

Bushfire survivors in Blue Mountains tell of losing homes

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As Sue Dunlop stood in the blackened rubble of the home she lived in for the past 41 years, the ferocity of Thursday's firestorm became painfully clear.

"You live in the bush. You live by the rules of the bush, and that's it," Mrs Dunlop reflected, as trees and scrub continued to burn around her in her backyard on Friday morning.

Still, that did nothing to ease the pain of knowing that she would have to rebuild her home on Buena Vista Road in Winmalee, one of the worst-hit streets in Thursday's inferno.

At least she and her husband, Phil, had escaped with their lives.

"We stayed throughout the whole fire. You fight for your home. We are too old to be starting again," she said.

Mrs Dunlop described how she and her husband had used a garden hose in desperation to douse the flames that raced towards their home and their aviaries.

Their efforts proved futile.

"A car explosion blew our windows out and that's when we knew we'd lost the house," Mrs Dunlop said.

"My husband came up to me and he said, 'Look, we've had all the windows blow up, the house is on fire. We're not going to save it'.

"He still did try, he tried so hard," she said.

Mrs Dunlop's tale could be repeated by others up and down her street, where at least 43 homes were lost in Thursday's unforgiving blaze.

At first light, many red-eyed residents, holding pets and each other's hands, walked down Buena Vista Road to see if their homes had survived.

One resident, Paul, was relieved to find his dog, Wilma, had survived after spending the night in the burning street.

Firefighters and police were returning to the area on Friday morning to catalogue the loss. They also used cadaver dogs to sift through the rubble.

Adrian Harrison, from Winmalee, was another of the unlucky ones.

He lost his house - and his cat - in Thursday's bushfires. All that remained standing were a few external walls.

Mr Harrison was at work on Thursday when his wife spotted the black smoke in the valley. She collected their two children, a boy and a girl aged 10 and eight, from school and raced to safety.

"I didn't want my kids to see the house. I will sit down and we'll have a talk," Mr Harrison told 2UE, breaking down.

"We will talk about creating new memories in a new home.

"I've got to look on the upside – that me, my wife and kids, we're all safe, we're all alive. You carry your memories in your heart and in your head, and everything else is material and we can replace it."

The support from friends and family had sustained him, he said.

"I've been inundated with phone calls and text messages from family and friends offering to put clothes on my back, put a bed under my body, food in our bellies," he said.

"You know, in a crisis situation, you really do find out who your friends are, because they all come out of the woodwork, they all want to help, and I am so grateful that all these fantastic people are in my life and they want to help me."

Despite the heartache, Mr Harrison vowed to stay in the area.

"Oh yeah, we'll stay here, we will rebuild here," he said.

Heather and David Abbey returned to a pile of bricks and melted plastic where their house once stood at Winmalee.

"We are numb. Just numb," Mrs Abbey said. "There's absolutely nothing left. It's a smouldering shell."

Mrs Abbey, who on Friday morning was still in her work clothes from the day before, said they had lost everything from the house they had lived in with their three sons for 28 years.

"We are all safe, that's the main thing. It's just stuff," she said.

Springwood Fire and Rescue NSW's Trent Evans stood at the top of Buena Vista Road on Friday morning and looked in shock as he surveyed the street.

"To see it in daylight is catastrophic," Mr Evans said.

"It has to be one of the worst bushfires we've had in the Blue Mountains."

He said it was impossible to contain the fire which started in Links Road at Springwood.

"It happened so quick. You can't put out a fire that large," he said.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/bushfire-survivors-in-blue-mountains-tell-of-losing-homes-20131018-2vqyg.html>