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ESF IMPACT

newsletter

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ESF Better Together Luncheon

After paddling an incredible 2,400km down the Murray River, ESF Board Director Tony Pearce has officially completed his trek. To celebrate his achievement and the lasting impact it will have on the emergency services community, **ESF brought together 180 supporters, partners and sector representatives for a special luncheon focused on leadership, adversity and human connection.**

support them, while raising \$50,000 to fund an additional ESF Residential Wellbeing Program.

The Residential Wellbeing Program is an early intervention initiative that gives emergency service workers who have "experienced a lot" the opportunity to step away from their everyday lives for four intensive days of learning, reflection and connection. Guided by experienced clinicians with a deep understanding of the sector, participants develop practical tools to support their wellbeing alongside a small group of peers who understand the unique challenges of emergency service work.

Learn more about ESF's Residential Wellbeing Program

"The uniform can create an image of strength and control and sometimes an unwillingness to ask for help – but underneath the uniform are people who hurt just like you and me," explained ESF CEO Siusan Mackenzie in her opening address. "That is why ESF has established its Residential Wellbeing Program – to help those carrying an often-silent burden from the work they do for us."

A journey of endurance and purpose

Speaking about his trek, Tony admitted that his greatest fear was not being able to finish – especially given the unpredictable weather conditions and strong currents that forced him off the water for two days and placed him in several dangerous situations. With up to seven hours of paddling each day, often without a break, he reflected on the mental challenge of the journey: "it becomes really monotonous, lonely and uncomfortable."

But any hardship was outweighed by the knowledge **that every kilometre paddled was helping to support the mental health and wellbeing of Victoria's emergency services community.** Reaching the finish line and surpassing his fundraising goal of \$50,000 was a deeply rewarding moment, but for Tony, the real reward was knowing that the funds raised will enable more emergency services workers to access the support and connection offered through the Residential Wellbeing Program.



The luncheon also provided an opportunity to recognise luxury travel provider APT, whose generous contribution played a significant role in helping Tony achieve his fundraising milestone. APT spokesperson Sam Briggs emphasizes that “supporting the Emergency Services Foundation and local volunteer services was a meaningful way for APT Luxury Travel to recognise the dedication of those who help others in times of need, while strengthening the communities that are home to our travellers, staff, travel agent partners, and operations.”

Graeme Simpendorfer: Rethinking strengths and resilience

The need for mental health support in emergency services was also highlighted by keynote speaker Graeme Simpendorfer. In his speech, he reflected on his time as a Victoria Police detective: “Looking back now, that job wasn't the thing that broke me. It was simply the moment I began to recognise how much I had already been carrying.”

For years, the TEDx speaker thought that resilience meant carrying pressure, responsibility and expectations without complaining – but eventually learned that it's not about how much you can carry, but about recognising when it's time to put something down. This understanding, he said, is what makes initiatives like the Residential Wellbeing Program so valuable: “What struck me when I learned more about the Residential Wellbeing Program wasn't that it teaches resilience. It was that it creates space.



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emergency service personnel and their families, he said: "Programs like the Residential Wellbeing Program aren't just changing lives. They're changing futures. They're giving people permission to stop carrying things alone. They're helping people understand that seeking support isn't weakness."

Lived Experience

The impact of the residential wellbeing program was further highlighted by Matt Pulin and Carolyn Young, two former participants, who spoke about their experiences at the luncheon. After several traumatic incidents as an Ambulance Victoria paramedic, Matt went on WorkCover before discovering ESF's Residential Wellbeing Program. Reflecting on his experience, he said, "the unique nature of the RWP was that for those four days, I could just be myself and not worry about any other roles that I take on in my life."



Carolyn Young shared a similar sentiment. After a series of traumatic jobs, she found herself feeling anxious, depressed and angry. Afraid to acknowledge the extent of her struggles, she initially turned down a place on the Residential Wellbeing Program, believing she wasn't deserving of support as a police dispatcher. After eventually attending, she described the experience as life changing, highlighting the lifelong friendships she formed and the lasting benefits she continues to draw on years later.

better.

More event info and photos

"This event and Graeme Simpfendorfers keynote make you think about what you should be doing to look after yourself. Even though you're doing a job, you still need to look after yourself and share your struggles, rather than just keep them inwards."

Sharin Styles, Red Cross

"Tony is amazing and he has an amazing group of people behind him, and what he did was for an amazing cause. The fact that it's my friends, and workmates who he's helping makes it so personal and so worthwhile."

Jo, Ambulance Victoria

"Today was fantastic. It was great to come together with a shared purpose: learning more about ESF and the important work it does, while reaffirming our commitment to looking after ourselves and each other."

Dan White, FFMVic

"As volunteers, what was said today resonated very deeply with us. I'm just really glad I got to hear these stories and I'm excited to support ESF and its work in any way we can."

Rebekah Graham, CFA

"Following Tony's journey down the Murrey River and to catch up with him on day 10 with some of our VCCEM staff and volunteers was fascinating. It's great to now get the opportunity to celebrate his return, acknowledge the great work ESF does, and celebrate the successful fundraising for another Residential Wellbeing Program."

Ed Murphy, VCCEM

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