

A walk along the boulevard of expression

A reflection of a Social Worker working with bushfire affected families.

ABSTRACT

There are many stories from the 2009 Victorian bushfires. There are stories of heroes and survival, and stories of devastation and indescribable horror. And there are stories from the people who came in after the fires had passed: the emergency workers, the relief and recovery workers, the counsellors and the case managers. This reflective paper is one story from a social worker working with a family affected by the bushfire, illustrating the nature of bushfire case management, the relationships that develop and the impact that it can have on both the client and the worker.

February 7, 2009 was a hot, windy day. The newspaper headlines warned that it would be a nasty day and as a Social Worker, I was hoping that they had got it wrong. The forecasters predicted extreme fire behaviour and unstoppable fires and as the day quickly heated up and the menacing wind gathered momentum, there was an unsettling, ominous feeling in the air. By mid-afternoon, fire-fighters were stretched across Victoria and our sense of safety on a hot summer's day changed forever.

In the aftermath there were stories of heroes and survival, and stories of devastation and indescribable horror. For the first time in this capacity local, state and Commonwealth governments worked together to set up a co-ordinated response for people who were affected by the bushfires. There are many stories – some are sad, some are inspiring, and in this paper, I would like to share one story with the readers of the Australian Journal of Emergency Management.

This is my story of my work with Linda (not her real name). I met Linda at the Whittlesea Recovery Centre on February 14, Valentine's Day. Linda, in her 50s, had her teenage autistic son living with her. They lived in Kinglake and left home early in the day, before the fires came. Linda was staying with her brother at his house in a nearby suburb and for the past week, she didn't know if her Kinglake home had been affected by the fires, or not. I couldn't imagine what this must be like

for her – not knowing if her house, pets and all of her treasured possessions were still there.

I was Linda's Victorian Bushfire Case Manager. Linda told me how she didn't like Social Workers and she wasn't sure if she was going to like me. She based this on social workers that she had met in the past. I wondered how to approach Linda and how to build her confidence. I wanted to make sure I didn't become another faceless Social Worker that let her down, but how could I be sure that she didn't get let down by the confusion that was around us?

My first visit to Kinglake was a poignant time for me. I had to sign in to go through the road block and I felt like an intruder – what right did I have to be here? I was stunned by the blackness and the obvious devastation – the miles and miles of burnt trees, the burnt cars abandoned on the side of the road, and the charred remains of homes. I was amazed by the silence – there were no sounds of birds, rustling leaves or anything. The quiet was disconcerting and uncomfortable. I felt like an outsider, a stranger who had entered a different world, where people were exposed and vulnerable, and feelings of sadness and anguish permeated the air.

It was two weeks before Linda could go home. She had heard from a neighbour that her house was still there, but there was some damage. Linda moved home as soon as the road block was opened and she was determined to live in her home, amidst the blackness and the destruction. She was worried about looters, and she wanted her son to be in a familiar environment. But there was nothing familiar about their Kinglake home. The house had received minor damage, the sheds were gone and there was a huge burnt tree that had fallen along the driveway. The power was on, but she didn't have any water as her rainwater tank had cracked in the fire and all the water had leaked away.

Linda drove into the township of Kinglake every day and filled up orange juice bottles with water that she and her son used to flush the toilet, to bathe and for drinking and she did this for six weeks. The repair of the concrete rainwater tank was a challenge as there weren't any concrete tank repairers in the area and we started telephoning people from adjacent areas. I recall one conversation with a concrete installer from interstate, who said that he could come and repair the tank, but he couldn't find any accommodation and so he

was sleeping in his truck. Linda offered to accommodate him at her house, which I was concerned about, and I made arrangements to find him a bed in a nearby motel. I think this was my anxiety about wanting to ensure that Linda was safe and not exploited, rather than Linda being concerned. I wondered if this was the right way to handle myself in this situation – should my decisions be based on my concerns and anxieties, or should they be informed by what my client wanted and needed?

