



# A Community That Defines

A community effort saved the towns and now they're coming together again in support of local fire brigades.

By Anne McLeod

**D**isaster brings the best out of communities. That was certainly apparent in Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine as residents rallied to support their Rural Fire Service (RFS) brigades when most of the firefighting resources were concentrated in the more densely populated areas of the mountains.

Out of a population of 120 who were in residence on the day the firestorm struck, 84 of them participated in the emergency response – either on a fire truck, doing fire officer logistic duties, or working over at the community hall helping with catering and keeping crews fed, a task that continued for days and weeks on end.

They were well prepared, with an Incident Management Team on standby. According to local RFS Captain Beth Raines, 'We've been through this before with different emergencies. It's the same formula that needs to be followed. You prepare for isolation, you prepare for no power, no phones and for more resources coming in.'

Training, that's the biggest thing, she adds, 'When you train, it becomes second nature. We train and practice as a brigade and we also ask the community to do the same thing – prepare their plan and then practice their plan.'

Praise for their resourcefulness comes from the Mayor of the Blue Mountains Mark Greenhill, 'If any community deserves an award for

resilience, it's Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine!'

Now they've come together again to support a fundraiser for the local RFS brigades. Bill and Lata Moss are among local residents who have opened their magnificent old estates to the public on this sublime autumn weekend.

Walking through their property Dennarque is like entering another world. Visitors are immediately struck by its vastness, natural beauty and serene atmosphere. They move slowly, occasionally referring to a map in their hands while orienting to what is in scope a botanical garden. As one of the visitors observes, 'It has a lovely energy. You can feel it as soon as you walk in. It's been loved, really loved.'

Dennarque is a Victorian Georgian house with double story verandah. Constructed from locally quarried stone in 1879 it has a grandness that defines this impressive estate. It would be fitting to see a horse and buggy driven around its circular driveway. Instead a golf buggy zips by steered by a woman with a bright welcoming smile. The buggy has been enlisted to enable those less mobile to tour the grounds with ease.

Between buggy tours Lata explains her and Bill's motivation, 'Opening up Dennarque is part of the process of community recovery and contributing to the local brigade.'

Lata is sitting outside the conservatory, a long glass-walled room being



Above: RFS Captain Beth Raines and President David Howell. Above Top: Visitors being served inside the conservatorium cafe. Right: Lata taking visitors on buggy tour. Opposite page: Lata is thrilled to hear about the successful fundraising.

utilized as a café, offering visitors refreshment during their expeditions. Enhancing their enjoyment of coffee, tea and cakes on the patio is a view overlooking the gardens that are continually under improvement with the help of a team of gardeners. Lata is quick to point out that she also takes an active role in the gardening and loves to get her hands dirty. With her ancestry in the foothills of the Himalayas she has a spiritual affinity for the mountains.

Recalling the events of that horrible day when the State Mine Fire threatened the area she describes her and Bill's predicament, 'We were in the city. We decided not to come up. It could have been very stressful, especially since my husband is in a wheelchair. We got constant information updates from the local RFS communication person sending emails to everyone because lots of people have weekenders in Mt Wilson.'

The fire was whipped up by a sudden wind change that saw it roar from Dargan across Bells Line of Road towards Mt Wilson. The fire came up a valley and right up to the road, the only access. Now the town was cut off. Lata and Bill felt completely helpless to protect their home of ten years. The stress is still evident in Lata's eyes, 'We couldn't do anything and the

roads were blocked off anyway...'

While both were very anxious at the beginning they reviewed their situation. With this force of nature at their doorstep they decided that all they could do was to let nature take its course. 'You have to respect nature and part of the respect process is you have to accept what's out there and then you just get on with it. You have to come to terms with a situation like that because it's very disheartening. It can set you back in a lot of ways, mentally, physically, spiritually.'

Perhaps the challenge of her husband's Muscular Dystrophy, a degenerative disease, means they are both experienced at accepting the inevitable while doing whatever they can to overcome it. Bill Moss AM is a self-made millionaire who, with Lata, established a global research foundation to discover a treatment or cure for the disease.

