

Interview – Kaye Laverty – 22 October 2020

ANNE-LOUISE: I've just got a few introductory questions that I need to ask you if that's okay, for the submission?

KAYE: Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Firstly, would you like this submission to be published as part of the inquiry or not? You don't have to, it doesn't matter whether you do or you don't.

KAYE: Oh, look, I don't mind.

ANNE-LOUISE: Is that a yes? Are you happy?

KAYE: Yeah, I guess that's a yes. Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah? Okay. Next question, would you like your name to be on the submission or do you wish it to be anonymous? Either way, it's still considered.

KAYE: No, look I don't mind if you put my name on it, that's fine.

ANNE-LOUISE: Okay, yeah. I think I know the answer to this one. Were you in an area where the fires occurred?

KAYE: Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Were you involved in responding to the fires?

KAYE: Not me personally, no.

ANNE-LOUISE: Okay, yes.

KAYE: Well, kind of. Yeah, that's – no. That's right, it'll be a no.

ANNE-LOUISE: Okay. Do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or communities affected by the fires?

KAYE: Yes, I'm on the Lucyvale committee. Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Excellent. Thank you. Now, so our local government area is Towong and then town postcode Lucyvale?

KAYE: Yes. 3691.

ANNE-LOUISE: 3691. You do not have to answer this question if you don't want to. Age group in the decades?

KAYE: Plus 70.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's it. Okay. So, what will happen is I'm just going to let you freely speak about any aspects of the Emergency Relief and Recovery or any aspects of the response to the fires. If you, where possible, provide examples is really good. I'll probably just ask you some more questions as we go along, like just to probe a little bit more of the information, if that's all right? You can chat for as long as you like.

KAYE: Okay. We'd gone away for new year to Melbourne, so we didn't get back to Corryong until that evening after getting through the roadblocks and what have you, we didn't get back until about 4:30 I think on the evening of, that'd be the 1st of January wouldn't it, I think?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes.

KAYE: So, I came back to the farm and we stayed here and just hovered around waiting for something to happen. [REDACTED] are actually firefighters so they were gone, so were looking after their place and our place. Then the police actually harassed up something terrible. They were backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards and just unnecessary, because we were well prepared. Both houses were actually clear and wouldn't have been a problem. They just kept coming back, coming back, more or less ordering us to leave so, in the end, we packed up and went for two nights to Yackandandah. So then my son in law and daughter and myself came back, I left my husband away because he's not capable of fighting fires, so he was left down there.

So that next 10 days or whatever, we had no power, no phone, whatever, just watching this fire sit above us probably two or three kilometres away on top of the hill behind us and down the end of the valley, waiting for it to come through, which it didn't do thank goodness. But in that time, my daughter and I did a lot of welfare stuff in the valley. We actually went to the fire shed and tidied it all up and all that sort of stuff that needs to be done. So that was [REDACTED] [REDACTED] sorting out people and what have you. So, kind of I was left at home because [REDACTED] and I was here on my own, actually just hovering around, watching, waiting, wondering what to do next. The worst thing for me -

ANNE-LOUISE: That was for that whole 10 days, like that whole period of time?

KAYE: Oh, nearly a fortnight.

ANNE-LOUISE: Right, yeah. Nearly two weeks of this waiting and watching.

KAYE: Nearly two weeks of just waiting.

ANNE-LOUISE: Were you within this area? Yesterday I was speaking with [REDACTED] [REDACTED] so were you blocked out?

KAYE: We're their neighbours.

ANNE-LOUISE: You're neighbours? So, you were in this area where you were blocked out from going through the roadblocks and contained within your township sort of area?

KAYE: Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah? For this two week period?

KAYE: Yes. So, we kind of relied on ourselves to maintain ourselves, which was hard work.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, I can imagine. Sorry, I interrupted you, you were about to say something.

KAYE: Yeah. I [unclear].

ANNE-LOUISE: You were about to say, "The hardest thing was."

KAYE: Just the waiting and also, the ABC radio. Now, they do a good job to a point, but they terrify everybody's families. So the phone calls we were getting, and I guess [REDACTED] [REDACTED] would be the same, people were ringing all the time once the phones came back on, ringing to see how we were going. Because we were supposedly on high alert, evacuating, all this stuff, which wasn't to me really true.

