



MEDIA RELEASE

May 2021

DUMBALK VOLUNTEER STILL BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS AFTER 40 YEARS

CFA volunteer and south Gippsland dairy farmer Janet Auchterlonie was the first woman to join her local brigade in the early 1980s and nearly four decades later she's still trying to break down barriers.

The former Dumbalk fire brigade captain continues to contribute many hours to the brigade and the wider volunteer service, and is encouraging more young people to follow her footsteps.

However, it seems some have the wrong image about being a CFA volunteer and Janet wants to set them straight.

"People imagine it's a very risky endeavour but it's not," she says. "I've been to so many fires over 40 years but I've never felt in danger. There's the image of someone with a hose in front of 20-foot-high flames and that puts them off but the reality is very different. You can get in dangerous situations but our training and safety-first culture minimise that risk and statistically I'm more likely to be injured on my farm."

Janet, who was earlier this year named South Gippsland Shire citizen of the year, plays a big part in ensuring the safety of volunteers. She is the brigade training coordinator, chair of the District Planning Committee training sub-committee, a volunteer representative on the joint CFA-Volunteer fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) training committee, and chair of a committee to develop strike team leaders.

"There's a lot more training now and it's very inclusive," she said.

As a regular strike team member, adding to the volunteer capacity in times of major fires, Mrs Auchterlonie sees the benefits of constant upskilling.

"We're trying to build consistent standards and get the right people with the right skills to do those roles and make sure we maintain their skills maintenance when we go for a few years without a major incident" she said.

During the 2019-20 fires in NSW and East Gippsland, Janet went on seven deployments as crew leader, driver or strike team leader and was away for a total of 28 days. Her husband Rob is also a dedicated long-time volunteer and made a similar contribution. For the first time they were away together, leaving their son to run the farm.

Volunteering has advanced since her first days on the back of a truck alongside Rob during blackout work at Driffield, near Morwell, after a major fire in 1983.

"I was the first female member of the brigade but I felt that's what you did in your district – you joined your local brigade. I never noticed too much that I was the only female, maybe because I mostly worked in traditionally-male professions."

After moving to Dumbalk, Janet and Rob found a proactive, welcoming and progressive brigade. And says she felt welcomed and respected in the volunteer service.

"I was thinking of dropping out of CFA, but as soon as we walked through the door at Dumbalk, we were like old friends."

She also found more opportunities. "The fact that I could become an officer and a captain for six years; that wouldn't have happened 40 years ago," she said. "I didn't chase those roles – I had men encourage me to stand."

Janet, 61, has stepped back from the captain's role but remains one of the brigade's most frequent responders and is dedicated to training younger members both locally and further afield.

"We're maintaining the status quo with numbers but the average age is getting older," she said. "Most of our members are out of town so it would be good to get some new people involved, especially young people."

"You get so much personal development out of it. I'm getting more involved in some dairy issues and the skills I've gained from the CFA have given me the springboard I need to deal with the dairy industry."

Volunteering remains the cornerstone of regional communities and Mrs Auchterlonie continues to enjoy being part of the CFA and Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria. "The VFBV is very important," she said. "A lot of people don't realise how much the VFBV does on behalf of volunteers."

"The CFA is the community for the community. This means that it can reflect some of the issues that our society has, issues that needs fixing and must be fixed. But it also must be remembered that everything that is fine and good and inspirational about our community can be found in the CFA in abundance."

Dumbalk brigade captain Dallas Campbell said Mrs Auchterlonie was an inspiration to all volunteers.

"Janet does a great job. She's very passionate and is always contributing night and day locally and on a group and state level, especially with training and driver training," Mr Campbell said.

"The brigade is ticking along quite nicely and we have a few younger members at the moment which is really good, but we'd always welcome more," he added.

VFBV CEO Adam Barnett said volunteers like Mrs Auchterlonie were the heart and soul of their communities and the CFA.

"Janet symbolises the critically important role women play in the CFA with her dedication to training and safety and her commitment to supporting our volunteer surge capacity during major incidents," Mr Barnett said. "She is an inspiration and role model to all volunteer firefighters and we are incredibly proud of her."

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