Having been through the traumatic experience of having their property threatened, they realized how integral the RFS are to the safety of residents and property. 'The local team in the village really came together very well. They're very organized, very well trained. Just amazing. It was marvellous the way they worked,' Lata says, her eyes glowing with admiration and gratitude.

While neither are active members of the RFS they thought, 'The way we could help is to open the garden and let them have all the proceeds ➤



Newly established Japanese garden from above. Above: Lata Moss.

from the entry fees as our donation.'

The Mt Wilson station needs an extension for a vital new communications office as well as extra space to house a vehicle. Captain Beth explains, 'Both Council and RFS have declined to fund the extension, so we've been fundraising for a number of years. Also, we've got two separate stations within our brigade area and need to fix Mt Irvine station which is in a pretty bad way. This weekend will make a significant contribution to what we've already raised.'

Beth and her firefighting brother, RFS Deputy Captain Peter Raines, were born in Mt Wilson. They grew up in Merry Garth, home of their parents Keith and Libby Raines who developed 2.5 hectares of beautiful cool climate gardens. Libby, awarded an OAM for her services to the Mt Wilson community, is a botanical artist who captures the delicacy and intricacy of nature in her watercolours.

Their children have always been aware of plants and trees and were brought up with the understanding that fire is a part of life. A photograph, Beth has that was taken when they were little shows them dressed in overalls and work boots. 'We were only tiny but were ready for a fire. It's always been that we will stay and defend. That's what we'll do.'

The State Mine Fire started near Lithgow on Wednesday 16 October. On Thursday afternoon her brigade went down to the nearby lookout but could see only smoke. What they couldn't see was that the main front of the fire had run, it had already passed them. "The run of the fire, how fast it went, took us by surprise," Beth recalls. "All the predictions we had were expecting it to be at Clarence Colliery by 4 or 5 pm but it was at Mt Irvine by that stage."

Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine, separated by eight kilometers of narrow winding road, have always had a problem with unreliable radio communication because it is so mountainous. There is a radio system through which they should have been able to talk to other units via Katoomba HQ. But they couldn't get on the radio to find out what was happening. This caused Beth great frustration with the system.

Peter Raines was out most of the afternoon at Mt Irvine but Beth was

unable to contact the mobile strike units due to inadequate mobile phone reception. When asked if what happened on the day still affects her, she replies, 'Yes, it really does. Horrific things happened, really horrible. I was out of touch with my brother for hours and I knew the fire was really bad and that he might get trapped on the road. When we found out about the two houses burning, we knew the residents were out of the mountains but Pete didn't, he thought there were people there.'

Beth and Peter are both considered heroes in this area for their bravery and leadership qualities. When asked what kind of a captain Beth is, the response from her team members is immediate: 'Fantastic!'

Why, because of her ability to stay cool and calm-headed in a crisis? Steven Dean affirms, 'It's a natural trait that she has that runs in the family. The whole family is like it. They've been trained from a very young age.'

Beth is full of praise for the local community coming together again for the RFS fundraiser. 'Everyone is very supportive. People give what they can. For some people time is the most valuable thing they can afford to give. But we have had some really big donations, very generous donations, especially this garden open day at Dennarque.'

Over the weekend, almost a thousand people take the rare opportunity to visit Dennarque, raising \$18,000. Lata is thrilled to know the weekend has been such a success. 'It's been great for us too. We never thought we'd see so many people walking through. It's been pleasant. Everyone who went through is happy.'

When asked about the resilience factors that help her manage her struggles in life and how that translates to a community level, Lata replies, 'You've got to make sure that something positive comes out of any situation like that. You've just got to stand up and support each other however you can. It's about humanity, all drawing on your resources. You band together.' Throughout peaceful Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine autumnal colours are blazing magnificently; it is hard to believe that just over six months previously bushfires were blazing through.

However, plentiful rain has encouraged abundant regrowth in the rich volcanic soil and now tree ferns proliferate in the area. ❖