

Volunteering in the bush

NEARLY 40 PERCENT OF PEOPLE IN RURAL AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA GIVE FREELY OF THEIR TIME AND EXPERTISE, FULFILLING A VITAL NEED AND PROVIDING ESSENTIAL SERVICES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

BY JANE MILBURN

AT 3.49AM the pager on Neil Beer's bedside table beeps loudly. As the Country Fire Authority's (CFA) Yea group officer reads the message, he is already on the way. Follow-up messages specify the map page and reference numbers, and a request for more fire trucks. Within a short space of time, 40 CFA volunteers are at work on Ross and Mary Armstrong's Yea cattle property "Island Bend" dealing with a hayshed fire in which 150 big round bales have succumbed to spontaneous combustion. At 6.30am Neil radios the communications officer requesting breakfast for 40, and by 9am things are under control.

"The response from the CFA was amazing," Ross Armstrong says. "They arrived so quickly I couldn't believe it and it's impossible to say what might have happened without their help." Like thousands of active CFA volunteers around Victoria, every night Neil sleeps with his pager beside the bed and clips it on his belt every morning. "I don't feel dressed without it on – it just becomes part of your life," he says.

The call they fear most is when wildfire takes hold, as it did in the 2006–07 fire season, which saw multiple brigades undertake 69 days of firefighting around the Great Dividing Range in eastern Victoria. Southern Australia is

susceptible to bushfires because the forest types are particularly flammable and there's a trend not to burn-off or remove trees. That, combined with climate conditions, makes controlling fires very difficult.

CFA Ararat group officer Charlie de Fegely was one of 500 firefighters who battled the Deep Lead and Grampians fires in 2006 that saw 40 percent of the Grampians National Park and 41,000 hectares of private property burned. The extensive destruction of farms and livestock meant that when the immediate fire danger abated, the volunteer effort switched to the recovery.

As well as being CFA's Ararat group officer, Charlie is Ararat branch secretary of the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF). "When neighbours have suffered severe adversity, our natural instinct is to want to go and help them get back together," he says. "Volunteering is something that rural landholders just do automatically."

Farm organisations such as the VFF have the capacity to mobilise their membership into a formidable volunteer force. VFF president Simon Ramsay says that in times of exceptional circumstances or disasters, such as floods and bushfires, members from its 260 branches provide a coordinated volunteer workforce for the recovery effort in affected rural communities.

In the case of the Grampians fires, teams ▶

Mike Sears has been a volunteer with Victoria's Stratford Rural Fire Brigade for more than 30 years.





LEFT: A thankful Tom and Sarah Guthrie among the vines at their regenerated winery.
 BELOW: Spike, one of the Guthries' dogs, leaps through what is left of a 500-year-old tree destroyed in the Grampians fires.
 BOTTOM: Tom Guthrie adds a sheet of iron to the pile – the last of the fencing to be removed after the fires.



PHOTOS: NEIL NEWITT

visited landholders and worked out what assistance was required, and fencing and fodder requirements were then coordinated through VFF members. “Teams made up of DPI [Department of Primary Industries] staff, local vets and farmers went from property to property assessing burnt stock,” Charlie says. “Severely burned animals had to be destroyed, and members of local field and game clubs assisted farmers with that because they had rifles and licences. The teams buried 62,000 sheep and 1000 cattle. After we buried the stock, we started the clean up and rebuilding boundary fences for each property to contain remaining stock and coordinating loads of hay because the pasture was gone.”

Charlie, who was closely involved in the operation for a

month, organised large amounts of fencing with support from Apex, Lions, football clubs, church groups and local prison gangs. “It was a team effort with Rowly Paterson managing the southern end around Willaura, Ray Davies and Kevin Jess managing the northern end at Stawell and Deep Lead, while I managed the middle area around Moyston,” he says. “It is a natural network that is able to look after itself, but even so, some properties destroyed by the fire are not fully recovered, with many still rebuilding pastures and animal genetics that were lost.”

Tom and Sarah Guthrie, from “Thermopylae” at Willaura lost virtually everything except their home and cottage when the wildfire swept out of the eastern side of the Grampians

and across their property, burning 60km of fencing, 3700 sheep and their 3.3ha vineyard. They had support from the CFA and the VFF on the day, and a subsequent volunteer effort and donations from all quarters that has helped them rebuild, restock and regroup during the past year.

