the car to get the petrol, followed my daughter up the road. She stopped at the end of our road and turned around.

'What are you doing?' I said.

Through the window of the car she said, 'We can see flames! We can see flames!'

I thought, 'Why's she dancing around in the car like this, waving, waving?'

'I can see flames from St Andrews.'

'You can't, because there's three mountain ridges between,' I said. We can see the city from the top of our street, but there's dips and valleys going down.

I said, 'If you can see the flames from St Andrews, they'd have to be a hundred feet high so don't be stupid.'

'That's true,' she said.

I said, 'Go down and help your Dad put the gutter plugs in all around, fill the gutters up just in case.'

I know that was between quarter to five and five to five. It was in a ten minute gap, because from the time our neighbour warned us, when I said he was a drama queen (of course now I feel bad for saying that), it was seven minutes later that we were fighting the fire in our bush at the back.

I'm looking at the sky thinking, 'But it's blue. Look at all this, it's blue. Yes, there's that plume, from the north-west rising straight up that looks like a volcano plume, but it's so very far away but I think it's the sun shining red because of it.'

Then the sun sort of peaked through and I said, 'See,' and took a photo of it. 'You go and help your Dad, I'm going up to the garage before they shut to top up the petrol can, so we've got enough fuel.'

I said to [my husband], 'Go to the front gate, have your wallet ready, leave it open. I haven't got time to jump out,' because of the dogs, you know. 'You leave the gate open for me, I'm going to the garage.'

He was standing at the front gate with it shut, just standing. He was like he had no input from anything. It was like he was frozen.

I swore at him. I think I said, 'Is there something fucking wrong with you?' Which was really cruel, I know, but I had to snap him out of it. I wanted to hit him to snap him out of it.

'Open the gate! Where's your wallet?' He didn't have it, so I flew off up the road without it.

As I got to the garage there were people running everywhere in Kinglake in the main street. There was an SES truck (or perhaps it was a CFA patrol car) blocking off the road down to St Andrews with people standing there looking bewildered. Not warning anyone, but just blocking the road off, so they'd obviously been told to do it.

I got to the garage, got my petrol can, wondered why people were running all the way down the street. It was a weird scene. There's cattle in a paddock between the police station and the pizza shop and garage. The cattle were pushing against the fence doing that horrible mooing sound that they do when they're in an abattoir truck, like that real mooing, jostling sound. I thought, 'that's weird.'

I jumped out of my car, ran into the garage.

Richard came running out going, 'I've got no power!' and waving.

Now something, *something* told me—okay, I do have to go into the instinctual bit here—something told me, and I didn't even think about it, something made me say, 'You've got two-stroke in the back and it's in a pump can!' I've never been in the bloody back, but I said it anyway!

'You've got two-stroke, it's out the back in the pump can. That'll do.'

I don't know how I knew that. I don't even know if two-stroke works in [a] normal petrol pump. I have no idea. As it turns out it worked for three and a half hours fighting the main fire front and then off and on through the night to attack flare-ups.

So he goes, 'Oh, all right.'

I went in and he filled it up. I didn't have my purse with me and no hubby's wallet. I said to the garage guy, 'Pay you tomorrow,' because I didn't have money.

He said, 'Yep, pay me tomorrow.' Well, he wasn't there tomorrow.

Anyway, I jumped back in my car after getting the fuel. I still could not acknowledge what was happening because the website had said it was in Wallan. I was stupid relying on that and relying on the radio. Surely, if there was anything in our area, surely there'd be something on the radio, surely they'd come around with the siren sounding like they did in 2006. That wasn't even a fast fire, that was a slow moving fire.

They would come around regularly and say, 'Get your fire plan into action. There is a chance you might have to go, *blah blah blah*,' all of that. That didn't happen.

And then I saw this huge thing rolling towards me. I would call it this low, horizontal tornado of blacky-grey stuff and it was filling this paddock. It was 15 acres wide or more, coming from Bald Spur Road or Grandview Crescent down towards where I was in the car leaving the garage and there were all these sparkly red things in it. It was all so fast from the time of the neighbour's alert, less than ten minutes, so it still didn't click it's a fire.

It's rolling towards me. All of a sudden I just went, 'Oh, shit!' and swung the car around and raced down to home, which only took me 30 seconds because I drove over a hundred Ks an hour, and kept looking in my rear view mirror. The black ball was behind me; the whole blackness was behind me. I was going so fast and it was catching up to me. Two seconds earlier it was a kilometre back and then it was not far behind my car with a sense of it chasing me. Well, it wasn't chasing me, it was chasing everyone, but that's what it felt like.

By the time I swung into my driveway, my daughter and granddaughter were screaming, 'Come on! Get in! Get in!' as if I thought I didn't know it was behind me.

The next day they said, 'We saw it behind you.'

I said, 'I know, I was watching it in my rear view mirror.'

I wasn't scared, it was more like I jumped into auto-mode but it was bewildering, like a crazy dream you can't make sense of. I remember checking the time, checking everything around me. I locked into a different zone and everything cut off except vision, everything else. I didn't hear the sound of the fire. Many others said how loud it was and my husband lost half his hearing from fighting it up close, but I didn't hear it, I did not feel it, I did not know embers were going down my back. I didn't know for ten days that I had spot burns all the way down my back.

[My] vision was important and it cut everything else off. My adrenalin did it; my physical body did it. I didn't feel hot and it was a stinker; it was a shocker of a day. I did not feel the heat of the fire. I remember later in the night when it was less frantic I was troubled with what felt like sizable pieces of charcoal under my eyelids, but I didn't feel them at the fire-fighting time. Of course, every now and then I would hear what I needed to hear, more as an alert, I suppose, but I shut my hearing off instinctively when I didn't need it.

My eldest daughter, she's (a trauma department nurse) very matter of fact and brusque in the face of emergencies as she sees them daily, but during our own crisis she started dancing around, knowing her kids were inside and in danger.

'Oh, what are we going to do?' she was yelling close into my ear. We were running in and out to the kids, checking and giving them instructions.

'Right, you get the dogs on the lead. Zach don't go in to the toilet.' I just happened to know everything instantly.

I said, 'Zach, don't go to the toilet in there because it's broken.' It wasn't broken. I said, 'Go to the one in Nanna's room.'

I did that because I knew it was furthest from the fire and if he went to the toilet in that room he would see the Coonara coming. That was how a friend of mine had later described looking out through her windows before her house burnt down. She was right – it was

exactly like that; like looking into a Coonara wood fire coming through the back. By the time I got in my driveway it was already in our yard, it was so fast.

Instinct just took over. We're trying to belt out embers everywhere and then we realised, 'Oh, it's pointless, there's about 30 million of them!' They were blasting horizontally like spears on fire.

She's dancing around in the driveway, 'Oh, the kids!'

I said, 'Stop! Stop being a mother and be a nurse!'

And she just went, 'Yep' and went into a different mode. Just like that. Like a switch flicked on.

'Stop being a mother. Be a nurse.' And she went inside knowing exactly what to do and she did it very well.

