

Interview with Helena Plum for the Bushfire Inquiry – 13 November 2020

ANNE-LOUISE: And I've just got some questions at the beginning which are demographic type information – I'm just going to turn these phones off– yeah, just for the purposes of the Inquiry. So I mentioned that we'll get the recording transcribed and I'll give you a copy. And then a copy will be considered as a submission for the Inquiry. Would you like the submission to be published? You don't have to. It's up to you.

HELENA: I don't mind.

ANNE-LOUISE: So I'll say that's a yes, happy for it to be published?

HELENA: Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Okay. Would you like your name on it or it can be anonymous?

HELENA: Yes, that's fine.

ANNE-LOUISE: Name?

HELENA: Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Okay. I think I know the answer. Were you in an area where the fires occurred?

HELENA: Yes.

ANNE-LOUISE: Were you involved in responding to the fires in any way, such as emergency services or anything like that?

HELENA: No, not really. I helped in the Relief Centre and that was basically with clothing and so forth for several weeks.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you continue to still be involved in supporting communities and individuals after the fires?

HELENA: I think with COVID, that's made it very difficult.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Definitely. Now local government area is Towong. And your postcode?

HELENA: 3707.

ANNE-LOUISE: 3707. And is that Corryong?

HELENA: Yes.

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

HELENA: 50 – no, sorry, 62. I wish I was 52.

ANNE-LOUISE: Would you like to receive the community updates from the Inquiry. We've been sending them out via e-mail. You may already be on the list.

HELENA: Yeah, that would be great.

ANNE-LOUISE: And that would be via e-mail, if that's okay. And just lastly, I like to make sure that everybody's aware that obviously sharing your story and your experiences this morning, it might bring up a range of emotions for you. If at any point you want to stop, we can just pause the recording, take a bit of time out, and I can also provide you with any information about support services as well. So sometimes it's pretty emotional retelling some of the things that occurred. Okay, so then now basically, it's over to you. I'm interested in hearing about your experiences of relief and recovery, the things that worked well, the things that didn't go as well, whether you've got any ideas for – or opportunities for improvements. You can basically talk to me about anything and I will just be listening. And I will probably just ask you some more clarifying questions as we go through, if that's all right.

HELENA: questions would be good to help me get through it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Sure. I can do that. So away you go. If you want to talk to me about the role in emergency relief or anything –

HELENA: Yeah. Look, I, personally, don't have any anger or anguish against anyone. I sat in the hall and I heard bagging of firemen, bagging of police, bagging of everybody. This fire was uncontrollable. It was something so surreal. It didn't seem real. You know what I mean? We weren't the only ones. I think, generally, everything that happened was just so unbelievable for words. I had my daughter's father-in-law at Batemans Bay lost his house. My father-in-law at Mallacoota was stuck in the midst of it. His house is still intact. I was in the midst of it. Fires don't just affect the people involved inside them. They affect the people out there. I think of my daughter and the stress she went under. I didn't know, for three days, if my own daughter was dead or alive. It's not just that. The police did all they could as far as I was concerned.

The firemen – you couldn't fight that. I heard how people were angry the firemen left their property. How could they fight that? Nobody could put their lives on risk. I wouldn't expect anyone – apparently the firemen put my shed out. I wasn't here. I was told my house burned down. The police, the involvement – nobody – we had no contact, phone contact, nothing. It was no one's fault. It was just something that happened out of the blue that no one could prepare for. Preparation –

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you remember how you were getting your information when the communications were down? Was it word of mouth? How were you finding out about things?

HELENA: In the beginning, no one knew nothing. We really did not know anything. We were all packed in a hall. You didn't know if you're going to live or die. The poor policemen at the front door were getting – there was one young girl standing at the door. Now she's come in and risked her life and I give her credit for that. A lady from one of the houses came

in and was demanding that she tell her what was going on, ring her. There were no phones. How could she ring? She expected that poor policewoman to come and tell her what was happening. No one knew. We didn't know. We had no radios, nothing. You just waited it out and that's all you could do. You couldn't blame the police. You couldn't blame anyone. There was just – you're stuck in a big hole of mountains right on fire, right around. I look at black hills right around me. I can show you. I look at a black hill every morning. I drive down the road. I see blackness around me still to this day. Nobody should get the blame for this.

The only thing I would say even to this day – I'm looking at a paddock across from me. The grass is a mile high, not a mile high, but you're looking at probably almost waist high. My neighbour behind me, waist high for us. The council is not supervising that enough.

ANNE-LOUISE: So that preparedness, people doing the right thing and preparing their properties, reducing the risk.

HELENA: And they're not doing it. That is not happening. This is people's responsibility as well and no one's taking – well, I don't expect people to take responsibility because I think, up here, most of the farmers live in a world of denial. My son-in-law lives at Tooma, my daughter – they're on 1,200 acres. My son-in-law literally rotary hoed a whole paddock to put his cattle on, to save his cattle. He rotary hoed around the paddock. A friend came up from – they burn off wheat farms and so forth. He came up and had all the pumping equipment. They put out the fires before it got across the [unclear] Bridge to the pump. I only found out all this later. Now that is the preparations. Farmers need to learn to prepare. Farmers need education. I see it to this day. There's the non-acceptance, "Oh well, everything's fine. We're all right again." I look around me. The long grass – I'm on –

ANNE-LOUISE: Are you on much land? Are you on much land yourself?

HELENA: I've got one- and three-quarter acres. You can actually see the black mountain

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Yeah, I can.

HELENA: I look at that every single morning. I watch the fire coming across the mountain.

ANNE-LOUISE: It's a reminder for you all the time.

HELENA: It is actually council land behind me or crown land. And my next-door neighbour has fenced it all off for his own purposes. It's not being maintained.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Right. Do you have much – do you talk to the council much about it or have you –

HELENA: I have found council absolutely impossible to deal with. I have complained because my fence – two of the wires burned down and they snap. It was old anyway, but the concrete posts got brittle.

We had BlazeAid here.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Right.