In keeping with wine-industry tradition, eight fellow growers donated grapes for Tom and Sarah to produce their 2008 vintage Grampians Estate Black Sunday Friends Shiraz and have donated root stock to replant their vineyard. “The overwhelming response we’ve had says to us that the spirit of the bush is well and truly alive,” Sarah says. “It has helped us cope, but there always comes a point when you have to organise things for yourselves.” ▶



PHOTOS: VFF

Firefighting and Victorian Farmers' Federation volunteers prepare to work with Department of Sustainability and Environment staff to save farms from the Grampians fires. BELOW: The work of volunteers doesn't stop when the fires have passed. After the Grampians fire, the clean-up task was enormous.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Volunteer fire brigades are often at the centre of small regional communities, particularly if there is no organised infrastructure or sporting clubs and few schools. The CFA encourages self-reliance and endeavours for the fire brigade to become a great community resource, says deputy chief officer Geoff Conway who became a volunteer firefighter in 1979 at Briagolong and joined the staff in 1983. "It begins with local people taking responsibility for the welfare of their communities and we then do everything we can to support them," Geoff says. The CFA has responsibility for all fire and rescue work in regional areas and on private land, with only 27 of its brigades in larger centres having career firefighters to supplement the volunteers.

There are 58,000 volunteers in the CFA, with 38,000 of those having the required skills to undertake active firefighting and the rest working to support the volunteer effort in other ways including communication, administration and incident management.

Neil Beer joined the CFA as a volunteer 31 years ago at a neighbour's suggestion and he is now the group officer of nine brigades in northern Victoria. Neil and his wife Jan, who is also a CFA member, operate a beef cattle property at Yea and a car dealership in Seymour and Neil leads the 400 volunteer members of the CFA's Yea group.

"You don't think about the time you put in; you just do it to put back into the community," Neil says. "You are mixing with a lot of people from all walks of life and age groups, and I get a lot of satisfaction



from watching individuals develop over the years. Brigades become like one big family and if someone is in trouble then everyone helps them out. It is bigger than just firefighting because the brigades get involved in natural disasters and road accidents as well. I get fulfilment out of helping others and our community, and I get a lot of laughs too. You meet so many people that you otherwise wouldn't."

Geoff says the common characteristic of firefighters is they are always looking for ways to improve and do the job better. "Volunteers know they need to be self-reliant and have the capability to protect themselves, and they willingly accept that responsibility and build firefighting capacity at their local level. They also show a willingness to support and assist others who are in need across the state and interstate."

CFA internal surveys show that what inspires people to become volunteer firefighters is the positive feedback they get from securing the community and helping others in their time of need. Additionally, they value the camaraderie and find it rewarding to be part of a group that is working well as a team. Volunteers also gain opportunities for personal development by undertaking training in leadership skills and working in groups. For a lot of people, being a volunteer firefighter defines their self-image.

The common thread is that volunteers give time, an increasingly precious commodity, and expertise. About one in three Australians (34 percent) volunteer, according to the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Voluntary Work, Australia survey, but it is known to be higher in country communities.

Associate professor Melanie Oppenheimer, from the University of Western Sydney, is writing a history of volunteering in Australia since 1945. "The services aren't there in the bush, so volunteering is consistently higher there than in the cities," Melanie says. "Rural people know they have to do it themselves, whereas in the cities there is a certain expectation that things will be done for you." (see *The invisible sector*, page 37.)

Australia's volunteer rate is among the highest in the world, being seven percent higher than the United States and Canada, according to adjunct professor of social economy Mark Lyons from the University of Technology Sydney, and it is only Scandinavian countries that have a higher rate. ABS figures show the volunteer rate is 32 percent in capital cities (average hours worked being 128 per year) and the balance of the states is 38pc (average 149 hours per year). "What that tells us is that outside the big cities, Australians are more likely to volunteer and are going to, on average, volunteer more hours," Mark says.

The four most common types of organisations for which people volunteer are sport and physical recreation, education and training, community/welfare and religious groups.

Women in Australia (36pc) are slightly more likely than men (32pc) to volunteer, while the highest participation level of any age group is 44pc in those aged 35-44 years. Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory have the highest volunteer participation rate at 38pc. Around the country, the scope of and reasons for volunteering vary but the latest picture shows the top reasons are helping others or the community (57pc), personal satisfaction (44pc) and to do something worthwhile (36pc).