We kept Caitlyn, our eldest granddaughter, on the phone to triple 0. Couldn't get through, couldn't get through. That took maybe 25 minutes. Then she got onto someone.

We said, 'Watch out the window and do this (waving) and let us know when they answer. We can't wait for them to answer. Just keep the dogs on the lead in case we have to jump the fence to [our neighbours'] place down the hill.'

Zach was on the couch huddled up in the foetal position in a blanket, stinking hot but he's in a blanket saying, 'Nanna, Nanna, the house is gonna burn down!'

I didn't say 'I promise' because I couldn't break a promise, but I said, 'It will not burn down, I know it will not burn down, Zach, but you're not meant to be there you're meant to be in Nanna's room' – 'cause it's furthest away.

I knew that if the main, largest trees close to the back of the house came down that's where they'd land – on that couch.

(It's the most awful thing but something told me, all within seconds, as much as I adored my husband, we'd lived a good life and our grandson was only starting his, so I made my poor, choking hubby keep one of the fire hoses on those particular trees even though he was clearly suffering the heat and smoke. I pressured him back to that area knowing I might well be saying goodbye to the man I met as a boy in high school.)

I kept running inside every five or 10 minutes to the kids and so did my daughter. We'd take it in turns so they weren't panicking. I grabbed my car and turned it around and shone it in the window so they could see, because it was as black as a moon-less night. It had turned black soon after the smoke-tornado thing had reached our property.

My husband and Jeremy—Jeremy is my son-in-law—we have two fire hoses to our fire pump. Jeremy guarded all along the water tank so we wouldn't lose that, and my husband hosed the trees that were overhanging. Very big trees overhanging our roof that were taller than our whole house is wide. Had they come in [the trees], that's the end of it, off you go. But we couldn't evacuate anyway because everything, every blade of grass, in all directions was on fire – it's no exaggeration to say that even short-cut grass burnt down into the roots and made the dirt appear to be on fire. Many people experienced that.

It was black. I could hear horses squealing, a horrible sound, and one was a mare with a foal. There was nothing I could do, nothing. And the cattle—the farmer next door, his cattle were all cramming under a row of pines – I couldn't actually see them but I heard them (when I decided to stand to listen) to them doing that desperate, huddled sound.

I had to actually cut off from them. I couldn't allow myself to care about them, which is not like me, because I'll usually save an animal. I wouldn't leave my dogs, for example. And then all of a sudden I saw a rabbit dart out from a burning pile of something in our yard—a wood heap—and it was on fire. The poor bloody little rabbit was on fire, squealing. As it shot off and across into the paddock the rabbit made the only bit of paddock not on fire, catch on.

The flaming rabbit ignited where this mare and foal was. I couldn't worry about that. I kept running to Rob and putting wet towels around him because we knew we had to keep these trees from burning through to stop them dropping into where the kids were.

Jeremy did an amazing job with guarding the water tank and putting out the neighbour's shed even when the fence next to it caught on fire. [Our neighbours] from next door were in New Zealand with their family at the time.

Before our neighbour had left, he said, 'If there's a fire'—this is weeks before—'if there's a fire save my shed. Let the house burn, it's insured.'

Brooke and I were running backwards and forwards to [their] place putting out embers around their bargeboards.

We're putting out the things and we get over there and we go, 'We can't go back and get water anymore.'

We'd been fighting this fire for at least an hour and we knew the guys had most of it under control and the kids were right.

I thought, '[They've] got a whole fridge full of Coke. Now, I did know that, there's nothing psychic in that, he's a Coke addict. I thought, 'We'll use that.'

So we've pulled out his slabs of Coke and started putting fires out with that. We couldn't start up his fire pump because it's locked in the garage; you can't do that in two seconds. We just had to use what we had.

As we were running back I still couldn't acknowledge how bad this was. I still took photos. I had my camera in my bra and took photos every couple of minutes because later on I didn't think anyone would believe how big this was. I didn't know. I knew it was up to Kinglake, 'cause I'd driven from there to there, but I thought, no one's going to believe how big this was. It's fascinating. So I was taking photos. I didn't think at that time that I was going to die. I was certain I would be fine. I felt as though I was 'outside' myself – like viewing it all from somewhere else. I did think the others could die, though.

When I thought they could be killed was when (finally) Caitlyn got through to someone on triple 0. My daughter, who was now in nurse mode, had said on the phone to them, I heard her, she said, 'All right. No, no, that's all right. I know you can't get to us.'

There was something she said that let me know that they couldn't do anything. 'They' meaning Emergency Services.

She said, 'We just need to let you know to look for six people.'

I thought, 'She thinks we're all going to die. No, we're not. I'm not.' And then, because of her words, it sort of hit me.

That's when I thought we were gone. The kids weren't there at the time. She must have scanned around; they must have gone to another room before she said that.

'Look for six people.'

While we were still putting [the neighbours'] house out, the local real estate agent, his house up on the corner, just blew up.

I said to Brooke, 'This house is burning down, and so-and-so's house. There's houses burning; I can't believe this.' I knew the neighbours on the other side of us were all right because they've got every bit of fire-fighting equipment in the world, but it's a wonder they didn't burn. It's a miracle they didn't burn down – a little weatherboard house backing right onto the same bushland as us.

I thought, 'This is actually really shitty, isn't it? This is bad.'

At one stage, when I'd gone inside, my husband came running in through the back door.

'I can't, I can't do it anymore. We have to let it go, I can't do it.'

I think he was having an asthma attack. I could see there was really nowhere else to run to safely, so I pushed him back out. For months later, he was angry at me for doing that but I think without him going back to it things would have turned out far worse for us all.

I went, 'No, no, no! Of course we can!'

'But you've got bubbles on your face!' he said.

I said, 'It's just water.' It wasn't water. I didn't know it was blistering. I didn't feel anything. I had a dome of cold over me. I just had a dome of cold. It was like I was in a fridge.

He'd said, 'I can't do this.'

And I said, 'You can, you can, you can! You have to! Zach's on the couch. You have to!'

That's when I thought we might all die.

I don't want him dying through my fire plan

'We're going to make a run for it!' The bloody paddock had caught alight and the hay bales were alight, and there was fire there, fire there. I said, 'Where the —?' We just ran to the next paddock, and got the dogs in there.

NERIDA: My Dad had always said if you get stuck and can't get out of a fire get down the paddock. I mentally pictured that because I lived on my own with the dogs, so that was the only thing that I ever thought would happen. It was never [going to] be get in the car and get out; it was 'get down the paddock with the dogs'. I never for one minute doubted that that would be a safe option.

Mark came up early that day. He wasn't working—that's the ex-partner. I got sent home from work early because it was so hot.

I said, 'We'll eat outside, it'll be too hot to eat inside, the power will probably go off. On the off-chance we have to get out, we'll have tea early because you're better off driving, if you do decide to drive, on a full stomach.'

We're watching the smoke, we'd just had tea.

I said to him, 'Look at that. It's heading down to St Andrews.'

Not being awful, you sort of think, 'Well, good' because it was half a K from my place four years before. He could see a plume of smoke—his eyesight's much better than mine—and said, 'I don't know about that.' So we went to tell the neighbours we were going to check it out.

