

This simply can't be real!

It's hard to describe where we are now. Settled, unsettled or just resolve. That anguish felt was bound by a coping numbness for some months. No one had expected such a threatening disaster in our small town of Beechmont.

The plateau of Beechmont nurtures a wonderful community of people. The world heritage listed Lamington National Park, is its backdrop along with some of the most spectacular sunrises and sunsets forming other brilliant views. Pristine air is filtered by mounded blankets of green and familiar scents of the Australian bush. Homes are placed to optimise this beauty with the never-ending hills of the Great Divide.

Genuine friendships are well nurtured feeding our heart and soul, and this is ever so present when the community celebrates or is in need. This need began with a whisper and built with relentless, self-fuelling ferocity on the morning of September 6th, 2019.

This was a school day for me. My husband kept me posted with regular updates of fires in the valleys below, fires too close to my son and his family. It was the first time it felt so real. I was not my usual self- trying hard to distract my students from the settling smoke around our school. Spot fires and controlled burns were relentless feeding the ever-thickening haze. School break was now indoors as both students and teachers struggled to breathe.

Fortunately, it was after school when I had word of helicopters flying over to smother an out-of-control 'controlled' burn before an impending wind change. My husband was keen for me to get home, particularly worried about our son, his beautiful wife and our precious, grandchildren. The deep gorge of Lamington National Park, across from Timbarra Drive where they lived, now had strong winds roaring through. This perfect setting for my son, his family and menagerie of animals was clearly under threat.

Now home, the smell of smoke was heavy, and a feeling of relief overwhelmed when I saw my daughter-in-law's car with the grandchildren. She too had become nervous of the closeness of the fire packing the car with as many treasures as she could. I went into Mema mode setting up their rooms and starting dinner to normalise things. We were anxiously waiting for our son, who spent much of the day blocking and filling gutters with water, clearing rubbish and closing everything as airtight as possible. He madly packed his musical equipment, a shed full of tools and the dogs. He then let out the chooks so they could find their own protection. With adrenalised strength and a heavy heart, he joined us at what was then a safe haven from potential fire.

Every form of communication was now our focus as we waited to hear updates. Timbarra, Binna Burra and its surrounds were now evacuating fast. Our brigades were deeply concerned at how complex the fires were becoming. The 'controlled' burn at Sarabah, was now a maze of wind-changing tracks of fire, licking their way through every available source of fuel. The winds changed too quickly for our meteorologists and fire controllers, with areas too dangerous to access. Decision-making was severely tested. Rural crews were

stretched trying to manage each fire that neared someone's home. For the first time, Binna Burra mountain and its historical lodge were under serious threat. Tourists and workers were evacuated. Even at this point, long-time residents still held onto local knowledge.

'Surely the surrounding rainforest would protect it?'

None of us even thought to account for rising temperatures that had changed our weather conditions, flora and fauna.

'Remember when we had four relentless weeks of heavy rain and fog?'

'Remember when you'd only see black cockatoos- not noisy, largening flocks of white ones!'

'This simply can't be real!'

News was in of the fire hitting Timbarra Drive. We were relieved the family were with us, but with white faces and nervous fidgets, growing worry had cemented. I distracted all with food, bath-time bubbles, cuddles and calming bedtime stories with our precious grandchildren. They sensed our unease and what was at stake. The elder of the two was wide-eyed and keen to share how smoky it was at his place and how busy mummy had been packing all their things in the car. I reassured him that all the fire fighters were working hard to protect their home, and even feeding their chooks! Satisfied, he and his brother eased into a restful sleep.

As evening wore on, whisperings of 'struth' fed feelings of dread. News was coming in fast that houses were lost on Timbarra Drive and the historical Binna Burra lodge was under fire. Seasons worth of fuel and winds that gained momentum tore through the valley and inflamed all the beautiful bushland around and right through their street. My son and his wife were convinced their place would be damaged at the very least. They were relieved that they salvaged as many treasures as possible, but what were they about to face?

By next morning, authorities made it very clear the whole area was closed off as it continued to be unsafe. With little sleep, my son awoke with an urgency to see what remained of their home. Reports were mixed, nine homes damaged. No eleven, one of many challenges to come as our Fireys were still trying to assess the damage. At one point, rumours were trickling in that our son's home had perished. Another, that it was damaged- more frustration and yearning to know. Well-meaning authorities delayed informing some residents for weeks following the fire. This created a slow-building cancer of stress which prevented their minds settling into a direction of resolve to move forward. It was heartbreaking seeing news reports of wide-eyed residents, huddled in lines, grasping each other in the pursuit for answers and trying to put on a brave face through the sea of cameras and well-meaning support staff. My son and his family soon to join this line to the unknown.

With the help of like-minded friends and a relenting police officer, my son saw his home. There was damage to the exterior, and the fire ate its way into the study where a smog of charcoaled damage and ash prevailed. Homely furnishings and years of memories became a carpet of grey ashen-snow. The smoke and water damage were relentless. My daughter-in-law's true strength shone through here. Her treasures were lost, including a cherished old sewing machine from her grandmother, now charred and melted, and her hand-crafted dreamcatchers an ashen mess. She had focussed on everyone else, leaving these behind... heartbreaking.

As my son was escorted out of the street, the haze and heat revealed an eeriness of lifeless silence. The gorge side revealed sharp silhouettes of scorched remains, smells of molten metal and plastic and hues saturated in grey. Seeing now what others had lost, saddened him. Gratitude then overcame, as he had something left.

When my son returned home to show us the damage, his strength and humility empowered us. He carried a sense of peace, satisfied with what he was dealing with. His focus became caring for those around him and moving forward.

I did the same and spent time supporting an astonishing group of women from the Beechmountain Queensland Country Women's Association, feeding our exhausted Fireys. Our new normal was seeing them with their tired eyes smudged in soot and uniforms dressed in flakes of ash. I arrived when food preparation and delivery was well underway. These women had worked for more than twenty-four hours without sufficient sleep yet were driven by sheer determination to support our community to enable it to survive. It was an honour to feed and thank the very people who had saved my son and his family's home. I was able to pass on regular updates of how the children's chooks were faring. Their chooks, and many other animals, survived on bundled, leftover scraps that the Fireys took with them on their patrols. Such a simple gesture resonated with our community.

Other community members and government groups kicked into gear with further food preparation, passing on more direct support to families in need of shelter and services. This continued for months, well after the fires were controlled. It was humbling to see how my family were supported by friends and the community when it came to clean up and planning the rebuild of their home. Around thirty volunteers turned up with every cleaning item imaginable and worked their way through the destruction. The clean-up was a stark reminder of the devastation but enlightened by the kindness and generosity to help them rebuild their lives.

Still today, their beautiful house is nearly a home once more. Only the laundry roof and blackened trees remind us of that fateful night. Through the help of so many, that eventful moment in time drew strength, resilience and resolve.

Out of the darkness, grew light, warmth and a brilliance once more!

By Marg Haebich