

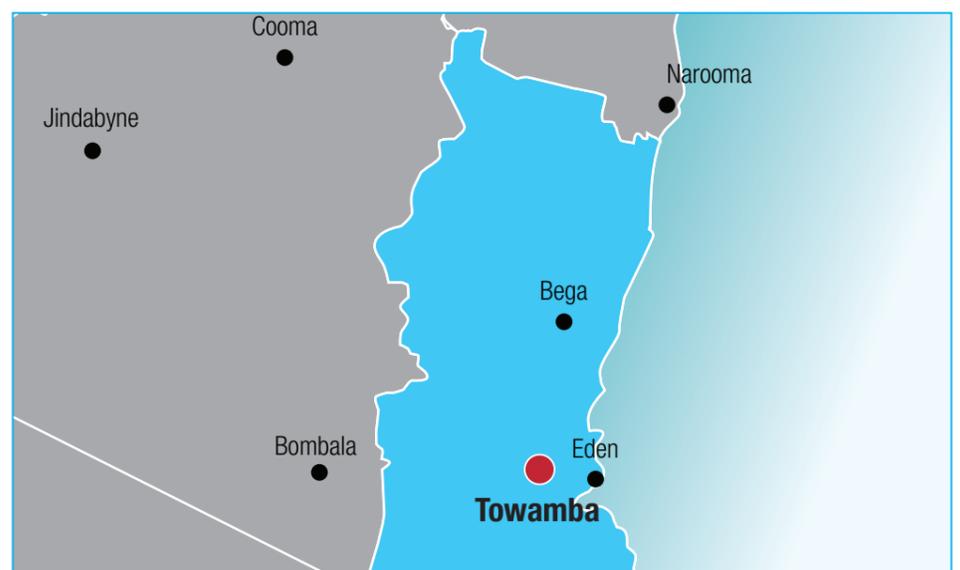
Towamba ‘Fireflies’ light up Bega Valley

Using art to help and heal

What?

The Bega Valley in the far south-east corner of NSW was among the regions hardest hit by the large-scale bushfires that affected much of the state during the summer of 2019-20. Residents in the small community of Towamba, west of Eden, experienced repeated evacuations over several very stressful weeks.

‘Fireflies’ was a unique community art making project that began after the Towamba township had been saved by local fire-fighting crews. Students from the local public school were given the opportunity to express their experiences and explore the regrowth and renewal of their forests through collaborative creative painting, during the first half of the 2020 school year.



Why?

In the South Eastern region of NSW, the impacts of extended drought combined with the unprecedented 2019-20 bushfire season have been devastating. COORDINARE – South Eastern NSW PHN is leading a coordinated primary mental health care response in the region, working in partnership with Local Health Districts, councils, and grassroots organisations to help local communities recover and rebuild.

The Fireflies project provided people in the Towamba area with a unique opportunity to share and support one another through the peak of the crisis, as well as an opportunity for healing in its wake.

“In the future, the kids can look at these paintings and realise that there is an end, and everything is going to be okay.”

– Karen Nelson, parent

How?

The Fireflies project was one of several community projects awarded funding by COORDINARE through their Natural Disaster Community Grants program, aimed at supporting locals to deal with the stress of drought and recover from the recent bushfires.

Towamba Public School teacher Nicci Grant, who applied for the funding, says the grant really supported the community, and all materials used were locally sourced. Once the materials had been gathered, the project “evolved organically,” says local artist Vicki McCredie, who worked with the school students to create the artworks.

“The school was closed for weeks and a lot of kids hadn’t seen each other for a long time. The process allowed us to explore the burnt bush and take some photos. We then started to paint! The resulting artwork (*Joy in the struggle*, pictured) was fantastic. Then all the kids wanted to do one!”

“The children were able to feel connected doing something they loved and felt safe doing.”

– Nicci Grant, Towamba Public School



Outcomes

The Fireflies project had, and continues to have, far-reaching effects for all those involved.

“We’re a close community, but when we went through the fires, we were very isolated from one another,” explains Carine Sheridan, mother of one of the students. “Having this project meant we could take the kids down to the school to paint, which was very therapeutic.”

“During the painting, the children were able to feel connected doing something they loved and felt safe doing,” adds Nicci. “And in a way, it helped them process what was going on.”

Once the first few paintings were complete, they were put up in Vicki’s ‘gallery shed’ so families could come and view them. Selected paintings were put on display in the community hall during community fire meetings, and the regional art gallery hosted a ‘virtual exhibition’ online. Then a bakery in Pambula offered to display some paintings on its walls, followed by a bank in Merimbula. The whole exhibition has recently been displayed in the CWA hall in Eden.

Plans for an official exhibition opening were put on hold when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, leading the Bega Valley Regional Gallery to offer to set up an [online exhibition](#), which has now become a permanent fixture on their website.

“Nothing has stopped it... it’s got a life of its own!” says Vicki. “People are mesmerised by those artworks. When you look at them, you feel awe and wonder at the things these kids have done. And you feel their love.”

For parents like Karen, the Fireflies project is about much more than painting. “This project helped our children in a way that we as parents couldn’t,” she says. “And it’s a gift that keeps on giving. In the future, the kids can look at these pictures and know that everything is going to be okay.”