We were quite safe. We were actually watching. You know the terrain, you know what's going on. We were safe. But all the families were terrified because of the ABC radio continually putting the same stuff over and over and over again, which is, to me, not correct. They don't need to do that. I don't think they realised we'd already had the police here terrifying us and then the radio just goes on and on and on. In the end, I had to say to my sister, "Can you fend off these phone calls? We're fine."

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes. I heard yesterday [REDACTED] talked about the pressure from the police as well. Can you tell me a little bit more about that? So it was that real focus on, "You need to get out, you need to evacuate."

KAYE: Oh yeah. I mean, one day my daughter and I were standing there and these two police came to the door and they'd already been, I think they came three times in one day and we'd already told them we weren't evacuating. So they didn't need to come back. They don't have to come back, but they came back and there was either two or three, I'm not really sure how many were in the car but the guy came over and spoke and then he was about to walk away and this young policeman, obviously they were from Melbourne, they've got no idea, came in and was looking at the big mushroom of cloud just above our house going, "Come on boss, we need to go. We need to go." He was worried about them going. You go, "Really? For goodness sake, just settle down, it's fine."

Yeah. So that sort of thing. So, they really weren't experienced enough in fires to actually go, "These guys know what they're doing, let's just leave them alone."

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes. And respecting that local knowledge. We heard quite a lot about that in the phase one about people not just respecting or understanding or seeking out local knowledge.

KAYE: Yeah. I mean, the communications was obviously bad from the word go, right from when the fire started over the other side of the river until it went to the coast. I mean, it

obviously went so fast nobody could probably have done much at all. Thank goodness people did stay and defend their houses because otherwise, it would have been a massive destruction. All the houses would have burnt if people hadn't hung around and saved the houses.

ANNE-LOUISE: Did you have any communications, like as in were you able to access it in any way or you're just relying on radio and things like that, and word of mouth?

KAYE: Yeah. I was very lucky. We had nothing here at my house. [REDACTED] are very smart and built an off the grid house, so they had communications up there and they actually had enough power to get by, even though the smoke started to impact on that, they still had power. So, I kind of hovered to there because there was no use being here. But yeah, I mean that's another thing that people should be saying, well okay, we should be supporting people to actually go off the grid and be self-sufficient.

But our committee, [REDACTED] would have told you, our committee had actually got radios and we're seeking grants to get more radios, so everybody will have a CB radio that we can be a complete unit, I suppose you'd say, with our own base station at the local hall.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. She talked about improvements to a response plan which sounds like really good work on your community's behalf to be thinking like that.

KAYE: Yeah, well we are a one road in, one road out little valley so we need to be self-sufficient. So the media actually hype it up so much and I mean, it was devastating, there's no doubt about it, but it went through Corryong so quickly that nobody would have had a chance to go this is – it just went. Yeah. So, going on about it -

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, they spoke about the speed. Yeah.

KAYE: Yes. I think from what I heard initially because we're in Melbourne, we had the VIC Fires thingy on and they said it started off with a tree that exploded and took off. Well, it should have been able to be stopped on the other side in New South Wales. Really, it's kind of a negligence bit attached to it I think as well, which has cost the country a fortune. That's without COVID being stuck on top of that.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, that's it. What about your experiences of like that emergency relief or things that went well, things that weren't so good, ideas for doing things differently and this recovery process since?

KAYE: The thing at the time was, and I don't know that people think about it, a lot of farmers now are aging, like we're all aging. So, I think somebody should have been welfare checking around. I mean, we did our valley [REDACTED] and I kind of hovered around anyone that we thought needed someone knocking on the door and saying, "How you going?" There probably could have been somebody else, I don't know. Just say, "Righto, you go and do a valley." Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: You just did that off your own bat?

KAYE: Yeah. Because you're not really sure how people are handling it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes. How long did you do that for, Kaye?

KAYE: We've had these – oh, probably the real bad week, probably.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes.

KAYE: I mean, well I've been here 50 years, so this is probably the third time we've had near misses. This one's been more hyped up because of where it went through Corryong and headed to the coast. I mean, it was such a bad year and it was so early. I'm worried now that people are going to get complacent because it's green, there's feed everywhere. Yeah, we'll be making heaps of hay and all this sort of stuff. Normally our fire season would be February March, last year it was January. So, this year it's going to be back to February March. I don't think people are thinking that far ahead.

