

## **002. Recording - Rosemary and Keith Arnold - 9 October 2020**

**Anne-Louise:** There we go. Now, I've just got a couple of questions in regards to some demographic information for the submission, so they'll just take me a tiny little bit to go through.

**Rosemary:** Okay.

**Anne-Louise:** I'll get the recording transcribed, so it will be a written document, and I'll send you a copy of it. For the purposes of the enquiry, would you like your name to be recorded or do you wish this submission to be anonymous?

**Rosemary:** No, my name can be recorded.

**Anne-Louise:** Great. Rosemary. Would you like your submission to be published or not?

**Rosemary:** Yes.

**Anne-Louise:** Were you in an area where the fires occurred?

**Rosemary:** We didn't have them burn our house, but we were in one street, and we were in a – yeah.

**Anne-Louise:** So yes? That's okay. Were you involved in responding to the fires in any way?

**Rosemary:** My husband was, yes. He's here now.

**Anne-Louise:** Husband? Yeah. Would you like me to put your husband's name on the submission as well?

**Rosemary:** Yes please.

**Anne-Louise:** What was his name?

**Rosemary:** Keith.

**Anne-Louise:** G'day Keith. Were you, or do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or communities affected by the fires?

**Rosemary:** No.

**Anne-Louise:** Local government area is East Gippsland?

**Rosemary:** Yeah.

**Anne-Louise:** The postcode of where you are?

**Rosemary:** It's 3890.

**Anne-Louise:** Okay. Now, you don't have to answer this question if you don't want to. Age group in decades, 60, 70?

**Rosemary:** Seventy-three.

**Anne-Louise:** Righto. Are you happy for me to put down gender?

**Rosemary:** Yeah. Male, female.

**Anne-Louise:** Yeah. And your postal address so that I can send this document to you, Rosemary?

**Rosemary:** [REDACTED]

**Anne-Louise:** [REDACTED]

**Rosemary:** Yes.

**Anne-Louise:** Is it Cann Valley?

**Rosemary:** Cann River.

**Anne-Louise:** Cann River?

**Rosemary:** Yeah.

**Anne-Louise:** And that's 3890?

**Rosemary:** That's right, yeah.

**Anne-Louise:** And last question, would you like to receive further updates about the enquiry?

**Rosemary:** Yes, definitely.

**Anne-Louise:** I think you said to me before that you don't have an email address?

I do. I'm not very computer literate.

**Anne-Louise:** Would you like it to come to you in hard copy in the mail?

**Rosemary:** Yes, please.

**Anne-Louise:** Sure, printed. That's fine. That's all the questions.

So, now it's entirely up to you, as I mentioned the other day, we're here to talk about the relief and recovery from the fires, but if you have other comments about any of the preparedness or response, that you may not have had an opportunity to share before, you're welcome to talk to me about that.

And, where possible, if you can give me examples that helps with the information. I'll just basically let you talk, and I may ask you some clarifying questions, once you've going, if that's okay.

**Rosemary:** Okay.

**Anne-Louise:** Alright, away you go, Rosemary and Keith.

**Rosemary:** Okay. We had a lot of information that we accessed through our mobile phones about the impacting fires that were coming close to Cann River prior to new year. We had moved there in October and decided that this was going to be the last place we would ever live in our lives. So, we decided that no matter how hard it got we would stay here, we would fight for the house that we had just bought.

And not only that, we had a German Shepherd puppy, we had a little Jack Russell dog, and we had a galah. So, the first thing we knew how bad the situation was, there was a wind change, and I think it was at night, but it was so dark it was almost night anyway.

We had a banging on the front door, which scared us to death because we don't have any relatives, we live by ourselves, and we went to the door and there was a policeman there saying that we had to evacuate, and evacuate now.

**Anne-Louise:** Right. When was that, Rosemary, do you remember the date or anything, or around about?

**Rosemary:** It was before new year. I mean the big fires here were at New Years, but no, New Year's Day we were there.

**Keith:** Christmas day.

**Rosemary:** Maybe it was Christmas day. No, it was between Christmas and New Year, I'm not sure, I haven't got my last year's diary.

