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How the Kinglake Ranges Community is Building Resilience in the Aftermath of Disaster

Communities in Control Conference
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Presentation by

Daryl Taylor & Lucy Filor

Kinglake Action Network & Development Organisation (KANDO)



How ya doin'?

The **FIRESTORM** keeps
on burning, searing.

exposing, revealing,
cleansing, destroying.

exciting, demoralising,
consuming, exhuming,
hope-making, heart-breaking.

going faster and faster
roaring louder and louder
feeding, seething, bequeathing

feeling better and better
.... and worse and worse
.... every single day.

uncertainty, wonder
insecurity, freedom

indiscriminate,
unrequited rage

stark incredulity
understanding denied
by the kindest of denials.

There'll be no Recovery.

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Healing will come ... has begun.

re-organisation, renewal:

The province of community.

bureaucracy and power
management and control
Engineering, technology
... and money

cannot address or redress,
manifold compounding tragedies,
... try, as they might.

How's it all goin'?

A hair-raising,
mind-altering,
body-thrashing,
emotional rollercoaster.

157 dead
1,100 houses
2,500 displaced
just in our region
animals ... birdsong ... all
firestorm climate refugees
lost to place and time

the forest ...
.... our home
shelter and filter
sequester, respirator

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refuge, repose,
respite, restoration

our history
... our culture
cherished memories
practiced rituals
precious artifacts,
sacred places
identity
coherence,
meaning

our context
... our cocoon
wondrous wet womb
crucible, chrysalis
pregnant, possibility
evolving, unfolding
enveloping, enfolding
orchestrating, synthesising
tapping, draining,
excavating, mining,
writhing, drying drying

Holocene equilibrium ...
..... gone.

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Ya sure ya okay?

Climatic canaries ... All

we are Gaia's disruption
disaster communities

quivering, quaking,
.... eerily vulnerable

quick to tears, to rage
only ever superficially
.... resilient

torn, unfurled fragments
capricious wholes

broken-hearted web,
heart-broken being

... like Aceh,
New Orleans,
L'Aquila,
Tuvalu,
Santa Barbara County

.... our inundated north,
and desiccated south

.... our parched centre
and once flowing rivers

.... our planet ablaze
our enduring legacy -

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combustion apocalypse.

Sing out if ya need a hand?

Unfortunately,
and essentially

it is now

up to us

all of us ...

each one of us

and only us

with resolute,
absolute focus

on the real work

the restorative work

the great healing work

... together

now from this place

now on this land,

now in our minds

now in our hearts

now in our deeds

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... together

Let us know if there's anything ya need.

Ever-present, effervescent
passionately engaged humanity

precarious, uncertain
we enter new realms

exhausted and exhilarated
inspired and overwhelmed

we find more love
from even deeper wells

wells of wheeling humanity

swirling and swarming
connecting and collaborating

we persevere ...

together

turning to one another
we endure another day

... together

we entertain hope
and heartedly laugh

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... together

turning another sod,
sharing another meal

we heal ...

... together

*inspired by Meg Wheatley
and Robert Theobald,
with thanks to Laura Brearley*

My name's Daryl and I'm from Kinglake. I'm going to talk a little bit about some of my friends and colleagues who have made a really big difference over the last four months.

I want to celebrate some of my friends and colleagues. They've done an extraordinary job in the aftermath of the fires. I am so proud and humbled by how many people, people I had never seen before, came out from under the trees, stepped up or stepped into places to do extraordinary work over the last four months, particularly in the first two months when there weren't a lot of other people around. The area was cut off, there was army everywhere, there were lots of construction people. The place was a mess.

So I want to celebrate these people particularly. Thomas and Tessa Lebreri, at the foot of our mountain, set up acres and acres of material aid. As only entrepreneurs can do, Thomas and Tessa contacted almost everyone they knew in Melbourne and linked up and shipped up

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goods. They got them through faster than any of the community service agencies could. They were absolutely incredible and made sure, particularly in the first four or five days when there was no-one getting up onto the mountain, that we had necessary food, clothing, blankets etc.

