

## **Richmond Rotary OXYgens’ BREATHING LIFE INTO UPPER PLENTY**

It’s not often that Richmond Rotarian Krissy O’Reilly and her partner, Dave Jackson, get up at 6am on a Saturday. But on Saturday, 16<sup>th</sup> May, they were up and away by 7am - on the road towards the Black Saturday bushfire areas of Upper Plenty to meet up with the Richmond Rotary OXYGENS’. (‘Our X Y GENERations’)

20 young OXYGENS’ volunteered to assist Blaze-Aid over that weekend as part of the Rotary Black Saturday Bushfire Relief Program. Hopefully this is the first of many such initiatives that will promote hands-on interest in Rotary projects.

Blaze-Aid (<http://www.blazeaid.com/>) was born following the horrific fires of Black Saturday. Kevin Butler, a local East Kilmore farmer, had his fence lines reduced to ashes by the fires and he sought urgent assistance to rebuild them. With the help of a fellow local, Cheryl Gray, Blaze-Aid was born. Now within just a few months, post-fires, several hundred kilometres of fencing has been resurrected for farmers in need. This task has been achieved with the volunteer assistance of many wonderful groups, as well as local volunteers who assist with food, equipment, billeting, transport and hands on assistance in fire zones.

### **This is Krissy ‘s report of the OXYGENS’ hands-on experience –**

“Dave and I arrived in Upper Plenty by 8:15am, and met up with other young volunteers who had driven from Melbourne for the day to help Blaze-Aid with clearing burnt fences and fallen trees and re-fencing the boundaries. There were members from the RC North Balwyn and the RC Port Lincoln, along with 20 young Richmond Rotary OXYGENS, rounded up by Nick Cowling. (Nick is the eldest son of President Nominee Josephine Cowling and Michael Cowling.)

At first we stumbled into a womens’ weekend sewing retreat, before being politely directed to the lunch co-ordinator of the Blaze-Aid lunch who told us ‘that everyone had already headed out for the day’!

Making our way to the property we were to assist on, we tracked down some of the volunteers to get directions on the work to be done. A team of 6 of us, including Phil Mylecharane, a fellow Richmond Rotarian, drove up to the top of the hill on the boundary of the property, and then gradually made our way down on foot. Along the way, under direction, we used a hammer, bolt-cutters and teamwork to roll up old and burnt fencing wire into bundles to be recycled. We had to remove any pieces of fence post attached to the wire and throw the bundles of wire onto the side of the nearby track. These were later collected by another group of volunteers with a ute. Several kilometres of burnt fencing were cleared this way.

That walk down the hill coiling wire, gave all of us plenty of time to take in an expansive and sobering view of the surrounding hills and valleys. At one point the wind picked up and we reflected on just how ferocious the weather conditions in Upper Plenty must have been on Black Saturday. The entire area had been burnt out, but now there were splashes of green with shoots of new life everywhere. The bird life doesn’t seem to have returned yet, but we saw quite a few

kangaroos, so things are starting to improve.

Before we knew it lunch was brought down to us by the wonderful Blaze-Aid team. The co-ordinators set up a table crowded with freshly made sandwiches of various delicious fillings and breads. This was accompanied by lots of crisp and tasty fruit, followed by snowballs. What a lunch!

In the afternoon, we used a ute to deliver rolls of fencing wire where it was needed. We worked in teams to build stays, put in star pickets, attach the rolls of wire and in some cases, tie off completed fencing. We made good progress! It was great to see the improvement. When we arrived many of the burnt fences had not been cleared and neither had the fallen trees, by the end of that Saturday, several kilometres of fencing was near-completion and awaiting tensioning and tying-off. Plus, the property now had a definitive boundary. It was so satisfying to know that something significant had been achieved for our voluntary efforts.

After leaving the property at the end of day we all went to 'Kev's woolshed' where Peter Cleary of the North Balwyn Rotary Club said he'd meet us (after a couple of quick beers at the pub). The property would have had approximately 50 caravans and a wool shed full of people on site. This was where Blaze-Aid had been formed. 'Kev', (Kevin Butler) who owned the woolshed, had opened his property and provided meals for survivors and volunteers since day 2 following the fires! The theory was 'that if they can feed the volunteers, then they'll come back'! Everything was self-funded from donations, with no government support. It was quite inspiring! The Blaze-Aid volunteers put on a great meal for us, and we enjoyed a few beers at a dollar a pop (they were the only items that hadn't been donated). It's such a massive sacrifice to open their homes and lives as they have done.

We met Cheryl Gray who'd been co-ordinating the Blaze-Aid effort. She seemed to appreciate us more than we did her. Cheryl has worked 7 days a week from 8am until the end of day since day 2! She even quit her job to properly serve her community! We had only been there for one day. We simply couldn't imagine living it everyday! She encouraged us to 'spread the word' because, as she said, 'If everyone from Melbourne came up for just one day, there wouldn't be much to do at all'.

Many of the volunteers we spoke to that Saturday felt encouraged and keen to continue the following day - some planned to return to volunteer the next weekend and beyond. New friends were made and existing friendships cemented through teamwork and a sense of true accomplishment. An uplifting venture! “





Prepared by our Publicity Officer, Rotarian Annie Wysham