There were eight people that died in Linda's street. For weeks, she had police and the army come to the door and ask if they could search through the rubble in her backyard and see if there was anyone dead there - it seemed a neighbour was missing. I was there one day when the forensic police turned up and we sat together at her table, quietly drinking tea. We watched them through the window as they lifted sheets of iron and took away unknown objects in brown paper bags. I wondered what Linda was thinking and feeling. What were they looking for and what would they find? Was there anything personal or private hidden amongst the rubble that Linda didn't want to be discovered? What exactly were they taking away anyway? And if it was Linda's would she ever get it back? Should I do more to protect Linda and myself – should we not watch this? I wondered how I would feel if this was my kitchen, my window and my backyard. How would I feel watching strangers comb through my personal belongings and inspect or take away bits and pieces? What if they find something awful – would I be able to live here any more? Thankfully, it turned out that the missing neighbour was found safe and well, but that experience has vividly stayed with me.

The insurance company was quick to assist and an assessor had been to Linda's house before she was allowed through the roadblock. They were keen to settle Linda's claim and I was there one day when they telephoned and offered her a lump sum payment of over \$50,000. The insurance adviser explained that this was the best offer that she was going to get and allowed only fifteen minutes to decide whether to accept it, or it would be withdrawn. I advocated on Linda's behalf and we negotiated some extra time by requesting the offer in writing and Linda was able to have some time to think about it and consider her options. Money was tight, and Linda normally lived week to week, so this was a lot of money in anyone's language. I was worried about how Linda would spend the money – would she make sure that she replaced the sheds and fixed the rainwater tank first? No-one has ever given me that much money before and I wondered how I would feel in this situation. How do you know if it is the right decision? Accepting the insurance money also meant the end of a chapter and the start of something new – the money would provide the financial means to start the cleanup and rebuilding of her home.

I visited Linda at home most weeks for six months and we developed a strong connection. There were funerals - lots of funerals. In one week, Linda went to three funerals. Linda talked about feelings of sadness and guilt. She was sad that her small, rural community would never be the same and she worried that she will

not feel safe in the summer again. She felt guilty that she still had so much – that somehow her house had survived, and people who stayed to fight had lost their home, their loved ones and sometimes their life.

Over this time I spent with Linda I noticed many changes. The countryside changed as the charred remains of buildings were removed and the burnt out cars disappeared. The road was repaired, new white lines were painted and shiny new road signs appeared. Much sooner than I expected, nature started to show signs of regeneration - the ferns unfurled dazzling green fronds and the blackness of the trees was covered up by brilliant red and green shoots. The birds returned and I felt buoyant to hear the chirps and chortles in the wind. As the weather cooled, the smell of wood smoke from combustion heaters permeated the air and many hearts, including mine, beat a little faster when we first noticed the acrid, burning scent in the wind.

Time passed quickly and soon it was time for me to say goodbye to Linda. We had been talking about this for several weeks and Linda was confident that she would be fine by herself. I wondered how I would be. Linda told me that she felt like she was back in control of her life, and she was going to finish her studies at TAFE because she wanted to give something back to her community. On my last visit she baked biscuits and she gave me a beautiful card to thank me for sharing this time with her. There were lots of tears at this last visit, and many of them were mine.

Now, more than two years have passed since those devastating fires, and many more things have changed. We have made it through the Australian summer without a repeat of those horrific fires, and we have faced new challenges with flooding affecting large parts of the country. For the bushfire affected families, many have moved into their new homes, and some have moved to start afresh somewhere new. Many are still not sure what to do next. For me, I've reflected on this experience and I appreciate how much of a privilege it was to walk along with these people, through a part of this devastating time in their life. It was a rewarding and inspiring experience that has changed me in ways that I am only beginning to understand. As I continue my research into the experiences of social workers working with bushfire affected families, I recognise the value of reflecting on these experiences as a boulevard for expression and I am committed to making sure that there are more stories told.

About the author

Helen Hickson is a Social Worker and Lecturer at La Trobe University and she worked for seven months as a Bushfire Case Manager, supporting bushfire affected families in Kinglake, Flowerdale, Redesdale and Bendigo. Helen was awarded a research grant by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) to explore social workers' experiences of working with bushfire affected families. This is a reflection of Helen's experience working as a Bushfire Case Manager.