Cameron Caine is the president of our football club and he's also a local policeman. Cameron is off work at the moment. He's had an incredibly harrowing time. He had to identify a lot of the bodies in our area. But he also played an incredible leadership role in having the first game of football happen at the start of the season. It was attended by over 2500 people and we had our Prime Minister and our Premier and many other dignitaries there on the day. It was an extraordinary community event.

Leesa Burton is, I think, a second or a third generation family member up at Kinglake West, Pheasant Creek. She saw an immediate need to look after animals. So Leesa stepped into that position. She got onto the CB radio, called trucks all around Australia and brought hay, seed and food for the animals. Lisa coordinated animal care for the first probably 12 weeks after the fire, and she was absolutely incredible at managing that process.

Bev and David Johns, they managed the Kinglake West Hub. Kinglake is a difficult community to understand when you're from Melbourne because it's a linear community along a ridge. So we had a community hub set up at Kinglake. But 15 kilometres away there are 2000 people at Kinglake West/Pheasant Creek. They also needed care. So Bev and David ran the community hub from the local Uniting Church.

Colin French and Wally Spezza have stuck to a process that they began in about the fourth week after the fires. They realised that we were going to need representation to talk to state

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and federal government people and also to non-government organisations and corporations wanting to support our community.

So Colin and Wally initiated a democratic process. They got endorsement from the Australian Electoral Commission and we held an election within eight weeks of the fires to elect 10 representatives who would then become Kinglake Ranges Representative Group and be the conduit for communication in amongst a lot of chaos.

Colin speaks about there being four tragedies of the bushfire. The first one obviously was loss of life. The second one loss of infrastructure. The third one for Colin was loss of communication – that was our biggest difficulty after the fire, getting communication going again. The main reason we set up the Kinglake Ranges Representative Group was to ensure there were regular, reliable means or conduits for communication.

The fourth tragedy I'll talk about a little later was community development and our community capacity.

Peter and Jodie Thorneycroft have been incredible keepers and carers of mental health. Peter was featured in the aftermath of the fire. He was the fellow on the roof in his shorts and thongs of the pub who literally saved the pub and saved 25 people's lives on that day. One hundred days later Peter was featured on the front page of the *Herald Sun* when they were following up with the heroes of the firestorm. Peter was candidly honest about how he was travelling and how difficult he found his newfound notoriety. And also how impotent he felt because he wasn't able to contribute to the physical rebuilding of his community in the way

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that he thought he might. His feature in the *Herald Sun* drew many, many men out in the Kinglake Ranges to talk about the difficulties they were also facing.

Jodie, his wife, has been an entrepreneur. She set up Kinglake Ranges Community Dining. We've got our two chefs here today in the front row. This has been a voluntary kitchen. The chefs are voluntary and all of the community volunteers contribute. It runs five days a week. On a Wednesday night, which is roast night, 200 people come to Kinglake Ranges Community Dining.

This building was vacant last year and was vacant for three years in our main street. That's a real blot when there are so few buildings in your main street to have one closed. So to be able to reclaim this space in the aftermath of the fire has been a tremendous victory for us.

Jodie has also negotiated with the North Eastern Division and Metro Division of GPs to get GPs up to our area. They've done an extraordinary job too. We've had to go beyond our boundaries to the metropolitan area.

Jodie is organising the women's weekend away which my partner is going to. There will be over 300 women going down to Lorne for three days.

Adele McErlain is a third generation resident from Pheasant Creek. Pheasant Creek is a settlement. There are 2000 people there. It's mainly what's called rural living. I'm not a great advocate of rural living. They're 5-acre blocks. That provides a cheap way to subdivide farmland but it leaves you with no physical infrastructure for a township.

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Adele has been working extremely hard to develop a report to turn Pheasant Creek/Kinglake West into a town, to develop an urban design framework, to build community infrastructure that's centralised, that enables people to have civic engagement and build critical mass for their community economy. Adele's a visionary, an absolutely incredible woman.