HELENA: [REDACTED]. So the council – I went to the council and said, “I need help with my neighbour. I rattled off the name to them.” And they’re like, “Oh no, not him, we don’t want to deal with him.” So that was no help to me. Then I put in another report to somebody else, and I’m still waiting to hear from them. And this is months later. Actually, I’ve had the bushfire fund people getting me some materials so I can fix it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Right. Have you had a case support manager or anything like that helping you with any of these issues?

HELENA: I’ve had a – [REDACTED] gave me some advice. Sorry, I need to actually wipe my glasses.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. All right.

HELENA: He’s been quite good, trying to help me where they can even to the point, “I think you need some counselling now,” because I think it’s hit me harder now than it has before. I was busy before and then it was – I live alone. I have two dogs. You find even financial support as single woman – it’s not per household. It’s per person. There’s only me. And to try and get support is very hard.

ANNE-LOUISE: You talked a little bit about that on the phone. Can you tell me a little bit more about that, what some of those challenges were around that financial assistance?

HELENA: The challenge – I live on a disability pension. I live alone. I had no funds in the bank whatsoever probably when the fires – because I’m a great one for buying what I want, living for today, not tomorrow. I’m not good at saving which – when my shed burned down, I bought a car. I’ve been ripped off on my car through [REDACTED] in Albury. I’m now fighting that to try and get my money back. I thought I bought a new car with a few miles and it turns out it’s a dud. It’s been pranged. So anyway, as far as the bushfire – at first, I got \$1,000. Three days after the fires, I got – well, I got that much later – I got \$500 from DHS. There was an old lady that wanted to travel to her daughters in Wangaratta. And I said, “I’ll drive you there.” I had my caravan in tow. The poor old dear, she said, “I was going to give you some money, but seing you got \$500, I’m not going to give you any.”

And I’m like, “Great, I’ve gone out of my way to take you to Wangaratta – not that I really expected any money. I did it out the goodness of my heart anyway. But that was a challenge trying to make ends meet. Luckily, I’ve got a credit card, so that helps. The \$1,000 – honestly, 600 went in insurance excess. So that was great. So basically, I even bought knickers and some clothing because I did quite a – I didn’t run. I came home, grabbed things, but there’s things you don’t think of. I grabbed photo albums. We were camping for two days. I had enough clothes in the caravan for a couple of days, not for – well, I think I only stayed away for five days anyway.

ANNE-LOUISE: Was that in the Relief Centre? Is that where you stayed the whole time?

HELENA: I did. I ended up – where was it – Wodonga Showgrounds.

ANNE-LOUISE: Oh yeah.

HELENA: And they actually vacated that to the army barracks. I, personally, didn't want to go to the army barracks. I had two dogs. And I don't know what it was. It was the bush around the area. I just didn't feel safe. You know what I mean?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah.

HELENA: With all the fires happening – yeah, so I –

ANNE-LOUISE: So were you able to take your pets to the barracks or not?

HELENA: Yes, you were. They were allowed to stay in rooms, I believe. The two dogs – I had just – Ted was only a pup at the time. He was just not quite one – he wasn't even one year old, the border collie. I've got a border collie and a Pomeranian. And it's almost like I didn't want to leave the security of my own caravan and car. You know what I mean?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah.

HELENA: I went there and said, "Can I put the caravan into power?" It was stinking hot. And they were like, "No, there's no way of doing it." So I said, "I'm quite happy to just stay in the caravan." They wouldn't allow that. So I was –

ANNE-LOUISE: That was at the barracks?

HELENA: Yeah. They wouldn't allow that. So I didn't stay there. There wasn't really – there was only a couple of us still at Wodonga Showgrounds. I had to start paying for the showgrounds, which wasn't very expensive. I think it was \$10 a night. So I paid, I think, \$30 in all. So I paid for that.

ANNE-LOUISE: And who was – do you remember who was running that? Was that the council who was running that?

HELENA: I think so. I don't know exactly who was running that. I didn't go there straightaway because, of course, I stayed here for three days before – I needed to know that my daughter was safe.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah.

HELENA: I wanted to know that they were still alive. We had no contact. I had put her down as missing persons with the police. Look, it was just flat out. I asked if anybody knew anything. There was not a great lot of communication between New South Wales and Victoria, but they didn't have that communication. The night of the fires, the poor police, they looked as devastated as, I think, the rest of us, to be honest. I remember one chap. I must have gone to him 100 times and said, "Have you heard anything from Towong or Tooma? Have you heard anything from Tooma? I need to know where the fire is." And he's like, "Can't tell you anything, I'm sorry."

ANNE-LOUISE: It must have been very difficult for you.

HELENA: Oh, it was – unfortunately, as I said to you, we were camping by the river when it started. We vacated and came back home. My sister, “We’re going to die. We’re going to die,” that’s all she kept – “Oh, how can we get out?” Then all the roads – there was no way of getting out of Corryong. There was just fires everywhere. I know of three exits – basically four if you go over towards Khancoban – four exits out of Corryong. There were fires at every exit basically, so you couldn’t get through. We lined up the cars, ready to leave if we needed to, to go to an evacuation centre. We didn’t know what was happening. I couldn’t get the radio to work in my house. My brother-in-law, luckily, got the radio station, local radio station. That was basically the main information we had. Yeah, otherwise, had I been here by myself, I don’t know what would have happened.

My brother-in-law cleared all the furniture away from the house. We soaked the lawn. We filled up the spouts with water, plugged all them up. Yeah. And then he’s yelling at me, “Helly, Helly, come. We’ve got to go.” And I’m like, “No, I’m not leaving yet. I need to get my photos. I need to get stuff.” So I grabbed my photo albums, couldn’t think of what the hell to get, to be honest. My sister’s like, “What do you want me to do?” I said, “I don’t know. I can’t think. I’ve just got to get the house right. I’ve got to get it safe.” Closed all the curtains, the blinds and then my sister – I didn’t actually even take – she took a photo of it starting to come over the hill. And she’s like, “We’re leaving.” “We’ve got to leave,” she’s screaming at me. And I’m like, “No, I’m not leaving yet. I’m not leaving yet.” She’s like, “Come on, we’ve got to go.”

