

Emergency Services Week

Commemorative Speech

SATURDAY 8 JULY 2006

Chief Officers, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. *[pause]* Good afternoon. My name is Vicki Munslow. I have been with the State Emergency Service for over 6 years and I have had the privilege of leading one of our fine local SES Units, Rivers Unit, for nearly 5 years now. Today, I have been asked to speak on behalf of the volunteers from the Rural Fire Service, the Community Fire Units and of course the SES.

[pause]

I am only one of over 1,200 emergency services volunteers who are proud to assist in protecting and preserving life, property and the environment in and around our community. We are capable, compassionate and confident and we, well most of us anyway, believe deeply in what we do.

[pause]

During my time as a volunteer I have developed a theory about why people choose to become emergency service volunteers and why they either stay or leave. It is a very simple and general theory that I have jokingly called 'Vicki's Volunteer Triangle'. The left side of the triangle is called 'giving' - people join to give something to the community. The

right side is called 'learning' – people want to learn some new things and the base of my triangle on which the triangle sits is labelled 'belonging' – volunteers to feel like they belong to something, they that they included. If any of these expectations cease to be met, then you lose your volunteer.

[pause]

Now, just to give you a bit of a snap shot of our parent organisations. The Rural Fire Service (RFS) has a very specialist skill in all aspects of fire management in rural and bush environments in the ACT and has approximately 370 volunteers.

The Community Fire Unit, with a current membership in excess of 750, was set up in the ACT following the Canberra fires in 2003 and reflects similar arrangements that are in place in other areas of Australia. The CFU as a whole is run by the ACT Urban Fire Brigade and CFU volunteers are trained and equipped by the UFB. Having CFUs in place along the suburban-rural fringes of Canberra means more Canberrans are able to self-assist during times of fire, which significantly decreases the chance of property destruction due to fire in vulnerable areas.

The ACT SES has the least amount of volunteers of the three organisations with a total membership of between 180 and 190. We are also a little bit different from the RFS and the CFU in that we are active,

fully operational and we train all year round. We don't have a specific season to work around. While we have primary responsibility for storm and flood preparedness, prevention and protection in the ACT, we are very much jacks of all trades. We train for and are ready to attend just about any emergency.

We volleys come from all walks of life. [pause] There are everything from doctors to builders to farmers to students, and everything in between. Of course, given that we are in the ACT, it would be remiss of me not to mention the disproportionately high number of both Federal and local public servants who volunteer. Our ages range from 16 to over 80 and we bring to our respective organisations many different backgrounds, experiences, skills and abilities. This is what makes our emergency service volunteer culture so rich and so interesting.

[pause]

I think that the name 'volunteer', as it is applied to us, is somewhat of a misnomer. To me it has inferences of being temporary, unplanned and spontaneous and believe me *that* couldn't be further from the truth. Regardless of which service we belong to we all train very carefully and very regularly to ensure that we can do our jobs safely, effectively and professionally. [pause] The fact that not one emergency service volunteer life was lost during the 2003 fires is a testament to how

seriously we take our service to the community. Like professional emergency services workers, who do this for a living, we have standards and competencies to meet. There is no slack given because we are labelled 'volunteers'. We accept that and we are equal to the challenge.

[pause]

We have been involved in many, many small scale operations in the local area that probably most people don't even know about as well as some quite large, well known ones and there has been the odd interstate operation too. Some of the major responses volunteers of the ACT have been involved in include:

- SES and RFS Task forces to Sydney and the South Coast for storm damage and to fight bushfires
- The Thredbo landslide
- The Canberra Hospital implosion
- And of course the Canberra fires that struck in both 2001 and 2003

[pause]

Besides all of our operations, we also do a lot of training, assist at many community events, and conduct education programs for the community.

While being a vollie can often make one as busy as the proverbial 'one-legged man in a donkey-kicking competition', we do have a lot of fun do what we do (most of the time anyway) and I personally wouldn't have

missed it for the world. Many volunteers will tell you that they have two jobs – one that they get paid for and one that they love. (*Not me of course, I love my paid job as much as my volunteer one*)

[pause]

In the whole game of volunteerism, there is another group of people who need to be recognised in all of this. They are the unsung heroes who we drag along for the ride - our families, friends, employers and workmates. Sometimes they put up with a lot.

[pause]

On behalf of all of the emergency services volunteers I would like to profoundly and publicly thank those people who not only allow us to us to take time out to do our thing but who support us during both good times and the not so good times. [pause] I think that it is fair to say that without them, we wouldn't be able continue to do what we love.

[pause]

Emergency Services Week is a time for all emergency services to promote public awareness of their roles and responsibilities and also to reflect on the contribution that they make in order to serve and protect the ACT community.

Thank you for your time attention. I hope that you have enjoyed the day!