

At 4am on Monday 28/2/22 I received a frantic call from my son, , he said, “Mum, can you ring the SES, we are in our roof space and can’t get through, the water is rising quickly, we need rescuing, and have little charge left on the phone”. I sat up alert, and asked, who was on the roof, as the flood plan had been for to stay in the house in South Lismore, and for his partner, , and their daughters 7years old and 4 years old, and their little dog to go to a friend’s place in East Lismore. He said they were all there, they wanted to stay together and made the place safe for the level of the 2017 flood, which they went through at the same house. , South Lismore.

I got off the call quickly and phoned the SES, but could not get through, I tried in desperation many times, without even getting a message or ability to leave a message. Clearly the line was overloaded. I then phoned 000, knowing the dire situation my family was in. The 000 operator answered and directed me to the police, who took all the details and said they would register the call directly with the SES. I was hopeful my family would be rescued soon.

I phoned my son back and told him that help was on it’s way and I spoke briefly to my granddaughters trying to be calm and positive and recognising that the situation was potentially deadly. I spoke to them about being on a great adventure, they were talkative and clearly hyper-aroused.

I finished the call with the hope that they would be rescued soon. As I am writing this, all the feelings of fear and utter helplessness are coming back to me, as I experienced for the next 5 or so hours on the day. I called in a couple more times, but said I wouldn’t call again, so they could save what little charge they had left. I knew and had done as much as they could to keep their girls and themselves safe. The girls were in life jackets, they had some food and water in the roof space and my son, had taken a small axe with him to chop out of the roof gable, which he had already done prior to the call. The dog had food, they had even taken up a potty for the girls. Their plan B, was to attach my sons two surfboards to the house with leg ropes and each of them to piggy back the girls on the surfboards if the house went under. When I heard this later, I was horrified to think their plans had got to this extreme, which would have ended in certain tragedy, which I can not even name now.

They were on the roof waiting rescue for 5 hours, , my husband and myself, were paralysed with fear and helplessness, I felt like I was holding my breath for that 5 hours.

During this harrowing wait, I heard many terrifying and unhelpful things, the most horrifying was that the SES was not going to start helping people until it was light!

Also, that my son got no warning and the floods water rose so fast they had no hope of escape.

We then got word, they were safe, a very kind volunteer in his own boat rescued the family. They were taken to the other side of Lismore and dropped to Prima House, where another volunteer had arranged a shuttle service to the SCU evacuation centre.

What I didn't know until later, and thought they were going to die on roof with their little girls. Then when they were in the overloaded boat, the river and flood waters were so rough crossing the Wilson River, they again thought they may not make it.

At the evacuation centre, it was chaos, took the girls to the toilet, where there was no light, she said she felt it was unsafe and got out as soon as she could.

My other daughter in law, who lives in East Lismore picked the family up and took them to her home, I think by then she had lost power, but at least they could feel safer and get some dry clothes.

brother in the meantime, who at the time was living in East Ballina, drove in a 4WD through the backroads to East Lismore, he bravely found ways that meant he could bring the family, plus my two teenage grandchildren, to the safety of our home in West Ballina.

I hugged them in our garage as they got out of the car, and held them both tight, relieved they were safe. The first thing and said through sobs was "we thought we were all going to die". I reassured them over and over that they were safe now.

As the morning progressed, the enormity of the flood, and their life threatening experience, became clearer. They had nothing left, except the wet clothes they were wearing.

The house had gone under completely, whilst they were huddled in the roof, they heard terrible rushing noises of the flood waters, saw animals swimming for their lives, banging and other loud noises they couldn't identify. When in the boat, they said they saw people trapped behind windows in rising water and many people on rooves, not knowing who had survived. Here is a photo taken from the roof space during the flood and several after it.

We settled in and around 3pm that same day, received a call from the SES, asking did they need rescuing still! We were all dumbfounded at the thought that if it wasn't for the amazing courage or community members they may have still been on their roof! A thought none of us went any further with.....

and were hypervigilant, they were on alert to everything, but tried to remain available for their little girls. They both continued to monitor the BOM site, and worried about the flood water coming down the Richmond River. We live on the Richmond River in West Ballina.

We all went to bed, aware that the river was rising, but assuring everyone, it would not come up that high to be dangerous. It never had.