TOP TO BOTTOM: Volunteer Ann Keating at "Chudleigh Park", Qld, with Holly Atkinson, nine, and her brother Busta, six; Lachlan Palmer from Offham Station, Qld, building a sundial in the dirt for his tutor Laurie Bester; Jennifer Oats teaches music to Pypah Kersh, five, and sister Mackenzie, six, at Bora Station, Qld.



Phiggles, the flying scientist (also known as retired teacher Phil Higgins), teaches remote School of the Air students on Queensland's Tara Station.

THE VISE SQUAD

The Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education (VISE) organisation harnesses retired teachers along the eastern seaboard and places them with outback families to help during times of need. VISE, set up in 1989 by Mike and Colleen Stock, recently calculated that its 18 years of voluntary effort would be valued at \$30 million, based on the usual emergency teacher rate.

Mike was in the Northern Territory on secondment from Canberra TAFE when he was asked what could be done to help parents on remote properties with School of the Air supervision when they needed respite or additional support during busy periods. His suggestion was to turn to the army of up to 500 retired teachers in the eastern states, and he took early retirement to establish VISE as the vehicle to get these volunteer teachers to families in need. The teachers commit to spending six weeks with a family. They volunteer their teaching time but their travel and board is paid by the family.

Karen Emmott from "Noonbah", 156km from Longreach in central western Queensland, says VISE saved her family's bacon when her second child Fergus needed literacy support at age

10. Now Fergus is 13 and at boarding school, Karen is much more confident than she might otherwise have been. "Mike came and gave Fergus one-on-one help for six weeks, which was wonderful," she says. "He really helped give Fergus the tools to cope in mainstream schooling and also taught me how to help Fergus. We are so geographically isolated that we don't have the opportunity to access support services and that is what makes VISE such an amazing service."

Retired teacher Pat Moore from Wonthaggi, Vic, has been with VISE since 1991 and last year volunteered for two terms. "I get tremendous satisfaction from it and am very pleased to be able to help," Pat says. "My motto is that nothing succeeds like success, and if children have success early on they are more likely to succeed in the long term."

From her home base at Ballina in northern New South Wales, retired teacher Jean Ison takes regular sojourns into the bush with VISE and enjoys seeing the outback as well as having families scattered throughout the country who have come to mean so much to her. "I so value being able to help these families, because

when you are on your own it is easy to lose the teaching skills and confidence," Jean says. "It gives positive meaning to my life, rather than wasting all those years of teaching experience. I love doing it."

VISE is supported by groups including the Foundation of Rural and Regional Renewal, Connellan Airways Trust and the Gympie Country Music Muster, and assists families in the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales. In 2007, 300 families were helped by various volunteer teachers, while one dedicated volunteer teacher spent the entire year going from property to property.

"We are a support group so we work closely with the Isolated Children's Parents' Association," Mike says. "We are there to support a mother who is exhausted and needs some respite, or in the case of the drought where stress has made the teaching more difficult. We also have volunteer tutors who have been trained in reading methodology to help children with intensive-reading assistance for a month-long period, when they can make quite big strides forward."

For more information go to www.vise.org.au



ALESIA PAWELSKI

CWA West Australian president Pam Batten with fellow member and daughter-in-law Nicole Batten at Yuna, east of Geraldton, WA.
 BELOW: The way they were ... Margaret Cameron presents a framed picture of the Queen to fellow CWA member Ruth Anderson while another member, Billie Nicholls, looks on at the CWA rest rooms in Darwin on November 26, 1960.



NORTHERN TERRITORY LIBRARY

AT THE FRONTIER

As a national network of rural volunteers, the reach and credibility of the Country Women's Association (CWA) in supporting women and families in the bush remains such that the Federal Government recently entrusted it with \$12 million to distribute as emergency-aid grants in drought-affected areas. This money was distributed as community grants of up to \$3000 and individual grants of up to \$2000 per household, with the need being assessed by the CWA against nationally agreed assessment criteria.

Giving service and providing emotional support, friendship and companionship is something CWA volunteers in Western Australia have been doing since 1924. Current WA president Pam Batten joined the Yuna branch near Geraldton when she arrived in the district as a 19-year-old bride, with her mother-in-law paying her first membership. Now, 37 years later, Pam recalls having paid the first membership for her daughter-in-law in 2001 as the next generation settles onto the farm and the women continue to be involved in the CWA. "I attribute a lot of my own personal growth to the leadership skills and training programs the CWA has provided, and the opportunities to learn and interact with the range of age groups within the association's membership," Pam says. "We have 162 branches in Western Australia consisting of 2400 volunteer members and two-thirds of these members live in rural areas.

