



## Seeds of recovery, Kinglake

### Extract from *Kinglake-350* by Adrian Hyland

The seeds of the recovery were there all along. They'd been planted by various members of the community, whether they realised it or not, almost as soon as the roar died down. It was just that the results, like mountain ash germinants, took time to emerge from the ashes. Outsiders came in to help, and they were important, but the real driving force to the community's recovery could only come from within. And it did.

Out of a hundred possible examples, here are a handful.

The Strathewen school burned down on the Saturday night. The principal, Jane Hayward, and her colleagues didn't know whether their own houses were still standing but they spent the Sunday organising a new school for the shell-shocked kids, half of whom had lost their homes, all of whom had lost friends. The new school opened a couple of days later in nearby Wattle Glen, and young survivors scattered all over the area were able to link up with their mates and help each other through the recovery.

A group of local women— Jemima Richards, Kate Riddell and Arwyn Taylor—set up a relief centre that morphed into an organisation called Firefoxes and went on to provide an astonishing range of support activities for families in the district.

A woman named Lesley Bebbington, who had lost her own home to the fires, recognised that the young people of the region were experiencing a trauma of their own. She organised a youth group, supported with her own funds, that soon had a hundred teenagers turning up at the centre.

Barely a week after the fires, with the bush still smouldering all round him, Cameron Caine addressed a meeting of the Football and Netball Club and asked whether they could form a team. The response was an overwhelming, 'Bloody oath we can!' The entire district would follow the fortunes of the Lakers that season. Sport was one of the poles around which recovery revolved.

Art was the other. A manna gum near the bridge at Strathewen came to be known as the Poetry Tree. That blackened stump was a lightning rod for the storm of emotions that swept through the region: songs of love, death and memory were plastered all over its scorched bark. A community choir called the Phoenix Singers rose out of the ashes. Blacksmiths forged leaves for a steel memorial tree; they received contributions from all around the world. Local musicians sang alongside artists such as Paul Kelly, Lee Kernaghan – even retired-rocker-turned-politician Peter Garrett – at concerts throughout the district. There was barely a painter, poet or songwriter in the ranges whose work was not shot through with bursts of crimson.

The twin poles – art and sport – came together one blustery afternoon in September when local muso Ross Buchanan, whose children Macca and Neeve died, got up at the local football grand final and joined Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in a performance of the national anthem. The emotional resonance was extraordinary. There is a tribe in New Guinea, the Kaluli, who hold that music is a

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form of communication with the dead; there were those on the oval that afternoon who felt, fleetingly, the same thing.

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