



# Rising from the ashes

In the New Year's Day fires that scorched NSW, the small town of Junee rated just a sentence or two in city papers. But Junee's story is worth telling, as **MELISSA SWEET** discovered when she visited the town in the aftermath of the fire. Told through the eyes of Junee's people, it is an eloquent tale of crisis, loss and kindness – and the strength of a country town's spirit.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILL BARTON AND MITCHELL WARD



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The signs were ominous, even as party-goers celebrated the countdown to a new year. When the first dawn of 2006 broke over the town of Junee, in south-western NSW, it brought the perfect conditions for a disaster.

The scorching heat and dry winds were too much for many locals, especially those suffering the effects of the night before. They pulled down their blinds, turned up the air conditioning and kept an ear tuned to the news. Just in case.

Sometime around 1pm, a glowing cigarette butt flew from a vehicle travelling on a highway several kilometres west of town. It landed in long dry grass not far from a bush cafe known as the Jail Brake Inn. Hot winds fanned a blaze that would soon roar across thousands of hectares, destroying homes and livelihoods and threatening an entire town.

John and Judy Gentle, whose farm lay between the highway and town, were on high alert even before the phone rang. They never took holidays in summer in case of fire and their place was carefully maintained to minimise any threat.

They'd built their home 21 years ago and worked their 100 acres intensively, breeding stud cattle.

Their thriving garden, an oasis amid the dusty brown paddocks, contained a particularly prized specimen – a magnolia given to Judy 23 years earlier by Dr John Potts, a local legend for his idiosyncratic brand of humour and longstanding dedication to the community. He was Judy's doctor for 42 years and delivered three of their four sons. The tree had assumed an extra sentimental value since his death in 2005.

After John left to fight the fire, Judy lost all track of time. She was on autopilot as she moved cattle and did what else needed to be done. As huge dark clouds rolled across the paddocks towards the house, she could not believe what was happening.

Judy, 59, had seen fires before, but never anything like this. She retreated indoors.

Meanwhile, John's foot was flat to the floor as he drove through dry stubble paddocks, in a desperate effort to beat the fire back to his place. He was travelling fast but the fire was faster. The Bureau of Meteorology would record a maximum of 44.6°C at nearby Wagga Wagga that afternoon with winds gusting up to 27 knots or about 50 km/hour, but the conditions were even more extreme at the fire front.

By the time John reached home, spot fires were breaking out all around the house, and the shipping container – where they stored farm supplies, thinking they would be safe from fire – was burning. Among the many treasures it held was a train set that he had played with as a boy, more than 50 years before.

When it came time to leave, Judy was in the grips of a numbness that would linger for days. She didn't even think about taking photographs or other valuables; she just grabbed her handbag and the dog, and left. On the way out, she saw the first of their dead cows. That hit hard.

Locals know the straight stretch of road between where the fire started and Junee as the "Mad Mile" as it is well marked by the burnouts of young hooligans. By the time the Gentles had evacuated, fire fighters knew they'd lost the battle to stop the fire's race along the Mad Mile into town. With all hope lost of containing the blaze, their focus turned to property protection.

One residence had already been lost when 62-year-old Margaret Wright carefully locked the back door to her house, on the crest of a hill on Junee's western fringes. As Margaret



left, with a basket of freshly washed clothes, her handbag and the dog, it didn't cross her mind that her home of 38 years might burn.

Minutes later, her home was being eaten alive. Margaret couldn't bear to watch, but her husband Doug couldn't tear his eyes away. Their beloved parrots, the galah Margaret had reared from hand, her mother's jewellery, the memories attached to a lifetime's accumulation – all were gone. Only a container of plastic clothes pegs would survive undamaged.

Doug, 63, would spend much of the next month in hospital, lost in a storm of bitterness and anger that his emphysema and frailty had left him unable to defend his home.

Gusting winds and cuts to power and phone lines hampered the emergency response. Many fire fighters also cursed the curious onlookers who blocked roads and got in their way. As fire encircled Junee and raced through a parkland towards the town's heart, wild rumours spread. Many people heard that a local landmark – the magnificent Monte Cristo homestead built in 1884 by one of the area's early settlers – had been lost.