So we ended up – we went up to the high school. And then she was yelling at me because we couldn’t get into the carpark area at the back of the high school because they had blocked all that off and we didn’t know where to park. The parking was chock-a-block full because you can imagine – there wasn’t just locals here. This involved campers. This was people from Nariel, people from all over the place. Corryong was the main point of connection. They were from Cudgewa. They were from Towong, Walwa. Everyone was here from Corryong. It was your main meeting point.

ANNE-LOUISE: And the high school was where the Relief Centre was?

HELENA: The high school was the Relief Centre. They had to open up the classrooms because there were just so many people. It was just absolutely packed. I can still see my brother-in-law up against the wall, looking at the ceiling. He was like – he was devastated. My sister’s messaging her kids saying, “I don’t think we’re going to see you again.” I’m just like, “Yes, it’s all right. We’re going to see them.” And then I thought: Well, shit, I better message my girls and tell them I love them. And then we – it was just the silence in the hall. The most you heard was a baby crying. It was just quiet. Nobody was talking. I don’t know. My Ted wouldn’t relax. And then someone came in and they told my neighbour and I that my house – our houses had burned down. And I just remember lying on the ground and just – I was out to it.

My brother-in-law was going, “Are you all right, Helly? Are you all right?” And I’m like, “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m fine. It’s all good. Don’t worry about it. We’re good.” And I said, “I’m just tired,” because it was early hours of the morning. We’d had no sleep and the dogs were restless. I was taking the dogs out, bringing them back in. I don’t know how many times I

walked out of that building. I've got quite a few photos of the fire coming in and it's just red in front of us. And it was just horrific. And the police – I can still see this policewoman sitting at the counter and this woman demanding that she ring her. And I'm like, "Please, she's doing the best she can. They can't do anything. You can't fight this." Those firemen, everybody that puts their lives on the risk – it's not just firemen. It's police. It's everybody.

We had one lady, she's the police pastor, an amazing lady, [REDACTED] I can't think of her last name. [REDACTED] her name and she is the most wonderful woman I have ever met in my life. She controlled everything basically. That was her main control point – was her. She just came in and she took over. Well, we all relied on her.

ANNE-LOUISE: Is [REDACTED] a local? Is that her normal role?

HELENA: Yeah, she is. She's a local. Her husband's a pastor. I think she's a minister. [REDACTED] – it could be [REDACTED] I can't think of her name exactly. She deserves a medal. She really does. She had the contact between the police, between everybody. She was the main source. She got the Relief Centres going. She's the most amazing woman I've ever met. She was there. She was taking – the Red Cross came in. They were amazing. They were taking everyone's names, phone numbers. Whoever walked into that building, she had our – they had our names and phone numbers. You weren't allowed to leave unless you told them. They were very efficient in that. The Red Cross ladies sitting there – there was one lady that came in on – I don't know who she is. I met some amazing people. The poor thing, she lost her house.

And all she could tell me was, "My husband's been cremated twice." She left me absolutely dumbfounded. And I'm like, "Are you okay?" "Yeah, I'll be okay." And I said, "Are you sure?" And she's like – she was stunned that her husband had been cremated twice. That's all she could say. And I'm like, "You poor bugger." It was just unbelievable. People coming in, just absolutely devastated – it was bewildering. You had campers. You had all sorts of people here, just –

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you remember things about the supplies? Was there enough food, water, masks, that type of thing?

HELENA: Definitely not enough masks.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Right.

HELENA: I actually went and got a pair of scissors out of the caravan and we were cutting up pillowcases. My hands are arthritic, and I was having trouble. I handed the scissors to my brother-in-law and I said, "I need your help because I can't do this." And we were cutting up pillowcases and making face masks out of the pillowcases. It was so hard to breathe. The breathing was almost impossible at times. We were cutting up whatever we could to try and make masks for people to breathe and wetting them. And they were worried about the toilet. The toilet – we had, I think, two working toilets for hundreds of people. The toilets weren't working properly. The facilities there – look, as far as – I don't know how people expect everything to be given to them. We had water. We could drink as much water as we liked. It

was donated. I don't know where it came from, but [REDACTED] had loads of water coming in. We'd take a bottle, and we'd drink it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Food? Were there donations of food and was that provided at the Relief Centre or elsewhere?

HELENA: Well, there was massive amount after. You're looking at say – within the first couple of days, it started rolling in, but even – we had the local pizza shop making pizzas. Some of the elderly women from – I think it was Lions or – I don't know exactly, Lions, Red Cross – they were baking – making things for people to eat. There were pots full of food. As far as food, we were well looked after, I consider. In the morning, you got up. We had – whether it was the local greengrocer or the supermarket – I don't know where it came from. We had fruit. I actually – we had coffee and there was no sugar. And I had used up all the sugar out of the caravan. And I had \$6 on me, cash and of course EFTPOS didn't work. And I got one of the police – it was quite funny really because I thought he was absolutely gorgeous. I jumped in the car and I didn't put a seatbelt on.

And I'm like, "I haven't got my seatbelt." And he says, "Do you really think we're going to worry about that right now?" And he made me laugh. I think it was the first laugh I actually had. He was absolutely gorgeous, and he dropped me off at the supermarket. And I managed to get sugar with my \$6 for the people to have sugar in their coffee. So I took that back. And actually, I grabbed a guy because my breathing was really, really bad and I said, "Look, would you mind just driving me back?" Some guy in the street, didn't know him, "Yeah, not a problem." Everybody was actually quite accommodating really. There were a few demanding people wanting more and more and more of people. But look, seriously, I honestly believe with all my heart and soul, we were well looked after in that respect. There was breakfast cereal. Okay, we didn't have bacon and eggs, there was breakfast cereal. There was something.