**Anne-Louise:** That's okay.

**Rosemary:** But anyway, the policeman said we had to evacuate to the schoolhouse, being the only building that was – that was the safest building that we could go to because its got metal frames on the windows, it's a brick building, and it's got good asphalt all around it for accessibility for fire trucks, emergency vehicles, ambulance, all that sort of thing.

We went grabbed quickly what we could, I put the bird in a cat crate and grabbed enough food for the dogs and the documents we'd need. We had two cars; we took one car, we went to the school and it was a bit chaotic at the school and they decided to put us in a little part of a back porch which people had to go in and out of to get out of the building, but it was so that we were in a corner where we could tie a dog each side of us and not get in people's way.

They gave us two mattresses on the floor that we put together, and we had just a couple of throw rugs, and well we thought we'd use those for blankets, and that's where we were. And we were there for, I think, nearly two weeks.

**Anne-Louise:** Oh goodness.

**Keith:** Ten days.

**Rosemary:** Ten days it was, yes. The fire impacted Cann badly the night before New Year, or it might have been New Year's night, I lost all track of time. My husband's saying it was the night before New Year.

It went completely black. There were a lot of people in the building, there were children, there were dogs. Everybody that came in from out of town, of course, had their dogs with them and the dogs were comforting to the children, I felt, all the way through. So, they had the dogs inside and children were laying on everything there was. There weren't enough mattresses to go around for people.

They had no pre-stock of emergency – anything to make people comfortable. Do you know what I mean?

**Anne-Louise:** Yeah, like material aid?

**Rosemary:** Yeah, yeah. I thought, “Well, gee they have fires here all the time, surely they would have had something somewhere else that were just not accessing that you could bring over here. You know, more mattresses from such and such, or something.

Anyway, we were there, and the food was fantastic. Relics our local little takeaway food had freezers full of food, and of course they wanted to use it because they had to use their generator, the power went off, and we didn't know how long they were going to last on their generators.

Everything was very, very frightening. Yeah, it was just awful.

**Anne-Louise:** I can imagine.

**Rosemary:** When we thought the fire was going to hit – they did, prior to the fire, evacuate some people, and we let children and families go first, of course. There were a lot of people reluctant to go because they were very frightened of when they'd be able to get back.

Anyway, there came a stage where they closed both the highways, so we were trapped, we could not get out of town if we wanted to. So, we had to batten down and the fire people, with the CFA, were there to protect the building, and they had people ringing them all the time, “Can you come out here to Club Terrace?” “Can you come out here to further out of town, the fire's impacting?” you know.

They said to them, “Look, we cannot do this, we have to look after the school, which was where we all were,” so we were so grateful for that.

**Anne-Louise:** How many people do you think were there, Rosemary?

**Rosemary:** Oh, 30 or 40. Forty, I would say.

**Anne-Louise:** For that 10 days?

**Rosemary:** Not for the full time. We'll get to that in a minute.

**Anne-Louise:** Yeah.

**Rosemary:** What happened next, the fire was going to impact, and it had got to the other side of the caravan park, which is on the way into Cann, which is about two streets away.

**Anne-Louise:** Yes.

**Rosemary:** My husband volunteered to take a hose, and so did another local chap. I know Keith had had no training with the CFA at all. Anyway, he went around to – what they did was they cleaned out all the gutters, the first they did; all the gutters were in a terrible mess when we got to the school.

The local lads got up on the roof, cleaned out all the gutters, and my husband and another man took the hoses on the back of the building and they wet all the roof for embers and all around the whole – all the asphalt was saturated, they did so much to set it up to save it from any ember attack.

Anyway, I was in the building and I was petrified because I didn't know my husband was out with this hose, and I didn't know where he was, and nobody could tell me, they just kept saying, "He's alright, he's alright," and I'm thinking, "But where is he? Where is he?"

