



Australia fires from Living City October 2010

Friendships that last

What a community can do in times of trouble

By Anne Rose

On February 7, 2009 — we call it Black Saturday — in Victoria, Australia, the worst bushfires since European settlement took over 170 lives and thousands of homes. The weather conditions were extreme. After years of relative drought, the temperature was 116 degrees, and the wind blew over 60 MPH.

The fire came within 500 yards of our home, which was only saved by a change in the wind. Fifteen years ago we lost one of the two houses that had been on our rural property in a fire, and with it many of our special things were gone. Two of our children lost all of their possessions. This made me feel especially sorry for those who had lost everything in the Black Saturday fires — 200 of them in our own district!

Soon after the fires a friend, Catherine, started a drop-in center for bushfire victims at a house on our church grounds on Thursday mornings. She encouraged them to take whatever goods they needed from the “opportunity shop.” Many of us at our church helped with another voluntary enterprise by fixing or replacing destroyed farm fencing. I was in a team preparing meals for those working on the fences.

Meanwhile Heather, another friend of mine, started buying items for those who had lost their homes with money donated by the community. Many survivors were hard to contact, so on weekends she went to their burnt-out-house sites, where they were clearing up debris, asked them what they needed, and then spent a day each week buying tools, brush-cutters, crock pots, kitchenware and other needed items.

Some of the survivors started meeting with Heather for coffee. She is a non-believer and, if anything, is against religion. However, after she and Catherine met, Catherine arranged for the group to meet every Thursday morning at our church’s house.

I offered to come along to the meetings to help. My contribution was to listen to the many stories of how people escaped from the fire. Since I live the Focolare spirituality of unity, I tried to love and understand the women who had lost so much. I also tried to quietly help with practical jobs, such as clearing the morning tea, tidying up and keeping an eye on any small children who came with their mothers.

As suggested, I started a meeting at night for those who were working during the day, arranging for speakers to come and talk about building new houses and sustainable living. This involved the husbands as well. We held bring-and-share dinners on weekends to help the men make friends and share with each other. Heather and I organized the night meetings for three months.

Meanwhile, the Thursday morning meetings with fire survivors thrived and grew in numbers. Even at the beginning of this year, nearly a year after the fires, new people joined in, after gaining enough courage to go out after suffering from so many traumas. Members of the group became very good friends. They shared about clearing their land, re-building their homes and even purchasing established houses and moving into them. Several women started to attend our church regularly.

Heather and Catherine organized a one-week holiday trip to other country towns, where the countrywomen we were visiting hosted our group for a generous luncheon, appreciated by all. We met with people who also had suffered from fires and shared our experiences.

Heather wrote a lovely poem. It told of how women on a country road had never met their neighbors before the fire. After joining the group they had become the best of friends.

Our group is going ahead with various activities, engaging everyone. The relationships and unity built among us will certainly endure.

Caption:

Fire survivors on a holiday trip. After suffering the loss of lives, homes and property caused by last year's raging fires in Australia, the community helped those who survived with various activities.