

How Braidwood community radio became lifeline of information during Black Summer fires

ABC Illawarra / By [Jessica Clifford](#) and [Justin Huntsdale](#)

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Gordon Waters manages Braidwood FM with a handful of volunteers and was on air for months during the bushfires. *(ABC News: Justin Huntsdale)*

As bushfires roared towards the NSW Southern Tablelands town of Braidwood in December 2019, there was limited information and communication.

The Rural Fire Service's Fires Near Me app was providing basic warnings, but those on rural and isolated properties were concerned the information was not specific enough.

ABC reception from Canberra and Bega can be patchy in the town; on this occasion emergency information was hard to hear.

Gordon Waters, the manager of local community radio station Braidwood FM, knew he had to step in and help.

Key points:

- Braidwood FM was the only local source of emergency broadcasting available to the town through the black summer fires
- Volunteers kept it on air for months on end
- It is now the platform for a new podcast, which examines the town's bushfire story.

"Being on the ground and having local information was imperative to the success for what we did," he said.

He grew up in Braidwood and knew the area intimately and the property owners by name.

"We were the only reliable station for both reception and content," he said.



Meet Mongarlowe's mosquito army (ABC Illawarra: Sarah Moss, with footage by Matthew Thane)

"We could narrow down the information to people's property names and it gave people a better understanding of what was going on at the time."

For several months, the volunteer-run community radio station in a small building behind the Braidwood RSL club and golf course became a community lifeline.

Mr Waters and his team of volunteers provided emergency broadcasting live for hours every day until there were no further updates.

An ABC spokesperson said Braidwood was known to have difficulties receiving ABC services because it was in an area that triangulated transmission signals from three locations – Canberra, Illawarra and the South East coast.

The spokesperson said to ensure full coverage of ABC Radio in the region, a new localised transmission service would need to be built and maintained, but the ABC was not funded to provide such a service.



Rose Ricketson (right, with Mr Waters and Claire Young) said she wanted to capture the kindness in the community in her podcast. *(ABC Illawarra: Justin Huntsdale)*

New podcast helping the community heal

Braidwood resident and filmmaker Claire Young diligently listened to the community radio station for months during the bushfires.

"My experience of the bushfires was being at home with two little girls and worrying about the smoke," Ms Young said.

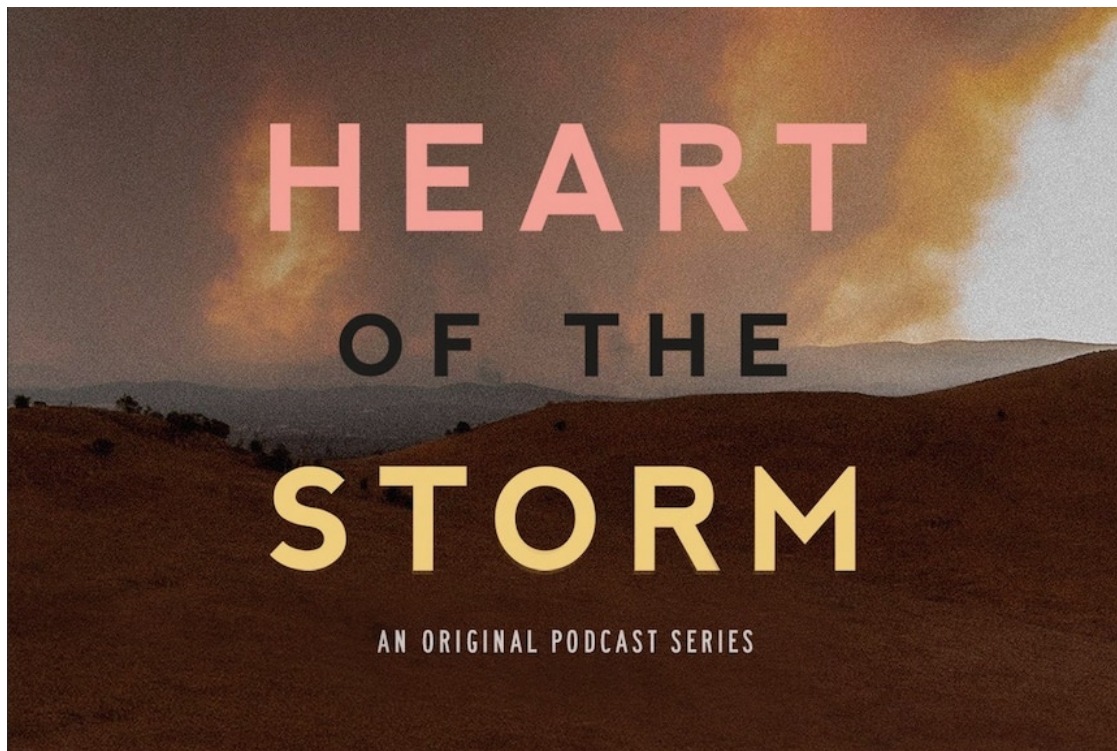
"Nobody could put out these fires."

When they were eventually extinguished, she wanted to help.

Along with friend and fellow audio producer Rose Ricketson, she began to formulate ways to assist.

One idea was to create a podcast.

Three years later, the six-episode documentary, [Heart of the Storm](#), is being released in weekly segments on Braidwood FM.



Heart of the storm is a podcast created by locals, for locals with support from Braidwood FM and Queanbeyan-Palerang Council. *(Supplied: Rosie Ricketson)*

Podcast heals community

With funding from the Queanbeyan-Palerang local council and support from Braidwood FM, the pair interviewed people from all over the area, giving them an opportunity to share their fire stories publicly.

"When you construct narrative around an experience, it's a beautiful way to tell a story," Ms Young said.

"First and foremost, these stories are for our community.

Ms Ricketson said for her, the podcast was a way to heal and give back to her traumatised community.

"The thing that got me through was seeing the kindness in each other," Ms Ricketson said.



Heart of the Storm podcast creators Rose Ricketson and Claire Young wanted to create something to help their community. *(ABC News: Justin Huntsdale)*

"One of the reasons I've done this project is I never want us to forget that feeling.

"We wanted to make sure people had time and space to share and that we could do our duty of care," she said.

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