

## **Interview with Robyn Coulston for the Bushfire Inquiry**

**Anne-Louise:** I've got some demographic questions at the start which I need to ask, if that's okay.

**Robyn:** Yes, that's fine.

**Anne-Louise:** I mentioned that we'll get the recording transcribed and I'll provide that to you as a copy, and we'll keep one as a submission into the Inquiry. Would you like your submission to be published? You don't have to; it's entirely up to you.

**Robyn:** Yeah, I think so.

**Anne-Louise:** Would you like your name to be on your submission? Or you're able to be anonymous; it doesn't matter.

**Robyn:** No, I don't mind my name being on there.

**Anne-Louise:** So, I'll put Robyn. I think I know the answer. Were you in an area where the fires occurred?

**Robyn:** Yes.

**Anne-Louise:** Were you involved in responding to the fires in that area?

**Robyn:** Well, I was, with my husband and another neighbour. I am legally blind, so I was just along with them.

**Anne-Louise:** And do you continue to be involved in supporting your community or individuals affected by the fires?

**Robyn:** Yes, absolutely.

**Anne-Louise:** Local government area is Towong Shire?

**Robyn:** Yeah.

**Anne-Louise:** The postcode, your postcode?

**Robyn:** 3691.

**Anne-Louise:** And are you in Lucyvale?

**Robyn:** I am.

**Anne-Louise:** You don't have to answer this question if you don't want to, but age group in decades? You don't have to, it's up to you.

**Robyn:** ██████████

**Anne-Louise:** And would you like to receive updates about the enquiry going forward?

**Robyn:** Yes, I would, thank you.

**Anne-Louise:** And Robyn, are you happy for me to send the copy of the transcript via email?

**Robyn:** Yes, that's fine.

**Anne-Louise:** That will be great. All right, that's all the questions I need to ask, so it's essentially over to you to talk to me about any of your experiences of the fires during and after the relief and recovery, but also the response to the fires if you want to talk about that. I may ask you some questions, depending on what you're talking about, to seek a bit more information, but it's entirely up to you about what you talk about. So, over to you.

**Robyn:** Thank you. Well, in the very beginning we were told to leave by the police, they came to all our houses, properties, and were quite bullying really. We had a plan.

**Anne-Louise:** It's a tiny bit hard for me to hear you. Are you speaking through your microphone on the computer or the laptop or something?

**Robyn:** computer

**Anne-Louise:** It's a little bit fuzzy, I can't hear very well.

**Robyn:** Okay, I'll turn it up. Now, would that be too loud?

**Anne-Louise:** No, that's much better.

**Robyn:** Good.

**Anne-Louise:** Sorry, so, do you mind starting again?

**Robyn:** No, not at all. In the beginning of the fires, we had a plan. We knew where we wanted to be, which was at home. But of course, as the fires came closer to us, we knew what had already burned, we knew we were going to go there, had we had to. But we were bullied by, I say the word "bullied," by the police. And they weren't our local police; they were police that came from Melbourne, which they had said themselves, and they were telling us, "Get out," we are going to die. Well, that was pretty horrific for me to be told that, when we knew exactly where we were going to be safe. However, and we had had all our equipment around our property, and very green, and lots of water, and slip-ons that we had around the paddocks, and tractors and hoses. You could do with support, not bullying like in that respect.

**Anne-Louise:** You sound like you were very well prepared?

**Robyn:** Very well. Yes, we were, and it's just a bit overwhelming to be told, "Get out, get out." They had no idea, I don't think they'd probably even seen a lit match. They were so nervous themselves really but yeah.

