

Bushfire Resilience Inc.



Black Saturday, 2009. Horses

Interview with Adam Lewis, Strathewen resident

Interviewer: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Malcolm

I'm Malcolm Hackett and I am with Adam Lewis from Strathewen. Adam lives on about 100 acres of bush property on Eagle's Nest Road. Adam defended his home with his family on Black Saturday.

Adam, tell us a little bit about the preparations that you took before Black Saturday.

Adam

Our preparation before Black Saturday was a lot of hand equipment as well as a fire pump and an idea of what our potential risk would be in relation to where a fire threat would come from. So we spent a lot of time making sure that the property, even though we were building at the time, was cleared around it. But like all building sites they get messy and you do get a lot of stuff that you need to continually keep cleaning up.

We were in the midst of putting a sprinkler system around the house that we were building. That wasn't operational on the day. But we had an operational pump, water supply, big hoses, small hoses, watering cans and rakes and all the little bits and pieces you need basically in all corners of the place we were building. There were lots of bits and pieces there.

Malcolm

And who was there on the day?

Adam

On the day there was myself and my partner Brooke, her sister, husband and their two kids, who I think were 12 or 13 and nine years old. Relatively young. We were having a day in the pool. We had the pool built but not the house. We were going for a bit of a leisurely day.

Malcolm

And you were building a straw bale house which seems pretty remarkable in a bushfire area.

Adam

Yes. Straw bale has got a little bit of a misconception about it. It's like trying to set fire to your phone book. The dense pack of the material doesn't sustain a fire but it will have a flash fire over the top of loose straw. At that point we actually didn't have any straw exposed. We weren't up to that stage to get the truckload of straw in. But the studio was rendered and sealed, so that was our go-to spot for radiant heat protection from any fire front that got on top of us. But yes, it's a bit unnerving when you say I'm building with straw in the bush.

Malcolm

How did the day unfold? What were you doing in the morning?

Adam

When building the house you do a bit of work in the morning. We'd had that week of extreme heat building up to it so everyone was a little bit frazzled from the extreme temperatures of the four or five days prior, knowing it was going to be a hot day also. We did a little bit of work in the morning and the sister-in-law was coming up in the afternoon to have a dip in the pool. They got there a bit after

lunchtime, and we were still doing our usual bit. Then it just got a bit too hot. And we just thought “Yes, that’s it. Down tools.” So we all went to the pool and had some lunch. We were literally sitting in the pool saying “How hot is this?” when all the phones on the deck were buzzing off the top of it and walking all over the place. We’re thinking “Who’s getting out?” Nobody’s wanting to get out. It was just too hot. In the end it was like “Okay I’ll get the phone.” And then another phone rang again. Then it was like “That’s your phone. Do you want that?” And everyone was going “Something’s going on.”

That was the feel. Everyone’s looking at each other going “We’ve just got three or four or five phone calls within about a minute or two of each other.” But there’s nothing happening looking up in the sky. No siren noise in the background if there was a truck to leave. And everyone said “We think there’s a fire out in the west out near Wallan or Wandong or somewhere like that.” So we basically went on the hunt for information as best we could. We knew that it was going to be a terrible day. We were aware of that.

We had some friends who were out at Pretty Sally and they watched the fire disappear up into Mount Disappointment range. That was the tell-tale because they said “It looks like it’s unstoppable”. We thought “Okay. There is something there. There is a worry.”

Malcolm

Were you aware then as the fire was approaching? Did you have a sense of what was coming?

Adam

No idea. I say always in hindsight at that time it was good to be naive. Because what we know now is a completely different ball game as to what we knew back then. We knew things could be bad. We’d seen fires years earlier. Ash Wednesday and things like that. We knew that the potential was there. We knew our bush was dry. It got to the point where it got so dry that a lot of the understory disappeared. We could actually see into the hills and see the actual trunks of trees which were normally hidden with vegetation. That had all disappeared in the preceding years. So we knew only by some tell-tales. We could see some high-level smoke probably just after 3 o’clock, and we then realized that something’s coming along here. And knowing which way the wind was coming from knowing where the fire was reported to be we knew that we would be in the path of it. So yes, we knew something was going to come on the day.

Malcolm

And what was the first sign that you saw something approaching?

Adam

The first sign was actually the gum nuts landing on the roof probably about 3:30pm, well before the actual fire front passed us. There was ribbon bark falling in paddocks nearby which looked like sheets of plastic. The gum nuts were just so prevalent it was almost “This is too much to look out for.” You cannot look around yourself and around the buildings and in the bush nearby that much to keep on top of it. You would run yourself into a spin. So it was quite an awakening point of the day where you’re thinking “Oh this is going to be pretty serious.” Because you just could not be in every spot at every time.

