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## Memorials help communities heal



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In September 2012 the community of Strathewen dedicated its memorial to the Black Saturday bushfires that occurred four years ago – 7 February 2009. The fire killed 27 people of the small community of around 200. But the memorial is not just to those who had lost their lives, but also to the loss of animals, homes and the surrounding landscape, as well as its impact on the close-knit community.



The Strathewen bushfire memorial – an elegant design of sandstone and slate circles, radiating out as ripples from four giant tear drops – is etched with the stories of that day and its aftermath. Strathewen resident Steve Pascoe, whose family lost all they owned in the fires, says the community has come to treasure the memorial as a place where it can rest its grief. “It provides a place of comfort and remembrance for everyone who was affected by the fires. But it also tells a story that future generations will be able to learn something about our history as a community.”

Memorials to the 2009 bushfires have been built across the state and taken many different



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forms – from Strathewen’s poetry-etched sandstone ripples, to the bronze bas-relief in Gippsland’s Mirboo North featuring the koala known as Sam receiving a drink of water from a volunteer firefighter, to the sculptural memorial tree by artist Anton Hasell in Daylesford Community Park.

Many other communities, such as the Mitchell, Whittlesea and Murrindindi Shires, are still in the process of developing their memorials.

These memorials have become an important way for Victorian communities affected by the bushfires to not only express their grief and loss, but also their sense of strength as a community. Psychologist Rob Gordon, who has worked for many years with communities affected by disaster, says that memorials are important because they provide a physical and symbolic place in which traumatised communities can be reunited. Even working together on a memorial can be an important part of the healing process.

As Gordon says, “memories, emotions and the relationship to what has happened are reviewed, discussed and placed into a new perspective”. Once the memorial has been created, he says, “it will slowly grow in importance and meaning to those it represents as years pass”.

Bec Buchanan, who lost two children and her brother in the Kinglake fires, is part of the Murrindindi Bushfire Memorial Working Group. Murrindindi Shire, which includes Kinglake, Narbethong and Marysville, lost 119 people in the fires. Determined that the memorials would be more than “just a plaque with names on it”, in 2010 Bec travelled for three months through Europe and the US visiting memorials to disasters to uncover what worked and what didn’t. The best memorials were those that told the story of what communities went through, both during and after the disaster, she says. They were also the ones that were beautifully designed, well-maintained and made of long-lasting quality materials. “There is nothing sadder than a neglected memorial that is falling apart.”

The community has been in no hurry to build their memorials, but is planning to finalise the design this year. “It’s really important that is done right,” Bec says. “We want to build something here that is going to acknowledge the losses of the whole community – the people, the animals and the environment – for many years to come.”

Jan Nowell, principal designer at Arterial Design, the design company that designed the Strathewen Memorial and is currently consulting with the Murrindindi Shire to develop the design brief for its memorials, says the challenge is to engage communities to have a sense

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of ownership of the memorials. “It’s so important that people in the community feel they get their story told. What we aim for is a design that allows visitors to share in a journey, where stories and experiences can quietly unfold, that allow personal tributes as well as a larger-scale memorialisation, and where materials and the design will resonate with the local environment and speak to the senses.”

Karin Derkley



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