Reg and Olive Ryan had poured more than 40 years of labour and love into restoring the grand old house, which was a derelict shell when they bought it for £1000 in 1963.

**As Margaret left, with a basket of freshly washed clothes, her handbag and the dog, it didn't cross her mind that her home of 38 years might burn.**



## A fire's cost

- 685 fire fighters, 117 tankers, three fixed-wing planes and five helicopters fought the blaze.
- It destroyed four occupied houses and seven vacant houses; four shearing sheds, four hay sheds and 20 other sheds; and 1500km of fencing.
- It killed 20,000 sheep, 100 cattle, four alpacas and two horses
- It burnt 24,286 hectares.

(Sources: NSW Rural Fire Service, NSW Department of Community Services, NSW Department of Primary Industries, Junee Shire Council)



Fire fighter Stuart Dietrich (right) and his team were called to up to 40 homes that day. The fire passed over their fire truck a number of times.



Their home was also a private museum that had attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors, many intrigued by its reputation as a haunted house.

The smoke was so thick and dark that Reg, 72, didn't see the flames until they were only metres from the wooden shed housing his huge collection of drays and buggies. As friends and family rallied with buckets and hoses, Reg was sure his life's work would be lost. He and Olive had been unable to afford insurance for the homestead with its priceless antique collection.

As the fire roared closer, Olive, 75, sat inside with three grandchildren and prepared for the worst. At about that time, a helicopter pilot saw where his load was needed. He dropped it right on target, taking the sting out of the blaze and drenching some fire fighters in the process. Monte Cristo was saved with not a minute to spare.

On another hilltop across town, feverish rescue efforts were also underway in another historic building. The Junee Hospital, with 28 aged care and 10 acute care beds, is equipped to provide only basic emergency care, and serious cases are usually transferred to Wagga.

Gail Lynch, the health service manager, had not realised the extent of the disaster when she arrived at the hospital shortly after 3pm. She had decided to drop in after being told a nurse

would be unable to make her afternoon shift because of a fire.

But the chaotic scenes that greeted her soon brought home the enormity of the challenges ahead. The hospital was without power and had no emergency generator. Gail found doctors working on burns victim John Heffernan in a light-filled corridor because it was so dark in the accident and emergency room (see story page 15).

As Gail oversaw efforts to find a generator, a triage was set up in the board room to deal with the dozens of people who began to present with eye injuries, smoke inhalation, minor burns and asthma.

One fire fighter walked through the front door and collapsed from dehydration. A woman required stitches for a dog bite acquired when helping neighbours save their terrified dogs. A number of elderly patients, including Doug Wright, were admitted needing oxygen.

Also presenting were nurses, hospitality, maintenance and other hospital staff. They came without being asked and set to work without needing direction. Some had left homes that were under threat. Later, many would refuse to accept payment for their work and Gail would have to beg them even to fill in time sheets.

(Above, left to right) Reg and Olive Ryan feared all was lost, until a last-minute water drop from a helicopter saved their landmark house Monte Cristo; Margaret Wright could not bear to watch as fire engulfed her home; a table with all that was recovered from Margaret and Doug Wright's home; Judy Gentle was gripped by a numbness that lasted for days.

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Health service manager Gail Lynch (above, left) arrived at Junee Hospital to find it without power and doctors working in light-filled corridors. Junee GP Dr Saad Saad (above, right) lost contact with his family when he was called to the hospital that scorching Sunday.

## Many fire fighters were grappling with the after-effects of close shaves. Some had been trapped in their trucks as fire passed over.

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The sweat dripped off staff as they worked; air conditioning was not restored until late that evening. The thick smoke outside meant they couldn't even open windows for relief. Wet towels were applied to the aged care patients as they wilted in the heat.

In the midst of trying to assert some order on the chaos, Gail was flummoxed when about 70 evacuees arrived at the hospital. Due to a communications mixup, they'd been wrongly told it was the evacuation point.

