

## MEDIA RELEASE

### Art therapy makes a difference in remote communities

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“I wish more men would come to stuff like this. To let go of some things from the heart. I felt that tonight. I let some stuff go...”

Many people who lived through the devastating East Gippsland bushfires continue to deal with the aftermath, such as this Cann River man. For some, ‘talking therapy’ is not easy; expressing his feelings through art was different.

The Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) Victoria has just finished a free, six-week art therapy program for people aged over 18 years old in Cann River and Mallacoota. The program was funded by Gippsland Primary Health Network (Gippsland PHN) and delivered by a qualified art therapist with the support of two RFDS Victoria Outreach CARE workers.

By the end of the program, participants had created a range of expressive pieces of art through the use of MeCards, mandalas, a tree of self, poems, an animal totem, prayer beads, a journey image and a hand of gratitude. However the look of the final art piece was not important; art therapy is about the process of creating and what emerges from that experience.

RFDS Victoria Team Leader – Wellbeing Operations, Molly Stilo, said while RFDS had been providing mental health and wellbeing services in the region for five years, this was the first time the service had facilitated the delivery of art therapy.

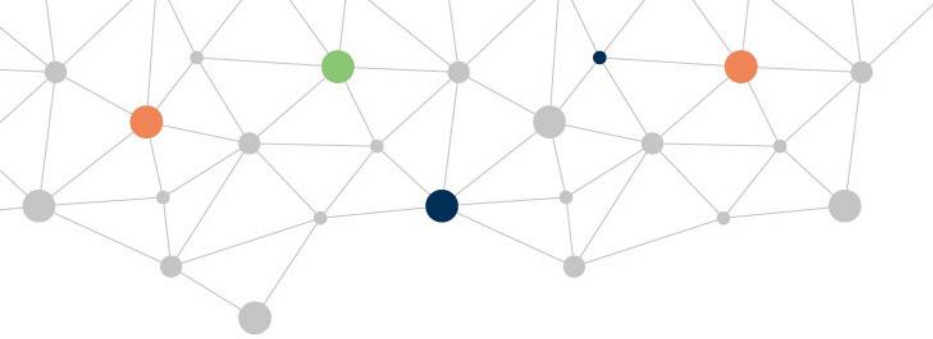
‘Talking therapy’ is not suitable for everyone, according to Ms Stilo. “Some people express themselves in other ways. With art therapy, you don’t need to be good at art – it’s about helping people explore self-expression and, in doing so, finding new ways to gain personal insight and meaningful coping strategies.”

Each session was 90 minutes in length and delivered by a qualified art therapist from Gippsland Lakes Complete Health, Andrea Farley, with support from members of the RFDS Victoria Outreach CARE team members, Amber Wade and Michelle Connell.

Participants engaged in a range of art therapy processes, determined by the art therapist.

Art therapy provides a safe space to express thoughts, emotions and experiences without needing to speak. Engaging in creativity like this can aid recovery as it helps people to focus, relax and improve overall wellbeing. It can help people cope with difficulties and stress, and speed up the recovery process.

“The program was aimed at people who had been impacted by the bushfires, in particular those who have difficulty articulating their feelings and are reluctant to engage in traditional talking



therapies,” Ms Stilo said. “Art therapy provided these people a way to access, express and process their emotions and experiences.”

In their feedback after the six weeks, participants praised the art therapist, saying they appreciated using a safe space to convey their thoughts, feelings and emotions. Some even want to continue with their art, exploring other forms. For others, it was a personal and private journey.

Some of their feedback provides an insight into measuring the outcomes:

- “We are lucky to have expert people come to deliver this type of program at Cann River.”
- “I’m going to use this as an ongoing strategy and thanks, this has made such a difference to my day.”
- “I want to thank you for opening up the right side of my brain. I am now seeing event solutions in imagery instead of trying to work through things in words.”
- “Thank you for your kindness and thoughtfulness – it was so lovely to get that book that you shared with me.”
- “Thank you for seeing me. I’m in a tricky space at the moment and I need it right now. It’s a testimony to your kindness, skill and compassion.”

Gippsland PHN Chief Executive Officer, Amanda Proposch, said it was important to listen to those people with the lived experience of the bushfires.

“The impact of the bushfires will be different for each person and we need to support services like this to ensure no-one falls through the cracks,” Ms Proposch says. “The communities may be small but the impact of the fires is enormous.”

After discussions with communities and educators, RFDS Victoria will now deliver a program for young people aged between 12 and 18, starting on 17 May. Funded by Gippsland PHN, it will be delivered by an art therapist who specialises in working with children who have experienced trauma.

**ENDS**

**Caption: Some of the artwork produced in the art therapy workshops.**

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