

ABC

EVERYDAY

Lismore's 1974 flood was the biggest on record, until this week. It's another to add to James O'Brien's family folklore

ABC Everyday / By James O'Brien



Pat, James O'Brien's sister, being rescued early Monday morning. (*Media-Mode: Brendan Beirne*)

PERSPECTIVE

It's late Monday afternoon and I'm thankful my family are safe and sound.

They don't have any power, they don't have any food, and they don't have any clothes.

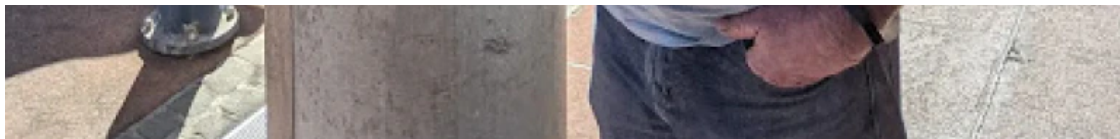
Like, seriously *no* clothes aside from the ones they were wearing when they were evacuated from their homes in South Lismore.

Anyone who has ever been to Lismore knows the city floods — hardly a year goes by without the river coming up.

The first big flood that I remember as a child was in 1974. All around Lismore there are signs that highlight that.

[LIVE UPDATES: Follow the latest on the NSW floods with our live blog](#)





A relative who had never visited Lismore could hardly believe his eyes when I pointed out the 1974 flood marker. (*Supplied: James O'Brien*)

'This flood has gone so much higher'

The '74 flood was the biggest on record. But I remember my dad's sister-in-law Eileen Crummey/O'Brien — a well-known local First Nations woman — talking about floods of similar heights to this week's in the days prior to European settlement.

Back in '74 the CBD was inundated as well as parts of North and South Lismore. All of our family's houses in South Lismore escaped the worst because our houses were built on stilts, as is pretty common in Lismore.

But [this year's flood has gone so much higher](#).

In '74 the flood peaked at 12.15 metres. This time, the flood will peak 2m higher than that!

During the 1954 flood, Mum, Dad, Granny, Uncle John, and my four older sisters had to live in the roof cavity of their low-set house for several days as the water swirled below.

Almost 70 years later and only one member of the family survives; my sister Pat. Never in her wildest dreams did she think she would ever be in that position again.

But, today, she found herself sitting on a chair on the kitchen benchtop, with water up to her chest.

She lives in a high-set house now and, when this flood has peaked, she will have had about 2m of water in the upper level of her house.

Pat's husband Jack and their grandson Sam stood in the water as they waited for boats to rescue them.



Lismore's streets have become rivers and boats now travel where cars should be. (*Media-Mode: Brendan Beirne*)

ABC Everyday's **Perspectives** is all about giving you a chance to share what you're going through. Chances are there's others facing the same highs, lows and life experiences. In a short paragraph, email us your pitch: everyday@abc.net.au

'Thank God she's alive'

I checked in with them all a few times overnight but by early morning I suggested they evacuate.

"Can you get out? I think you need to get out," I told Pat.

By that time, they had already moved their cars to higher ground and the water was coming up, so they were effectively trapped in their houses.

Thank God the rescue boats arrived in the early daylight hours. They were assisted into the boat via a narrow kitchen window and were taken to the nearby Ballina Street Bridge.

Pat is a little bruised from the experience, but thank God she's alive.

When I spoke to them on the bridge, there were about 20 other people with them.

The SES told them they couldn't transport them any further at that stage as they still had another 200 people to rescue.

However, Pat has a lung problem, and her resuscitation machine was covered in water, so an ambulance was called to come and pick her up to take her to Lismore Base Hospital.

Jack and Sam went to the evacuation centre at Southern Cross University until later joining other relatives at a home in Goonellabah, which is up on the hill.



Lismore locals have banded together to help rescue their neighbours and loved ones.

(Media-Mode: Brendan Beirne)

'Grab a ladder and climb into the roof'

Everyone has also been joined by my niece Karran and her young family who took refuge in the roof of their two-story house in South Lismore.

I never ever thought I'd recommend that Karran would need to grab a ladder and climb up into the roof, but that's just what they did.

"That's what Mum and Dad did in '54, and I think you should do that too", I told her.

Where to get help:

- For emergency assistance, contact SES in NSW or QLD on **132 500**.
- If your life is at risk, call Triple Zero (000) immediately.
- Listen to ABC Local Radio for regular updates:

After a few hours, another family member was able to use his fishing boat to rescue them. This involved a long ride over several kilometres to finally reach safety. The depth and the strength of the fast-flowing floodwater made it frightening to travel in.

"We were at the same level as the electricity wires," Karran told me.

"I kept the girls' faces covered — so they couldn't see anything."

We all know it's likely some people have drowned.

No one in Lismore expected such extreme flooding. Both recent arrivals and long-term locals like my family never expected anything worse than the '74 flood.

It's been a roller coaster of a day for my family in Lismore, and me. We've stayed in touch hourly, though there's a bit of radio silence now, as mobile phones have started to run out of charge.

"We don't have any power, so I'll have to go and sit in the car or go around for a drive," Pat's daughter Michelle joked when we spoke earlier today.

I've done a couple of spots on ABC Radio today to tell the story of what they've gone through. Everyone needs to know how bad this is, and when the time is right, I hope people will support my beautiful hometown.

James O'Brien presents [Editor's Choice on ABC Radio](#), which features yarns collected by a team of reporters from around Australia. James is a proud "Southie" who spent half of last year back home with his family in South Lismore.

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