ANNE-LOUISE: Actually, I asked [REDACTED] that question yesterday because in East Gippsland where I've been speaking with people the areas that weren't burnt their anxiety's really high for this coming season because still like drought-affected and I said, "What do you think the feeling is in your community?" [REDACTED] said very similar to what you have said, you know, "The grass is green, the feed's great, prices of the cattle and the sheep are good." It's probably all right for the time being. I think [REDACTED] said that, "Yes, but in turn, people potentially will be anxious about the next season."

KAYE: Yes. I think it'll be February – March, I think that's when all this feed's going to be dried off and everything and the winds will get up and lightning strikes and what have you. Yeah, it's part of Australia isn't it, really?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes. Any other kind of like, experiences and the recovery, like how that's been going, how you think the community's been going, the impact of COVID, how that's impacted on people's recovery?

KAYE: Well, since the fires back in 2002 I think it was, the last big fires up here, we started happy hour at the local hall the last Friday of the month. So we've been having that for close to 20 years and we all miss that because we can't get together at the moment because of COVID. Hoping on the 8th of November we might be able to roll it onto the back of our next meeting, hopefully. Because people don't get out. This is even worse, really. So, it will be impacting on people's mental health, there's no doubt about it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you think that people have been accessing services, support services for mental health and other, whether it be financial services, have you any sense about how that's going within your community?

KAYE: I wouldn't imagine people are going to mental health in town because they're choosing to stay home rather than go and take a risk, like run the gauntlet of that. Financially, farmers are a pretty proud lot and I think a lot of people would say, "No, we'll just get on with it." You don't dwell on that sort of thing because you have bad years and good years you go, "Well, we'll just ride the hump." We couldn't have had a better year, so this year farmers are fine.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, right. Since the fires.

KAYE: Yeah, since the fires. Yeah. So, it's the social, we need to get together, the social get together and de-brief and what have you.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes. So important. It's been very difficult with the COVID, hasn't it?

KAYE: Yeah. Well, we're allowed 20 people at our meetings but that's only just a representative of the whole group, the whole community. Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Any other thoughts on sort of that during or after the fire, things that spring to mind, any issues or things that went well?

KAYE: Yeah, well communications. I think the donations of food, I mean that was just crazy, there would have been an awful lot of stuff gone to waste. I don't know what they did with it. It needs to be better organised or better, I don't know, just don't bring in truckloads and truckloads of stuff and just have it there with not being able to be kept properly.

ANNE-LOUISE: Was that into Corryong or made it to Lucyvale as well?

KAYE: No, no. Well, they dropped some stuff off at the fire shed, which was fine and there's still a little bit in the hall now that just hasn't found a home. But we went down to [u Cudgewa because we had to register and we went to the Cudgewa hall and it was just unbelievable. Just unbelievable. Got boxes and boxes of food, fresh food and what have you. But they had no facilities to store.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes. Do you have any recollections of, because this is one of the aspects we are looking into, the appropriateness of donations and things like that? I know your comment about fresh food and stuff and not being able to store, but yeah, do you recall anything about how appropriate the donations were?

KAYE: Probably not too bad. There's a heap of toiletries and things that are still in the fire shed and I don't know what they're going to do with those. Yeah, people don't go there looking for a toothbrush and what have you. If they come from away they bring their gear with them. I think that was donated by schools or whatever, I think there was names on some of it. You go well that's a group thing, this is what we can do. Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Who was kind of – I noticed your comment about the coordination of it, like at Cudgewa who was kind of looking after that management and distribution of donations?

KAYE: I have no idea.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, okay.

KAYE: No idea at all. I don't know who was in charge and whether it was ordered or whether it was just sent up from down Albury-Wodonga willy-nilly and just thought people would use it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, but just way too much and not necessarily what people need.

KAYE: Yeah. I hate waste. Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. No, it's come up quite a bit about the amount of donations and how it's been managed – coordinated, the appropriateness, etcetera. So yeah, certainly something needs to change in that area I think.

KAYE: Yeah. I also heard of people actually going from one relief centre to the other, actually stockpiling.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes.

KAYE: You don't understand people can be like that.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. What about your -

KAYE: But you've probably heard that before too.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, a little bit. What about you getting together with your community to form a community recovery committee, have you got any thoughts about how that's gone?