Anyway, so the fire, to all intents and purposes, should have burnt us down that night. There's no explanation, even the fire guys, even the elderly residents have got no idea why we didn't get embers, why we didn't get the fire. We didn't notice any wind change whatsoever. Everything just went quiet, we could hear the fire, we could see the fire, and it just didn't go any further. It just seemed to stay and hover.

And, of course, this went on for hours, and eventually people started leaving the building; we'd been ordered to stay in. And we stayed there – there were fires still coming up all over the place and all the roads were closed. Within a few days they got one of the roads opened.

The only reason we survived, mainly, too was because three fire trucks that were supposed to be going to Mallacoota couldn't get through because the roads were closed. So, we had an extra three trucks here, because we only have one truck, although the CFA and DELWP were doing a fantastic job, they were terrific.

And it was our local contractor, [REDACTED] who used all his bulldozing equipment to go and do fire tracks and do fire breaks wherever he could on the other side of the town, because the fire was coming from all directions.

I forgot; prior to the fire being onto the school, we were all told to bring our vehicles and put them in the middle of the oval, and it was cordoned off with rope, and we were told to remove all petrol cans, and anyone who could bring fuel in that they could donate would be appreciated, because they didn't want to run out of diesel, they didn't want to run out of fuel.

They were pulling water out of everywhere, the fire truck was having to pull water out of the river, going through scrub to get to the water to pull water out. We had one fire brigade member, who isn't in the driving team, [REDACTED], he had radio contact up to date with what was happening all around us, which was fantastic to have a bit of contact with what was happening.

My phones went off, I couldn't get anything from Optus whatsoever, so I couldn't contact anybody, couldn't have any communication with the outside world at all.

**Anne-Louise:** That must have been terrifying.

**Rosemary:** It was absolutely terrifying, the most frightening thing I've been through in my life. Everyone was wonderful there. The Red Cross [REDACTED] the local Red Cross lady, she was there the whole time, and her and her husband worked endlessly to try and help people to be more comfortable and make sure that they were all fed, and to document a list of who was there; that was very important so they could get tabs on any –

A lot of residents wanted to stay in their houses, you see, and they needed to know who was left in the houses. After the fire, and they had got one of the roads – well, they hadn't got the road open, but they had devised a track to go through the scrub where there were burning trees, but they might be able to get through, and they tried to get people to evacuate.

They told people, in front of children, that if they didn't get on the bus people were going to be left with no support - they were going to have to withdraw all the support - and they were going die.

**Anne-Louise:** Goodness.

**Rosemary:** And this was very wrong, I thought, it should never have happened, it should have been up to people whether they left, and definitely nothing should have be said – the children were petrified the most, as you can imagine. I comforted a little girl who was crying because she thought she'd never see her friends again, and her friends had turned around and said, "But you're not coming and you're going to burn."

**Anne-Louise:** Oh goodness.

**Rosemary:** Yeah.

**Anne-Louise:** Who was saying this, was it the police, the CFA, do you remember?

**Rosemary:** Who was it that was saying it? It was the person who was addressing the crowd.

**Anne-Louise:** Incident controller?

**Keith:** It was the new fire –Victoria -

**Rosemary:** Fire Victoria, Fire and Rescue bloke.

**Anne-Louise:** Oh yeah, the FRV person, yeah.

**Rosemary:** Yes, we had those, the ones in black, the ones in black.

**Anne-Louise:** Oh yeah, like dark navy, yes.

**Rosemary:** The black uniforms.

**Anne-Louise:** Yes, I know what you mean. Were they holding regular community meetings and updates while you were there at the school?

**Rosemary:** They did. Yes, they did.

**Anne-Louise:** Do you remember who was basically managing the school as the relief centre? Do you remember, were there council people there? You mentioned the Red Cross. Who was running the school as a relief centre?

**Rosemary:** The police.

**Anne-Louise:** The police? Okay.

**Rosemary:** Yeah, the police or the Red Cross.

**Anne-Louise:** Were there any council people there, do you know, were there any council people there?

**Rosemary:** No. Not that I was aware of. Everybody who was anybody left town, they all had their holidays and were up north somewhere, or in Melbourne. All the shop owners except for the Relics. Even the IGA he left, so nobody could get anything from the supermarket. The service station, he left, so there was no easy access to petrol. People couldn't get cigarettes, that was really bad for some people. You know, it was just awful.