**Anne-Louise:** Every single person that I've spoken to from Lucyvale has commented on this.

**Robyn:** Have they?

**Anne-Louise:** Yes, so it was obviously quite a big issue and caused a lot of angst.

**Robyn:** It was, absolutely. A lot of women left, and children, of course. I only stayed because I was safe with my husband and he's very involved, fighting fires for fifty odd years. He has even got national medals for firefighting and things over the years. I just felt very safe, and that's exactly where I was going to stay. And had we had to have moved down to the paddock which was already burned, that would have all been ok anyway. But we stayed here. We lived in our shed for 11 days. We slept inside some nights, but it was so black with smoke, breathing, and visibility with my eyesight anyway is bad at the best of times, all the black smoke. However, we lived in the shed and we survived and helped as much as we could with others. In Berringama, friend down there that were burned out, and we'd go there at night sometimes for dinner. And of course, we lost all our freezers. We had a 500-litre and a 400-litre freezer full of meat and different things. So, we took that down to their place, and they hadn't had meat. It was such a good feeling to be able to contribute.

**Anne-Louise:** To help them?

**Robyn:** To help them, yes, and they were all there, girls, boys. Yeah, it was great. It was just great to catch up and talk to people. Because we had no communication, no power.

**Anne-Louise:** Do you remember how long that was for, no communications and power?

**Robyn:** Yes, it was 11 days until we got a generator, somebody gave us a generator. It was weeks, weeks. About three weeks, I think, for the power and the phones. And we had no mobile service here whatsoever.

**Anne-Louise:** So, how were you communicating with each other?

**Robyn:** UHF, we had a UHF in our Landcruiser, and that was it. And as for showers, you just had to have a bit of a wash when you could get some water out of the tap. Overall, we survived, and you learn daily to survive. We had a barbecue in the shed, and we cooked, and we invited neighbours and whoever was left in the district, for breakfast and dinners. It was just good to be able to help. And of course, there was a person who donated goods to our CFA shed at Berringama, and it was just overwhelming. Because we couldn't go shopping, you couldn't get out, we weren't allowed to go in to anywhere near any shops or anything. And to be able to just go and help yourself to what you needed to survive.

**Anne-Louise:** And was the donations appropriate? Was the food and things that you needed?

**Robyn:** Absolutely, it was.

**Anne-Louise:** Do you know how it got there or who donated it, or anything like that?

**Robyn:** I do not, actually. I haven't got that far in asking. But it was dropped every day, all the way, from I'd say Wodonga or Albury. It was dropped at the people's place that we would go to some nights for dinner, where we took the meat to that time, and in their house they had the same sort of setup with people, because a lot of people were going there for

dinner and meals through the day, and people could help themselves there. Anything, from hygiene to - all non-perishable stuff, of course. Fruit, vegies. Well, you couldn't have a shower if you didn't have power, so you needed other ways of washing. Of course, there was no washing, there was no clothes washing or anything.

**Anne-Louise:** No clothes washing?

**Robyn:** No, definitely not.

**Anne-Louise:** There was a small group of you who were left in the district, is that right?

**Robyn:** Yes, that's right. There were several elderly people. There was one couple in their late eighties, they wouldn't go. So, you had to be aware of them too. You needed to keep an eye out for them, make sure they had food, because they weren't going down to the CFA shed to get their food. So, different neighbours would be taking them food as well. We did have, I don't know how he got through, but he came from New South Wales, he does have a property here, and he would drop us fresh bread, and gosh, it was a luxury a bit of Boston bun or something. But the bakery in New South Wales, he said, had donated food for him to bring to us. It's just overwhelming.

**Anne-Louise:** That's good that people were able to support you.

**Robyn:** Absolutely. And you make so many more friends too and we have happy hour once a month. And since the 2002 fires, that was when we started our gatherings at the hall, and it's happened every month since. We have 30-odd, 35 people still gather there once a month and support each other. It's great community.

**Anne-Louise:** I've heard the others talking about the once-a-month Friday night catch up. It sounds like a great opportunity for the community to come together.

**Robyn:** It really is.

**Anne-Louise:** But obviously, over this last year you haven't been able to do that?

**Robyn:** No, that's right, no. So, all of a sudden now that we've got the bushfire recovery, we have a meeting there and we gather there every so often and talk about what we can do to keep building our community safer, and putting in tanks, more tanks, and quick-fills for the future. Because you just never know. And of course, once you've been through it a couple of times, you have a lot of respect for things that need to happen, what we just need to do. And we're going to make our hall a safe place for us to be if it ever happens again. And yeah, just have good plans ahead of us.

