



## Defending the home - Sue Exell, Haven

### Extract of witness statement to the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission

**Narrator:** Sue and her husband Gary, a plumber, live on a 4.7acre property on the Henty Highway just out of Horsham.

6. Gary and I did not have a fire plan before 7 February 2009. I never seriously believed that a bushfire would come to Haven and I had never experienced one before during all the years I had lived there. Although I was aware of the risk with the tea trees behind our property.

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9. In hindsight, I have realised that the drought has changed Haven and I was a bit blasé about it. I never really realised that our risk of being affected by a bushfire had increased until after we had the fire. I think that I just took it for granted that because we had never had a major fire before, we would never have one. Black Saturday was a real kick in the pants for the whole Haven community and we have a lot of work to do to make sure that the place is safer in the future.

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24. The fire front came from the north-west and it struck our property at the back fence adjacent to the shed and the shipping containers. Gary was on the roof of the house at that stage trying to keep the leaf litter in our gutters wet. I remember hearing him shout out that the fire had arrived and to ring the neighbour. The property behind our place (which burnt immediately before the fire front reached us) is an open paddock which normally has horses on it, so the grass was short. The flames that we could see were not very big. The flames jumped the irrigation channels which run along our back fence. They seemed to split the fire front in half and direct it around the shed and around our house. I think the shed and shipping containers provided a buffer for our house. So the fiercest part of the fire front didn't actually directly hit our home but went around it in both directions.

25. Neville Pope's property next door had a lot of tea trees on it and when the fire reached them it really took off and the flames became much larger. ... I feel sure that Neville's house would have been destroyed but a water-drop helicopter flew over at the critical moment and dumped water on the house. Other neighbours were not so lucky and three houses on the south side of Neville's property from our house were destroyed.

26. Back at our place, although the fire front had gone around our house, there were spot fires everywhere on our property. We worked for three or four hours to try and put them out. We have some gum trees near the bird cages and everyone worked hard to keep them wet and stop them from catching fire. Despite that, it must have become too hot inside the cages for the birds because I discovered later that most of them died. Gary was also running behind the shed with a hose to protect the shed. I was part of a group working on bucketing and hosing spot fires which were burning in our garden beds where we had wooden sleepers, mulch and bark chips. We repeatedly put these fires out and then they would reignite after a few minutes. Eventually we decided that water was not doing the job on its own and we raked the mulch and bark apart so this would stop



happening. We had the same problem with a large wood pile and we had to pull that apart too. To do that, we needed an excavator. We own an excavator, which at the time was at the Haven Primary School preparing for re-building. I drove Jeff across the road about 300 metres to get it. ... Most of our buckets were plastic. At about 2.30pm, and while we were working on bucketing spot fires, one of the CFA volunteers who was helping us picked up a bucket which had softened in the heat but still looked normal. His hand was burnt with hot melted plastic when he picked up the bucket and he later required hospital treatment. Gary tried to get to Horsham to get some petrol for our generator but realised that he would not be allowed back in through the roadblock so he just came back home again.

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31. I realised later that Gary and I did lots of things wrong while we were fighting the fire. These include:

- a. using plastic buckets – we should have used metal buckets;
- b. not testing the length of the hoses on our fire pump;
- c. leaving a window open in the house while the fires were burning;
- d. storing our other hoses on plumbers' utes instead of making them easily available around the house;
- e. leaving the house so soon after we had finished fighting the fire;
- f. not checking the radio for emergency information;
- g. wearing inappropriate clothing and not preparing any face masks or something else to help us breathe through the smoke;
- h. not catching the cat and throwing him inside to keep him safe (he escaped the property and I thought he would die but he returned home with burnt paws); and
- i. forgetting to remove an old door mat at the shed, which nearly caused the shed to burn down.

33. During the following weeks, I have spent many hours helping to organise the recovery effort in Haven as well as a series of community events. One of the things I helped organise was a large community information meeting at the Haven Community Hall. About 250 people came to the meeting and my role was to help organise all the background planning, food, assisting with audio equipment and the seating for the meeting. This was only one of the numerous meetings which I helped to organise.

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