I raided my caravan for biscuits and things and gave them to some children and said, "Look, there's some bickies and things, eat them," and, "Are you sure?" "Yeah, just take it." My sister was doing the same. We were giving it to the kids. We were giving biscuits out, dry biscuits or whatever we could find, we gave to the kids. That's all I cared about.

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you remember were the – was the council staff there now at the Relief Centre?

HELENA: I can't recall –

ANNE-LOUISE: Are you not really sure who was coordinating apart from this lady, [REDACTED] that was obviously doing a great job?

HELENA: [REDACTED] is my main – [REDACTED] Red Cross. I never spoke to anyone personally from the council. I remember guys in green overalls, red overalls. I'm not sure. The green overalls seemed to – I've got quite a lot of photos, and I'm sure my sister has got 10 times more than I have, even of the meetings we had. They started up some meetings. I'm not sure if that was late afternoon of the first day or the second day, and they'd get people come in, trying to tell us what was happening. People were getting angry that they didn't know about the meetings.

So I joined up with the Red Cross and we did house knocking. There was one poor old lady that had locked herself out of the house and was sitting in a shed or an open shed in the back. And I had actually come across her in my travels. I thought: Mm. I walked down and thought: This is a bit strange.

And she'd accidentally locked herself out of the house. I called the – oh, I didn't call the police. I went to the police station and said, "I need you to get someone to come and open a window for her and get her into her house." And they did that. The police – personally, could not fault.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. So you were doing door knocking with the Red Cross to let people know about meetings or to keep them informed?

HELENA: Yeah. You couldn't do much else. People were saying, "Radio stations – well, if your batteries are flat or they're – I went to a – they set up a new community group thing and I said I'd be on the committee, but no one told me about when the meetings were or anything. So I've been out of that now. I think that's set up through the council.

ANNE-LOUISE: Through the recovery – is that for a recovery committee maybe?

HELENA: I don't know what the group is called. I've got it on – it's on Facetime, Facebook as well, and I joined up with the Facebook unclear. I went to a meeting. I think there was 10 of us on the committee. And I think they set them up in – one in Cudgewa, one in Towong and one in Walwa.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes.

HELENA: Yeah. Apparently, they didn't think Corryong really needed great support. And what I think is Corryong is your main area of contact for everyone. You know what I mean? Apparently, the council – I heard on the grapevine the council felt that Corryong didn't need help. Not many people got hit as directly as I did. One house burned down. A unit burned down, and a man's shed burned down. I lost a shed. My neighbour lost a hay shed, which is probably why the fire caught to my house more. It was close to the houses. But in saying all of that – okay, they might not have been directly hit, but mentally – I know there's one lady that apparently has not left her house since the fires. She refuses to leave her house just for fear or I don't know. I was talking to a girlfriend who said, "Mrs. so and so doesn't leave her house." I'm like, "Oh really? And I thought I had it bad." I'm nervous enough.

But as far as council – council came to my house and said, "Oh, you were hit bad. Yeah. We're going to cut that tree down over there. We're going to cut that one down." They cut two trees down for me and that's the whole involvement of the council. I asked them for help with the fencing, nothing. Oh, they planted two trees on the nature strip. So that's as much as I've seen of council. The army, brilliant, love those guys. I was struggling – couldn't get the rags out of the downpipes. I went to the army depot. I didn't know where to go to get help being me on my own. And I said, "Look, is there any chance I can get someone come and take the rags down?" And they were like, "Yeah, not a problem. We'll send someone around." So they sent the plumber and the army around and they pulled the downpipe apart

and got the rags out for me. So my downpipes worked again. Without them, I think I'd be battling to this day. They were a godsend. They weren't allowed to do a lot.

The council stopped them from doing a lot. I know, at one stage, I was pulled up and said, "Where can we get water?" And I said, "Well, there's a water main up the road there." "Oh, we're not allowed to use that one." I said, "Why not? That's bullshit." "Oh well, the council won't let us." So I'm not sure exactly what went on there, whether there was a bit of conflict or what was going on with army and council. And the council – it was like the council wanted to take control but weren't in control. They weren't really – it's like – you know what I mean? Whereas the army come in and they were out there helping people fence. They were out there doing stuff, which is what we needed. Some of the times, they said, "We just want to get out there and do more and we're not allowed to." And that's where it was wrong. They weren't allowed on private property. But without their help, I would have been stuck.

ANNE-LOUISE: Have you had any interaction with – at the recovery hub – I understand there's a Corryong recovery hub that is run by the council. Have you been in there –

HELENA: I went up there about the fencing. Yeah, I'm still waiting. That's about it. We had the Relief Centre for the clothing up there first, and we had to shift from one – we shifted from one building to another because it was suddenly – Grocon came. So Grocon wanted where the clothing was, which was ridiculous. So we had to move out of there into another section of the school. At the moment, I believe the council's taken over. The volunteers have nothing more to do with it – the clothing side of it anymore.

ANNE-LOUISE: You were sorting donations and things, were you?

HELENA: Yeah. We sent a lot back. We had –

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. I was going to say can you tell me a bit about that. That's one of the things we're interested about. What types of things were donated? Did they meet people's needs? What happened to the stuff that wasn't – either safe, dirty, whatever it might be, rubbishy? Yeah, how much of that? Because in Mallacoota, there was a heap, and in other places, there was a heap of stuff that was just not appropriate.

HELENA: Yes, you got some inappropriate things, but the way I look at it is someone's gone through their cupboard, shoved things in a bag for you. They obviously – their idea – your idea of what's clean and hygienic might be different to mine. You know what I mean?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah.

HELENA: The fact that someone's made the effort to donate it should be a credit in itself and nobody should complain about it. That's my opinion. You know what I mean?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, I do.

HELENA: So yes, we did get underwear or something that was inappropriate, but obviously, someone's given that out of the generosity of their heart, not really thinking twice about would somebody – who wants brand new? I was in Wodonga and two ladies came in in there, and they came into the Relief Centre and said, "We want sheets." And they said, "Oh, there's

some over there.” “No, we want new sheets.” Now that was selfish, in my opinion. If you’ve got nothing, wouldn’t you take anything? We went through – yes, I gave a couple of bags of rags to the local mechanic and said, “There you go. There’s a bag of rags. We can’t really use it. It’s torn sheets or something like that.” But it was good for rags. So it came in handy for something. You know what I mean?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. You weren’t inundated with so much that –

HELENA: We were. We were.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. You were inundated, okay.