Malcolm

The gum nuts and the leaves and so on. They were warm or they were smoking?

Adam

They were all blackened. There were no there was no glowing ones. There was nothing that started any spot fires as a result of that until probably I’d say about 20 minutes before the fire front came through, that we actually had spot fires on the ground. Everything before that was blackened leaves, gumnuts and bark. It was just probably from the early hours of the day that had been lifted up into the sky so high and then just getting dumped on it. But once we saw that on the ground we knew that we

were in the drift line of the smoke. The embers. "The smoke's sort of coming our way. There's got to be a fire that follows this."

Malcolm

And did you have a plan? Or did you make up a plan on the spot? "Right. You do this. You do this." How did that work?

Adam

With all the equipment around the place we had. I can't remember how many rakes. It was about five or six rakes for essentially the two of us at any one time. We had some watering cans. We didn't really have a plan as to what someone was doing, because like a lot of things, you don't know who's going to be there on the day. So we knew that we couldn't account for the kids and the dogs. We had three dogs at that point. The kids couldn't be of any great help to us. So we popped them in the studio and said you cannot leave the studio. Put the dogs in the bathroom. Filled up the shower base. Filled up the tub. Wet every towel. Threw it all on the floor. It was like a sauna when we finally got back in there. It was that hot and steamy.

So everyone then wanted to do something that was outside, trying to keep an eye on these embers. And we cleaned a little bit of the spouting out, almost to fill in time because we knew that it was going to be inevitable that something was coming to us. And we didn't know how it was going to pan out. So at that stage it was really just get a rake keep walking around. You look over the back and then come to the front and go back to the back again and have another look. And we were just yo-yoing back and forth. Other friends and family then starting to ring us as well. Like, "What's going on? Where are you doing? What are you doing?"

But we did make the decision. Once the fire truck from Strathewen went down to a spot fire south of us. That was probably about a good hour-and-a-bit before the fire front. I said to the fellows that they weren't to leave in their car because south of us where the fire truck went to, I didn't know what the road conditions were like and I didn't want to find that they were trapped and I'm thinking they've got away safely to town or something like that. So that was our thinking at that point.

Malcolm

I'm imagining if I was there in that circumstance I'd be nervous about the proximity of the bush because you've got a lot of trees that that are close to the building. And certainly some of the leaf litter and so-on on the ground. When the fire front came through what was that like? How did it how did it present itself?

Adam

Well, the fire front came through while we were at the front of our house. We had the wind change. I'm talking literally five minutes before the fire front hit. The west of the house had a spot fire start probably about 15 minutes before the fire front came through. And it was just like a little campfire. About a metre round campfire size. It was nearly calling me to go down the hill and put it out. It looked like it was a really manageable situation to put out. And I was adamant that I wasn't going past the end of how far the hose could reach. So if I could hold on to the end of the hose I could do anything in that radius.

I just said "I've got to leave. I've got to leave." Told the brother-in-law to keep an eye on that sort of thing. And then it got to the point where we could start to hear it coming over the hill northwest of us. And we were a little bit like "What is that?" That's like "We know there's a fire coming but what is that?" And that was the realization that "Hang on. This is it. What's going to happen?" And then the wind changed. And that little spot fire that was like only a metre in diameter literally wiped out everything on the west side of the house in the bush. Didn't get to the edge of the house. It joined up at the north of the house with the fire front in its almighty glory.

It was just horrendous to see. The cloud was just black to grey and as high as the trees. And the only flames we saw literally were the flames above the tops of the trees once they got oxygenated enough where they could actually flame up. It was just like an over-fuelled fire that doesn't have right combustion until it gets that oxygen. And the oxygen was that wind change that was then fed into it on the southern flank with the change. Then it just took off. It just leapt off the top of all the trees that were lining the north and the northeast side in the rough vicinity of the nearby house.

Malcolm

So if that change hadn't arrived do you think your house would have survived?

Adam

Probably no, I've got to say no. And we did a lot of things with the council at the time that we thought "Oh that's a little bit onerous on us to do that with that timber and that with this and fire rating has to be ticked off for that." And it wasn't until you saw it that you realized well even that was under-done. There were aspects of it where you think "I wouldn't have stood a chance".

Rooflines are a classic case. The ultimate failing point I believe. Because you can't access them. You can't do much with them. If they do catch fire they've already had some time to develop some fire.

We were lucky without a doubt that the wind changed and it missed the house. It missed the studio and it missed the shed which is just north of the house. But it burned around the back of it. It burnt plastic buckets literally with the grass fire. There was that much heat in the air. They just basically melted around the sand that was in them. There were a lot of things that happened that you just could not believe. You were scratching your head for months and months as to how it evolved into what it was.