**Anne-Louise:** And Robyn, have you needed to access any of the grants or support services, or anything like that, that's been available in the recovery?

**Robyn:** Yes, we certainly have, it's been absolutely marvellous.

**Anne-Louise:** Did you have a case support worker helping you, or you were doing that on your own?

**Robyn:** No, we've had different people coming from different areas, like a man from Marysville came to have a talk, and then other people, because how they went through the fires at Marysville, and they've actually been just marvellous too. They've just donated us a lawnmower for our hall, a ride-on mower. That's just absolutely beautiful. Because they know exactly what we went through. But no, the grants, we have different people coming and telling us about them. I know her name is [REDACTED] Anyway, she come out from Corryong and tells us what grants are available or whatever. Anyway, we put in for them, some we missed out on, but we'll go on the second round.

**Anne-Louise:** And has it been useful having somebody provide you with that support, like through that case support program? Can you tell me a little bit about that, like how beneficial that's been?

**Robyn:** Absolutely. We wouldn't have known about any of these grants had this lady not come and shared all her knowledge with us, because that's what she does. She's at the CRC in Corryong. She's very knowledgeable. And there's also another gentleman, [REDACTED]

**Anne-Louise:** Yes, [REDACTED] from the council, I think.

**Robyn:** Right, yeah, I think he's to do with council. Anyway, he's a great lot of knowledge too, because these people just know things, and it's been terrific that they just share with us and tell us how and who to get onto for different things for our community. Like the quick-fills to put in, there's a grant for that, or there's a grant for something else for your hall or your community; they'll just help.

**Anne-Louise:** That's great that they're able to provide that information.

**Robyn:** It is, and we're all very interested and we're all playing our little part in it, and it all comes together, it all helps. And if we miss out on one, we'll apply for another. Because like they're saying, the money is there. You might actually in the beginning feel a bit, "Oh, we don't really deserve that," or need it, or whatever, but the money's there and like they keep saying, if you don't use it, it's gone. It's there to be used. So, no, it was absolutely very valuable meetings that we've been having. And it's not only our Lucyvale and Berringama; there's Cudgewa and Thowgla and Nariel. They have the same meetings. Because they were burned quite badly too at Cudgewa, and they're getting grants to do their place back up, and it's just looking amazing. I mean, it hasn't happened yet, but it's going to look amazing. Just looking at the black, from looking at black, you would never think in three years it would look so good.

**Anne-Louise:** Have you been having much to do with the other community recovery committees? I suppose it's been hard, you haven't probably been able to get together with them, but have you been communicating?

**Robyn:** Well, [REDACTED] communicates with Cudgewa, and [REDACTED] she goes to Cudgewa meetings when she can. And [inaudible], she's another one that goes to the Cudgewa meetings. And then they bring it back to us and tell us what's happening, and have we put in for this, or this grant. going along. It's really rewarding.

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

**Robyn:** [Inaudible]

**Anne-Louise:** I'm finding it a little bit hard to hear you again.

**Robyn:** Sorry, I got a bit emotional then.

**Anne-Louise:** You're all right, Robyn. Are you okay?

**Robyn:** Yes, fine thanks. I do that.

**Anne-Louise:** I absolutely understand, talking about these experiences, it is quite emotional for people. Have you been able to get some support for yourself as well?

**Robyn:** Yes, thank you, yes. No, that's all good. I'm usually good, usually good. My eyes are too close to my bladder most of the time.

**Anne-Louise:** But it comes back when you talk about it.

**Robyn:** It does, it does. And to think that it was nearly 12 months ago, the impact is -

**Anne-Louise:** Ongoing.

**Robyn:** Yes. But however, we do have a lot of support, and that's the best thing to do, to be able to talk about it.

**Anne-Louise:** It will probably be hopefully better with the restrictions lifting a bit more, you can actually be out and about in your community seeing people more.