I had my bag with me. I'd already set up the leads and everything for the dogs. We got to the road to tell the neighbours we were going to check the smoke out, and I heard it, and said, 'What's that bloody noise? It's the fire! It's the bloody fire!' It was like you just knew it was about a K away but the roar was — Oh, man!

At that very minute the neighbour drove in. He'd been round his son's place in Kinglake West. He said, 'The school's on fire.'

'What, the Kinglake West school?,' I said.

'No,' he said, 'the school up here. You can't get out!' It was just bedlam, and you just knew whatever this thing is, you've got about three minutes to move your butt.

I said, 'We've got to get the dogs out.' The neighbour wanted some petrol—Mark had some petrol in the back of the ute—and so Mark went down there. He always diddle-farts about everything. I just screamed at him.

I said, 'Get up here! We've got to get the dogs out!' That's what we did. We got the dogs out.

It went pitch black. Everywhere you looked there were flames.

I said, 'This is what hell would be like.'

We just started walking. There was all this wind and leaves and stuff blowing. It was just weird. You just thought, I'm walking the walk, you know, I'm walking the walk that I never thought I'd have to do.

I thought, 'I'll give him the option of going to the neighbours because I thought, 'I don't want him dying through my fire plan.'

'Do you want to go to the other neighbours?' I said. We'd never ever discussed it with them.

We got down there and there were flames, there were things flying into the bush. They didn't know we were going to come down. They've got a dog; I've got three dogs. One of my dogs will kill anything. Mark went in and he came out, thank heavens.

I said, 'No, we're just going in the paddock'. And we went in the paddock.

The bush about 90 metres away was alight. It's probably about three acres and you knew that was a serious situation. You're there in a t-shirt with the dogs, there's these hay bales.

I said, 'We're going to have to hide behind the hay bales.'

There's nothing else to hide behind. So that's what we did. He was watching thank heavens. Then I heard this voice yelling. I didn't even know who it was—you're so off in a funny place—and he said, 'We're going to make a run for it!' The bloody paddock had caught alight and the hay bales were alight, and there was fire there, fire there.

I said, 'Where the —?'

He'd been watching. I'm so grateful he was there; I'll give him that. If he hadn't been there I would have had to be watching, but it's not easy with three dogs because they don't all get along. We just ran to the next paddock, and got the dogs in there. The clover was really green, there was smouldering over there, but you just knew, 'I think we're going to be all right here' which is what my Dad had probably imagined.

The first paddock must have had dry grass in it and the hay, and the thing just was going at such a rate of knots. In a way it was a blessing because it burned that paddock so quickly that probably five or 10 minutes later you could have sat [there].

I said that to him, I said, 'If this one catches alight we can sit in that one,' because it had all burned.

We essentially ended up right in the centre of these paddocks just watching Rome burn all around you. Kaboom! Oh, I tell you! But you're in such a state that you're sort of protected by your adrenalin. Do you know what I mean? You're sitting there and you're thinking—I'll be honest with you, we had 15-minute intervals where you knew you were completely safe. It was like, 'I wish I had the bloody telly here, this is going to be a long, drawn out experience.'

It sounds facetious, but I said to him at one stage, 'Have you got a light?' You know, to have a smoke.

He said, 'Well, there's plenty around.'

It's really weird because you sort of get to a place where you keep thinking, 'I think I'm safe here.' But you didn't know what was going on with your neighbours because things were blowing up.

We just stayed there. The worst thing is how thirsty you were; it was beyond belief. I was thinking I might even take the torch, go to the pump, which I know, used to leak. Mark went up to the top of the hill but he couldn't go past the paddock. I don't know what the hell he was doing, but he wasn't bloody doing anything. I'm up there with the dogs and he came

back and he hadn't got any water; he hadn't done anything. He hadn't gone out of the paddock. It was sort of dying down by this stage and theoretically he should be able to—I don't know—go and see what's going on. But he didn't, and in the end I got sick of it and said, 'Well, I'll go.' So that's what I did.

As far as I was concerned the worst of it was over. This is about three and a half hours later. It was getting dark, it was cold, and you think, well you've got to bloody get some water for the dogs, and for ourselves. He hailed the neighbour. It was just incredibly good luck the neighbour must have hooned down to his brother-in-law and come back, so we got some water for the dogs, but honestly you wouldn't drink it, you just wouldn't, because it was out of the dam.

I thought, 'No, someone's got to be bloody alive out there, there's got to be somebody alive from this thing.'

You couldn't see the neighbours. From the lie of the land, you couldn't see.

I think we realised they were OK because he said, 'Oh, the bad news is you've lost the house.' I knew the house was alright.

'I'll know when it burns down because I'll smell the patchouli!' I said.

There was stuff drifting in the wind that you knew was your house.

I just thought, 'I'm just not going to watch'. And then you knew the sheds were alright.

I thought, 'Well, I suppose I've still got the dogs.'

Facing mortality

We fought it right up to the front gate, saved the neighbours on both sides of us, and saved their houses.

E BONY: I was working on the day of the fires and saw smoke from behind [our neighbours'] and immediately called my partner and told him that it was not a cloud. We went into bushfire action. He was fantastic. We did everything we had to. Frank had to race down to St Andrew's to pick up my son because we didn't want him not with us – that was about 4pm. Crazy, when you think back.

We just did all the things – rake leaves, put on the sprinklers; we had everything going. Then the power went out. We made the decision to stay because we didn't know which direction to drive. There was no information out there. We were afraid of driving into it.

I said 'I'm just going to get the kids and get out of here.'

'He said, 'Where are you going to go?' Good point. We didn't know which way to go. So we just stayed put.

We fought it right up to the front gate, saved the neighbours on both sides of us, and saved their houses. We had one neighbour who stayed, one old guy who wouldn't even leave his front verandah. Lucky we were there or he wouldn't have made it. He had a generator – at

least we had electricity, both of us, because we had a power lead going across. We still had power. We all had water. That's the biggest problem and that's what needs to be looked at in a small community. The fact is, when the power goes, you have no water.

Both my older sons, my 14 year old and my 15 year old, were out there fighting with mops and buckets and spades and rakes. They came out rather empowered because they faced their mortality.

My 15 year old son said, 'I always wanted to face my mortality.'

I said, 'You've done it now.'

They've come out quite strong.

Fighting fires in a back brace 4pm to 4am

Six weeks before, I'd had a spinal fusion. I was still wearing a back brace and not supposed to be lifting anything or doing anything or driving. I was getting the mops and buckets and hoses and generator and everything prepared – and lifting.

MONICA: My husband and I had been down in town shopping. We came back and saw a fire, or smoke, way over Kilmore way. We got home, checked the Internet. It didn't seem too big, bad or monstrous, and we thought it was a fair way away. During the afternoon we could see the smoke and were wondering how close it was, but the updates weren't there.

My husband [works in a nearby town] and had left the keys in his pocket. [He] decided to go [there to] put the keys back, probably around two o'clock in the afternoon. He and my youngest son were turned back at a roadblock. My husband found another way down.

