

'We Will Get Through This'

Devastated by summer's bushfires, the community of South Australia's Kangaroo Island is rebuilding. In part two of our series, [Anastasia Safioleas](#) and photographer [Christina Simons](#) meet the people behind the recovery effort.

by [Anastasia Safioleas](#) *Contributing Editor*

@anast

Kangaroo Island is tinder dry. You can hear it in the crunch of the leaves beneath your feet. Long hot summers with record-high temperatures and little rain have become the norm. Locals speak of unusually hot gale-

force southerlies. Others about a lack of backburning in recent years.

Over summer this spelled disaster for the tight-knit 5000-strong community, as bushfires tore across the island just after Christmas Day, killing two people, destroying almost 100 homes and obliterating wildlife and livestock.

"The fire started coming across the paddock," recalls Simon Kelly, a sheep farmer on the South Australian island, nine weeks after the blaze. "It was like an animal racing in different directions."

Kelly is a big man, his hands weathered by a lifetime of working the land on an island his family has called home for generations. On that day, Kelly and his two grown-up sons had gone to Stokes Bay on the island's north coast to save their sheep holding. But with reports the fire was rapidly burning eastward, they'd made the life-or-death decision to return to the family farmhouse to try to save it.

"We were driving in black smoke and you just didn't know where the fire was," he remembers. "I kept thinking, *Are we doing the right thing here?* We were

passing cars going in the other direction, people waving their hands and flashing their lights at us."

Once back at the property, they pulled on CFS firefighting gear, turned on the sprinklers, and watched the red glow on the horizon. Then it began to rain embers. "When it was upon us. I said, 'Righto, time to go inside.'"

The Kelly men sat in the farmhouse watching the fire surround them, razing almost every building on the property, including the prized shearing shed.

Miraculously the farmhouse and its three occupants survived. Sometime around 3am, a lost fire truck appeared through the thick smoke, unable to find its way through the flog. Kelly volunteered to take firefighters back to base. But first, he wanted to check on the houses of his neighbours. They would save two homes. It was too late for another three.

The following morning Kelly and Madelyn, his wife of 30 years, found more than 5000 sheep – half their flock – dead. With the help of neighbours – and in some cases strangers who had simply heard they needed a hand – they began the gruesome task of putting down badly injured animals. Even the crew from the lost fire truck returned to help. The general consensus was no farmer should have to do such a job on their own. Kelly returned the favour to fellow farmers. Later that night, he rang three of his closest neighbours.

"I had been thinking about them and feeling guilty that I couldn't help them," he says. "But I was so involved



TOP: SIMON KELLY
BOTTOM: MADELYN KELLY

in my own little world... I said I'm sorry and that normally I would be the first person to come around and help."

Community kindness is on an endless loop here. Friends are now letting Kelly use their property until his own farm is ready again, bringing over what's left of his flock to graze. And since he no longer has a shearing shed of his own, they've also given over their sheep shed and all-important wool table and wool press. It's backbreaking work, and here in the shed, the shears click at a furious rate.

Some of the wool bears black singe marks. Meanwhile Simon is helping with the mammoth clean-up of fire-damaged properties.

"Our neighbours, my cousin Lisa and David, their house burned down. We went to their property with 40 guys, front-end loaders and trucks to help clean up – you don't want to see burned things all the time because it's just a reminder – the looks on their faces... It was fairly emotional," he says.

The next six months will be spent repairing fire-damaged fences, rebuilding the flock and growing crops. But what Simon is looking forward to the most is coaching the local footy team once the season is able to return, whenever that might be.

"Coaching is great fun. You can have a couple of beers and catch up with everyone. They're going to need their footy this season. They sure are," he nods, his loyal sheep dog Boof, as always, by his side.

photos by [Christina Simons](#)
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They say in a crisis, you should look for the helpers. On Kangaroo Island, you'll find these helpers cleaning up burned properties, rebuilding farm fencing and nursing injured wildlife.

A deceptively tiny dot on the map just off the South Australian coast, Kangaroo Island is almost 150km long. It teems with wildlife, a lot of it unique to the island, and is home to a thriving farming community whose output includes wool, meat, honey and grain. It's also a world-renowned tourist haven, with beautiful beaches and luxury eco-lodges. It's a special place. Since the bushfires, swathes of scorched land have left many parts of Kangaroo Island unrecognisable. Locals too bear the scars from the fire's devastating impact.

You'll find helpers at the bushfire recovery centre in Parndana. Manager Anna Osman and her team from the newly established Parndana Recovery Centre, work closely with locals affected by the fires, which includes looking after their housing needs. According to Osman, some 98 homes were lost. There is limited public housing on the island, so many have been couch-surfing, staying with family and friends. Others were able to access private rentals with the help of their insurance. Some chose to stay on their land to look after surviving stock, so a call-out was made for donations of caravans and campervans. Mining magnate Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest's Minderoo Foundation sent over shipping containers converted into homes.

"But that was late summer...and that was quite suitable then," says Osman over the phone, when we catch up in late May. "We still have some people living in old caravans or campervans – some have pushed them into sheds or have had sheds built for them – so we've given them a toilet and a shower." Meanwhile, council and the state government are working with the community on permanent housing solutions.