HELENA: Yeah. We had a lotta, lotta, lotta stuff. They turned a lot away in the end because you had stuff going to Cudgewa. You had stuff going to Towong. You had stuff going to Corryong. Look, I saw tourists go out with boxes full of stuff. And the way I figure it, “Okay, they’ve been through hell and back. What the hell?” No, they probably shouldn’t have taken it, but after what they’ve been through, who gives a damn? What’s a box full of groceries or a box full of water or whatever? When we left the Relief Centre, and I took this old lady with me – it was the local ministers. She knew him and he said, “Can we get you anything?” I said, “Just give us some nibbles and a bottle of water each to go home.” And he goes, “Oh, but you need stuff.” I said, “People here need it.” At that stage, they didn’t have – they had a lot, but not a massive amount.

And he’s like, “No, no, no, I’ll get you some more.” I said, “No, we take what we need. That’s the most important thing,” because there’s the police there. There’s the – it’s not just about us as survivors. It’s about the police. It’s about all these other people that are there as well. They need support too. They need water. The army need water. Okay, if it’s donated, share it round. Let everybody use it. I don’t know if I’m making sense actually.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. No, you’re fine.

HELENA: We had plenty of food, plenty of water. The Relief Centre actually was still dropping off an occasional parcel for me. And I said, “Look – my dog nearly knocked one old guy over, and I’m like, “I don’t want to be responsible for him breaking a hip.” I said, “Just leave it. I’m comfortable at the moment. If I need anything, I’ll come.” They’re so lovely. [REDACTED] organises all that. I don’t ask for anything. But look, I just find – as far as funding, there was the Red Cross. There was the Salvation Army. The Red Cross, I had to fight a bit for, and I thought: No. They said, “Oh, we only give you a donation if your windows are blown out.” I said, “Well, I need a new roof and I need new carpet, curtains.” I’ve got new blinds. My curtains were just yellow and stunk. I got – what was it? Look, I’ve just done so much work to the place.

It’s unbelievable. Yeah, so – but look, as far as donations, it would be good if they give it per household, not per person because I struggled on my own. The insurance came good. I had to fight over the roof. They tell me the roof is damaged, but then they tried to pull the pin. And then one young guy goes, “If we give it to you, we might have to give it to somebody else.” And I said, “But the rubbers are all melted on one side. The paint’s coming off the – “Oh,

that's old age. It's wear and tear." And I'm like, "Are you serious?" It was fine before Christmas. So in a matter of a week, the paint just disintegrated and disappeared, so yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Any other things about the recovery? So obviously, the financial assistance is part of that recovery. Have you been able to access counselling, any other support services or is there anything that you've seen that you think: That was really good or no, that hasn't been so good over the last six or so months?

HELENA: Look, with COVID, in all honesty, I think it's made life extremely difficult. I speak to a counsellor – look, I've broken down on the telephone to [REDACTED] a couple of times. He's with the bushfire something or other, recovery or something. He's been excellent. I don't know. I ramble away like you wouldn't believe. I'm a good talker, as you've probably noticed, and I ramble away. And I think it's like I'm avoiding the whole situation of the fire. And then all of a sudden, it's like wham; it's hit me. I'm not the only one.

ANNE-LOUISE: Definitely not.

HELENA: No. I have a chronic lung condition from the fires. I am living off asthma rubbish and you cough up phlegm every morning and it's just horrid. But as far as talking to someone – it can be hard to access in some ways. [REDACTED] keeps saying, "You need to talk to someone." Well, my counsellor actually came and sat with me yesterday – that I've been seeing for other reasons anyway and we actually – she's been a marvellous help.

ANNE-LOUISE: So she was able to come to Corryong. That's one of the things we're interested in

HELENA: She would [unclear]

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Okay, like how people have been accessing –

HELENA: Yeah. With a lot of the counsellors that we have here – they've also been hit hard. When I first was chatting to her, she was having trouble getting hay. And I was ringing around, trying to see if I can find some way that she could get hay for a feed for her stock. A lot of the – you're looking at counsellors and people that work in the industry are basically farmers.

ANNE-LOUISE: They live and work in the same area.

HELENA: Yeah. So we haven't really had a lot of outsiders come in and help. I've not really seen any, to be honest. But I've never met [REDACTED] I've spoken to him on the phone.

ANNE-LOUISE: He may well be a case support manager – a case support worker, I'm thinking.

HELENA: Yeah. He's no longer existing at the end of the year. And this is where I think it's a shame because I think end of the year is going to be hard for a lot of people – 12 months. New Year's Eve is not going to be pleasant here. We spent New Year's Eve in a hall, wondering if we were going to live or die. I think it's now you need support. You've gone through bushfires. You've gone through the first thing of COVID and trying to get people up

here to fix things and do things. And we've had all of that to deal with in between who you can get up here. I gave up on the carpet, to be honest. My carpet was – it was brand new two years ago and it's got a yellow tinge to it. It's a light grey. I couldn't keep it clean because of the fire. Well, mainly too because I've got two dogs. They were just walking in ash constantly and I couldn't leave them out and I couldn't lock them in.

So I did get flooring in the family room section and I got ripped off on that. That's the other thing you find, is a lot of supply people tend to rip you off, take advantage of the fact that you've been going through insurance or been through bushfires. And usually, the excuse up here is, "Well, you live in the bush. It's miles from anywhere." So that's a big –

ANNE-LOUISE: That's a concern.

HELENA: Yeah. That's a big thing. We get ripped off because we live – and yet, when I lived in Melbourne – we were down there when the fires hit Kinglake and everything. So I think it's almost following me, to be honest. I'm not involved. This is the closest I've got, and I never, ever, ever want to go through it again.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's right. Yeah. Definitely.