My son was saying, 'We've got to go home, there's a fire coming. We've got to be with Mum and help.' He was 18, just got his licence, bought his car the week before. That's the car they were in.

My other son, Martin, was at home with me.

Douglas, my husband, said, 'No, we've got to go down. I'll get into strife at work if we don't.' They've got spare keys at work, but he insisted on going down.

He got my son to drive him across as far as Yarra Glen and back with the fire on both sides of the car.

Meanwhile, my other son and I were up here watching the fire front go across the back of our property. We were preparing for the fire; getting our fire plan into action.

Six weeks before I'd had a spinal fusion. I was still wearing a back brace and not supposed to be lifting anything or doing anything or driving. I was getting the mops and buckets and hoses and generator and everything prepared – and lifting.

The front went across the back of the place at the back fence line. We had cleared, and we'd been watering to keep the place moist and reduce the risk. I had the sprinklers on the house. The next-door neighbour hadn't cleared his property, so the fire came up alongside [our] property. I was out there from about 4 pm to 4 am with the hose.

At about 9 pm I spoke to my husband. He was at the roadblock at Whittlesea. He convinced a policeman to let him back up to get me out. He said once he got past the roadblock, he wasn't going back down again; he was coming up to stay up. So it was three of us stuck up there. The other son was left at the roadblock with his father's drivers' licence in his hand. Apparently, about 11 o'clock at night he was taken to the Relief Centre and phoned one of his friends and asked if he could stay there for the night.

He [my husband] came back and took over – just: 'Do this! Do that! This isn't good enough! That isn't good enough! You haven't done this properly! You haven't done that properly!' Which is fairly sad. We just continued fighting the fire until about four in the morning when we went and lay down.

We were woken at six o'clock. The helicopter that was airlifting people out. We went for a walk to have a look and see what we could see. We went down to the main road and just as we got there, there was the convoy of vehicles leaving. We were watching the fires lifting up the power lines so buses and ambulances and things could go under. It was strange; there was one little kid on the first bus who waved at us so we waved back. Then everybody in every seat on the bus, and the next, waved at us. They were all waving. It was just incredible.

One of my main concerns was to try and contact our son who was down in town still. I didn't know where he was. I phoned one of his friends I thought he might be with. We had to drive until we got the signal on the mobile, because that was the only communication. We were driving around and I just yelled at my husband to stop when I got the signal, which he did. We phoned this friend and he wasn't there, so they phoned around other friends and got the number that we could phone.

He was [worried about us]. He still can't stand the sound of a helicopter. He said he was down in Doreen just watching the glow of orange all night. The family he was with tried to distract him. He said they took him to Bunnings, just to do something.

He said he felt like screaming at people, 'Don't you know what's happening? Why are you behaving so normally?'

It was around that time that my phone call came through. I got onto his friend because my son's phone had died.

I said, 'Can I talk to Adam? It's his Mum.'

Apparently Adam fell to the floor; he was just so relieved to hear from us. That was about 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock Sunday morning.

Gradually you realise the fire's not going to pass you by

I sat in my chair like a dog in a car watching him, just expecting him to drop dead from the smoke. Or be burnt. I was just frozen. I couldn't do

anything other than just go from room to room and watch him. I couldn't help.

ANDREA: We'd prepared for the fire during the week knowing it was going to be a terrible day. We were up at five o'clock that morning. I was out on the mower, just compelled to get out of bed, on the ride-on mower and mowed the back lawn to dirt, mowed the drive to dirt. You just kind of knew it was going to be a terrible day. Our house is positioned such that we've a 360-degree view. With the first fires in the morning we watched them from Wallan and Wandong, so we were in a high state of alert from whatever time they started in the morning.

I didn't think the fire was going to come to us, because we'd had a fire two years previously and we'd done the same thing. So again from our place, looking north, we started to see the fire burning at Wandong at whatever time that was and then it was just the whole day of escalating anticipation.

We had all our fire stuff ready, the baths were filled, the towels, all that kind of stuff. We were listening to the radio and then the power goes off. It started to become, what I would say, is real, because you're listening to the radio going, 'Oh, it's at Wallan. It's at here. It's at there.'

Then all of a sudden they were saying, 'The fire's at Whittlesea! The fire's at Strathewen!'

And you think, 'Shit!'

We don't have any children. [My husband and I] were just watching and waiting and watching and waiting. And then you started to hear reports, 'Six people have been killed in Kinglake'.

I was just like, 'How could this possibly happen?'

Or, 'Six people were killed in Strathewen' or wherever it was, and you're just incredulous and you're thinking, 'How could this happen? This can't happen, this can't happen.'

And then you're hearing reports of more people being killed and the news is becoming more chaotic and the skies are becoming filled with smoke.

Then the sense of uncontrolled panic sets in, but it's a calm panic. You're not running around like a chook without your head, but you're just kind of going, 'Shit! We're in deep shit.' Everybody's in deep shit and nobody's going to come and help. You couldn't contact anyone, and we're quite isolated on our property.

That day I'd arranged to have probably a dozen of my friends come. I rang them early in the morning and said, 'Look I really don't think you guys should come today.'

They said, 'Oh no, it'll be fine, it's only a bit of hot weather.' You know, they were going to drive on the road from Whittlesea.

I rang a few times and said, 'I really don't want you to come.'

And they said, 'No, it's only a bit of heat.'

Eventually, I insisted and went, 'Don't come!'

As it turned out, had they been on the road they could have been killed, people were just killed on that road.

Gradually, gradually you realise the fire's not going to pass you by. You're going to be in it.

By this time 28 people are dead and the level of chaos has risen. I don't know what time it was but then we were watching this just enormous—I reckon it was going to 38,000 feet—this *huge* cloud. Literally, you're a small person and the cloud's just going like this over you and you can see flames up into it. Gradually you start to hear explosions. You hear that sound of the train. We were standing out looking south, probably five or six metres from our back door, and all the birds come that are dying! We can hear our neighbours screaming. It's just terrible!

The smoke hit and we couldn't find the back door. Neither of us had taken a breath. I thought we were going to die before we got to the back door, it was that quick. You could not see your own hand. You run blindly and you don't know where the house is.

We did get to the back door; it was only five metres. Had everything shut to that side of the house. By this time, the bush is all on fire.

We just went, 'Shit, we'd better just stay inside.'

The wind was blowing directly from behind the house. There's no garden up to the house. We kept nothing around the house, so basically the fire just jumped over the house. All the embers and everything just set the paddock on fire and basically jumped the house. We stayed inside long enough—I don't even know how long it was— until my husband was ready to go outside. We had fire-fighting equipment and stuff and he went out to fight the fire, there were trees near the house. I was just frozen.

I sat in my chair like a dog in a car watching him, expecting him to drop dead from the smoke. Or be burnt. I was just frozen. I couldn't do anything other than just go from room to room and watch him. I couldn't help.

The most intense time passed. I went outside and put a few fires out on the porch and stuff like that. We had some animals, some pigs – we'd put our geese in a horse float on the menage, which was made of sand – and we just let our pigs go out of their paddock. Their paddock was completely burned; all the stumps and things were on fire. They were all right, they'd just gone and knocked over the rubbish bins, waited for the fire to pass them, then went back in their paddock. Pigs are fantastic, that's all they did, 'I'll eat the garbage and go back to bed.'