John Burgess and Pete Williams are from Flowerdale and they helped create the Flowerdale Now blog on the third day after the fires. This brought international community attention to our area and it was an extraordinary initiative.

Cris Ruhr started up the men's shed. He got a block of land in the main street for free. He's well on the way to establishing a men's shed in Kinglake, which will be a major point, I think, where we organise our infrastructure rebuilding because it will be a hive of activity for local tradesmen.

Chi Kwang is our local Buddhist nun. We did a Resilient Futures Alliance mapping process, an education process with the Resilient Futures Alliance, in March. One of the objectives of the training was to relentlessly map community conditions. When the community conditions have changed as much as they have in Kinglake, this has been an incredibly valuable thing to do. The Reverend Chi Kwang has really stuck to her guns, talking and talking and talking and mapping and mapping and mapping. We now have a better understanding of our town thanks to her.

Ali Griffin is an artist from Steels Creek. She initiated an exhibition at her Three Stories Gallery in Healesville. It was absolutely extraordinary. It was called *Resurrected Memories* and it included burnt found objects from fire-affected properties – incredibly evocative and powerful.

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The next section of my talk is about consternation. That's VBRA's map of how to do recovery. That's the Shire's initial go at how to do recovery. Now, this is Flowerdale's attempt at how to do recovery. They have thrown everything at this model and they haven't been able to fault it yet.

I have found the Flowerdale people absolutely inspirational. I think it's the inspiration of scale. Flowerdale is a relatively small community.

Kinglake has got 4000 people stretched across the best part of 50 kilometres so it's difficult for us. We're a community that spins out rather than comes into a centre. So we all go off the mountain in different directions down different roads every day. We're really peri-urban people living in a sleeper suburb who drive off in three different points off the mountain. So it's really difficult in Kinglake to get a centre of community. There isn't one. There's no real heart.

Flowerdale, being a smaller community but still no less linear, but with the smaller population, have been able to get organised a lot better. And one of the things that the Flowerdale people have said from the outset is that there is no hierarchy and there is no politics in Flowerdale. That's been to their absolute advantage. They've gone right ahead in terms of being able to effectively respond to the bushfire emergency.

Their model works something like this. It's an inverted pyramid. Whenever we look at the state and local government models, communities are always at the bottom and the government's always at the top. So they were actually looking over the computer one day and

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they saw it and said, “It looks better upside down.” So they flipped it up the other way. That was the critical insight, that was the critical moment.

So what they do is everything comes through the community. And then they have almost in the working groups of the community leaders, the people who are presidents or secretaries, treasurers etc. of community groups.

Then they have work engines. The work engines are just basically a place to process the information, to get the data behind whatever it is that they’re aspiring to in terms of recovery, and to get a fully fledged proposition. The proposition then comes to their representative committee. They’ve followed our lead at Kinglake and had an election a couple of weeks ago. They’ve elected six people. We’ve elected 10. I think Marysville will elect about 10 as well.

Then they’ve picked out facilitators, specific people who are very, very good at negotiating with power. So that’s how all of their projects flowed. Nothing happens around it. There’s no bypass.

These are VBRA’s models for their template for the community renewal plan. We think this is fantastic. Everything that we would want to do could fit into this.

This is just my go at trying to make sense of it. In the community development area we’ve put planning, there is no strategic planning, there’s no urban design frameworks across the Kinglake Ranges area. It’s an ad hoc developed area. One of our key planks is to slow down and get some basic planning foundations in place before we do any rebuilding or we will just

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rebuild ad hoc and no-one in Kinglake wants that. We want a much more coordinated, much better designed community, not something that's just unfolded and unravelled over time.

We've also looked at governance. Governance is going to be a critical factor for us. We currently sit under every boundary under the sun. We cannot do anything in a peri-urban area without having to talk to multiple agencies and multiple government departments, multiple service providers, multiple infrastructure agencies.

I got exhausted trying to find out how to get community health services for our area. We had to go and talk to Healesville, Plenty Ranges, Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Plenty Valley, Yea, Seymour and Mitchell community health centres. It took us a year to meet with the CEOs and by the time we got around them all two of them had resigned and we had to start again.