As Gail tried to find space to accommodate them and to settle the tensions that inevitably arose in a room crowded with hot anxious people and their pets, she made a mental note. She was determined that plans for the new hospital, due to open in 2008, would include an on-site generator and better emergency communication backup.

It also was clear to Gail the town needed a better media and communications strategy to cope with such disasters. The hospital had only one emergency phone line in operation and, with the CDMA system also not operating, communication problems were generating much anxiety and anger.

When Gail finally knocked off, about 1 am, she gave the young firey who'd collapsed from dehydration a lift home to Temora, the nearby town where they both live.

**J**unee, a town of about 4500 people, gracious pavements, historic buildings and manicured rose gardens, has known its share of plenty and struggle. Built on the back of the farming and railway industries, it has been reinventing itself as a tourist destination. Drought is a never-ending source of conversation.

But for weeks after that dreadful day, the talk everywhere

was of fire. Many felt the need to return to it over and over. One woman vented her anger at seeing a butt thrown from a car in town on the night of the fire. Others found their losses too painful to discuss. Dr Saad Saad, a local GP, got in the habit of beginning consultations by asking patients about their experiences. He wanted to give them a chance to ventilate their feelings and concerns.

Dr Saad, 49, understood why so many people felt so traumatised. He had been on call on that ugly Sunday and had watched the fire's progress from the end of his street. He had prepared himself for the worst, expecting there might be many casualties.

After being called to the hospital, he lost contact with his wife and two teenage children, and didn't find out until much later that they were evacuated when the fire came within 10 metres of their home.

At a meeting for farm families four days after the fire, organisers distributed information about what help was available, but their real purpose was to provide an opportunity for debriefing. For some, it was their first chance to speak to anyone apart from family about what they'd been through. Rural counsellor Tony Paton paid close attention, listening for intelligence about who was travelling poorly and might benefit from a visit or referral to professional help.

Grief, anger, anxiety, relief and guilt were among the mixed emotions stirring the town. Many fire fighters were grappling with the after-effects of close shaves. Some had been trapped in their trucks as fire passed over. One man had collapsed in tears in his vehicle, overwhelmed by fatigue, the fire's intensity and the hopelessness of their efforts.

More than once, the rural fire fighting team led by Stuart Dietrich had waited agonising moments, with the sprays pumping protection on the men on the back of the truck, as the fire passed over them. Dietrich, 30, had thought that he and his men were goners. His truck had been among the first to reach the blaze on the Mad Mile and he had lost count of how many homes they were called to that day, it could have been 35 or 40.

He hadn't returned home to his wife and young children until after 4am the following day. A few hours later, he was out on the road again, carting away burnt livestock. Like many volunteers, he worked on mopping-up operations, while also keeping up a day job, until the fire was formally declared extinguished on 17 January.

The shire's mayor, Lola Cummins, who describes herself as a blow-in – "I've only been here 32 years" – thought the worst of the shock lasted for about a fortnight. It was only then, she felt, that people really began to comprehend how lucky they were, that much more of the town could have been lost.

For Judy and John Gentle, the shock was crippling. When they returned to their property that black afternoon, they'd found their home saved but so much else lost – stock, hay, vehicles, fencing, equipment, and much of their garden.

Insurance would come nowhere near covering their losses, estimated at up to \$100,000. They realised they would have to keep working at their off-farm jobs (Judy teaches and John drives a school bus) into the years they had planned for retirement. Many times the Gentles felt like giving up, but the kindness of strangers, friends and family helped put them on the road to recovery.

In the days after the fires, a neighbour Judy had not met arrived with several hundred dollars' worth of groceries, and friends and strangers dropped off hay for their surviving cattle.

A friend, who'd rung survivors of the last big bushfire to ask what would be useful, came equipped to clean their house. Family arrived unannounced from Sydney with meals prepared and launched into restoring the garden. Judy had never had to accept charity before and found the experience humbling.