**Robyn:** Yes. No, it will be good to be able to have our happy hours back again, and our meetings.

**Anne-Louise:** Your happy hour, that's right.

**Robyn:** Yes, we call it happy hour, every month.

**Anne-Louise:** They said perhaps I should try to come up for one of the happy hours to catch up with people face-to-face.

**Robyn:** Absolutely. Where are you from?

**Anne-Louise:** I'm in Woodend in Macedon Ranges, so I'm in regional Victoria, but the rest of the team's in Melbourne, so we definitely do want to come up when we're able to. And the others were saying, "Oh, you better come to one of the Friday nights," so we'll see. Hopefully we'll be able to tie that in at some point. It might be early next year, but it will be good to meet people face-to-face.

**Robyn:** It would be.

**Anne-Louise:** And also, to see how they're going, 12 months after the fire, with the recovery, and just seeing if there's things changed over that last six or so months.

**Robyn:** Things are looking quite beautiful. It's amazing the grass that we've got this time of year too. It's good to see everybody when you go to drive into Corryong, doing their hay or all the silage at the moment, because there's just so much grass around. It's just good to think that they can put that in their sheds, whereas normally we wouldn't have that much grass, without the amount of rain that we've had here too. So, it's rewarding to watch them do that.

**Anne-Louise:** And how do you think people are feeling about the upcoming fire season?

**Robyn:** Well, see this is it too, we haven't gathered to even find that out, if people are worried. But if this green still stays around and we still get more rain, I think we'll be okay. But yes, it's a bit scary, if the heat comes and all of this grass we do have dries off, it would be a furnace. It would be worse than last time, because we've got so much grass.

**Anne-Louise:** And is there anything else you wanted to talk to me about the relief or recovery?

**Robyn:** I don't think so. No, we'd just like to see a bit more backburning done, especially in the Wabba Wilderness Area, because that was our real worry for our place here. We were up on the top of the ridge fighting it from coming over to our side, so that was our big worry at the time. And of course, we couldn't get any help here whatsoever, because everybody around us was burning and they were busy. They were busy and we were just waiting for the fire.

**Anne-Louise:** The house was okay in the end?

**Robyn:** Yes. No, we were very lucky in this fire. We did have a fire later, after the big ones, down the valley a bit, but everybody was right on top of it, because there were the volumes of people around and fire brigades, because they weren't busy. But that's all I've really got to say.

**Anne-Louise:** Thank you very much, Robyn, and thank you for sharing your experiences and your story with me. I'm really impressed with the Lucyvale community and the way they're thinking about how they can make themselves more resilient for the future, and how you're working together, and how strong you were and you are as a little community. So, you've just reinforced a number of the messages that I've heard from the others, which is really great.

**Robyn:** Thank you. It is exciting to think that what we've got head of us, and what we can hopefully get out of some of these grants that will keep us safer. Big expenses, big expenses some of them, so normally you just can't afford to do. It's a real safety thing. It feels good. Hopefully we can get some.

**Anne-Louise:** I hope so too. So, what I'll do, Robyn, is once the transcript comes back, I'll send a copy to you via email so you've got a copy. We'll keep another copy as a submission in to the Inquiry, and potentially I might be able to catch up with you early next year, have a

chat with you again about how it's been 12 months after the fires, and hopefully come up and see some people face to face at some point.

**Robyn:** That would be great. You're welcome.

**Anne-Louise:** All right, well thanks very much, Robyn. I appreciate it great, and you look after yourself.

**Robyn:** Yes, thank you. You too.

**Anne-Louise:** Okay, thank you, bye bye.

**Robyn:** Bye.

Details are:

Submission to be published - yes

Submission to be named - yes - Robyn Coulston

Were you in an area where the fires occurred - yes

Were you involved in responding to the fires - yes

Do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or community members - yes

LGA - Towong

Postcode/Town - Lucyvale - 3691

Age group -

Gender - woman

Keep up to date - yes - email -