HELENA: Never. And I don't think anyone around here will want to. I think COVID has definitely made things difficult. Counselling, you're not getting the counselling that you probably should be or need because they can't – it was only this week that she could come to my house.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, so that face-to-face interaction that hasn't been able to happen –

HELENA: No. And you can't talk on a phone, although I can, but a lot of people can't. It's been difficult. It really has. Look, even after the fires, the police were out there helping people fence in their time off. You can't fault them for that. Rotary helped me with my paddock. Rotary, absolutely amazing people – they don't even get mentioned, but Rotary –

ANNE-LOUISE: Was that a local Rotary or they came from elsewhere?

HELENA: Came from elsewhere – I think they might have come from Wodonga. I don't really know. Look, I put a thing on Facebook. I went to one of their meetings. They said, "Come for tea." I said, "Oh no, no, no, it's okay." "No, come for tea. We'd like you to come." I went there. They were the most beautiful bunch of guys and women I have met. Their care for people and, "Let's get the job done," was amazing. The way they talked, "Oh, we watched so and so on the tractor. We did this." I tried to help out with BlazeAid. I didn't find them as comfortable to be with or as pleasant. They had rigid rules. I didn't stick with them. But the Rotary crew, absolutely beautiful people. Words can't – they had me in tears just listening to them. And then they introduced me as somebody they'd helped and I just burst into tears and said, "You are the most beautiful people I've met." I said, "You have given up your time."

They were covered in black ash and you've got no idea. They were filthy and they were there to help. That is a gift. That is a gift you can't – that is the help we need. They are God's gift,

not the council. I wouldn't give you two bob for the council, to be honest. The army, beautiful guys. "Can you do this?" "Yeah, not a problem." They pulled my shed to pieces and made a mural for me. I paint. I am still to finish because I got so sick. Actually, the mural blew down. We had this massive storm and I'd got it – I can turn it. I don't know if you can see out there.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Yeah.

HELENA: That's my mural that I'm –

ANNE-LOUISE: Okay.

HELENA: But unfortunately, one, I ran out of paint and money for the paint. And two, I got – well, the most important thing was I couldn't breathe outside. So it needs to be pulled apart and painted properly. You can't do it – I couldn't do it out there with my lungs the way they are, with the wind. So I've got this carport under here, but yeah, it's like – if I can get it going – I've got an army guy on one panel which is the one still standing and it's an army guy – girl actually, talking to a young girl in Corryong. And I fell in love with the picture. I've got the name of one of the army photographers and some of the work that – they were doing amazing work. They put on a band display and they had sausages and things down at the park for all the town to go to. And it was just so, so nice.

ANNE-LOUISE: Was that in the weeks after the fire or the days or –

HELENA: Yeah. It just made people feel better. They took us – the first time I've ever been in an army truck – they took us for a ride in the army truck. They were the most beautiful guys. Look, I've met some amazing, beautiful people here. The police – I remember I finally got a – not a permit. I finally could get across to my daughter and I went through. And you had to be back by nine o'clock, and I was trying not to break the curfew. And it was dark when I drove through. And these poor buggers, they're standing in the rain, pulling me over. And we were having a lovely chat and I said, "You look tired." He said, "Oh, we've been fencing all day and now we're on nightshift." What better guys can you get like that?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. That's a great story.

HELENA: These other things that aren't being told – they put – it's not about their job. It's about the person. And the Red Cross ladies, they come, and they make sure people had – when I walked with the ladies, we made sure people had food. We made sure they had, okay, long-life milk. They couldn't really make a coffee unless you had gas. But they had food parcels, so we were taking food parcels to elderly in their house. I went to one house and there was one lady and she said, "I'm trying to get my mum to leave and she won't." And she said, "Oh, I can't leave because my mum's in the nursing home." And I'm like, "Do you want your daughter to leave?" And she goes, "Yes, I do." I said, "Do you think your mum would want you to leave?" She goes, "Yes, she probably would." I said, "Well, don't you think it's probably in your mum's best interest that you both leave, your daughter and you? And I'm sure she'll be well looked after."

And she actually thanked me, and she said, “I didn’t look at it in that perspective.” I worked in aged care for several years, so I can imagine what the mum would be thinking because I’ve talked – I did diversional therapy, so I worked with a lot of them and I said, “I honestly feel that perhaps you should ask your mum what she wants you to do.”

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah.

HELENA: And anyway, she said, “I’m going to pack my bags now.” And I said, “There you go,” because we had to – they were encouraging everyone to evacuate Corryong and that was probably three days after the fires. They feared the fire was coming back. I wouldn’t leave until I had seen my daughter or knew she was safe. I still remember the day she walked in. Yeah, she just said, “Oh hi, Ma.” I couldn’t let her go. Yeah, it was the happiest moment of my life, I think, apart from holding her when she was born, but yeah –

ANNE-LOUISE: Incredibly emotional.

HELENA: I left. I couldn’t do anything else to – they had plenty of helpers. They had professional people here. I would only be a hindrance and use resources that they needed for themselves.

I didn’t leave to be a coward. I left to give the resources to the people who needed it.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Definitely.

HELENA: And that’s the important part. I could go somewhere. People here didn’t. I’d offered my house to people, anybody, relief people. Once they got the generators going – you couldn’t run hot waters. You couldn’t run aircons. For me to stay home and do all that, it wasn’t fair. So I left, packed up the caravan. The first exit out – my sister’s girlfriend managed to get out. You could not drive out unless your vehicle was to a certain height. My sister and her brother-in-law wouldn’t leave their caravan. They have a big caravan. And she was just losing the plot. We ended up in an argument which I still, to this day, don’t know. She had an argument with her girlfriend because her girlfriend kept saying, “Stop yelling at Helena.” And she’s – but she just – I think she was that wound up, she was yelling at me. And then she’s yelling at her girlfriend and I don’t even – she said to me, “You’re taking sides.”