They all get some funding to provide services in Kinglake. But we've found that outreach services don't reach services in peri-urban areas. So we want to ultimately govern our own community health service and have it as an attractor that builds that critical mass within the centre of the community, that helps us spin out, re-localise rather than fragment outwards.

Culture and learning were also important. Over the last five years the tracking data shows that our children go to 25 different secondary schools from three primary schools. That fragments not only the kids, it also fragments the adults, the parents who follow them to the schools. It has an impact on our sporting and arts community as well as kids are not available. It's a tough call being a super-commuter at the age of 11. Some of the kids spend an hour and a half on the bus going to school, an hour and a half on the bus coming home. So obviously a high school and post-primary education is a priority for us in the aftermath of the fires.

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We also want to engage a systems view. This [refers to image] is looking to Kinglake from Melbourne. So that's what we must look like from the offices I would imagine. We think that there's a counter view, which is looking to Melbourne from Kinglake [refers to image]. These are really important world views because bureaucrats and big business will look at us with the first view. We definitely look at Melbourne with the second view.

The two views need to come together in a successful recovery, rebuilding, whatever you call it. I'm with Lucy – I don't think we're going to recover; I think we need to be reorganised and renewed.

In my vision of community rebuilding, I'm drawing on Cheryl Walter's influential article in Meredith Minkler's book *Community Organising and Community Building for Health*. It's about thinking about community not as a place, but as a way of being.

The most frustrating thing for us and the reason we've been slow to recover, I think, at one level is local politics, power. So long have we been downtrodden in our area that people turn on each other rather than turn to each other. The structures that we've got don't help that process. We need really good facilitatory, respectful, enabling institutions to partner with community. The idea has to be that we all operate as community, not as government and bureaucracy, corporation, non-government organisation and community.

The community groups that have formed to have the discussion with government have absolutely no resources at the moment. We've been promised resources from the State Government to support us, but at the moment we're all working as volunteers and we're absolutely exhausted. It is really, really hard work. It is really, really hard work to keep up with

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local government, VBRA and State Government agencies that have enormous resources behind them when you've also got to look after your block, look after your family, look after your friends.

We want our rebuilding process to reflect the five dimensions as described by Cheryl Walter. It's got to include community development, the power with. It's got to include good, integrated community planning, not top down power over planning but participatory planning that also values local knowledge.

It's got to include community action, the power to actually do something. The men in our community particularly want to be involved in the recovery and have found it very, very difficult to engage. It's got to have community consciousness, something about depth of community, something about really thinking what does community mean and what is its place. That's the power of community.

And also looking at our context, as Lucy described in the poem, looking at our broader context, how do we work within the limits? How do we work within constraints? How do we work within unfolding crises? How do we plan to adapt and ameliorate some of the factors that are causing those crises?

I'm incredibly proud of the work of Marysville, Kinglake Ranges and Flowerdale. We're going to continue to work together to support one another as we recover, redesign, re-emerge from the crisis. We look forward to working with VBRA, we look forward to working with our local government authority and the people of Victoria. But we do need support. We're finding it incredibly difficult.

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We've been a super-commuter community for a long time as it is. People don't have the civic time or space to engage in community groups when they're commuting an hour or an hour and a half each way to work, and working up to 10 hours a day. We've found families under enormous pressure, neighbourhoods under enormous pressure and particularly community organisations under enormous pressure. We had 47 community groups before the fires. I would think that's probably down to about half as a consequence of death or people who are now outside the area. We lost one in 25 people on February 7.

So the sort of support we need for community building is less about material welfare, it's more about genuine support for community organisations, so that we can bring back things like our pony club, so that we can bring back things like community arts for kids after school, so that we can make sure our sporting clubs can put teams out on the court. Those kinds of things are vitally important at the moment.

Probably more than anything over the next couple of months we'll need some governance support, we'll need admin. support. We'll need people to kind of step up and step into that space. I'm not sure where they're going to come from.

Thank you.

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