

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS IN ACTION

DRIVING BUSHFIRE RECOVERY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

CASE STUDY | THE SANCTUARY



THE POWER OF EMPOWERED YOUTH

Mallacoota's young people heroically endured the Black Summer Bushfire Crisis and yet, are a pillar of strength for the wider community.

With a passion for climate change and social justice the youth of Mallacoota have created a space to come together and to share their voice for a brighter future.

"We applied for funding and jumped at opportunities to speak of our experiences, as isolated rural youth working hard to support each other and be active participants in our community" Mallacoota youth member.

The primary objective was to secure a space where young people could find each other, charge phones, connect to the internet and feel safe during the tension and aftermath of the bushfires.

'Permission was granted to use the old Newsagency, and the young people involved created a youth led community organisation and called it 'The Sanctuary'. The space was made

available from 10am-7pm for the initial response period. Drop In open times are now 2-3 afternoons a week plus other events and occasions led or supported by The Sanctuary. The ages of focus are 12-25, but a diverse range of people of all ages participate in programs and events as mentors, facilitators, supporters and volunteers.

This has enabled young people with a desire to support each other, and the broader community, to gather in a place where they feel comfortable and a sense of ownership.

This youth led initiative has also allowed services and the broader community to meaningfully engage with the ideas, perspectives and unique circumstances faced by their young people.

Outreach referral pathways have grown significantly as a result of The Sanctuary and it's proactive and collaborative approach. Supported by Uniting and an extensive number of project partners, the Sanctuary continues to thrive beyond the immediate bushfire response, and is now an Incorporated Association.

This case study series demonstrates the central role of community organisations as champions of place-based community led bushfire recovery.

"Having support from people my own age, my friends and stuff, is really good because I know that if they like me, or understand me and believe in me, I am probably a good person. Sometimes it's not as easy to believe in my own thoughts or feelings."

Youth member

PROJECT PARTNERS

The Sanctuary has fostered over 47 partnerships with organisations and community groups. A selection are listed below:

- Uniting
- East Gippsland Shire
- Bushfire Recovery Victoria
- Gippsland Primary Health Network
- Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal
- Headspace
- Children's Wellbeing Collective
- Mallacoota Boardriders
- Friends of Mallacoota

It's good that we did something that made the town better, when the fires and covid and stuff damaged it. And it's not just about the fires, but it (the Sanctuary) is gonna keep going!"

Youth member

"Your ability to take something horrific and turn it into a positive way forward is inspiring. We are in this together and here for each other"

Community member

The initiative drew upon the model and learnings of the Youth Creating Disaster Recovery and Resilience initiative and involved engaging young people in arts-based activities to explore their stories of recovery and resilience through creative expression. Workshops, activities and events were youth directed and designed to build trust and rapport between young people, support services and project partners.

A variety of creative activities, based on youth passions and interests, were explored including documentary film-making, animation, photography, printing, painting and music.

Activities culminated in a Youth Masterclass where participants were guided to 're-imagine their dreams forward.' Results from the Masterclass have since guided the planning of youth projects and programs across the region.

The Sanctuary crew are now working on ways to make the space sustainable. Developing training and career development programs that offer pathways for young people is also a priority.

Initiatives such as the mentors program aims to match young people with specific interests, with local professionals to show them the ropes and further their interests and skills.



"Less obvious and yet complementary, are the benefits of all aged members of our community seeing the success of the youth group, for the well-being of all rises in seeing our youth have opportunities such offered via The Sanctuary.

Similarly, the positive views of the wider community feedback to our youth for the multiplied benefits for all.

The initial premise that the group be driven by youth, with support to help their goals come to fruition, should be acknowledged as fundamental to long term benefits."

Community member

KEY OUTCOMES

- Creating an incorporated association run by young people, for the benefit of the whole community.
- Learning good governance, establishing operations and having weekly meetings known as 'Gatherings' where everyone works together on ideas and plans and has a voice.
- Creating a 'Drop In' space where young people gather to support each other, learn, study, create, advocate, organise, perform, exhibit and have fun.
- Creating over 34 partnerships with other organisations and community groups. This helped us to combine efforts, leverage support and reach more people. E.g. 56 youth were specifically referred to service providers covering health, educational and social needs.
- Advocating for adequate access to support and services in far East Gippsland. E.g. gaining support for a Youth Worker and AOD Worker, roles which have long been lacking but especially needed during this time of recovery.
- Mentoring youth leaders by allocating an adult mentor in an area such as media, music and events, to learn and work together on Sanctuary programs.
- An intergenerational approach has strengthened bonds, awareness and advocacy across the community.

KEY EMERGING LEARNINGS

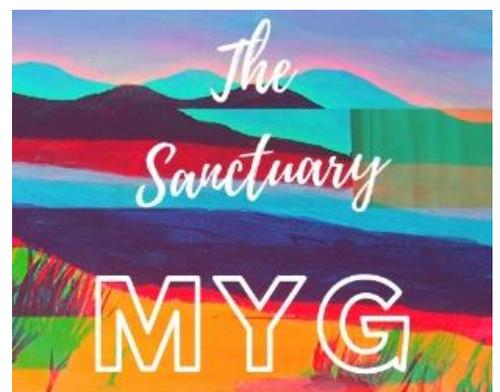
- The importance of repeated visits to meet with young people with the emphasis on building relationships and listening for the messages which are important to young people's lives.
- Meeting with young people in a space which is familiar to them. An awareness that for young people to communicate clearly they need to feel safe, a sense of belonging, appreciated and acknowledged.
- Mentors have an important role to play in nurturing young people to shape their message. Mentors have helped them learn more about the world around them and how to communicate effectively while empowering them to be guided by their own experiences, the experiences of others and good critical thinking.
- Continued follow up with young people is critical to maintain their interest and energy and report back on what collecting their perspectives has resulted in. This information needs to be tailored to the youth audience with appropriate language, tangible and relatable examples and the opportunity for more conversation and questions afterwards.

Project contact: Kate Kapos kate.kapos@vt.uniting.org
For further resources visit [VCOSS Bushfire Recovery webpage](#)

“The Sanctuary has opened up an incredible opportunity for the young people in Mallacoota. As a parent, you want your children to be able to develop strong relationships, be supported and nurtured during tough times, as well as having someone take interest in them, listen to them and ultimately look out for them when needed. The Sanctuary does all that. It is like a big, safe, fun guiding hand!”

“It makes me smile anytime I hear one of my children say “I’m heading down to The Sanctuary to hang out” Young people are being listened to and it’s what community support should be about”

Parents



Uniting