And I’m like, “No, no, no, I’m just – I just want peace. I just want to know that my daughter’s safe. Just do whatever you’ve got to do.” And I just avoided her. There was even a policeman that said to me, “Oh my God, that woman’s going to lose control.” I said, “You need to get her out of here. My sister’s not coping, and we need to get her out.” And they tried talking her into leaving the caravan, but they weren’t going to leave the caravan. But I think they got out on the third escort out which – they got out on that one. And yeah, I got out on – once I had seen my daughter, I was okay.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, and very stressful situations and the decisions you’ve got to make, so you can understand that people – everybody reacts differently.

HELENA: They do. They do. And the day after the fires, everything had calmed down. My sister's like, "Come, we're going to go and see if your house is all right, still standing, what's going on." I said, "Oh, I don't really want to go and look." And she's like, "Come on, we're going to go and look." So they wouldn't let us through at the police at first. And I said, "I need to see my house," which eventually, he let me through. But we just drove down and back out again, and it was still standing. So you could see the damage. I came back later that day actually because the shed was still smouldering and put the shed out. I had all my sleepers burned around the house. They were all smouldering. So I put them out. The fire came within a metre of my house. The backyard, the same – I've got a little backyard. It's looking really nice now actually. I'm very lucky.

ANNE-LOUISE: I heard there's been a lot of rain up that way and things are pretty green. But probably means long grass.

HELENA: A lot of mowing, a lot of mowing, living on the ride on yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's it. Yeah.

HELENA: As far as – I'm not one to say anything bad about anybody up here as to regards to helping in police, fire. I got a lot, a lot of respect for army. I love those guys. I think they put up with a lot. Some of the stories I heard actually from Rotary – they go, "These young bloody bucks, they can go up those hills and we can't even get anywhere near them." Without the army, I think we would have been totally screwed, to be honest. They did things that a lot of people couldn't do for us. They're fit. They're healthy. They're full of energy. They've got life in them. And they could scramble up a hill to fence. Whereas a lot of them couldn't. A lot of the volunteers you get are elderly people. They're retirees. And yeah, Rotary, brilliant.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's really good to hear.

HELENA: I believe BlazeAid did a lot of good as well. I joined them and helped them for five days to set up. I just found them different. They were there. They were the bosses. Between you and me, a little bit arrogant in some of their mannerism, but we had it where – there was a young girl came to help. She was only 16 and they – but she'd been organised for a BlazeAid. And I got to the hall and I was like, "Oh, where are you staying?" And they go, "Oh, we don't know where to put you." And she goes, "I've got a tent." "Oh, you can't stay in a tent." And I said to her, "Well, look, if you like, you can come and stay with me." But I felt that was very inappropriate in their plan management and I copped the flack of it because I told them so. I just said it was very inappropriate and they got their back up with me. There was a wedding that was planned in the hall. They refused to move out for the wedding.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Right.

HELENA: And I'm like – because they had the main hall. I'm like, "All this stuff can go." "We're not moving. We're not moving." So that's why I say they were a tad arrogant. They wanted – I didn't get involved with Lions, but the Lions fed them. And it was like they wanted the best of everything, not – and I'm like – I said to a couple of the Lions people, "You shouldn't be there getting them breakfast. They can do that. The men can do that. It's not right. They're expecting too much." Then they turned around and they wanted a variation

in the menu, and I said, “You’re crazy if you give them that. Give them one meal and call it quits. You people are exhausted.” These were local Lions people that are run off their feet.

So that’s why I say BlazeAid was a tad arrogant. I was very disappointed in a lot of their attitude. They had a lot of equipment, but it could have gone in the back room so the wedding people could have gone ahead. The wedding didn’t go there at all. That was changed to – I have no idea where it ended up actually.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Right.

HELENA: But that was the best facility for a wedding. And I thought: Everything these people have gone through and you’re stopping a wedding that brings happiness? To me, that was – I couldn’t justify what they were doing. So I guess I got a bit despondent with BlazeAid and stood back from them and stopped going, just the mannerism – and I tried to contact the actual person that runs the whole show and say, “I think you need to sort something here because something’s not right,” but I got told basically to mind my own business. He wasn’t interested in trying to help. So I just ended up walking away from it and thought: Well, I’m not prepared to help people like that either. But yeah, look, they did do a lot of good I believe too. So that, I guess, isn’t to be frowned upon, but it was just some of their arrogant mannerisms. They were there and they felt like they were running the show and that was a bit disappointing.

ANNE-LOUISE: I heard a little bit about that in some other places as well, so it’s good that you raise those type of issues as well.

HELENA: Oh look, I’d rather be honest, and I’ll tell you honestly what I think. You can take it or leave it. But I could not fault Rotary at all. Their facility – they had a little tin shed that they were all working – their facilities weren’t great, but they made do. They weren’t arrogant. I didn’t meet one person that wasn’t. I met a guy actually that – he got involved with the [unclear] show or festival and he said, “I was asked to join BlazeAid, but I refused to. I went and spent one day with them, didn’t like them and came back again.” So I said, “Well, there you go.” But Rotary – he spent all his time – I met him through Rotary. They’d say, “Come back, have a drink,” and it was social, just the feeling of care and belonging and those are the things you need, not someone coming and bossing everybody around, that I’m in charge; this is what I’m going to do.

We’re all on tenterhooks here. We need love and tender care. We don’t need some bossy breeches coming in and taking over. But yeah, army were good too.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, it sounds like it.

HELENA: Two favourite was the army and the Rotary.

ANNE-LOUISE: No, look, that’s great. I appreciate it so much.

HELENA: And the police. The police – can’t fault the police. I think those guys, what they don’t get credit for is the help. They also helped with – the ones helping out fencing – one of

them looked at his hands and I'm going, "What's wrong with your hands?" He goes, "Oh, they're sore. I've been fencing all day." What person does that?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. No, that's great.

HELENA: You know what I mean?

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, really, really good.

HELENA: You probably don't hear about those things, but those are the things that must be mentioned.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. No, that's great. I appreciate it greatly.