Margaret Wright was also overwhelmed by generosity. Friends and family gave her clothes, furniture and other household supplies, and gift vouchers. A hairdresser provided a free trim. The post office passed on a package of clothes, sent there anonymously with a note, "please give these to someone affected by the fire".

Doug Wright had difficulty accepting donations but they helped sustain Margaret as she oversaw plans for rebuilding their home. "People are just unreal," she kept repeating incredulously.

The council and many local businesses threw themselves into fundraising efforts. Staff at one service station were amazed at how many strangers, stopping for fuel as they passed through the town, volunteered donations.

From a small office on her farm near Junee, Debra Charlton, the NSW Farmers Association's regional service manager, spent long days organising a fodder and agistment appeal, which resulted in the donation of about 4500 tonnes of hay. Debra was overwhelmed by the response, especially when told of elderly women in other country towns buying hay to donate.

When speaking to farmers to arrange delivery, Debra, 30, often found herself providing informal counselling. She was particularly struck by the impact on farm women, who couldn't block out the sound of the gunshots destroying stock as they struggled to clean the fire's filth from their houses. "I nearly went insane, hearing nothing but gunshots," one woman told her.

For some farmers, already worn down by years of drought, the blaze seemed like the final straw. Two months after his farm's decimation, David Carter would still be unable to imagine his future. On the bad days, he struggled to find the energy, the motivation or the funds to rebuild the property his grandfather had established in 1933. But at 50, he didn't know what else he could do.

His wife Cheryl was also emotionally gutted. She'd pan-



For some farmers, already worn down by years of drought, the blaze seemed like the final straw.

icked as soon as she heard about a fire on the highway near the Jail Brake Inn.

On that same road 16 years before, another fire had started. It had burnt down their former home.

In the last fire, Cheryl had been pregnant with Scott. This time around, Scott was ploughing a firebreak when flames and smoke surrounded his tractor, sending its alarms haywire. "Get me out Dad," the 15-year-old had screamed over the radio to his father, who was in a fire truck nearby. David could do nothing to help, other than tell his son to remain calm and keep driving in circles. When the fire cleared, David recovered Scott safely.

They returned home to find Cheryl frozen in fear. David had to physically shake her to force her to focus on what needed to be done. Soon she and her daughter were crouching inside, shielding themselves from the smoke and heat with wet towels, and praying as David, Scott and other volunteers fought the blaze outside. Their home was saved.

David reflected later that he had thrown Scott from one dangerous situation to another, without even giving him time to regroup. The Carters were already traumatised from nearly losing their eldest, Phillip, a year before. He had been racing in a tractor to fight a fire when struck by a train. It was a miracle he had survived without serious injury.

In the days after the Jail Brake Inn fire, David left early every morning to help with containment efforts. It was easier to be away than to face the devastation at home, although he knew his family missed him.

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David Carter (top) is struggling to find the energy to rebuild the farm that his grandfather established. Elizabeth Lewis (above) with her husband Derek: "I am not a woose, but I was weepy for days after."

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Stuart Kanaley, with his wife Margaret, was unable to see properly for days after being blasted by hot ash and dust from the fire.

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He wished there were more on-the-ground counselling services to help farm families affected by fire. It was not enough to have agencies on the other end of a phone line offering help. People needed more face-to-face contact, he thought. Especially the wives, who were often stuck at home while the men had more opportunity to offload at the pub or wherever else they met.

In late February, a few gardening experts and a small crowd packed into a bus for a garden tour. The Department of Primary Industries funded the excursion to give farming families some tips for restoring their fire-ravaged gardens.

The hosts at one stop, Elizabeth and Derek Lewis, told how they struggled for long hours to save their historic homestead, Hillcrest. The strain was still evident in Elizabeth's voice as she recounted evacuating her 93-year-old mother with flames all around. Elizabeth, a nurse by training and the manager of the local aged care hostel, had chest pains and soaring blood pressure the following day. "I am not a woose," she says, "but I was weepy for days after." It helped to talk with a neighbour who'd lost some property.