Early the next morning        woke us, saying we had to evacuate, there were warnings on the BOM. We all discussed what we should do. In his hyper-aroused state,        , mobilised my teenage grandchildren to assist us in putting as much as possible upstairs, given there was a risk of flood here as well.

We all decided we would be safe upstairs, and took food, water, bedding etc. upstairs and waited. The electricity faulted, but we still had some lights. Then it all went out.        mother phoned and said we needed to evacuate.

The decision was then made, for        ,        , their little girls and the two teenagers to go to        in East Ballina, which was high on a hill.

              and I decided to stay, we couldn't see how we could leave and felt we would be OK, and our 2 cats, wouldn't cope with going to East Ballina with two dogs and nowhere to feel safe.

We waded out with everyone to        waiting car, the water was brown and covered the road, it was up to our knees at that stage. We waded back to our house.

The next day,        phoned, and pleaded with us to leave, he was terrified about us being in our house, surrounded by rising flood water. Given the level of his anxiety and what he'd been through, we agreed. We locked our cats in a large room with water and food and litter and hoped they would be OK.

              , waded through the filthy water to help us out,        is a very active and fit 81-year-old, I am 65 and active but with several health issues which were treated and under control, but at times like this always underlying.

By now the water was thigh deep and I was terrified of what was underneath. We didn't know what was going to happen now.

We stayed at        in a house of 7 adults, 2 children, 1 baby, 2 teenagers, 2 dogs and 2 cats (not ours). For two nights, during this time, everyone was on alert. There was very minimal, sometimes no telephone or internet. The first morning we went to the local supermarket in East Ballina to get milk and other supplies to find there was no credit card buys as the systems were all down. I had to get a puffer for my asthma, and the chemist could only supply it and holding the script as their computers were down. I had no cash left now and        was very low on fuel. There was no fuel left at the local petrol station.

The roads were now closed into the main part of Ballina.

On the next day,        , my son and his brother-in-law        , decided to try to get back to Lismore,        was desperate to get back to his home. I was fearful for them but I could see they needed to go.

They returned home that night, covered in mud, describing what they saw as a "war zone". They had to go via Byron to get through and then had to leave the car and hitched on the back of a truck (like many others) the police turned a blind eye.

What they described about the state of            house was heart breaking. Windows broken, other people's furniture on their roof, their entire house had been submerged. It seemed like they had lost everything. What was left was covered in thick mud.

They returned the next day to try to salvage what they could. Returning exhausted and overwhelmed. Numb.

None of us were sleeping.

One night, our 4 year old granddaughter was found in the dark in the kitchen screaming, surrounded by water. She had been sleep walking and probably slipped over and spilt some water, but nobody could make any sense of this.

Both little girls were sleeping with their parents, partly because they needed the comfort and partly because the house was full.

In the meantime, my other son,            , who had a rental property in Crown Street, South Lismore, with his partner,            and 3-year-old daughter,            , had evacuated earlier to a relative of            in Goonellabah, they had been safe, but were frantic about            and his family when they learnt of what had happened. They also lost everything, their house was not liveable, and my son, who had a studio on the first floor of a Keen Street, rental, had also been inundated and he lost everything there as well. They had no insurance.

They have since relocated to a Brisbane suburb, where they feel safe, but are now quite isolated from family and friends. They were given temporary accommodation in a B & B kindly arranged by the owner for several weeks prior to Easter, which was comfortable but always only temporary.            , has spoken about feeling "guilty" for leaving Lismore, the reality is though, there was nowhere available for them to live. He has also described,            , being bewildered about not going back "home" and having to learn that her siblings would not be able to live with them, given the distance and that they shared time between their parent's homes.

After our staying two nights in East Ballina, and one failed attempt to return to the cats at home in West Ballina, we made it back,            , waded back through the water with us and we assured him by now we would be ok and that the water was no longer rising.

When we arrived home, we found our house had been flooded downstairs, in the house, just enough mud and water got in to destroy the flooring. In the lower parts of the house, the laundry, bathroom, boat shed and garage, the water was higher. Both our cars and            beloved motor bike had been wrecked and there was slimy smelly mud throughout. My beautiful garden was muddy and still flooded. Our cats were ok, had run out of food but still had water, they were OK. We realised we should never had left them, we would not leave without them again.

There was no power and we had no phone coverage.

We had water and the plumbing upstairs was working, the downstairs was not working.