"Over the years, CWA branches have initiated ideas and ►



MARK MULLER

“You identify a need and know the job has to be done. You can’t wait around for the government to do it.”

Melanie Oppenheimer, from the University of Western Sydney, is writing a history of volunteering in Australia. BELOW: Jock Cameron enjoys swinging between mum Fiona and volunteer Judy Green who helped out on “Kanowna”, the Camerons’ Queensland property, last year. BELOW RIGHT: Rodney and Judy outside the shearers’ quarters at Kanowna.

THE INVISIBLE SECTOR

When Melanie Oppenheimer was growing up at Walcha in northern New South Wales her mother taught School of the Air, volunteered at the pony club in the 1960s and to national parks in the 1970s, and is still heavily involved with the National Trust and other heritage groups. There’s a history of volunteering in the Oppenheimer family. Melanie’s great-grandmother, Grace Munro, was a founder of the Country Women’s Association in 1922, one of the early rural volunteering groups established specifically to look after the interests of women and children. Grace was motivated to establish the group as a support network to advocate for better health services for rural women after she lost her own child due to inadequate access to medical care.

Melanie is currently researching volunteering in Australia at the University of Western Sydney. She says a big barrier to volunteering in the bush today is the rising cost of petrol, which has put severe limitations on volunteer work involving lots of travel. “Petrol prices have risen 40 percent in the past five years, which has put a real strain on volunteering in rural areas,” she says. “It’s been estimated that the average cost of volunteering is \$600 a year, which is not factoring in your time, just your cost. Because a lot of volunteers are retirees, the rising cost of fuel may mean they forgo their volunteering because they literally can’t afford to do it.”

Although volunteers are part of the fabric of Australian society, volunteering itself is often invisible with governments tending to be exploitative and taking volunteer work for granted. “Many people in government don’t understand the ramifications or the breadth of volunteering in our society, and we don’t yet have the policies and procedures to adequately deal with it,” Melanie says.

A volunteer effort often begins when people

identify a need, then band together and perhaps form an organisation to help meet that need. It is only later that a government might move in to formally provide the required services.

Governments by their nature are bureaucratic so they aren’t in a position to be as responsive as local communities in recognising and acting on needs.

“You identify a need and know the job has to be done,” Melanie says. “You can’t wait around for the government to do it, so you just get on and do it yourselves. For example, social work originated through volunteers and it was only later that their work was professionalised with university training courses post-World War II, and that was when the value of their contribution was recognised.

“Landcare is another example. Although it does have some government funding now, it originated when farmers identified the need to curb erosion and land degradation, and they banded together to do something about it. Social change and social movements come from the voluntary sector, and it is only later that the government might step in and do something about issues of concern.”

In Australia, some state governments have made efforts to recognise the importance of the sector. For example, in South Australia there is an Office of Volunteers and a Minister for Volunteers, and in New South Wales there is now a Minister for Volunteering. But Melanie believes advocacy for the sector needs to be driven at a national level because the Federal Government has umbrella influence and more money and resources to distribute. A united approach is needed on volunteering, which would include a national compact and a charities’ commission – similar to that now operating in the United Kingdom – to provide leadership, and a charities register to get a handle on the size and level of volunteering, which is happening in every part of Australia every day.

projects to bring their communities together. Among the many things CWA members do is to provide catering services for local activities such as clearing sales, sheep and cattle sales, wakes, seminars and workshops. Members place more emphasis on providing the service rather than the fundraising opportunity, although through these opportunities branches are able to donate to cancer research, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, local schools or other groups.”

Frontier Services’ Outback Links program places volunteers for short periods of time to assist with everything from computing to childminding, accounting and fencing. Frontier Services is a major provider of aged care, health and community services, and pastoral support to people in outback and remote Australia. It is a non-profit agency of the Uniting Church that grew out of the pioneering work begun in 1912 by the Reverend John Flynn.

