

Mountain Force

Anne McLeod gives us a first hand view of the bushfires that devastated whole communities and left its mark on many individuals. Coupled with our highly prized photographers, Blue Mountains Life recalls the harrowing experience.

By: Anne McLeod

Photo: Greg Bourke



Just after sunrise with the fire-fighting helicopters already overhead I walk through Pope's Glen, a corridor of natural bush and rainforest that backs onto the house where I am staying in Blackheath. I had been taking Dusty, a grey woolly-coated miniature Schnauzer, for her morning walk along the usual streets when I decided to cross the creek at the end of Clarence Rd and head up the steep track to Pope's Glen. With the possibility of a "mega fire" just a wind change away I felt an imperative to check out the state of the vegetation and assess how much of a threat it might pose.

As Dusty and I walk along the narrow track we enter a wonderland of ferns densely carpeting the Glen's slopes, slender silver-trunked gums and tree ferns beside a creek that pools enticingly after flowing over rust-coloured flat rocks. It was difficult to image how this green lushness could fuel a quickly spreading fire; but it isn't at ground level where the potential problem lies. A crown-fire could travel through the tops of the tall eucalypts 20 metres above my head combusting the oil-rich leaves in successive explosions whipped along by the wind or sucked by a vacuum of depleted oxygen.

It is inconceivable that this enchanting landscape could be destroyed and turned into Armagedon, as a friend from Mt Victoria described the recent devastation in Hartley Vale, just off the Darling Causeway. Hartley Vale Road, winding steeply beneath overhanging cliffs and giving views of the distant escarpments with their imposing rock pagoda formations, was one of my favourite drives.

At tennis on Sunday one of the guys was smashing the balls so hard

they were flying out of the court and even over a nearby building. He mentioned that he had been fighting the fires in Mt Vic and was having a day off, as he was exhausted. At tea break I asked him about the state of the fires. It didn't take much for Ron to start "debriefing" — describing his experience of watching a house go up in flames as he pulled an elderly woman into the fire truck just in time. Protected by the truck's sprinklers they watched helplessly as her car, containing her dogs, exploded into flames. Her chickens caged and stacked onto the back of a van suffered a similar fate.

I commented that I'd probably prefer to hear only the sanitised version we get on the TV news. He then told a hilarious story of fighting fires around Mt Irvine and Mt Wilson, historic villages with heritage gardens featured in *The Great Gatsby* movie. Fortunately the fires have destroyed only two of the houses there. Attending an emergency call from one of the residents the fireys approached a particularly grand property. As they entered the imposing wrought-iron gates Ron warned his two teenage volunteer companions "Be on your best behaviour!"

He manoeuvred the truck up a long driveway bordered by overhanging trees. Over to one side was a lake with a large fountain and a wooden rowboat drifting on it. As they approached the stately house surrounded by vast lawns, Ron, awed by the grandeur, told the two teenagers not to say a word, not trusting these "boofheads" to do or say the right thing in this refined milieu.

They all hopped out of the truck as a silver-haired lady in twin-set and pearls came rushing out of the house. Ron asked her where the fire was.



AS FRIENDS OPT TO EVACUATE TO SYDNEY I HAVE FOUND ONLY ONE LOCAL WHO APPEARS WELL PREPARED TO FIGHT TO PROTECT HER HOUSE.



Photo: Anne McLeod



She pointed in horror to a single charred gumleaf on the immaculately manicured lawn. The fireys all stood around looking down at it. Ron managed to restrain himself and humour the woman who had diverted this precious fire fighting resource, "We understand your concern, but I think you're going to be fine."

As friends opt to evacuate to Sydney I have found only one local who appears well prepared to fight to protect her house. Her dog, a charcoal coloured miniature Schnauzer named Ash, had come out to meet Dusty on our walk yesterday. When I asked if she was going to stay or leave if a bushfire comes through she proudly explained that she was a sixth generation Blackheathen and is used to bushfires as her father was captain of the local volunteer bushfire brigade for many years. The house she and her partner built from locally quarried quartz also backs onto Pope's Glen but has a football field-sized cleared area between it and the bush. They have a generator standing by to power a pump in case the power goes and a proper fire hose, not a plastic one that will melt in the intense heat of a firestorm. A full tank of water also feeds the sprinklers on the roof and the terraced garden in front of the house. She was completely confident they could withstand a fire attack and was determined to do so.

A black cockatoo flies through the trees as I get to the end of Pope's Glen where it meets up with the Grose Valley. The entire area, closed now to the public until the emergency is over, is still and peaceful, in contrast to the eerie silence of the last few days. As I walk stealthily back the way I came, not wanting to be fined \$200 for bringing a dog into a National Park, I am stopped at every turn by the dazzling scenery, its abundance highlighted by the golden sunlight. With the spectre of Armageddon



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hovering over the mountains I value even more this exquisite ecology.