My husband was up all night fighting the fire and I just slept. I got on my mattress and kind of went, this is so much stimulation that my body just shut down. I couldn't do anything, was really just sleepy. We stayed home, isolated for, I can't remember how long. It might have been one or two days, simply because the place was still on fire. You'd put stuff out and five minutes later the wind blows. You just couldn't leave.

I think at that time maybe I'd rung one of my neighbours just to find out that she was okay. And the people that were screaming, I went over to see them. They were still alive. We just sort of checked on a couple of local people, but we didn't leave the property.

Getting back to save the place

... There were already a couple of houses gone, and people died across the road. So we just left the car there, jumped out and ran across the hill.

LIZA: It was one of the kids' birthdays and we had people over on that day. I think one of the neighbours told us, because we didn't see it until it hit the top of the hill in front. My sister-in-law took one of the kids and took off. My mum and sister were here and they took one of the other kids and went. So there was me, Ben—that's my partner—and our eldest son here. We started getting out the fire pumps and packing up the car and, I don't know, [the fire] took nine minutes to go from the top of the hill to the bottom. It just went like that.

We packed animals in the car. The 15 year old took the truck that was packed up with tools and whatever, and him and I left. We left Ben here, and, of course, we couldn't get back.

We dropped everything off just the other side of Whittlesea, and kept trying to ring Ben. We tried a few times to get back where it was blocked off with police then went around the back way. We just sort of lied our way through the police blocks and got back in the back way. We couldn't get back down our road because I couldn't contact him on the phone.

After a couple of hours he [my husband] got through to me and said, 'If you can get back we probably will be able to save the place.'

We got to the end of the road here and they wouldn't let us through. There were police and CFA. They said there was no use them coming up here. There were already a couple of houses gone, and people died across the road. We just left the car there and jumped out and ran across the hill. We came across that way.

We got to the hill just above the house. We could see under all the smoke that the house was still here, and we came back. He [Ben] was down there, collapsed, still trying to fit fire hoses together.

He was drunk as anything when we left, so I don't know how he did it. It was like some super-human thing, but he kept it all along the fence lines. He had three big fire hoses going.

He'd been at it for going on three hours then. And he'd fallen; he'd slipped around the side here 'cause it started to get muddy with all the water. He slipped and fell on his back. Those bloody fire pumps are heavy and he was carrying two of them around at once. Everything's big or heavy. We helped him drag a few more hoses around. He was trying to stop it getting to the goat house and the shedding down the bottom there, so we just finished all that off. It was terrifying.

A view of Mt. Disappointment

I called people that afternoon, because where I am I could see it. I had the view ... We could see it hit [the road] take out the back of our property and our neighbours'. We were on the phone telling them where to be and to get inside. About 20 minutes ... later Mt Disappointment came over the top of us so we had the two fire fronts.

NINA: My sister Davin was there. I called my partner, Carl, all day and asked him to come home.

And he's like, 'Don't be silly.' He's like 'I'm listening to the radio, it's still in Kilmore, rah rah rah rah.'

When it was going over our heads, the radio said it was still in Kilmore. He made it home, I think, 10 minutes before they actually shut the road.

We just rushed around, I suppose. We had our little tank of air, we had generators, and we were getting our hoses inside and doing the whole thing, trying to get ready. We'd done our fire plan. The plan was to be inside when the fire went over.

My sister had decided to come up. I had 19 horses. My dad had come at one o'clock and taken my kids down town to my brother's farm in Yarra Glen, which ended up catching fire, which was horrible. Really traumatised my oldest daughter especially – she was just hysterical.

We got a phone call as we've run in the house. It's hit my place the same time as Yarra Glen. You can't get onto 000 or anyone and we lost our towers. We lost our phone over the next few hours. We could get texts through, but that was about it. At this stage we couldn't even get out of the house.

I called people that afternoon because where I am I could see it. I had the view.

In the afternoon I had DSE ring [to] say it's going up Mt Disappointment.

'You need to get out and if you're going get out, or just be ready.'

But we could see the whole thing; we could see the whole thing come. We could see it hit [the road] take out the back of our property and our neighbours'. We were on the phone telling them where to be and to get inside. About 20 minutes or half an hour later, Mt Disappointment came over the top of us, so we had the two fire fronts.

To see the enormity of the smoke, it was like an atom bomb, the way it grew. And to run in the house, I've got a tiny house, and that first instinct when we've run in and I turned around, and I've just looked at my house and thought, 'What were we thinking? We are going to die!' I think I even said that. Amazingly enough, the wind changed at the right time, but all of my property [was burnt] except every horse paddock and my house. The wind just changed at the right time. Don't ask me how, but it did.

After that we went outside. We waited 'til we could see a little bit. We knew that the major fire front was over the top of us and started putting everything out. Just the same, went

down to our cars – we had cars in the paddock – we’d planned that was where we were going. We’ve got a cleared property and see, the whole thing was that was still untouched where we had the cars next to the horses.

All the rest of the property was on fire, so we’re sitting in the cars thinking, ‘Well, if it did come down we would drive to where it was burnt.’ But anyway, we sat there most of the night.

At about 1 o’clock Davin and Carl decided they were going to go and try to get through to the kids. No chance. It took them about two hours just to get through to Yarra Glen. It took two hours to just to get to [the] middle of Kinglake. It was pointless. I was really uncomfortable where I was, at my neighbours’ place. I didn’t want to stay at home by myself. It was covered in trees and still burning. I just kept trying to text them to say come back. They eventually came back.

We thought we’d go and see if there was anyone - because by this stage you hadn’t seen anyone. There were no police, no one anywhere. You were definitely on your own. Davin and I drove, which was pretty hairy, driving through trees and smoke and burning stuff, just up to the fire brigade. To me it was safer at my place, in my paddock.

I said, ‘Nah, turn around, go home. We should tell all these people to come with us.’ But we didn’t.

We ended up going back there. We sat in the paddock and just kept running and putting out stuff around the horses and the house. At about 4 o’clock in the morning [we] tried to sleep, then went back home at 5.30 or 6 and just continued, for the next month, putting out the boundary and property.

Every horse paddock was untouched, but I’ve got 50 acres, so that’s 30. The whole rest of the property was just annihilated, the bush, all the boundaries. You couldn’t even leave because you had to keep putting stuff out literally, for a month.

Keeping track and keeping calm

The sound was like a jet plane taking off. The flames were actually at the back of house. The fire was coming in that direction and when I decided to leave, the flames were leaping above the trees. There was just this big glow of red coming. I said to the girls, ‘We’re out of here.’

TAMARA: On a Saturday morning that’s my routine to wash the floors and get everything sparkling. We have a bush block that has a huge big dam on it so we went out – all of us. I have two boys and two girls. One of them is now married, he had his partner. There would have been twenty of us down the dam because they had friends as well. We were having this day swimming because it was just unbearably hot in Kinglake.

