



On 7 February 2009, home for Australian filmmaker David Laity and partner Ali was in Chum Creek, a beautiful, lilly, densely treed and sparsely populated township near Healesville in Victoria's Yarra Valley. They were in Melbourne that day, at separate wedding functions, when David took a phone call from Ali's sister with the chilling words: "We think your house is burning, you need to come home."

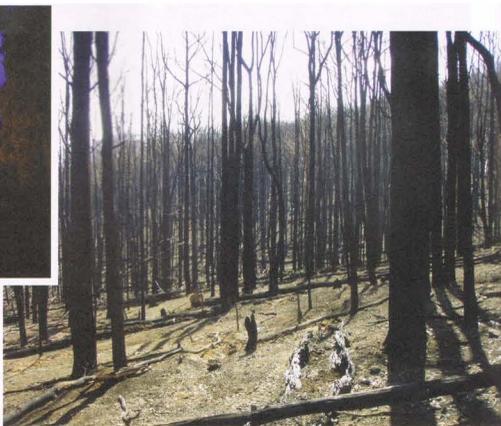
Before setting off for Melbourne that morning, knowing the extreme weather forecast, they had taken their dog Daisy to what they hoped was a safer place – a house they'd signed a lease on in nearby hamlet Toolangi, and which they were due to move into in two days' time.

Twenty years of David's film reels were in his house, as were the back-ups he'd painstakingly made of his life's work and the third draft of his latest film. But as the bushfire tore through their property, it took everything in its path including those precious reels, which would have disintegrated in a matter of seconds. When asked about the fire, he says quite simply: "It reset me."

The region was thrown into chaos that day; hundreds of people were evacuated to nearby towns and forced to watch the dark orange sky in shock, homeless or in limbo, not knowing the fate of their properties, animals and in some cases, their loved ones.

After two days of not knowing if their home had survived, David and Ali drove in towards it as far as they could, walking the last few metres along a smouldering, charred lane to find the burnt-out remains of their life.

A few days later, in shock and still separated from Daisy, they managed to get past police roadblocks and drove further into the fire zone, through flames on either side of the road, and passing tankers working to capacity. >



wrong place that day; other people made spur-of-the-moment decisions at that time, many of which had horrific consequences.

Talking about it now, forehead furrowed with memories, exact timings and events have blurred for David – a common experience for survivors from the day that was quickly dubbed "Black Saturday" – but he knows all too well that their actions that weekend to find Daisy nearly cost them their lives.

Now an active member of his local Country Fire Authority strike team (he helped fight 44 fires last year), David regularly sees himself as he was in February 2009, staring back out from the eyes of people he's now saving; that look of fear and sheer horror at the knowledge they might not make it. He wasn't sure how he'd react when faced with fire again, but it's the faces, not the fires, that scare him the most.

And while David and Ali lost almost everything on Black Saturday, that fateful day did give them something new. With the AUS\$15,000 they received from the Red Cross Bushfire Appeal (money donated to the victims of the disaster by the Australian public), the pair established a social enterprise, Goodwill Wine.

It's a simple concept in which everyone wins, explains David. Goodwill Wine buys small parcels of premium

wine from Australian vineyards (end of run, or tank samples), relabels them and sells them by the case to buyers like you and me.

The purchaser can then select their favourite charity from the Goodwill Wine list of partners and a percentage of the proceeds from the wine sale are forwarded to that particular charity. Each charity has a unique bottle label, also designed by David. When a case of wine is sold and a charity chosen, he prints and sticks labels onto each bottle and personally delivers where possible.

Humbled by the outpouring of support they received after the bushfire, David and Ali decided to pay it forward. They both had sampled charity wine programs in the past and questioned why the actual wine had to be so bad.

Light bulb moment – their concept was to bring good-quality wine to the tables of the masses while benefiting charities, in particular the Country Fire



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Authority whom so many people in country Australia owe their lives and livelihoods to.

"Not knowing how to start their own business, the couple took a three-month new-enterprise course where they fine-tuned a business plan and structure.

To date, 150 charities have benefited from AUS\$98,000 raised by Goodwill Wine. Last year Goodwill Wine also sold 1500 cases, an amount most vineyards would be proud of.

While the vineyards' margins are large, however, Goodwill Wine is giving 65 per cent of its profit to charity. "I'm pretty particular about tracking and stats," admits David.

"I like to see that the business is growing." Currently drawing a modest wage from Goodwill Wine and living in his wine warehouse, he's far from materialistic.

But being altruistic doesn't put food on the table, so David has plans for a commercial venture, which he'll run in addition to Goodwill Wine; one which will pay his bills.

A major challenge is the perception that 'charity wine' is cheap and nasty. In fact wine lovers shudder when the words 'charity' and 'wine' are uttered in the same sentence.

But David says he selects only the stand-out wines and many are top-shelf drops that he's "giving away" at between AUS\$12 and AUS\$16 a bottle.

With no formal wine training but a background in boutique beer making, he appreciates the complexities of making a fine wine; the techniques, the ingredients and treatment, and what's required for that end result.

Getting people's heads around the simplistic concept also proved tricky. "It was a new concept; a business model that hadn't been done before and it proved hard for people to grasp. It's ironic really – you come up with a business model, and you fine tune and simplify it, to the point that people question how it can be that simple!"

David says the charities especially were searching for a hidden cost or catch they were missing, but it didn't exist.



When asked if he would do anything different if he had his time over again, David pauses thoughtfully.

"Business partnerships are really messy when you don't choose your partner wisely," he says, referring to Ali, his partner of the time.

"Some couples work well together because their skills and traits complement one another's, but I should have identified the skills I needed in a business partner and then sought out that person and ensured they had the same level of energy and commitment to it as I did."

"Instead, I fell into business with my live-in partner after we'd both been through a trauma. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that was bound to bring with it additional stresses and challenges."

Looking back, the fire destroyed and regenerated David's life and career; just as fire destroys and regenerates the Australian bush and gum trees.

It regenerated David Laity, from community filmmaker to altruistic entrepreneur. ■

RIISING FROM THE ASHES

IN A MATTER OF seconds, David Laity's life's work was GONE. And while a BUSHFIRE stripped him of almost everything, it also gave the budding entrepreneur SOMETHING NEW.

WORDS HELEN COLLIER