Rodney and Judy Green headed north from Lenswood, South Australia, to lend a hand to drought-affected families in Queensland. They didn’t realise the experience would be so mutually beneficial or rewarding. The former apple growers in their early sixties acted on a poster Judy noticed in their local Uniting Church. The Greens left home in the winter of 2007 and spent time with five different Queensland families within a 300km radius of Charleville in an arrangement organised through Outback Links coordinator Davida Melksham.

“It was a fantastic experience getting to know people, seeing how they live and how they are coping with the drought,” Judy says. “It was a real learning experience for us and the wives loved having Rodney around the house to do odd jobs that their husbands never have time to do. I helped with housework, washing, looking after kids, whatever was needed,

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LANNON HARLEY



ONE TOWN'S EXPERIENCE

Western Queensland mayor Mark O'Brien says inland communities are only as good as the locals who make them, with the social health of a community being very much a function of the level of its volunteer effort. "We have a strong volunteer culture, with the type of work ranging from necessary practical volunteering to more social leisure-related volunteer efforts," Mark says of his Murweh Shire.

Practical volunteering happens at facilities such as Healthy Ageing, which is a Health Department service that asks locals to help with caring for the elderly in the Charleville community. More than 100 elderly people attend the centre each month, and volunteers play cards, talk, play putt putt and generally engage with them.

Social volunteering happens when community groups get together to run local events such as the Cooladdi Gymkhana. "This is a great annual community weekend event that provides entertainment for local and visiting families and is run entirely by volunteers, although council contributes in a small way by making sure the facilities are tidy," Mark says.

There is education-related volunteering, such as that which supports the Save the Bilby Fund, also in Charleville. Mark says awareness of the endangered bilbies has grown during the past seven years, thanks largely to the 20 volunteers who man a store during the tourist season and give educational talks in the evening. "Because of the commitment of these volunteers concerned about the environment, we have been able to secure a \$5 million grant to build a National Bilby Centre in Charleville. We wouldn't have been able to display a business case for this centre if we were paying people to man it, so we are fortunate to have many volunteers committed to educating Australians about the conservation of endangered species."

There are also sporting clubs including those for golf, bowls and tennis, and volunteers run the annual Charleville and District Eisteddfod. "Volunteering is a typically Australian thing to do," Mark says. "Right across the Murweh Shire, we have a strong volunteer culture that creates lots of social activity. Small rural communities live or die by the quantum of volunteering, because if the locals don't do it, there will be no activity in the town. We don't have the financial resources or a wealthy benefactor

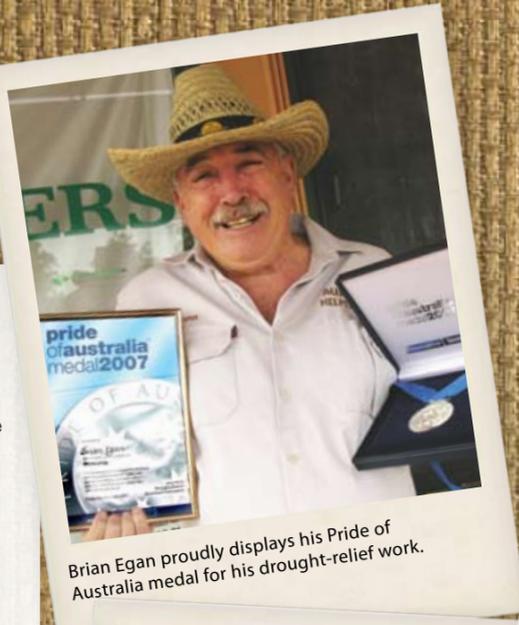
to support community activities, so organisation has to be done by volunteers."

Charleville resident Michelle Omyla raised \$80,000 for the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) two years ago. The 25-year-old says volunteering has become a way of life, in between her day job in customer service at Elders and her weekend job at a local newsagency. "The reward is the satisfaction," she says. "I am an organised person so it's not difficult to organise fundraising events and that's why people keep asking me. I'm happy to help where I can and I get pleasure from doing it."

In 2005 Michelle won the Spirit of Queensland Quest with support from locals - when they saw her working hard on fundraising, they wanted to help. Since then, she has been an ambassador for the south-west region in the Showgirl competition, winning the local and regional categories, and coordinator of the Charleville Youth Show Committee. She is also the driver behind the Bulldust and Bowties Charleville Charity B&S Ball, which provides a social evening for local young people who come in from surrounding stations. "It had a really great feel about it and was such a good time," Michelle says. She has set up a website (www.bulldustandbowties.com) to promote the event, which last time raised at least \$8000 for the RFDS. It will be held again on October 11, 2008. Michelle has recently taken on the job of girl-guide leader to 16 girls aged five to 12 years.