We had to just wait it out. Eventually, several days later, we got power back on. Because our house is higher than others we had less damage and got power back earlier.

On the Saturday, 5<sup>th</sup> March, my elderly neighbour waded through the water and spent the day with us. She had lost her car and entire downstairs area of her house was still inundated with filthy water. I could at least offer her hot tea and food as we have a gas cooktop (which I had forgotten about for a while in the chaos). She was distraught, having lost her partner 6 months earlier and having to deal with this disaster on her own.

That morning, I think I went into 'Social Work' (I am a clinical social worker), and I bought a car for \_\_\_\_\_ and I to use, a car for our neighbour, three washing machines and two driers all by phone and on credit cards. I had it in my head, we needed these things to try to get back on the road to normality. The plan was always to use the car for us, until our insurance came through then pass it on to \_\_\_\_\_, who had lost her car in Lismore. My main concern was to ensure it was a high car, so it was safer. She now had "Misty" which the girls named the car, a 5 year old Hyundai SUV bought site unseen, from the Tweed.

I don't like using the expression "lucky" because nothing that happened during these floods is lucky, but we were fortunate, that everyone was safe and we all had somewhere to sleep etc.

Of course, then there was the second event, of torrential rain in early March. The water had receded in our yard and out of our garage, then, it came up again and by then we had picked up the car which was parked in the driveway, as our two broken cars were stuck in the garage. I got extremely agitated at the thought of losing "Misty" as I saw this as another big loss for my son and his family. Several days later \_\_\_\_\_, came and carefully drove Misty through the receding flood water, it was precarious, getting the car out, but successful.

The second water inundation was clean storm water, not the filthy river water, which we were somewhat grateful for.

The timing is very confused for me, but in the next weeks, we all had many offers of help, strangers water pressured our boat shed, the RFS washed out our garage and removed the stinking carpet from our downstairs. The floating floor people came and removed what now looked more like a skate ramp in our lounge room.

In the meantime, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ tirelessly went to Lismore to clean their own place and help others. Many people took clothes, linen and bedding to wash in an effort to salvage whatever they could.

Not because of the material loss as such, more because of a need to reclaim their lost lives they had in Lismore.

My granddaughter, \_\_\_\_\_, school in South Lismore was lost, as was the two pre-school's \_\_\_\_\_ attended in East Lismore and the CBD.

workplace, he is a self-employed NDIS provider, was washed away in the Lismore CBD as was my practice in the Strand Arcade in the CBD.

I was not able to go into Lismore for several weeks due to the loss of our cars, so could not assess or assist with any salvaging of my precious practice. On 11<sup>th</sup> March, we wrote this to family in Sydney

*“... was in the throws of a planned handover of her business to a carefully selected and trusted Social Worker, which was going to be a gradual wind down and exit from her treasured career. She is now further heartbroken by the loss of almost all of her resources and furniture. It had been carefully chosen over the years to fulfil the needs of a specialised trauma-informed therapeutic space, from the moment a person walked into the waiting room. She kept saying to forget her work stuff during the crisis of the flood when we didn’t know how everybody was, but the reality has hit her on top of seeing the sheer devastation to the whole community. Her kind colleagues have cleared her rooms as we couldn’t get there due to not only cut off roads but also no cars. She is now dreading the reality of going back to see the dark miserable uninhabitable space. We plan to go there in the next day or so. What is needed in Lismore is hope for the future and a way forward. People have been kind and helped a lot, we don’t expect any special treatment, many have lost so much. We do need for people to keep The Northern Rivers Flood in mind to keep it on the agenda for any meaningful healing and rebuilding to take place.*

Here are photos of some of the damage of our home which is higher than many of those on Riverside Drive

My kind and generous colleagues and their families, cleared and cleaned as much as they could from my office. I haven’t been able to really thank them properly yet, it seems no thanks is enough.

When I did eventually get to Lismore and see the practice, it was devastating, and really hit home, what this meant. It was not just my “stuff” that was gone, it was the many stories of people I had seen and assisted over the years that was attached to the tens of books, therapeutic resources and artworks that had all been lost.

Linda, my colleague, deserves a medal, for washing all the rescued sandplay symbols, thousands of tiny symbols collected over decades. She also washed all the rescued puppets and soft toys, including tens of small “feelings” characters which fit inside two special therapeutic characters. Another major thing she was able to save was my huge blue and orange Dragon Puppet, “Blossom”, who held many important stories for children over the years.