KAYE: I think it's terrific. Yeah, people have sort of hit the ground running and we're just applying for grants. Yeah. [REDACTED] and they've got a grant, they got \$6,000 to buy some radios. We need to get more radios, so we're applying for grants for that. We're applying for grants to get more water tanks so we've got more water storage. We're running in conjunction of the fire brigade, the local fire brigade as well. So, yeah, we've just got our hand out trying to safe proof ourselves.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. No, that's fantastic I think. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

KAYE: Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Oh, perfect.

KAYE: [REDACTED]

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, great. [REDACTED] Yeah. No, I've had a few chats with her.

KAYE: Oh, have you? Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. So, that's how she put me on to the group of people who were interested in have a bit more of a conversation.

KAYE: Oh, fair enough. Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. No, that was terrific. Yeah, that's good. So, it sounds like your little community is extremely tight community who were working well together before the fires.

KAYE: Yeah. As I said, for 20 years we've had this happy hour which we know has been beneficial. Yeah, probably a thought to put in there for other communities to actually try and do something the same. We share a meal, we have a few drinks and have a bit of a chat.

ANNE-LOUISE: How do you think that – I've got quite an interest in this area, how do you think that's – what's the word – affected, impacted, the recovery by the fact you all knew each other well, you had these sort of established community connections? What kind of impact has that had on your recovery would you say, your community's recovery?

KAYE: Well, I think because we're missing out at the moment, we're not being able to do that. I would imagine people are probably quite isolated.

ANNE-LOUISE: You were up until towards the end of March or something like that, or close to the end of March?

KAYE: No, the last one we would have had would have been our Christmas one, the first week in December. Though we haven't had anything since.

ANNE-LOUISE: You haven't had any since, yeah right. Okay. I wasn't sure whether you were able to have some and then with COVID it stopped.

KAYE: No.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, okay.

KAYE: It's just haven't been able to.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, it's a very challenging time

KAYE: Yeah. But anyway, we'll get back to it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, well hopefully 8th of November. Or did you say 6th?

KAYE: Yeah, hopefully.

ANNE-LOUISE: 6th of November I think it is, is a Friday.

KAYE: Yeah. No, we're having it on the 8th to run in conjunction with this meeting, our fire meeting. So, we'll have the meeting first then the others can come after we've had our little chitchat.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, that sounds good.

KAYE: That is the plan.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, lovely. Anything else, Kaye?

KAYE: Not that I can think of. No, probably not.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's all right. So, you're happy with that?

KAYE: Yes, thank you. Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Okay. So, what I'll do is the recording gets transcribed and I'll send you a copy of the transcript. Are you happy for me to send that through via email?

KAYE: Absolutely. That'll be fine.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah?

KAYE: Thank you.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's okay?

KAYE: Yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Okay. Then the details that you gave me at the start, I just send that through to the team that are recording the submissions and then this will be considered your submission into the inquiry. For your info, we're taking community submissions and feedback up until about the middle of March next year and we do definitely hope to get up to your way at some point, probably early next year I imagine. I live in regional Victoria but the rest of the team is in metro Melbourne, so until they allow people from Melbourne, yeah, they're stuck. I've got a little bit more flexibility up here, but we would like to try to get back to see people early next year which would be 12 or so months after the fires, to have a bit of a further conversation about recovery. So, I'll be back in touch with [REDACTED] around that when we can. So, thank you very much.

KAYE: Well, hopefully, you can come on the last Friday of the month and then you can join us.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. I think that's what [REDACTED] said too, so sounds good. Look, thanks very much, I really appreciate it and if you know of anybody else who would like to share their story in this manner, please pass on my details to them. I've got a few other people on the list to give a phone call to, or anybody else in other communities, Cudgewa or Corryong that you might know. Yeah, please pass on their details and more than happy to make a time for them. We really value the information that people provide in this environment. Yeah, and just want to say thanks very much, I appreciate it greatly.

KAYE: No worries. Hopefully, I've helped.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes, definitely.

KAYE: Okay.

ANNE-LOUISE: Thanks, Kaye. Okay, take care.

KAYE: Okay.

ANNE-LOUISE: Bye then.

KAYE: You too. Thank you.

ANNE-LOUISE: Bye-bye.

KAYE: Bye.

Details are:

Submission to be published - yes

Submission to be named - yes - Kaye Laverty

Were you in an area where the fires occurred - yes

Were you involved in responding to the fires - no

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

LGA - Towong

Postcode/Town - Lucyvale - 3691

Age group - 70

Gender - woman

Keep up to date - yes