Helping others grew out of Michelle's teenage difficulties when she suffered clinical depression for two years. She overcame this with a fresh start, first at an agricultural college in Victoria and later at Charleville. "You make your life what you want it to be," Michelle says.

Mark O'Brien hopes that during the next 20 years the many thousands of retirees and people with means flocking into south-east Queensland might consider heading west regularly to contribute to communities. The idea of engaging the skills of grey nomads to assist in the development of outback towns is the subject of research by Volunteering Australia in partnership with Professor Jenny Onyx (University of Western Sydney) and Associate Professor Rosemary Leonard, with case studies taking place at Barcaldine and Winton in Queensland, and Kimba and Roxby Downs in South Australia.



Brian Egan proudly displays his Pride of Australia medal for his drought-relief work.



Save the Bilby coordinator Emily Chandler works hard to ensure a future for this little Australian.



Deb Lindsay, right, from South West Healthy Communities volunteers her time to check a patient's blood pressure.



Wildlife carer Lois Wilson nurses sick, injured and orphaned animals back to health.



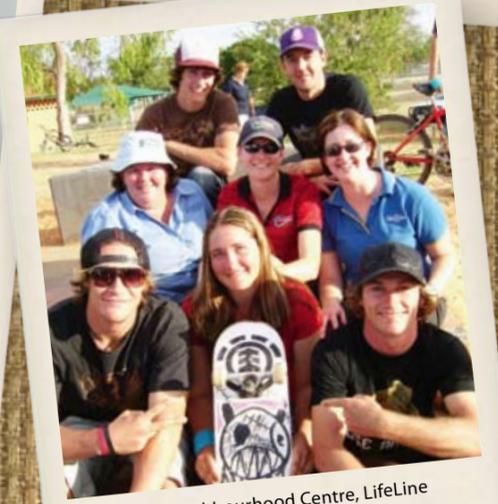
Michelle Omyla has donated her time to raise money for worthy causes and to help run worthwhile community events.



Volunteers staff the gates at the Bulldust and Bowties charity ball.



Sheree Clare, left, and Sadie Gannon volunteer their services on Pancake Day.



Charleville Neighbourhood Centre, LifeLine and South West Healthy Communities have built a skate park for local young people.



Lottie Webster and George Balsillie volunteer at Charleville's Historic House museum.



State Emergency Service volunteers repair storm damage to a homestead near Charleville.



Inspector Michael Dowdy congratulates Sergeant Steve Schaffer-Steel for extra time spent on road safety.