I have very gradually, started seeing children for therapy again, thanks to the generosity and foresight of “Head to Health” and SCU, who have provided rooms for therapists who lost their rooms. This has assisted me in returning to work, which seems like will continue, with now no retirement in sight.

Children who have seen me since the flood, all had their questions of what was saved. They all were concerned about special characters they had become attached to and showed such relief when they either saw or were told that, "Blossom" survived for example. This also is not because of the item in itself, I see these reactions as indicative of everybody, children especially, holding on to what ever they could from their lives pre-flood.

In the here and now in mid May, we are still dealing with mould, dirt and losses. I haven't started to reclaim my garden, life has been too busy. That may happen soon, a bit at a time, as it is a huge job for myself and to clear the rubbish and mud (now dried hard) and pull all of the dead plants and shrubs, separate out the weeds from anything we can salvage. Minimal compared to what others are facing.

Initially, my son and partner, were committed to returning to their South Lismore property, every time I heard them discussing plans, I relieved the dread and fear of that morning at 4 am on 28<sup>th</sup> February, when I wasn't sure whether I would see them again.

Thankfully, they have now understood the unwise ness of moving back to South Lismore. Their children and themselves are too traumatised to live in the house where they thought they might die. I am so grateful they have made this decision.

As a result, including my continual offers to do anything for them not to live in any low lying area of Lismore again, they have decided to find another house to live. They are very committed to staying in Lismore, they have a supportive and generous community who have all help each other out.

We have withdrawn money from our Superannuation to assist them to get into another house. This was the only way we could see them being able to make this happen in the short term. They have been able to stay in East Ballina which has been a great help, this has meant they had a safe place to be, whilst they sorted through the many many different things they have had to do.

They did have flood insurance! But to date have not had a settlement for the damage, so we are not sure what will happen with that house in South Lismore which is a sad shell with a broken gable still showing my son's efforts to free the family and find safety.

We are all severely impacted by the catastrophe, my granddaughters have regressed and are terrified when it rains, my son and daughter in law are continually exhausted with trying to rebuild their lives and their careers. is providing her house and lots of childcare and would have to also be exhausted, although I don't remind anyone of this.

For and myself, this flood has meant that we don't feel comfortable going too far from home, I am aware of the toll all the cleaning and clearing has had on, who often sits exhausted at night after yet another day of clearing.

I used to love the rain, I saw it as feeding my treasured garden and I'd tell the kids it gave water to the farmers for their animals and crops. Now I wake in the night

anxious about how much we might get, often checking the rain gauge and worrying about being trapped in by flood water.

Our family losses have been huge, but it is also important to recognise the trauma experienced by the entire Northern Rivers community.

There have been many heroes along the way as well, Janelle Saffin, in particular heads my list of heroes, she has worked relentlessly for Lismore and this needs recognition.

Also, the brave and committed man who rescued my family from their roof, I will be forever grateful for the care he showed on that terrible day. He saved many people's lives. My granddaughter said his name was \_\_\_\_\_, it was on his hat. He deserves a bravery award for what he did. Also, the chippy who moved power lines away with a plastic pole, as the boat negotiated the treacherous flood water, he offered to come back and fix the gable roof when my family were ready.

Others who have raised money and donated money, offered help and given of themselves, it has reminded me of what humanity is capable of.

For the Future:

I would like to think that all residents and business in South and North Lismore be given the option of a buyback. People went to these places to live, because that was all they could afford, to either rent or buy. This isn't right, to have people put in harm's way and life-threatening situation because they cannot afford to live in a safer place.

This event has been life-threatening at worst for some of my family and life changing for all of the Northern Rivers. Please do not forget this when you are making recommendations. My family will live with the impacts of this for many years, if not life long, as will many others.

I have lost faith in the SES, clearly this is not their fault! And they couldn't have saved everyone on their own, but there were huge gaps, in alerting people at risk and in getting out earlier. The SES needs to be properly funded by the Government, much like the USA has a National Guard, we shouldn't have to rely on good hearted volunteers in the face of any catastrophic event in our country. No lamington drives, no raffles, we need this service to be taken seriously and funded seriously.

Note: This was a very difficult process for me, reliving many of the terrible events, but I know there are many things I have left out, but have come to the end of my ability to relive this trauma.

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