Then everything started to take on a different course in the sense that we were getting localized winds coming in from the east. And they were coming back up the eastern flank of the property which we thought had already burned. But it was coming back for more. And it was outside the line of the hose. So there's my theory I'm putting right at the test now because it's coming back to the house and I've got the hose that can't reach it. I could reach it on some point if the wind was right behind the water. That would take the drift. But we ended up going with watering cans and rakes and we cleared the whole eastern flank probably about 100 metres with breaking a little bit of earth and then watering the fire with the watering cans. Just topping that up and watching. At this point everything on the western northern flank it was all gone. So there was nothing else for it to consume. It was just literally in the grass and that was it.

Malcolm

But I'm assuming there would have been still lots of embers coming off the burnt area.

Adam

Yes, there was not as much in the way of embers as it had been. Just the wind that was taking the smoke around and getting in your face. And then you'd want to stop. You'd want to say "Okay timeout. We want to stop here for a tick and have a recoup." But we found that we just kept going and going and going. And you can see where that fatigue comes in. Because it's near dark before we actually sort of have a breather where you can actually see the fire glowing in the dark at night.

Malcolm

So this is about 9 o'clock by this stage?

Adam

This is coming up to 9 o'clock now, yes. And it was at that point in time that you could see what had really burnt. Like some of the trees that were still on fire. They were still heavily lit. And you realized that "Well I can't get over to them. A watering can's not going to put that out." This is where you need

some more help. A water tanker and a fire truck came to the back fence through a neighbouring property and they tried to do as much as they could but it was like putting out the whole suburb. It wasn't going to happen. They were just doing anything that was immediate to the property and that was that was all that they could do. There was a lot more still to find and deal with I suppose.

Malcolm

You're mopping up outside but you've been outside for a fair amount of time. What sort of effects we're you getting from smoke inhalation, from the heat, from the fatigue?

Adam

We knew straight away that it was going to be tiring because of the heat. So the heat was one of the big taxing aspects of it. We were lucky that the fire front brought the cool breeze because we were on the southern flank. So we had a lot more fresh air initially afterwards. But once the night came it started to get really smoky. And you didn't realize that. And you probably didn't realize that probably for a day or so until you started to feel it in your throat a little bit and stuff like that. But I remember Brooke at the time was seven months pregnant. She was glowing like a beetroot and we had to throw her in the pool to cool her off because we didn't want to have any issues, with no way of getting anyone out. And we realized that there was no way anyone's going to get out through here. Our driveway was covered with trees straightaway. So wasn't even an option to get out. That was that was one of the main things. Everyone did push through. Everyone was drinking a lot of water. We were in for the long haul. And everyone really knuckled down and got on with it as best they could.

Malcolm

You mentioned before when you went back into the studio that it was like a sauna. How were the kids coping through all of this?

Adam

The kids did really well. The oldest one, Caleb, we gave him a camera to take some photos and preoccupy him. The younger girl, Tess, always says that Auntie Brooke swore at her because she was near the door or something like that. So that was her major thing on the day that sticks with her. But yes, they coped as probably good as you could expect kids to cope. They're probably naive to it as much as the grownups were in a sense. We knew the ramifications were a little bit more. But there's always long-term effects, especially with kids. They're very impressionable. They take a lot on board.

Malcolm

Oh, I spoke to them at the commemoration back in February and they seemed to be pretty well adjusted I would say, which is good. What have you done since then? I suppose I should say what did you learn from that experience and would you do things differently and in what ways?

Adam

There's another half hour! Everything you do... and I say it to people, my customers and staff at work as well, that you've got to stop doing your fire preparedness when you're happy with it. There's no benchmark point that you can stop at. So if you want to stop at just a fire rake at the front door, good on you. You're set for yourself. That's your undertaking. With ourselves that was really just a matter of trying to fireproof as much as we could. Knowing that we're still in the bush. Knowing that embers are going to probably be the bigger concern, more so than the fire front itself. Because that can be longer lasting and more intense over a large area.

Hose reels. Anywhere we could put a hose reel we put a hose reel all within a zone where they could almost get to the next hose reel so that if you were on one you could get to the next one and retreat your way back to the building.

Clearing. Clearing is always one of those things. Mother Nature pops up out of every little nook and cranny in the garden, so you're always doing some vegetation tidy-up and leaf raking every season.

We always put hours and hours into raking leaves up and taking them up the hill and dispersing them on that barren ground that never really recovered from the fire to give it a bit of mulch.

Then there's a lot of being aware I suppose. Knowing that you've got fuel in the pumps. Knowing that the pumps are in good working order. Knowing that you've got water in the tank and you do use some water through summer and things like that. Knowing you've got a volume that's suitable for any sort of situation.