Helpers abound at Kangaroo Island Community Education too, the main school on the island. With students from kindergarten to Year 12 spread across three campuses, most of them experienced the bushfires first-hand and began the school year as fires still raged.

Principal Maxine McSherry says most students arrived for their first day still worried about family and their homes. Others turned up exhausted, having helped put out fires on their property.

"Coming back to school was fabulous because it helped build routine," says McSherry. "And the children appreciated getting the chance to step out of the fire-response situation and focus on something different, like their learning and meeting up with their friends."

Prior to the coronavirus lockdown, the school was tasked with holding regular health and wellbeing meetings led by McSherry with health workers, a chaplain, parent representatives and students.

The catch-ups provide insight into what a community faces following a collective trauma. During the meeting we attended back in March, a nurse from



TOP: PAUL STANTON SURVEYS HIS HOME
 BOTTOM: STANTON'S AVIARY SURVIVED

the local health clinic spoke about the recent increase in those seeking help for mental-health issues. Some were struggling with the insurmountable task of rebuilding. This prompted a discussion about additional mental-health first-aid training, as well as suicide prevention training. Another argued for an increase in childcare hours offered in Parndana. Another for marriage counselling, unions buckling from stress. Art therapy workshops were approved, as well as a fun-run for students. Principal McSherry mentioned the sheer number of people and organisations, from here and overseas, who have offered help.

But then came the coronavirus lockdown. "We were a community in recovery before we were hit with a second crisis. They were absolutely vulnerable and are still vulnerable," says McSherry, whose students have recently returned to face-to-face classes.

Osman talks about the importance of providing support to trauma survivors in the months following a crisis, and the difficulties the Kangaroo Island community has experienced amid the pandemic restrictions. "Normally our staff go to people's properties and connect with them but we haven't been able to do that in recent months. We spend an enormous amount of time on the phone reaching out to people, but another challenge for us here is we don't have excellent phone reception across the island, particularly in the west.

"We find women tend to talk about their feelings a lot



GRAEME CONNELL

'These places are good therapy'

Tools whirr noisily, sending up plumes of sawdust that hang in the air before slowly floating down again. A handful of men mill about chatting. This is Kingscote's Men's Shed, the local chapter of the national organisation that provides men with somewhere to potter and chat in the name of improving mental health. Since the bushfires the shed has been a hive of activity.

"We have a thousand of these bee stalks to make," says Graeme Connell, a retiree who helps run the group, as he holds up a post made of soft wood.

The island's green carpenter bee lost most of its habitat during the fires. Traditionally reliant on making a home in the dry flowering stalks of yacca plants and in the trunks and branches of dead banksia, extensive land clearing means entomologists have long resorted to building artificial nesting stalks for these beautiful jewel-like bees. Now that most of their habitat has gone, new stalks are desperately needed.

"They're a native species and there's hardly any left," adds retired police officer Bob Pain.

But perhaps the Men's Shed's biggest job in the fire's aftermath has been making kennels for the island's farm dogs, many of whom suffered burned paws. Building kennels with a floor means they can keep their paws out of the dirt while they recover.

"Dogs are very important to the farmers; they're part of the family," explains Connell. "We're working with a farmer who lost everything – his home, as well as two of his dogs. He was so emotional about his dogs. His other dog burned its paws, so he got a kennel. The dog has come good now."

Not only is the Men's Shed helping to rebuild the island, the shed is also somewhere locals can come to keep their hands busy while they have a chat. As Connell puts it: "These places are good therapy." ■



A MOB OF ROOS GATHER FOR A FEED AT STOKES BAY

more freely, so it's the middle-aged [male] farmers that we worry about the most," says Osman. "We see these normally very stoic, capable high-achieving farmers just feeling it right now. They've worked so hard in the past few months cleaning up, dealing with the loss of their livestock and homes, and now it's their moment to take pause and really try and get their head around the enormity of what's happened.

"It's an evolving challenge for us but we're determined to see this through. We're not going to let our community down."

We meet Paul Stanton at his property overlooking picturesque Stokes Bay, where he owns a clutch of holiday cabins overlooking the water. Normally he'd be busy tending to his wildlife sanctuary, Paul's Place, and managing cabin bookings, but since the fires "normal life" has been put on hold.

Today the cabins are filled with several local families whose homes were destroyed. It's also where he's relocated his own family, wife Katja and daughters Poppy, 16, and 10-year-old Sunny, after their own farmhouse further up the road was destroyed.

For Stanton, whose parents settled on Kangaroo Island following WWII, offering his neighbours a place to call home seemed the logical thing to do. "It's really hard times for everyone," he concedes.

It's blowing a gale across the bay's secluded beach. There are only a few hours of daylight left so it's time to feed the kangaroos – Stanton's been taking in

orphaned wildlife since he was a boy. In his distinctive high-pitched yell, he calls out into the wind, cutting open donated bags of fruit, vegetables and kangaroo pellets. Almost immediately, kangaroos and wallabies emerge from every direction and before long a mob has gathered. There must be at least 100 kangaroos. It's a blessing to see them in such numbers, given the devastation of their population.