The Hillcrest gardens, as elsewhere, showed the incredible resilience of plants. Green shoots poked from many trees and shrubs that had been burnt to a crisp. Judy

Gentle, who was on the tour, was delighted to have discovered a flower on Dr Potts' magnolia the day before.

Margaret Kanaley, who lost much of her own garden and farm, helped organise the tour as a defacto form of counselling; she knew that many country people would be reluctant to seek professional help but would benefit from the opportunity to chat with each other. More than a few on the tour had some connection to the burns patient John Heffernan (a relative of the prominent local politician, Senator Bill Heffernan), and they were anxious for updates about how he and his family were faring.

Margaret's husband Stuart wished they had been in the district 16 years ago for the last big blaze. Then he might have known what to expect – and to keep his goggles on at all times. When he took them off in the fire truck cabin, hot ash and dust had blasted his eyes.

He could barely see, when the fire hit his farm sometime later, to help their 17-year-old son James and other fire fighters. Margaret and their two younger sons sheltered inside as their home filled with hot smoke.

The house was saved but Stuart's eyesight took three days to recover.

As he wondered whether he would ever see properly again, Stuart was intensely frustrated – by his stinging eyes, by his inability to assist the mopping up operation, and by the stupidity of it all. He fumed that one careless cigarette butt had cost so many so much. ●

## Reflux

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## A young man's brave fight

One of the many photographs taken that day shows a tractor driving through a smoke-filled paddock. Another picture, taken not long after, shows the tractor burnt out after being abandoned on a nearby road. It takes a caption to make clear the awful poignancy of these images: in the first, a desperate father was rushing his badly burnt son to hospital.

By the time the second photograph had been taken, John Heffernan, 21, had walked into Junee Hospital. When Dr Darren Corbett arrived at the hospital soon afterwards, he found John in the shower, telling Dr Saad Saad and hospital staff about his injuries. With severe burns to 80% of his body, John was in excruciating pain, but Dr Corbett didn't hear a word of complaint. He thought John one of the toughest men he had ever met.

Over the next few hours, Dr Corbett and colleagues pumped 11L of fluid and 150mg of morphine into the patient as they tried to arrange his evacuation. There was one frustrating delay after another. First the helicopter that was expected didn't show because of mechanical problems.

Then an ambulance was slow to materialise. The roads to Junee were closed to the public but were

### With severe burns to 80% of his body, John was in excruciating pain.

being used by emergency vehicles; however, the NSW Ambulance Service later said it had not wanted to put its staff or the patient at risk on a road surrounded by unpredictable fires. It waited for assurances the road was safe.

Irate at the delays, Dr Corbett concentrated on caring for John. He was hampered by the lack of power and the difficulty of finding access for the drip. He made a mental note for future reference – to sew in drips with burns victims, otherwise their dressings work loose as their flesh swells.

Dr Corbett was amazed that John remained conscious and coherent throughout the ordeal.

Finally, more than two hours after John had arrived at the hospital, he was rushed to Wagga Base Hospital under police escort, with Dr Corbett in the ambulance. There he underwent emergency surgery to cut into constricting tissue on his arm and chest, to stimulate circulation.

Dr Corbett thought then they'd been lucky in some way that the helicopter hadn't arrived to transfer John direct to Sydney as he wouldn't have been able to have had the surgery in the air. John was later flown to Concord Hospital where he began the long and painful journey to recovery. He is now in a stable condition.

Meanwhile, Dr Corbett returned to Junee where a long queue of patients kept him busy into the early hours of the following day. He was surprised how many people had suffered burns to the cornea.

For Dr Corbett, 40, who had left Sydney more than six years earlier, the experience reflected positively on the local health professionals involved in the emergency response; they had worked well together as a team. But he hopes never to see such a bad burn injury again. "Bad fires come through every 15 or 20 years in this area so hopefully I'm off the hook for 15 years," he says.

\* Locals' concerns about the delay in John Heffernan's transfer were relayed to the NSW Ambulance Service by the NSW Rural Fire Service. In a statement to this magazine, the Ambulance Service said the response had been as timely as possible under the circumstances.

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