And those maintenance things. The watering cans. Keep adding to the watering cans. Update those as they get ruined around the garden. Make sure they're on standby for summer. Containers full of water that sit on the veranda that you just walk past as if they always existed.

Malcolm

What sort of water supply have you got?

Adam

Tank water supply. The tanks are poly tanks which we were going to screen in to give them fire protection. We're now looking at just doing away with them and putting in a straight steel tank with a liner to give us some specific storage rather than using a combined fire domestic mix. That way we know we've got a static water volume on supply at all times.

We house the pump in a brick housing now. It's almost a room in a sense. It's only got the two pumps in it. Fire mesh door sealed up all the way around. Tin roof. Brick walls and minimal air vents down low with the right mesh. Go into that nth degree a little bit further. But same old story; you've got to be able to find the time to do it and the funds to do it to get to where you want to be.

Malcolm

And by the way your ember protection. You mentioned the roof spaces and all that. What sort of things have you done there?

Adam

We put the flashings behind the spout that go up under the roof so that anything that gets under the edge of the roof sheets can't go up past the fascia and into the eave space. Before we put the cappings on we put a membrane from one side of the roof to the other side and then put the capping on top so the embers couldn't deposit down the centre of the two roof sheets where they intersect. It's not a fire rated item but there's nothing else on the market that's as flexible and pliable. I thought "We've got to have a chance here. If we don't have it we're worse off". That was my belief.

And since then the sprinklers have been on the fascias as well to run the perimeter of the house and in the studio. So we've got a fair element of built-in protection. And the thing is it's whether you're there on the day to enact some of these things, like pumps and so forth, versus the passive stuff that's sitting there doing its thing all the time. We basically went to fiberglass insulation for all the eaves. There is no polyester so there is no melting. Fiberglass for all the eave spaces. If anything does get through there's nothing for it to work on.

Malcolm

And you suggested that this house might have survived if the wind change hadn't come. You are committed to staying and defending now or if there's circumstances where you might not?

Adam

I think it changes as your family changes. Now the kids are 10 and 12 and a little bit older. And as you get older yourself you start to think "what are my capabilities and do I want to do it?" If you have a week of 40-degree days and it was going to be a catastrophic day the following day you'd probably find us down on the shoreline somewhere around the bay. Whereas at the same token if it was a 35-

degree day, really hot with a terrible wind you'd probably be nearby because you'd have a better chance if something was nearby to defend if it was a local ignition.

There's a lot at play with the decision making. And then you have to look at everything else as well. Like other people if they're visiting, or animals and things like that. You've got a lot to weigh up at all times.

Malcolm

I know there are a lot of stories around about people who were visiting on Black Saturday and I suppose one of the things that struck me is that can be really helpful when you're trying to defend a place but also there are people putting themselves in the line of danger. How would you treat that issue of people visiting in future on a catastrophic day?

Adam

I think we'd tell people in the future not to do it. Even if they really wanted a dip in the pool I'd be like "No. We'll have to say no. Make it another day." But with that you're exactly right. The extra hands made all the tasks so much easier. You had that extra two sets of eyes running around looking at things. Feeding you back information. Answering phone calls. So there are definitely benefits to having other people there. But you're literally putting other people in the firing line of what could be a pretty disastrous outcome.

Malcolm

So I haven't thought about it much, before. But as I think about it, extra hands can be part of a fire plan because they can make a huge difference providing you can guarantee everyone's safety I suppose.

Adam

That's it. Yes. We really think that looking after everyone at the house was probably one of the paramount things. As much as we didn't know what was coming over the hill, we were conscious of the fact that we had people there. And when I said that they couldn't leave because I wasn't too flush with the idea of them driving out, that was probably where I started to think "Oh gee I've got ownership of this. They're looking at me now so I've got to make sure that the decisions are the best decisions I can make." And luckily for us it did pan out very well for us. We didn't lose any buildings and no loss of life.

Malcolm

Thanks Adam. Well really appreciate that. Now is there anything that you think the people watching this should know about that we haven't talked about? Is there anything you'd want to say?

Adam

I think bunkers are probably the next thing that I believe would be a good thing. Because that's your guaranteed safe spot. So if you've got relatives or friends visiting and you do find that there is a predicament and some people will react differently that's the known. Some people might panic before they even think that they're panicking. And if you've got a bunker you know that the bunker is the greatest spot to be. With a bunker I think that's probably the best thing to look forward to having a bit of relief, knowing that you've got that ultimate backup for your property and yourself.

Malcolm

Yes. In my travels I've come across quite a few people that have either installed or are installing bunkers. Not all of them intend to stay but if they're caught there then they want certainty that a bunker gives a place of last resort. So I think you're right about that. Thank you for your candid responses.

Adam

You're welcome.

Malcolm

We really appreciate your participation.

Adam

Thank you.