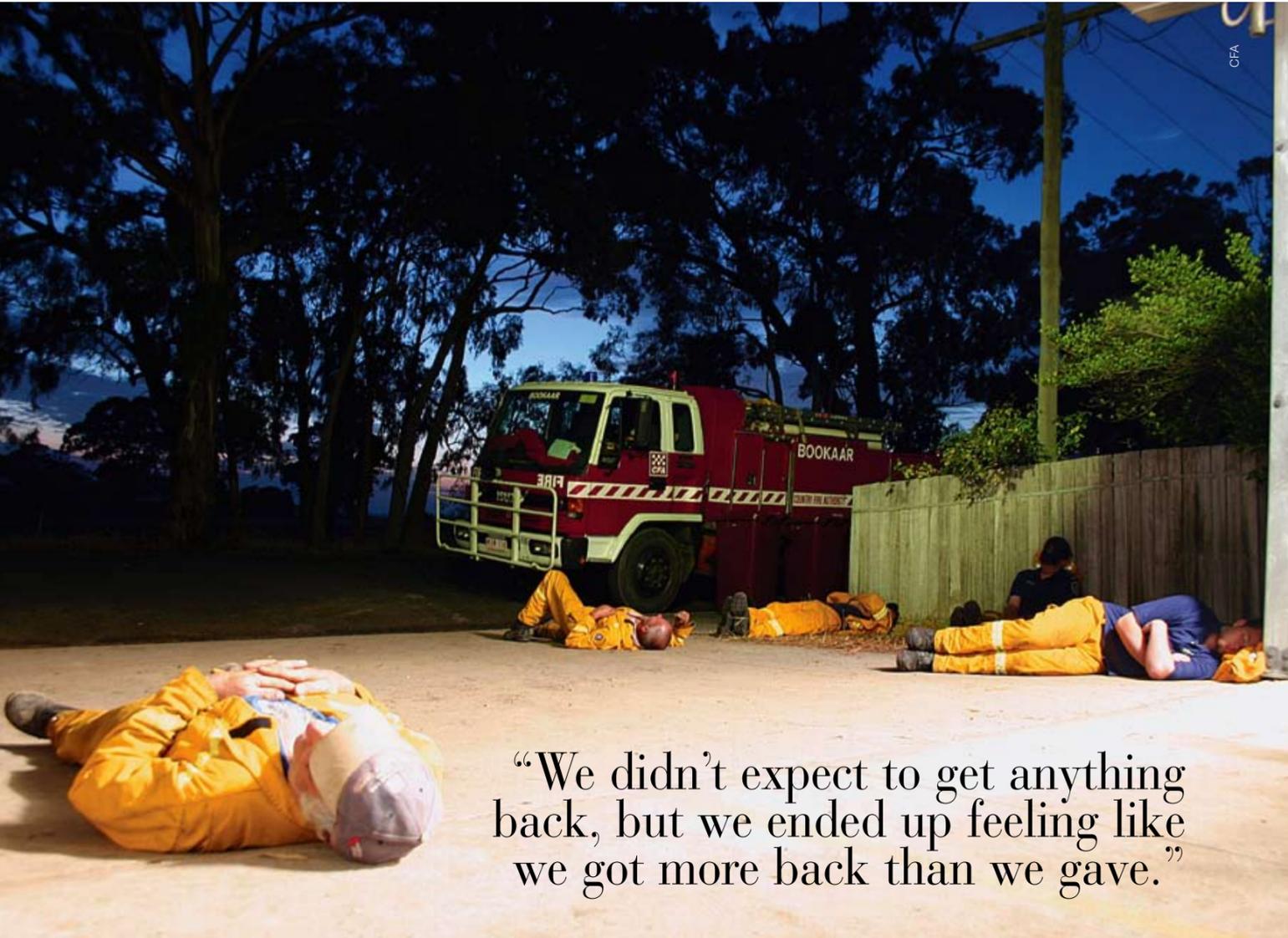


Scientist Peter McRae and fellow animal lover Margaret Thorsborne during Bilby Week celebrations.



Charleville Guides rally together for Clean Up Australia Day.

PHOTOS: DONNA WRIGHT



“We didn’t expect to get anything back, but we ended up feeling like we got more back than we gave.”

Exhausted volunteers from the Victorian and New South Wales firefighting services sleep on the concrete outside Pomonal Fire Station during the Grampians fires of 2006.

and did lots of gardening. We didn’t expect to get anything back, but we ended up feeling like we got more back than we gave. It was great to get to know these people and we have become friends with quite a few of them.”

The Greens were impressed with how Outback Links coordinated the arrangement, and were happy to submit to police checks and gain first-aid certificates. “We could have chosen to go places on our own but the success of Outback Links is in matching people and their skills with the need on stations,” Judy says. “Davida was able to match us with those who needed a hand and we went from place to place helping out. She would phone regularly to ensure everything was going well. It was good to have that support there had we needed it, and they cover the necessary insurance.”

Judy describes her husband as a “workaholic who likes to be busy”. “On stations where there is only the husband and wife running them they need more hands for fencing and feeding, and often they can’t get workers because they have left to work in the mines,” she says.

Fiona Cameron and her family benefited when Rodney and Judy visited them on their property “Kanowna”, near Bollon in southern inland Queensland, last year. “The Outback Links program is unique,” Fiona says. “When people are willing to give up their retirement travel time to help us, then that is really special. Rodney and Judy relieved us of the everyday general chores and July was absolutely wonderful playing with and reading to the children.”

Judy thoroughly enjoys getting off the beaten track and recommends everyone who is travelling to take time out in this way. “The other big benefit is that you don’t spend any money when you’re out on the stations,” she says. “It was a great experience and we hope to do it again this year. It was so much more rewarding and worthwhile than just travelling and stopping at caravan parks and running into the same people on the road.”

The Greens epitomise volunteers in the bush, getting as many rewards out of their experience as the hundreds of communities that benefit.