Being from Melbourne, I vividly remember the Black Saturday bushfires. I had driven through the ranges north of the city on my way back from Sydney only two days before those devastating fires erupted. As soon as I left the Hume at Ballina and turned onto a narrow country road to take a shortcut to the outer eastern suburbs I was struck by how dry the landscape was. After five days of above 40-degree heat it was as if a gigantic magnifying glass was trained on it and the entire area felt like it could spontaneously combust.

Travelling past the turn-off to Marysville, a quaint village popular with tourists and honeymooners since the 1920s I decided against stopping there, I'd visit on my next trip. Two days later it was completely razed. That bushfire threat lasted for weeks in some places.

A friend of mine who lives in Warburton, a picturesque town beside the Yarra River surrounded by heavily treed ranges, told me that the fire burnt for so long that the townspeople, nerves stressed beyond belief with the constant alerts as the wind brought the fire close to town then away again, wished that it would just come and burn the town and get it over with.

After just one week of being on constant alert in Blackheath I can understand how they felt. The adrenalin is constantly pumping and every sense is attuned to the sky to assess the huge brown cloud that fills the northern and western horizon, the smell of smoke, the wind direction and the RFS updates. Like a miracle, we had enough rain the night before the worst predicted fire conditions to sufficiently dampen the vegetation. The RFS heroes did a phenomenal job of back-burning and dousing breakouts. At last we are able to get back to normal—for now. This year has been the hottest on record with virtually no rain. And it's still only spring. We wait to see what summer will bring. ❖

For information about Anne McLeod and her other articles please visit www.annemcleod.net.



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Anytime Fitness Supports Victims

Anytime Fitness Springwood had a staggering 25 members lose their homes in the recent Linkview Road fire on 17 October. The Anytime Fitness Clubs at Springwood, Windsor & Emu Plains offered the use of their shower facilities to persons affected by, and helping fight, the fires.

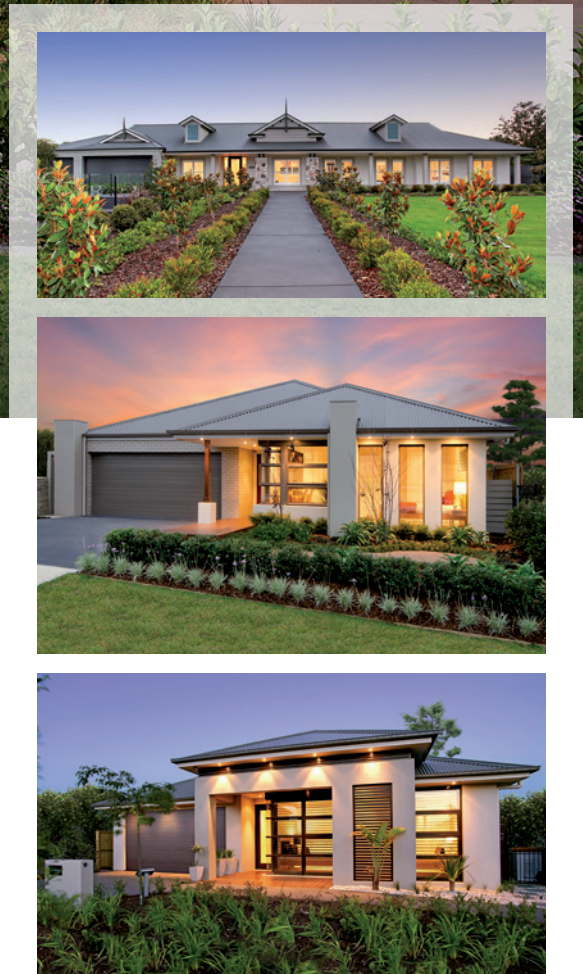
Springwood Anytime Fitness is aiming to raise \$10,000 before Christmas. "The money collected will be distributed to the members to give them an extra boost over the festive season and to let them know that we are thinking of them," said franchisee and local resident Louise Swatridge. "The bush fires were emotionally exhausting for many. It is important not to let your health and fitness suffer and not to forget to take time out for yourself after such an event. This is particularly important for everyone over the Christmas period," says Swatridge.

Christmas is a busy time and Anytime Fitness want their members and the wider community to know that they don't have to feel torn between responsibilities, because with them you can enjoy all that the silly season has to offer without the guilt. Visit www.anytimefitness.com.au

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