Anyway, we had the radio on all day listening to see what was going on. We knew the fire was at Kilmore and then the fire started at Murrindindi about, I don’t know, three or four o’clock in the afternoon, I can’t quite recall.

[My husband] said, 'We better go home.' He felt that was a threat to us. Where we were, you had to sort of manoeuvre in and out of the scrub to get out, so if we had been there, we would have been cooked for sure.

We got out of there, came home, realised how close the fire coming from the west was, and decided we better go get some water, because we had no power. Will and Terri, the older son and his wife, went to check on their house. They got turned back.

Marisa had her boyfriend with us, a boy from [the city]. Very much a city boy – didn't have much idea when it came to utilising your basic life skills. Not that any of us had a lot of experience. James went off to get water with my two boys. I organised the girls. We got the sprinkler going at the house, filled up the downpipes with socks to fill the spoutings with water, kept the water going.

We had a horse in the back paddock at the house. The girls decided they'd get the horse out. By that time the smoke was pretty horrific. I decided, because James hadn't come back with the water, we'd better go. We had five cars at the house. We thought we'd [take separate cars to] save the cars.

The sound was like a jet plane taking off. The flames were actually at the back of house. The fire was coming in that direction and when I decided to leave, the flames were leaping above the trees. There was just this big glow of red coming.

I said to the girls, 'We're out of here.'

We'd done all we could to prepare the house. Brigid and Terri had run the horse just up the road and had put it in a paddock and came back. The girls were quite distressed. At this stage it was quite threatening.

[James] still hadn't come back from getting the water. The oldest one was left with my husband's parents. His father is 90 and his mother is 86. He left Will with them and came back with Sam. These boys being 29 and 27, they've got a few brains to use with that sort of scenario. Will also had done fire-fighting season with the Melbourne Waters, so he had a little bit of experience in that field.

We all got in the cars, but the girls remembered we left the dogs behind. Two kelpies, we'd left them in the house. I headed off and Marisa's boyfriend headed off around to the farm. I thought the best place for us was to stay in the paddock around the farm [where Will and his grandparents were] on a 200-acre farm. That has always been my plan to go around there if there was a fire, because you have plenty of space between yourself and the bush.

I was heading up around there. The smoke was that thick you really couldn't see. It was like driving by memory rather than anything else. I vaguely remember passing a car which must have been James going to the house. The girls had started but then they remembered the dogs and went back. James drove in the driveway as they were driving out. He told them to get into the house.

They ended up, the three girls, my daughter-in-law, Marisa and Brigid, ended up at the house with James and Sam, my husband's second son. [I] and the boyfriend from [the city] ended up around at the farm with Will. We weren't sure where the girls were. We presumed, I just presumed, that they were home and James must have, you know, they must have, caught up somewhere along the line.

On the way around the farm at the intersection of Glen Burn Road and McMahons Road there were some people not knowing where to go, so I told them to come with me. As we got further around the road there were two young guys that were trying to drive out.

I said, 'You can't go that way. The fire's coming that way.'

I told them to come with us as well. We ended up picking up these two others. They had cats and dogs in their car. But we all ended up at the farm. We sat in the paddock for a time. Where the fire burns you then go and park in the burnt bit, so you're safe because the ground's already burnt. There's nothing going to burn there.

My husband and the two girls were at home with Sam. We sat it out. They ended up coming around about 10 o'clock at night. We would have been separated for about three hours. It's all a bit of a daze. When the fire actually happened I think we all reacted, as we needed to, there was no huge panic in what we did. We all sort of knew what to do.

Feeding the crew to help save Melbourne's power supply

With the fires there's a lot of down time. Jeffrey initiated to take a thermos down to them. I said, 'Well, tell them the kettle's on.'

JOANNE: As for Black Saturday it was a perfectly happy day.

He said, 'It's going to be a shocker. What's left of the grass is brown and scrunchy and there is no humidity.'

We'd booked to go and pick up a six-week-old German Shepherd pup from Glenburn.

He said, 'Hurry up and get them fed, we've got to get over there before the wind comes up.'

I said to Jeffrey, 'The heat is shocking, I've got to go and lay in the river.' That was my habit, never pass the Rubicon River without getting in fully clothed and laying it. So we did and the dog nearly came in after me and drowned, but we got home. The dogs got introduced to each other and everything was fine.

We turned on the radio and switched between local and ABC (which knew very little). The local radio, the man was in the CFA, had all the locals ringing up telling him what they'd seen around.

By about four or five o'clock (excuse the language) I said, 'The whole fucking state is on fire, Jeffrey.'

We live under the Blue Range. On three sides we had thick scrub, at a distance from the house, and far too many trees, which we have subsequently gotten rid of, but bare ground apart from the trees. Suddenly, there was skidders, there were fire trucks, slip-ons. They didn't want the Blue Range fire to join the Black Range fire.

Because we live five kilometres up the road, we go partially under the SECV Power lines. SP AUSNET, bless their souls, they wanted to save their power lines because over there is the Rubicon, Melbourne's power supply. We had a hell of a lot of help, not because of our

intrinsic value (Marysville was already gone) but because of other reasons that are all quite legitimate.

Our neighbour to the north is in the CFA. They're on the Thornton-Taggerty Road and they've got a really good view up to where we are. The doctor on the parallel to our property, he was staying. His wife and children had gone to Alex. And there was Jeffrey and I. So between Baz, and the man in the CFA down the front, Brett, we just kept in a lot of phone contact.

Jeffrey said to Baz, 'You need a pump. You need this and that.'

So Baz just went into town and bought everything he needed. We had our own little group and bonds were formed.

I remember one night we went up the back and stood on the containment lines next to the fire truck. I stood about 50 meters back from a huge lot of mountains. You're just looking at the whole lot, lit up like fairy lights. In the end, because the fires got sick of it they changed it so it burnt faster, but it could have come down. It's right across all of the property. It could have come down into Jeffrey's woodblocks. Jeffrey was absolutely terrified of that.

With the fires there's a lot of down time. Jeffrey initiated to take a thermos down to them.

I said, 'Well, tell them the kettle's on.'

There were always biscuits and we became known as 'the goat people where the kettle's always on.'

They'd come down and I've got photos of them. We exchanged life stories and things.

You don't see much past your own

You only have enough time to think about your own during such a crisis and chip in and help others when the dust settles.

KATE: At a quarter to five my husband went to babysit the grandchildren. As he was driving down, he saw a fireball roaring down the street, about to take him out.

He went in and said, 'Quick! Get out! You haven't got time to get nothing.'

The kids said, 'What are you talking about?'

'Come outside and have a look at this!'

They said, 'Oh my god!'

This was my son and his wife. Brooke was six months pregnant. They put their baby in the car and just got the photos. They couldn't get the cat. Brooke was upset about that. They knew their house was gone.

We had the second threat at the back paddock. The trees started to catch and the fire was racing down what seemed like a million miles an hour. There was smoke everywhere, a

great big mushroom over the whole house. Our biggest fear was the big forest with the pines; they go up like a bomb. We would have had no way out.

We drove up to the corner to see what was going on and if there was a way out. The fireball was coming this way, was exploding! There were people outside the fire station at Kinglake West. Fire was coming at them from both ends of the road. I'm talking about a huge monster! I didn't know if these people would even be alive the next day.

