

In late March, roads and sporting fields became lakes in Lismore, NSW, with homes and businesses totally submerged in floodwaters.

# HOPE AMID HEARTBREAK

WHEN CATASTROPHIC FLOODS HIT QUEENSLAND AND NEW SOUTH

WALES RECENTLY, IT WAS ORDINARY AUSSIES WHO STEPPED UP TO HELP.

WORDS ANGELA SAURINE

PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES

Houses along the Hawkesbury River in Windsor, NSW, were inundated in March. **BELOW** Volunteers in Murwillumbah, NSW, helped to sweep away the smelly sludge of mud, oil, garbage and sewage left behind by the deluge.

## THE RAIN CAME...

and it just kept coming. In February and March this year, parts of New South Wales and South East Queensland were ravaged by relentless rain 'bombs', which resulted in destructive flash flooding. And the damage was widespread – the towns of Lismore and Coraki, in the NSW Northern Rivers region, were all but erased.

When footage of desperate locals – including entire families with their pets, elderly residents and pregnant women – stranded on rooftops began circulating on the news and social

media, it spurred many into action. Kind-hearted people from nearby communities showed up with shovels, bins and brooms, prepared for days – or weeks – of work as the clean-up began. Some cooked for exhausted victims; others paid for clothes, food, petrol and essential supplies for struggling strangers.

Here, some of those generous helpers share their experiences... *Country Style* is donating 10 cents from the sale of every copy of this issue to Givit. For more information and to donate, visit [givit.org.au](http://givit.org.au)



## INSPIRED TO ACT

*Byron Bay resident Odette Barry, from public relations company Odette & Co, did everything she could to help – from buying underwear for flood victims to making sandwiches and even joining the 'mud army'.*

When she learnt her friends' house in Mullumbimby, NSW, was destroyed in the floods, Odette wasted no time heading there to help with the clean-up. She soon found herself knee-deep in mud, helping mop and carry furniture onto the street. "The most heartbreaking thing was my friend throwing out her wedding dress and her wedding shoes," Odette, 36, says. "We were standing in front of a massive pile of her life, and she started clawing back items, like her son's crib from when he was a baby. She said she didn't know whether she wanted to keep it to hand down to his children. It was made of timber and mixed in with chemical waste from the floodwater, it was toxic... but you have to hold space for someone in that situation. In the end, she realised she couldn't keep it, she had to let it go. There were so many moments like that."

As soon as the freeway heading north reopened, Odette drove up to the Tweed to buy underwear – one of the essential items added to a whiteboard list at the Mullumbimby evacuation centre. She and her husband Chris, who moved up from Sydney seven years ago, also bought \$400 worth of food and made an esky full of sandwiches, which they took to Coraki – a small town that sits on the confluence of the Richmond and Wilson Rivers, south of Lismore.

"I saw that there were people still on their roofs five days later," Odette says. "We didn't know if we could get through, but I thought, 'We have a 4WD, we can have a crack at it'. We just went doorknocking and offered to help clean up. We wanted people to know they didn't have to weather this storm on their own."



## CREATIVE AID

*Artist Emily Imeson, who lives on a hill at Lindendale on the outskirts of Lismore, sold her paintings to raise money for local flood victims.*

From her home on a hill at Lindendale on the outskirts of Lismore in NSW, painter Emily Imeson witnessed the devastating floods unfold. As her father and boyfriend set out in their tinnies to rescue people stranded on their roofs, 30-year-old Emily did whatever she could to offer support. She started collecting donations, and helped to clean the homes and cars of friends and strangers.

When the floods hit, Emily had been preparing for an art exhibition at the Elevator gallery in Lismore. Sadly, the site was destroyed in the natural disaster, but fortunately her works were still safe on high ground.

Although painting is her sole source of income, Emily, whose moody landscape pieces are inspired by her childhood experiences in regional Australia, started selling her artwork online, with 100 per cent of the profit going to flood victims.

"The Northern Rivers is my home and it's seen a lot of natural disasters," Emily explains. "But it's more extreme every time. The question is: what is the climate going to do in the future, and how do we live with it?" >



"I saw that there were people still on their roofs five days later."



PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES, ANNA HUTCHCROFT, ABBIE MELLE



As roads leading to Gympie on the Sunshine Coast, Qld, became impassable in late February, evacuation orders were issued for the town. **BELOW** In Murwillumbah, NSW, piles of debris and ruined possessions sat outside every house.

“When you go out and volunteer, you see normal people doing superhuman things. No-one’s trained for this. Everyone has just jumped to action.”



### FEEDING THE MASSES

*Lauren Langley and Jarrod Dan, from Gympie-based catering company Beauty and the Beard Eats and Events, fed volunteers and threw them a thank-you bash.*

When the Mary River flooded at Gympie, in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, most of chef Jarrod Dan’s team was stranded on the other side of the river from his restaurant, The Bunker Smokehouse & Bar. But he and his wife, Lauren, opened outside their regular hours to feed volunteers. “I may not be very good on the shovel anymore, but I can feed people,” Jarrod, 36, says.

That led to them getting a contract to cook for the SES as well. “We were feeding 100 to 150 volunteers a day,” Jarrod adds. “We served things like brisket, slow-cooked pork and salad.”

With the help of donations from brewery companies and other suppliers, the couple, who have catered events including the Sunshine Coast Craft Beer & Cider Festival, Heart of Gold International Short Film Festival, and the Gympie Show, also hosted a thank-you event afterwards, which was attended by around 300 people and raised \$25,000 for the recovery effort.

“I’ve lived in Gympie most of my life, so I’ve seen a fair few floods, but being part of the business community now, it was really amazing to see everyone get in and help out,” Jarrod says. *CL*



### ANSWERING THE CALL

*Byron Bay-based interior designer Jason Grant helped deliver food and other supplies to communities impacted by floods throughout the region. He also used his social media following to raise awareness of what was happening.*

As he drove through the streets of Lismore, delivering much-needed supplies to people affected by the floods, interior designer and stylist Jason Grant found it hard to comprehend the devastation before him. House after house, in street after street, had a sprawling pile of rubbish out the front. Muddy mattresses, upturned lounges, suitcases, children’s bikes, books, fridges, televisions, guitars... an entire life’s-worth of possessions lay ruined.

“There were streets where you couldn’t see the shops or houses because the rubbish was piled so high,” he says. “It was like a war zone.” When the floods began, 47-year-old Jason, who moved from Sydney to Byron Bay five years ago for a lifestyle change, felt compelled to help. “I didn’t even really think about it,” he says. “Everyone I know has just been doing something every day.”

Jason and a friend, who owned a van, began delivering food and other items to stricken communities. He also shared photos and posts on Instagram, where he has more than 100,000 followers, to raise awareness of what was happening. He told people which reputable organisations they could donate to, including a GoFundMe page set up by catering company Pip’s Plate and Natural Ice Cream Australia to deliver chef-cooked meals to people in evacuation centres and towns isolated by road closures and landslides.

Jason, whose projects have included the retro Blue Water Motel in Kingscliff, was buoyed by the region’s strong community spirit. “When you go out and volunteer, you see normal people doing superhuman things,” he says. “No-one’s trained for this. Everyone has just jumped to action.”



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