**Anne-Louise:** Between when you said the roads were closed, how were supplies provided? Do you know how that happened if the petrol station was closed and the supermarket was closed? Did they get food and supplies into Cann River?

**Rosemary:** We used all the supplies that Relics Café had, they had freezers full. They supplied the food. The policeman got access to IGA, I think, and I know that if anyone wanted cigarettes they had to get it from the policeman who could get them from somewhere.

They did get people through by going on this bush track to Orbost, and they said to people, "You'll only go to Orbost, it'll all be fine," but when people got to Orbost, Orbost was full and then they got sent further away to Bairnsdale, I think, this is just from memory.

And lots of people there couldn't get back here for six weeks, and they said that they didn't have the money to support themselves, and they said they'll never leave town again, they'll stay here.

They gave us a choice after so many days; we could go home because they were still watching the town and the town was deemed safe at that stage, or we could stay there. But then again, it could flare up any time around the town, so we decided we'd stay at the school

where we'd made ourselves comfortable, and we knew what was going on. Because at home we still wouldn't have had the phone, we still wouldn't have had electricity, it wouldn't have been any good.

**Anne-Louise:** Yes.

**Rosemary:** So, that was what happened, and that's why I really, really think if there's any funds available why can't they make sure there is a fireproof building in each of these towns. We've heard since that we can't use the school again, there was too much damage to the school by people's dogs and by carpets getting marked, and superfluous things like this. I mean, goodness, old carpets. And somebody wanted to break into their toy cupboard so that the children would have something to play with, and all these silly little things that weren't anything to do with human life or making people get through a crisis at the time.

**Anne-Louise:** Mm. Once the fire level came down a little bit, did agencies get out to Cann River? Were you able to access any of the financial assistance payments or anything like that, with regards to recovering after the fires?

**Rosemary:** Not for quite a while. After a little while they opened up the community hall once it was safe. The hall is a wooden building and it has some asbestos in it, it wasn't a brick building, and they made that the rescue centre, more or less, and helicopters got in there and they brought food in.

I think [REDACTED] did a lot of help in that respect, putting people onto agencies.

**Anne-Louise:** Was she the Red Cross person?

**Rosemary:** Yes.

**Anne-Louise:** She was the Red Cross? Yeah, great.

**Rosemary:** The community centre was closed because their people there were away on holidays, they weren't there, so they couldn't open it because they didn't have anyone on the committee who was available to man it.

**Anne-Louise:** Yeah.

**Rosemary:** They opened the hall, and they had a day there where they actually got someone to come up from council, they got someone from Red Cross, they got someone from the water people, the power people, all there so that if people needed to get money, or help, they could get it there.

But a lot of people didn't know that was on.

**Anne-Louise:** Right.

**Rosemary:** Because they didn't have communication. Us town people knew it was on, and it took a lot longer for word of mouth to reach out to the extremities, of course.



**Anne-Louise:** Yeah. So, was it just via word of mouth, Rosemary, is that how people knew about it?

**Rosemary:** That's how we knew about it, but I don't know about other people, you see. I mean I'm only speaking from my perspective.

**Anne-Louise:** No, for sure.

**Rosemary:** And my slant on it could be completely wrong.

**Anne-Louise:** No, your slant is your slant.

**Rosemary:** I wouldn't like to – I don't know what the word is – held accountable for what I've said by the hierarchy, or anybody, because I'm only saying this how I felt and this is what happened, as far as I was concerned, at that time.

**Anne-Louise:** No, that's absolutely fine. Don't worry about that part of it.

**Rosemary:** I just wish to hell I'd documented it. I'm a great one for diaries, I'm a great one for keeping notes, and do you know I didn't write a thing.

**Anne-Louise:** Yeah, you probably had a lot of other things on your mind, I would say, by the sounds of it.

**Rosemary:** Yes. Trying to keep a 10-month-old German Shepherd quiet and give it enough exercise was predominant on my mind.