We looked at each other and said: 'Let's get the hell out of here!'

I was in sheer panic, but we had grandchildren to try to save, and we only had a backpack to fill with water and mops and wet towels.

We were all terrified. We'd saved our son and his family only by minutes and we had our own fire to fight.

As we were fighting the fire down in the backyard, we got a call from my daughter, Ruth. Their house was gone and all of Flowerdale was gone.

Ruth got to stay in Yea. My son and his wife stayed here for a while. She was quite hysterical. She was six months pregnant and hyperventilating. I had to get oxygen. We started the generator and I got her on that. It was just lucky I had that.

The drama of the whole ordeal was terrifying. You don't realise until the next day that thousands of people were in the same situation. We thought it was just around our little area at the time until you saw the utter devastation and loss of friends and people you know.

You only have enough time to think about your own during such a crisis and chip in and help others when the dust settles.

When you're amongst all that, you don't see much past your own.

On guard with the Fire Guard Group on 7.2.2009

I felt really scared, so I drove back home like a maniac because of the goats. I hadn't let them out. It was instinctive - something going boom-boom-boom in my heart.

CHRIS: I was with a fire guard group two kilometres away. I live in [a road] which is completely forest. A few years ago we were evacuated in a fire. I realised it was a bit stupid to drive the 16 kilometres down that road. The fire group started and we were doing all the things expected of us by the government. We were aware it wasn't too good, but we weren't planning to evacuate because of the day. There was a spontaneous fire in the State Forest.

I had a lot of issues with my daughter who was going to a twenty-first in [another town]. I didn't want her to go. We turned on the radio and heard the fire had jumped the highway at Kilmore and was heading to Kinglake.

She said, 'I'll take the stuff with me, but I'm still going.' I gave her all my fire kit because she wasn't organised.

It had been a funny year before. Mum died and I'd been caring for her, so I hadn't really prepared for a fire at the house and I had never planned to stay. We'd had six other funerals and we had a really big year. I'd been in Sydney for a week and got back a few days before the fires and hadn't unpacked, so I took the suitcase from Sydney. My daughter left and I couldn't get the dog from under the house. She'd been there since two, so I knew it was serious.

After she left, at about four, I started to feel panicky. I ran up and got my stuff in the car and tried to get the dog [and couldn't]. Then I just left. There was nothing to say what was happening, but there was something that was just wrong.

I left the dog and got to my fire group. When I got there I realised it was even more serious, so I changed into my fire clothes. Just before I left, the power went off. When that happens, I know something's happened in Kinglake. I felt really scared, so I drove back home like a maniac because of the goats. I hadn't let them out. It was instinctive – something going boom-boom-boom in my heart.

I was closing the gate and there was a convoy [of probably 50 cars]. One road had already been shut off already. People were just panicking. It was bumper to bumper. We still didn't know what was going on.

I said to these people, 'Don't go anywhere.'

It was probably the most dangerous road – for the first 10 kilometres it's solid bush.

They said, 'Our kids are in Chum Creek or Healesville. We have to go.'

The convoy ended up being led by my neighbour. They all got through, but at the time, we were all devastated because we didn't know what [would happen]. That was pretty traumatic.

We were on guard. It was 6.30 and it all went black. It was a mushroom of red and embers. We knew then that something was pretty serious. The power went off at 7.30. We still had the telephone till 1am. Then the tower burnt and we had no contact. We didn't see any flames, but our neighbours were all fighting fire.

The next morning my friend and I drove to [town]. There were trees all over the road, and drove back to my property – because it's a multiple house property – and made sure everyone was all right. We thought it had all finished. I got the dog in the house and started to get some food, [but] there was a fire coming over the ridge. I could see it coming over the ridge towards our house.

On that Sunday, because all the roads were closed to the Melba Highway, people had died and everything was shut. They opened [another] road to let people out, but there was no way to know that. We saw some local people coming and going out again. I thought I'd stay [but] a couple of hours later my two sons drove through the fires and came and got me and

made me go. I was upset with them. We were still full of adrenalin and waiting and watching the fire heading to my place.

The property burnt the next day. The house was saved by a helicopter, but we lost everything else, the granny flat, the office, the chook pen, everything. Right up to the house.

Four weeks of fighting fires

There was suddenly a massive white explosion ... followed after a fraction of a second by an equally intense white line of light that went outwards from the mountain to both sides from horizon to horizon ... At first I thought it was an atomic bomb and waited to die ...

LI: Literally, I wet the walls and around the house every hour during daylight hours for the three weeks before February 7th. I thought I had got things fairly well prepared. We spent thousands on equipment; a lot of time in preparation. Sally had found even prior to the fire that we didn't get enough work locally, so she got a job in [the city]. We'd seen what the forecast was likely to be with a strong south-westerly and with temperatures as they had been before. It's the absolute classic 1983, 1939. Absolute classic.

She started for home in the early hours of Saturday morning. On February 7th. I started very early in the morning as well, doing all the things I had been doing and then some. By the time she got back here the temperature was already fortyish, probably. I was very relieved to see her.

I think there were many occasions we thought we might die. Sally woke up on February the 8th and, despite what happened, was convinced she was going to wake up and find everything black and gone.

We were putting wet towels by the windows and doors and removing the curtains in the main stone house. I kept wondering where the fire had gone. I had expected it would be with us in minutes, as it kept getting darker outside.

We started to hear what sounded like the drone from heavy aircraft over the Blue Range. I soon realised this was too frequent to be planes. We were soon able to distinguish amongst the roaring periodic explosions and the crashing of huge trees. I realised that people were being affected by the fire somewhere nearby, as we were hearing gas explosions. I am grateful that in our need to stay focused on saving ourselves that my imagination ceased and my thoughts turned to how we would survive. The noise was like that of a giant thunder clash, which just seemed to go on forever, with increasing volume.

We stood there listening; we could not talk above the noise. The visibility up to Mt Cathedral, about two kilometres [away], was clear. There was suddenly a massive white explosion about two thirds of the way up on the south side of the main Cathedral, followed after a fraction of a second by an equally intense white line of light that went outwards from the mountain to both sides from horizon to horizon. Above the sound of the fire approaching from the Lake Mountain direction we could not hear the explosions.

At first I thought it was an atomic bomb and waited to die from the blast-wave, but nothing happened except that we lost all visibility within moments. All smell of smoke vanished. Everything lost its orange tinge and became white. We assumed that it was the power lines that stretched across Cathedral.

We shut the dogs in our stone bathroom, which had a large window and access near to the rear door of the house, and got into our 4WD with the 1200 litre tanker and took up position near the flock in the stables.

By midnight the temperature in the paddock was still 103 degrees Fahrenheit. We had known for hours that we had fire on three sides. Sally tried to follow events on an iPod to save the car fuel and batteries and we listened to our scanner.

At one point we heard the Taggerty tanker crew screaming that they were on fire – we thought they had died, as we didn't hear anything more. We felt helpless to affect the fires and help anyone else. We took some consolation that we were behind the CFA, who were in the paddocks just south of us, and could possibly give them reserves of water if we kept our tanks safe. If they retreated towards us.