Leaving the kangaroos to feed, we make our way to Stanton's home and the sanctuary. It's only a short drive there but first we make a brief stop in a fire-ravaged area of bush once teeming with sugar gums and she-oaks, home to the endangered glossy-black cockatoo. All that is left now are blackened stumps. Before the fires, there were estimated to be around 370 glossies on the island. Today, with up to 75 per cent of their habitat destroyed, a question mark hangs over them.

The sun is beginning its descent when we arrive at Stanton's property and begin the slow walk down its long driveway. A magnificent hand-built stone fence snakes alongside us. When the driveway finally ends, we turn into what was once the home's frontyard. Broken tiles, snapped sheets of corrugated iron, twisted metal and a lone basketball litter the dirt. Among the debris sits a children's trampoline, untouched by fire. Close by is the flat outline of an outdoor table, the heat having left a plastic puddle in its place. Beyond these sit the remains of what was once the Stanton family home. Look closely and you can trace the fire's path, so clear is its passage through the house. Obvious too is the fire's unpredictable nature.

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"I started building it 46 years ago; it was nearly finished. I had even kept some of the walls from the original cottage I grew up in. This house had so much love in it," he says.

Gone are the countless hand-me-downs and family mementos. Gone too are the animals. "That's the hardest thing," he says quietly. "That's why Katja has trouble coming back – she can picture exactly where all the animals were in the house. Sunny came out with Katja for the first time about 10 days after the fire. Coming down the main road she saw her friend Jack's house burned, her Uncle John's house burned, and then she saw her house burned... It's just too much for the kids."

We enter the house, the crunch of shattered glass and broken tiles beneath our feet. Above our heads, corrugated iron flaps loudly in the wind. The mood is sombre. Stanton shows us what's left of the rooms, including the kitchen where family dinners were made.

I point out the broken plates beneath our feet and he nods that yes, they were once their dinner plates.

Leaving behind the ruins of the house, we visit the large aviary. It somehow avoided the fires. As we sit admiring the birds a handful of kangaroos turn up, like old friends coming to visit. Paul Stanton hugs each in turn.

The coronavirus restrictions are being lifted. Cafes, restaurants, shops, campgrounds and caravan parks have re-opened. Even Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park has opened its doors again. Wounds are healing, the community re-knitting. What the island needs is for people, tourists, to return. "It's so important for our community as they recover," says Anna Osman, "to know that they are not forgotten and that everyone is cheering for them. We will get through this." ■

IF YOU OR ANYONE YOU KNOW NEEDS HELP, CALL LIFELINE 13 11 14



BLAZE AID VOLUNTEER
DECLAN LANGHAM

'Farmers can't function without fences'

Out at the Parndana Football Oval, trailers are being loaded with fence-building equipment and teams of people in their workwear wait to be despatched to nearby farms. They're from BlazeAid, the volunteer organisation that works with rural communities after disasters, rebuilding fences and structures that have been damaged or destroyed.

Retired Adelaide couple Greg and Ann Stevens coordinate BlazeAid's temporary camp from the oval. "Farmers can't function without fences – it's the biggest stumbling block to getting farms back to normal," explains Greg. "We put teams of people in the field, take down burned fences and put up new ones.

"And we can do other things if the community wants them, like build shelter sheds for sheep. We've even started

negotiating with the local school about starting a community garden. We're happy to do anything that helps the community get through this crisis."

BlazeAid was formed by Victorian farmers Kevin and Rhonda Butler following 2009's Black Saturday fires. Urgently needing to rebuild their fire-damaged fence line, they put a call-out for help to family, friends and neighbours. They helped their neighbours next – and before long BlazeAid was born.

But aside from building fences and sheds, BlazeAid have another, arguably more important, role to play. Often they provide a sympathetic ear to farmers struggling to cope. "If the farmer wants to talk, we talk," says Greg.

The enormous task of rebuilding the island has been supported by hundreds of volunteers from all over the world. "France, Italy, Israel, South Africa, United States, Canada, Columbia, New Zealand – right from the start we had enormous interest," says Greg. And while COVID-19 has forced some people to leave the island, a dedicated group of volunteers is continuing this essential service.

On a farm just outside of Parndana, a pair of volunteers are hard at work erecting a brand-new wire fence. In between unrolling wire and stretching it taut from post to post, Lachlan McCarthy and Declan Langham talk about the farmers they've met along the way. Like the one who lost almost 7000 sheep, another who watched his marriage dissolve, and the farmer who lost his home in a previous bushfire only to watch everything he had rebuilt be destroyed all over again.

McCarthy is from Kurrajong in the Blue Mountains and became a BlazeAid volunteer after spending the summer watching his own home narrowly avoid bushfires. Langham from Perth was prompted to volunteer after speaking to a couple who were affected by the bushfires in East Gippsland.

"Just listening to the stories and the mental toll it took on them; it was heartbreaking," he says. "I figured this was an opportunity [to help]. It's without a doubt the most rewarding thing I've done." ■