

Bushfire Resilience Inc.

Black Saturday, 2009. Horses

Interview with Kathy Brown, horse owner

Interviewer: Malcolm Hackett OAM



Malcolm

My name's Malcolm Hackett and I'm here with Kathy Brown who has generously agreed to share some of her Black Saturday experiences with us.

Before we start just a brief explanation of the property. Kathy and David live on a 100-acre grazing property set up for horses. About 300m from very dense bush but right at the base of Mount Sugarloaf in Strathewen.

Kathy, can you tell me what preparations had you done on your property before the bushfire?

Kathy

We cleared as much as we could from around the house. Dead stuff in flowerbeds, things like that. All along we've had nothing really growing too close to the house. And we have a huge gravel area between the house and the stables for horse trucks and things. So that in itself was a bit of a fire break for the house, and with lawn to the front and back of the house. In that respect it was a relatively safe spot compared to some as far as trees and bushes and undergrowth were concerned. I'd also that morning put the garden sprinkler system on, working overtime. Dave said to me "Why are you wasting all that water?" And I said "No, everywhere needs to be soaking." So all immediately around the house was wet. Obviously out to the paddocks, couldn't do anything with them. But they were in our mind, quite safe paddocks because there were no trees in them. They were cleared. There was just low grass that had been eaten out.

Malcolm

And that water was coming out of the dam?

Kathy

The water was coming out of the dam. So we had plenty and I literally soaked everything to within about 10m of the house.

Malcolm

And who was home on the day?

Kathy

There was my husband and our son Jack who was about 18 at the time. Our other son was over in London and that was horrendous for him not knowing what was going on. So just the three of us there.

Malcolm

And did you know the fire was coming?

Kathy

We didn't realise it was coming that fast. I had been listening to radio reports and the CFA website and the last I heard was the fire was in Wallan, and had jumped the Hume. At that point Dave and Jack were outside looking to see if there were any spot fires anywhere because we had all these dry, really hot leaves falling around the place. And as soon as I opened the front door all I could see was this wall of flame coming up from the other side of Sugarloaf. It was there. No chance to evacuate, no chance

to have planned exactly what you were going to do with your animals because it was just there. And as soon as I saw that fire the spot fires started. One minute the front garden was on fire, next minute the back garden was on fire, and then the stables were on fire, and that was well before the fire front came through.

Malcolm

So the stables were on fire before the front came?

Kathy

Yes. I reckon that was rabbits going into the hay that was stored at the back of the stables. Rabbits on fire setting the hay on fire. We had only just about a couple of weeks before taken a whole load of lovely Lucerne hay in. So that was the situation we were faced with. No real time to do anything other than what came to you at that moment.

Malcolm

And what animals did you have on the property?

Kathy

On the property we had 21 horses. Thoroughbred mares, foals, yearlings. Quite valuable stock. And fortunately we didn't have all our stock there. Some of the mares hadn't come back from agistment farms where they'd been foaling earlier on.

Malcolm

And dogs and cats?

Kathy

Yes. We had Chloe, our Labrador. I kept her inside. Ashley our cat was a stable cat, a mouser. And as soon as I'd open the front door and had the garage door open as well and was shouting to Dave and Jack "Turn around. Look to see what's coming," she shot into the garage from the stables and then shot straight into the house, curled up in a ball surrounded by pairs of shoes and boots and she stayed there for a good 12hrs. She hadn't moved.

Malcolm

She had a sense of what was coming and where was safe.

Kathy

She had a sense of what was coming yes, definitely.

Malcolm

So tell me how did it unfold from that point of the spot fires? What happened?

Kathy

The spot fires made it quite smoky so you couldn't really see what you were doing. I'd soaked wet towels in the bath and got the garage door down before the power went off. I made up water bottles. Dave and Jack were given the wet towels and the water bottles and they tried to just prevent the fire from taking the veranda posts, because if the veranda posts had gone the house would have gone. I was indoors trying to direct them here there and everywhere and supply them with more wet towels. Dave was concerned. I'm not quite sure what order it comes in. We had some horses in the stables. At that point Jack had come back to the house. You couldn't see the stables or anything around you.

Malcolm

So this is only 30m away from the house?

Kathy

Yes. This is very close by, and Dave had gone back to the stables and he managed to get the first box open which is where one of our yearlings was. He couldn't get in any further because of the flames, but Jack and I didn't know. We couldn't see him and we couldn't hear him. The roar was just horrific and you didn't know what any of your other horses were doing.

Malcolm

Did the horses sense the danger before the fire arrived?

Kathy

That's hard to tell. Very hard to tell.

Malcolm

So, smoke and noise?

Kathy

By the time it was getting close it was just so smoky that we couldn't see what was going on.

Malcolm

So it was spot fires? Was there a fire front that moved through?

Kathy

Eventually there was. That was when the sky was black and all you could see outside was red.

Malcolm

So everything was on fire?

Kathy

At that point Dave had come back because we kept shouting to him "You're more important than the horses," but he didn't seem to want to hear that. [Chuckles.] And the intense heat. You just couldn't be outside. That was the only time I remember standing in our family room thinking "If the windows go that's it." But fortunately the fire came on to the end of the house where it was the garage. The short end of the house rather than the main long front with all the windows. And the windows didn't go.

Malcolm

Then after the fire front moved through how long do you think that took?