Shortly after midnight the northerly wind was dropping. As the temperature began to subside slowly the height of the flames also dropped until, at about 1.30, there was only a glow somewhere off the ground to the southeast. At 3.30, Sally went to get some sleep, as we could no longer see any bright spots in the smoke. By 6.30 the temperature was 75 degrees Fahrenheit. I was too tired to stay up any longer and went to bed. Sally came and woke me at 9.00. The whole world seemed silent and motionless.

We worked together during the next two days and operated a three-hour shift pattern of fire-watching overnight, when we patrolled the farm on foot. For the next five days the sheep remained in the stable as fires continued to rage on three sides of us. We had no power and no telephones and the radio was filled with stories of hopelessness, death and destruction.

[At different stages the] expectation was that the return of the fire was imminent. A police car came one afternoon to see if we had any accommodation for coroner's workers. We made offers of temporary housing to several people, but they all said it was too near the fire to be safe.

We loaded clothes and essentials into our boat, and for the first time debated the wisdom of leaving. We were exhausted after fire watching around the clock in three-hour shifts. We now had a different understanding of fire and had lost confidence the more fatigued we became.

We remained under direct threat or urgent threat for many days. It's almost as though you revisit previous emotions where you felt out of your depth. That's probably what it is, all of those circumstances where you feel helpless. Thinking in terms of Sally, her response in the past was to flee. I think that my situation has been very much 'something bad happens, well I'll stand here and die rather than be a victim.' My mode is resistance. Sally had a real struggle in the fire. I was very proud of her.

The forecast for Saturday 14th February was very frightening. The radio was full of stories of disaster. Everyone around us was saying we could not defend our property, although previously they had said we were the safest property in the neighbourhood. [Sally] was talking about going to Eildon and putting the boat on the water.

I was thinking, 'Well, you don't want to be on a boat with falling embers, whether in the water or not. Not a good place to be.'

We did consider seriously going, and we did actually put materials, warm clothing, that sort of thing, dog food and so on, into the boat on the basis that, because we weren't in the same position on the 14th of February as we had been on the 7th. We were absolutely exhausted and we did have to face up to the reality of: could we really, absolutely, safely stay and defend because of the state we were in? We hadn't slept for a week; we'd had various injuries and all sorts of things that had happened.

I went to the CFA shed to see if I could get any information to help us decide what to do. There were Melbourne City tankers along the road, which I was told would asset protect if the fire broke through the power line area further up the road. We decided to remain, as we would not have to rely on ourselves alone.

The last night of the fire, when that rain started, 5th of March, we had a look at the forecast. There were no graziers' warning, nothing. No warnings whatsoever. We're sitting there, had a friend from England phoning, and I suddenly realised how cold it was. It had been 30° plus during the day. We nearly lost our whole flock to hypothermia that night.

Somehow, we worked together

My son who was five was a bit nervous of course and it was before we saw the flames but he was worried, so I said, 'Why don't you draw a picture?' and he said, 'Yes, that's a good idea.' He drew grey smoke and black smoke and orange flames and he started screaming because he was too scared.

ELLEN: On Saturday afternoons he teaches martial arts at Macleod. [On the day of the fires] he went to work. In the morning we had been doing more work and making sandbags, in case.

He said, 'Call me and I'll come straight away and by the time anything happens, I'll be there.'

We had fires in 2006. There were days of warning and it was slow moving. So we thought it would take a long time to reach there.

In the afternoon, my neighbour, whose husband is in the CFA, said that she had heard that the fire had spotted to Toorourong Reservoir – first going in another direction, but she said, 'If the wind changes, we'll be in trouble.'

She came back and said to tell him to come home.

By the time he got to just past St Andrews, to the road to Mittens Bridge, there were police there. They said he couldn't go up. He said, 'What about Kinglake?'

They said, 'Yes go on up. You'll be fine.'

He went, and just around the corner there was fire on the side of the road. The police didn't realise that, but they would have realised soon after. Once he saw that, he was really worried and thinking, 'It's on.'

We had an old [car]. He put his foot to the floor. It started heating up the hill, so he had to go really slowly. It got him home. I think afterwards, it's one of the 'what ifs.'

He wished he'd never gone to work.

We did more clean-up and blocked the gutters and filled them with water. I had filled the bath. The neighbours had said if it changes direction the power will go off. We were filling the gutters by climbing up a ladder and I was passing buckets up to him. We looked at the field next door and it was high grass. We thought, 'No, we are not going out there. We'll stay and defend the house.' That had always been our plan.

I had this flee instinct, and said, 'Maybe I'll take the kids and we'll go.'

We both looked at each other and thought, 'No, it's too late.'

When I think about that, in my mind, it was really silly, irrational, because I was even thinking, 'Right, we have to pack a bag and get clothes and toiletries and food.' How stupid! That's another one of those 'what if' things because he couldn't have defended the house by himself and we couldn't have got anywhere.

The smoke was going on a diagonal, not directly over us at that point. We were looking at it, going, 'If it keeps doing that it might just pass us.' Then everything went still. It was blowing a gale before and really noisy and it was suddenly still and silent. Then it started blowing directly over us – grey smoke and black smoke and you could hear this noise like an engine, and you could see a glow through the trees. It was so noisy.

He said, 'Right, go inside,' while he finished off.

My daughter and I were putting towels in the bath and under the doors and windows. We could see comets of fire shooting off into the bush and going off where they landed. My son, who was five, was a bit nervous of course. It was before we saw the flames, but he was worried.

I said, 'Why don't you draw a picture?'

He said, 'Yes, that's a good idea.' He drew grey smoke and black smoke and orange flames and he started screaming because he was too scared.

I lose track of time.

The kids were sheltering downstairs, which is the most safe and stable part of the house. Adrian and I were rushing up and downstairs each carrying a bucket and mop. We had to do a tag team. It was to sprinkle water around to make everything damp. Quite a lot of the windows cracked and some of the windows shattered. One in my daughter's room shattered and there were embers coming in and he was calling me to help him.

In our room the window flew open and I couldn't shut it. I was calling him to come and help me. You had to wet everything as soon as it came in, and there were a couple of points downstairs too, and through the bathroom. After a while it became really difficult to breathe. The kids were sheltering under wet towels and we had to hold a wet towel on our

face when we went upstairs. We could take it in turns; one would go upstairs and the other would go under the wet towel with the kids for a bit and have a sip out of the water bottle.

My son was screaming, 'Mummy I need you! Mummy are we going to be dead?' [He] has since told me that when we weren't in the room with him, he thought we were burning to death.

At one stage everyone was yelling.

Then Adrian yelled, 'Everyone stop yelling! I'm the only one allowed to yell!'

Somehow, we worked together. He was giving me the instructions and I was doing it and it worked. There was a period that we didn't know we were going to get through it, we couldn't deal with putting out all the stuff. Then it passed a certain point, after half an hour or so. It was still really intense, but it was like there was a turning point.

We started to think, 'Maybe we're not going to die. Maybe we'll get through it.'