

Spirit of the Mountain



Bushfires devastated the forests and houses of Ferny Creek in January 1997. Seven families and one teacher from the primary school lost their homes and three people died. In the aftermath, the Dandenong Ranges Music Council (DRMC) engaged professional musicians and composers Susie Davies and Phillip Splitter to work with the children of Ferny Creek Primary School to express their feelings about the forest and the fire. After the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983, the DRMC had observed the impact of its commissioned work, *Elements*.

Together they sang, danced, played instruments, learnt to improvise, and created a mural and a mythic fable about the fires. After listening to all the stories, Susie and Philip wrote the song *Island in the Sky*, which reflects four stages as the children described them.

Life before the fire:

'... We chose to build our homes here far from city pace, / Our neighbours are our family, each one a smiling face, / People who don't live here often ask us why, / Because this is our home – our *Island in the Sky*.

Panic as the news of the fires spreads:

... Some of us remember, it's been this way before, / As the blue sky turns to red and the raging monster roars. / The fire is overwhelming, exploding all around, / Our precious trees and homes are burning to the ground. / We try to save possessions, some beaten by the flames, / Others retreat to safety, silent in their pain.

Fighting the fire:

... Helicopters, Super Scoopers, C-F-A, / Volunteers, fire-hoses, tennis balls in drains. / Mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, we toil, sweat and cry, / To save our precious mountain, our *Island in the Sky*.

Regeneration:

... Like the leaves that start regrowing, green against the black, / New life is emerging and most of us come back. / With fierce determination we toil, sweat and cry, / Because this is our home, our *Island in the Sky*.'

The song is included in the CD *Rising From the Ashes*, and is still sung regularly at Ferny Creek Primary School. The school performed the song again in 2005 as part of *The Fire Cycle*, a DRMC community music project addressing the hills community's strong environmental concerns, particularly about taking responsibility for living in a bushfire prone environment.

In an interview (*The Age*, 24 May 1997, C3) Susie Davies is quoted as saying, '...now I understand [why the Ferny Creek people stay after such devastating fires]. The community is so strong. They are so bonded. They know everybody, it is a beautiful community and they really celebrate life.'

From Bev McAllister

What can we learn?

Ready for change

Devastating bushfires called for a healing process.

Making a start

DRMC engaged composers to work with the children of Ferny Creek Primary School.

Strength in numbers

Mapping your assets

Energy levels were high with the desire to regenerate.

Learning from others

Professionals were engaged to lead the sessions.

Have a plan

Getting your message out

Performances were advertised in articles in local papers with photos of children. A CD and booklet were produced.

Resources & partnerships

Australia Council, Arts Victoria, Dandenong Ranges Community Music School, Upwey High School, Dept. of Education, Rotary Club of Waverley, Truck Radio, Sherbrooke Parish of the Uniting Church.

Resilience in tough times

Keeping things going

Island in the Sky is still performed.