HELENA: Didn't have much to do with firemen. They came in. They gave us reports, told us they were going to be there at 11 o'clock in the hall. 10 o'clock, you'd go there and get the report for the day. That's what happened in the end. They gave you as much as they could. Nobody could do anymore. That's my feeling. We were in a massive crisis. It's like COVID. People are bagging the government for COVID, and I'm like, "We're dealing with something that's unknown at the moment. Why cause trouble over it until we can get on top of it?" And it's the same with the fires. We were dealing with something so unreal. I can send you some photos if you'd like.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, any of the photos around – particularly in this relief and recovery space as well because we want to make sure we include photos in the report and everything like that. So yeah, your fencing ones, your activities you did together, any of the Relief Centre things if they're appropriate, yeah, would be terrific.

HELENA: Okay. Well, I will do that. A lot of them are on an old phone, but I will come across it all for you, see what I can dig up.

ANNE-LOUISE: That would be great, really good.

HELENA: How can I say? I appreciate everything that was done for this town. They came in – the tree loppers that turned out – one of them was my niece's partner who had the contract for AusNet. And actually, when I drove back into town, I saw him on the side of the road and I just – I broke into tears and just grabbed him. It was so good to see somebody I knew and somebody that – you could see that – and I knew what they were doing. My niece – people don't realise it; families here in Corryong had their families. My niece went without her partner for weeks and weeks. He was up here, cutting trees. The police, they're not home with their families. They're helping us. The Rotary, everybody that helped up here, they put themselves out. They are the ones that really need a damned good medal and a great big – the gratitude that I give to these people – the police out there, helping in the paddocks, they didn't have to do that. They could lie on the bed and wait for their shift to change. They were out there helping.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. No, it sounds really impressive, those agencies working together and helping with the community.

HELENA: Oh, brilliant, brilliant. And I sat in a hall and I listened to so much shit that was being said and that's putting it mildly. They were bagging – “Oh, the firemen didn't stay.” I would not want anyone to risk my life doing that. I'll send you a photo of the fire we saw from the hall. It was just red. Nobody could fight that. They stopped it at my place basically. It came over that mountain straight for me. Actually, I'll walk outside this front door and then my dog will probably push me out. If you look, that mountain there was the one that was coming straight for my place. It is right round. You can't quite see that. But yeah, can you see the long grass of my neighbour?

ANNE-LOUISE: If you tilt it down a little bit more – yeah, yeah.

HELENA: Unbelievable, and nothing's being done. I've got a paddock across there, nothing's being done. Now I'm trying to walk across because if I look over the roof of my house – all those mountains right round – if you look just over there, at the shed, all burned. And it's basically all the way around. I'll hold it up. Can you see the mountain –

ANNE-LOUISE: Yes, I can. Yeah.

HELENA: I'm surrounded. So that is – there's one – couple of little mountains up there but the rest are black. I drive to my daughter's and it's just burned mountains.

ANNE-LOUISE: You're seeing it all the time, yeah.

HELENA: And as you can see, my house actually looks nice and I did put solar on.

ANNE-LOUISE: I noticed that.

HELENA: Yeah, I put that on. Actually, that's what I did with the Red Cross money.

ANNE-LOUISE: No, that's great. That's great.

HELENA: I thought: No, I'm going to do that.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, good job. And look, I don't want to take up anymore of your time because you've probably got things to do and I've actually got to do another interview in about a half an hour or so, so –

HELENA: you need to get prepared

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, I know. I'll just have a little break. I'll just have a little break, get myself ready for the next one. But we're really interested too in touching base again with people next year, about mid-Feb through to mid-March just to have a bit of a reflection back about, “Well, it's now more than 12 months after the fires. What might have changed from a recovery point of view?” So if you'd be interested, I'd love to have another chat with you again at that time. And also, if you're talking to any friends, neighbours, other people in Corryong, in particular, who would like to share their story in this way, please give them my phone number or my e-mail address because I haven't had – you're the first person in Corryong we've had this direct contact with. We will be coming out face-to-face at some point and Tony Pearce, the inspector general, possibly as well. But yeah, it's just a great

opportunity at the moment to get some feedback about that early relief and the first six or so months of recovery.

HELENA: Yeah. Maybe you can push the council to come and clean up the place.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah, maybe, but I don't know. Anyway, look –

HELENA: I drive to my daughter's. The grass is like – and I'm like, "Oh no, this is so bad." But they say that we'll probably get grass fires this year, not bushfires.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's right, yeah, and maybe a little bit later. Yeah.

HELENA: Yeah. There's a lot of bush.

ANNE-LOUISE: That's it.

HELENA: And they're not even growing at the moment, most of the – a lot of the trees, but yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah. Okay. But listen, thank you very much for your time.

HELENA: No worries.

ANNE-LOUISE: I really appreciate it and you've provided a lot of really valuable information. And I think you also made that really good point about you've been really busy, COVID's happened and now perhaps is the time when you're thinking about getting some more support for yourself because it was a really traumatic time. And I think, for many people, yeah, it might be later on, like now, whether those impacts really start to take hold. So make sure you use Neville or whoever it is to continue to get that support or your counsellor or touch base with the hub, that type of thing.

HELENA: Yeah. Okay.

ANNE-LOUISE: All right. Well, you look after yourself and I will send you a copy of the transcript via e-mail. It will be back probably by early – mid next week, so I'll send that back to you then. And yeah, if you've got any of those photos, that would be fantastic to send them through to me.

HELENA: Yeah. I'll go visit the ladies' room, then sit down and send you some.

ANNE-LOUISE: All right. Well, you look after yourself. Thanks a lot, Helena. Okay, bye-bye.

HELENA: See you later. Bye-bye. How do I turn off –

ANNE-LOUISE: So then you just go – well, in a sec, I'll end –

Details for recording are:

Submission to be published - yes

Submission to be named - yes, Helena Pluim

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 -
no

LGA - Towong

Postcode/Town - 3707 Corryong

Age group - 60's

Gender - woman

Keep up to date - yes - email - 