Kathy

Well it was at least an hour. It was going round and round and there was thunder. You could hear the thunder. It was like hell.

Malcolm

Then when you were able to come out, what happened after?

Kathy

When we did finally come out the first thing we saw was our neighbours walking up our driveway absolutely soaking wet. They'd survived in their dam. And you could hear cooees all around the valley because it was deathly quiet. So you knew that people were out there and were okay. And more people just wandered along and took refuge in our place because theirs had gone.

Malcolm

Sends chills up the spine and tears in my eyes.

Kathy

Then it was a question of "Let's go and check our stock." Obviously the dog and the cat were okay because they were indoors. So Dave went off and did that as much as he could but it was absolutely horrific. For anyone who goes through this or wants to plan to go through a bushfire the key thing is to get rugs off, get head collars off, leave all the gates open and for goodness' sake remove their shoes. Our neighbour who was training racehorses had all his horses shod. They had to be put down because the intense heat that came up through the metal of the shoes burnt their feet and they were not saveable.

Malcolm

And some of them would have been saved if it hadn't been for that?

Kathy

Some of them would have would have been if they hadn't had their shoes on. So a lot of horses were lost because of having shoes on. None of ours were shod fortunately but we still lost 10 horses that day, including foals. And it was mainly the younger horses who panicked. The older horses that survived seemed to know what to do. Some of them went and stood on areas of ground that had been burnt out by a spot fire and that's where we found them on the bit that had been burnt initially. And they just came together with their foals. We had two mares and foals in one paddock. And old mares. And there they were, just standing.

We had another horse, a retired broodmare who rounded everything up afterwards. All of a sudden she brought everything together and segregated the boys and the girls. She was absolutely amazing. And if we'd known what she was going to do we'd have put her in with everything else [laughs].

Malcolm

I know with some animals, cattle for example, which maybe aren't as smart as your horses, but they would run away from the flames towards the bush and then perish in the bush. So were there fences? Had horses run through fences trying to escape?

Kathy

Some horses had run through fences because they couldn't see where the gates were. They were totally disorientated I think. There were some horrific injuries.

Malcolm

That broodmare sounds pretty impressive but tell us about the other horses that survived.

Kathy

British General, as we named him after the fires, he was the horse that Dave got out of the first box of the stables. He was only a yearling at the time. He'd passed in at the sales and we'd only got him back on the property a couple of weeks before the fire. We lost his mum and his half-sister in the fires, but we decided to keep him and race him. He was a bit singed after being let out the stables but he survived on a gravel laneway and must have been very sensible. We heard him running up and down but he was okay apart from having lost a bit of hair. He went into training and became the wonderful racehorse that he was. We couldn't believe it. He won three times at Ballarat and then went on to Flemington and won 'black type' races at Flemington. It was one of the joys of the fire's aftermath seeing him having survived and going on to do such great things. A lot of the people in Strathewen used to follow him.

Malcolm

Absolutely, you're bringing tears to my eyes again.

Kathy

Sorry Malcolm. I won't say any more then.

Malcolm

That is a fantastic positive story to hear. And the response of neighbours to your situation. Did people rally around?

Kathy

They were just pleased to have somewhere that had a roof and somewhere for them to stay because they'd lost their homes. And our other neighbours who were away on holiday up the hill, had a generator going and a little group of us used to go and congregate there. We took anything that we had such as leftover food, and they'd set up breakfasts and showers. It was marvellous.

Malcolm

What preparations have you in place now for such an event?

Kathy

Don't listen to what the radio is telling you. Unfortunately, our house is in the shadow of Sugarloaf, so you couldn't actually see how close it was until it arrived there. You couldn't see what was coming. There was a plume of smoke way in the distance, but yes. If we knew then what we know now and had been told it was going to be the worst day ever we would have evacuated the day before or at least tried to get some of the horses out. But there was no time and we were just working on instinct.

Malcolm

Are there any other preparations you would have done differently knowing what has happened?

Kathy

I would certainly recommend leaving the sprinklers on even if you are wasting water. Because that saved a lot of the fire coming too close to the house. But with the spot fires you just don't know what's going to happen.

Malcolm

Having the hay stored.

Kathy

Is not good.

Malcolm

It's not good.

Kathy

No. Because the hay shed was at the back of the stables but all part of the same building. And that's a no-no really.

Malcolm

And it was a steel building?

Kathy

It was a steel building. We had the builders of the stables come back to have a look and assess after the fires. They said they had never seen such damage to steel in a fire. And the concrete base had exploded. So the heat in there.

Malcolm

Are there any other things you want to tell us about, Kathy?

Kathy

That's all I can think of at the moment.

Malcolm

Well thank you. We appreciate you sharing those experiences. And I know how emotional it can be because it certainly rises in me when I hear people talking about it or when I talk about it myself. So thank you for sharing that because I'm sure there are a lot of people out there with horses in particular who can't imagine what it would be like, and certainly you filled in that.

Kathy

One thing we did find when we were able to get some of our horses transported away; they were just in total shock. One so much that when trying to get it onto a float it clamped hold of Dave's hand with its teeth and just wouldn't let go, and it wasn't being nasty, just terrified. And that was 24hrs later.

You need to prepare, you need to have a plan not just for you but for every animal on your property. And everybody needs to know that plan.

Malcolm

Excellent advice. Thank you very much.

Kathy

Thank you.