**Anne-Louise:** I can imagine. We've got a two-year-old Golden Retriever, and he's still pretty playful, so I remember what he was like at 10 months, so that would have been pretty tricky I reckon.

**Rosemary:** Yeah.

**Anne-Louise:** Okay. Anything else? So, afterwards, anything that you recall about things that were effective, or didn't work as well, or ideas that you think for improvement?

**Rosemary::** After the fires it was fantastic, the amount of support we got, the amount of food we got, the bottled water we got. It was quite funny because I was talking to the councillor that day when they were all at the hall, and he said that to his knowledge there'd never been anything wrong with the town water, and in my presence he said, "As a matter of fact, I'll clear this up now." And he got on the phone to the people at our waterworks, and fair enough, the water was drinkable all the way through.

I think, at one stage, it did start to taste a bit more like chlorine than normal, but yeah, that was interesting.

**Anne-Louise:** We've had a few people talk about the donations that came, whether that be food or other goods, do you have any comments about how satisfactory that was, whether

they were appropriate or not, and how people knew about what was available? Do you have any information about that?

**Rosemary:** I think it's like the doctors, and it's like everything else, you've got to look after yourself and you've got to look for it. I'm not computer literate but I had no trouble getting help, and I found that the help available was terrific, it was easy to access, and it was very quick coming through.

**Anne-Louise:** That's terrific.

**Rosemary:** And I'm still getting help today, I'm getting help from the Flying Doctor, and I had a – what do you call it - someone from the council, and not directly from the council, who became my -

**Anne-Louise:** Case support worker?

**Rosemary:** Yes, a social support worker, that's it, yes.

**Anne-Louise:** Case support? Yeah, great. Can you tell me anything about that, how that's been?

**Rosemary:** Oh, she's been wonderful. I went in and saw her at the Bush Nurse and explained how the fire had affected us, about losing – we had all our freezers stocked with food for New Year; we do big shops once a month so everything was chockers, it was just before Christmas and we hadn't used it.

She put me on to financial people, I was able to get funds to be able to replace damaged white goods, to help with fire damage in the house, and it was just easy to get and it was just terrific.

**Anne-Louise:** That's great to hear.

**Rosemary:** Yeah. And even now she rings me up once a month to make sure how we're going, and I keep her informed how we're tracking. It's very personal, it's good

**Anne-Louise:** That's great. Did you have any involvement with cleanup? Was your property or outbuildings, or damage where Grocon was involved or anyone like that?

**Rosemary:** No. We hadn't got any fences up, at the time, so that was alright. The worst thing we had, as far as damage, was the smell, the soot all over the curtains and all over the carpets and the bedding. And the windows and the cars, oh it was just like a black tar all over everything.

**Anne-Louise:** Right.

**Rosemary:** But I couldn't get over how the tops of the trees had singed, that's how close it was.

**Keith:** Particularly in the back windows.

**Rosemary:** The stickers on the back windows burnt inside. That's how hot the heat was in the actual town.

**Anne-Louise:** Goodness. Thank you. Anything else? Did you write anything down on your page that you wanted to talk to me about?

**Rosemary:** No, I think I've covered everything. I'm sure my husband would have said if I'd forgotten anything.

But we're getting ready already now for the fires, but I find I'm getting anxious because it's getting near fire season, especially with all this rain, and I'm looking at the back where it hasn't burnt around the town, and I can't understand why they haven't started doing something to make the town fire-safe for this season.

**Keith:** Mm.

**Anne-Louise:** Yeah, I'm hearing a lot about that, about the anxiety of the coming season.

**Rosemary:** I did ring the council last week about it, to just mention my concerns, and we're doing everything we can.

**Anne-Louise:** Are you on much land?

**Rosemary:** No, we're in town. We're on the equivalent of about two blocks. But we moved here for the peaceful life. We'd retired, but we'd retired breeding miniature horses and our health deteriorated and our doctor said, "No, you've got to give up the horses and you've got to change your lifestyle." So, we came up here for peace and quiet and to relax -

**Anne-Louise:** And then this happens.

**Rosemary:** Yes, the first thing you get is the fires, and then the pandemic.

**Anne-Louise:** Yes, yes. Have you been getting that ongoing – yes, you said your case support worker is still checking in and you've got that availability of counselling and that if you require it.

