



REBUILDING WITH BOOKS

24 - 31 October 2009

Libraries supporting bushfire affected communities

ALIA leads collaborative effort to help bushfire communities Rebuild with Books

During October, booksellers around Australia invited their customers to purchase book vouchers to be sent to people who lost their homes in the Victorian bushfires, while libraries held fundraising events from 24 to 31 October as part of the same Rebuilding with Books campaign.

It is too early to say how much cash was raised, but while these activities were taking place, volunteers were sorting the many thousands of donated books at the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority's warehouse in Clayton, extracting the best to be distributed to families through libraries and relief centres in the bushfire-affected communities.

The Rebuilding with Books campaign, led by ALIA, has brought together many arts bodies, representatives of government, private and public sector organisations, and individuals who felt passionately that they wanted to do something to help. ALIA was pleased to be able to harness this energy and goodwill, and provide a mechanism for assisting bushfire-affected communities in a way that has been greatly valued by the recipients.

Named partners are the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, the Australian Booksellers Association, Arts Victoria, the State Library of Victoria, Public Libraries Victoria Network, the School Library Association of Victoria, Friends of Libraries Australia, and the Australian Publishers Association. In addition, the project has had assistance from Blue Shield Australia, the Municipal Association of Victoria, and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. It has been a truly collaborative venture.

Another part of the ALIA disaster recovery project has been to document the role of libraries in a crisis situation and the Victorian experience has clearly demonstrated the many different facets of a library in its community.

Although the bushfires swept through 11 library regions and had a devastating impact on six – LaTrobe City, Eastern Regional, Murrindindi, Yarra Plenty, Mitchell Shire, and High Country – none of the public libraries was destroyed. As fire-ravaged families came down from the hills seeking a safe haven, the public libraries provided something the hastily-convened relief centres couldn't: shelter with a sense of normality, a place to draw breath and take stock, without the chaos and debris.

Ann Le Lievre and her team at Murrindindi Library Service, covering Kinglake, Alexandra, and Marysville, were at the centre of the worst scenes of devastation. Ann describes "throwing the rule book away", opening from early morning to late evening, looking after kids while their parents phoned insurance companies and tried to arrange temporary accommodation, handing out magazines and books to shell-shocked victims, making endless cups of tea and coffee, and just sitting and listening to people as they told of their terrifying ordeals.

At this point, the Murrindindi mobile library service was unable to reach the outlying areas, cut off by fallen trees and with areas cordoned off by the police. As soon as she could, Kate, the mobile library driver, headed back to Buxton, Eildon, Flowerdale, Marysville, and Strath Creek. She drove past road signs that had melted in the heat, past burnt out homesteads, to the stops at the heart of what had been lively small towns and were now mainly rubble and ashes.

Kate says she spent a lot of time those first few weeks sitting on the floor of the mobile library with the children, handing out grapes, letting them talk about what had happened, cry over lost friends, and share stories with each other. It was traumatic for the library staff, many of whom had fought to save their own homes from the blaze, to discover the loss of familiar faces in the library. Some 23 mobile library users died in Flowerdale alone. The return of the Yarra Plenty Regional Library mobile library service to St Andrews was a cause for celebration, with a party in the community centre to welcome it back. Residents felt as though it was a small step in the direction of normality.

For the first six months, books weren't high on the list of priorities for bushfire-affected communities. ALIA's original disaster recovery project manager Jane Grace, from Yarra Plenty Regional Library, had put in place a Build Your Book Collection scheme to distribute new and best quality second-hand books from the thousands donated by bookshops, publishers, and members of the public. There were only a handful of requests to begin with, but in July and August the number increased dramatically, to the extent that a revised system was needed to cope with demand.



Volunteers sorting donated books at the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority's warehouse in Clayton

ALIA has now set up local distribution points, in libraries and relief centres, so people can browse a wide selection of fiction, non-fiction, and reference titles, and take away what they'd like to put on the bookshelves in their newly reconstructed homes.

The book vouchers purchased with the funds raised by library staff and booksellers will enable families to choose one or two special books to add to their collection.

More information at <http://www.alia.org.au/disasterrecovery> or email sue.mckerracher@alia.org.au.

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