**Rosemary:** I'm still doing my counselling, every fortnight I'm speaking to a lovely lady who comes up from the Flying Doctor.

**Anne-Louise:** Terrific.

**Rosemary:** And she's been a big help.

**Anne-Louise:** Yeah, that's great. Look, thank you very much, Rosemary and Keith. I really appreciate you sharing your story and your experiences, particularly about the emergency relief and what it was like at the school. We heard a bit about that in Phase 1 because people commented on it, but just hearing a little bit more detail today has been really helpful, so thank you very much.

**Rosemary:** A lot more people would have commented on it, but a lot of the people are like me. I mean, I've got arthritic hands and I can't text. If I text something it's gobbledegook, I have great trouble texting, and a lot of people are like that, they're not conversant with the new way to do things.

**Anne-Louise:** Mm, and the computer and so forth.

**Rosemary:** Exactly, exactly.

**Anne-Louise:** So, if you're talking to anybody else and you said that it was an opportunity to share your story, please feel free to tell them to give me a call. It's taken us a little bit over half an hour, which is nothing at all, and if people put their experience down in writing then I'm happy to help them do that. So yes, feel free to share my number and my name, and I can support some other people to also put in a submission.

**Rosemary:** Okay. What was your number again?

**Anne-Louise:** My number is [REDACTED].

**Rosemary:** Okay. Thank you.

**Anne-Louise:** That's alright. So, what I'll do, Rosemary, just so you know, the recording will be transcribed, it doesn't take very long, a couple of days, then we'll get it printed, and so I should probably be able to have a copy for you back in a little over a week.

**Rosemary:** Oh, fantastic. We live [REDACTED], by the way.

**Anne-Louise:** Right.

**Rosemary:** This should be the safe end of town.

**Anne-Louise:** Hopefully for you, that's it.

**Rosemary:** Yes.

**Anne-Louise:** It might take about a week and a half, I think, based on someone else that we've already done this for. It's a little bit difficult because we're not in the office at the moment, so someone's getting things printed at Officeworks and then getting it in the post, and everything. But the main thing is we'll get it to you.

So, thank you very much.

**Rosemary:** Another thing I didn't say on the recording, which I should have said, is that we only have, at the moment, about four or five people on our fire brigade.

**Anne-Louise:** Right.

**Rosemary:** I thought they would have been having membership drives, training days, and nothing's happened at all.

**Anne-Louise:** Yeah. It's a difficult time, I think, with the COVID. I've still got the recording going, so that will pick up your comment anyway. I won't hit stop until we've actually finished. I know we did hear in Phase 1 that there is a decline in volunteering in some of those brigades because people are getting older as well, and the young ones, potentially, aren't coming through, or the people just aren't interested or don't have the time. So, it definitely was recognised in the Phase 1 report.

**Rosemary:** Yes. I just wish someone would give me a younger body and I'd do something myself, the same with my husband.

**Anne-Louise:** You have to remember that you came there to have a bit of a rest.

**Rosemary:** Yes. That's the body not the soul.

**Anne-Louise:** That's right. If there's nothing else, are you happy for us to finish?

**Rosemary:** Yes, certainly. Thank you.

**Anne-Louise:** Okay, alright. Thank you very much, I really appreciated talking with you.

**Rosemary:** Okay, bye.

**Anne-Louise:** Bye.

Submission Details:

Name - Rosemary and Keith Arnold

Publishing of submission - yes

Were you in any area where the fires occurred - YES

Were you involved in responding to the fires - yes

Were you or do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or communities affected by the fires - NO

LGA - East Gippsland Shire

Postcode/town - Cann River 3890

Age group - 73

Gender - woman

Do you wish to be kept up to date with the Inquiry - yes - Postal address

