

ABC

EVERYDAY

Lismore's flood victims find comfort in 'generous' volunteers who pitch in, clean up

ABC Everyday / By James O'Brien



Lismore is being supported by "wonderful" volunteers, writes James O'Brien. (*Instagram: Nathan Gordon/Supplied: James O'Brien*)

PERSPECTIVE

I'm home in South Lismore helping clean up our family home. It's been left devastated by the record-breaking flood that saw water reach up to 2 metres inside the two-storey house.

With thick, putrid mud covering every surface of the house, not only have we needed to remove and clean the contents, but we've also needed to gut our family home. The lino, the carpet, the wall panelling — everything has had to go.

We're not alone; there are thousands of homes in Lismore and other towns throughout the Northern Rivers of New South Wales that have seen similar devastation.

I didn't expect to see half a dozen volunteers arriving at the door each day to offer help.

Yesterday it was six volunteers from the Gold Coast. There were four women who did an awesome job of cleaning mud-covered household goods and photographs, and there were two huge blokes (a carpenter and a plumber). They all achieved in just an hour or two what we had set out to do throughout the whole day.

Today there was a couple from Byron Bay, a bloke and three young people from the Gold Coast. They had no airs and graces and no sense of pity. They were all wonderful people who happily did anything we needed help with.

These generous people pitched in to do anything that needed to be done. From physical work like ripping up carpet, lino and floor tiles, or pulling down once-fashionable wall panelling, to more tedious tasks like washing dishes and more photographs.

Then there were the people who came to our door with food; fresh salad wraps, coffee and chocolate.

Later we were joined by a group of my niece's colleagues from Lismore Base Hospital.

They have been awesome in their hard work and care. One, in particular, has been wonderful in recognising the emotional stress we've all been under. Another will be delivering dinner for us all tonight.

We are so incredibly fortunate to have been helped through this. The community response has been amazing.

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



These volunteers turned up from the Gold Coast and Byron Bay to happily pitch in and help. (Supplied: James O'Brien)

Overwhelmed by simple tasks

One of the volunteers told me today that she has been seeing many residents overwhelmed by the scale of the mess and destruction they've been faced with.

"A lot of people in the homes we've visited just stand and stare into space," she said.

I had just been apologising to her for finding it difficult to respond to a very simple request.

I can't remember exactly what it was, but, to illustrate, I found it difficult yesterday to put on rubber gloves — I struggled for a couple of minutes to find the thumb hole.

Today, I've seen two other family members go through this also. My job today quickly became one of assigning them simple tasks that didn't require much thought.

"I need you to wash these plates," I said to one family member.

"I need you to sweep this floor," I said to another.

It's the one part of this recovery process that I didn't consider. I was expecting tears as we cleaned our family home, not an inability to think clearly. But that's what has been happening.



Lots of my James's memories are in his childhood home, including this toy car. (*Supplied: James O'Brien*)

'That's my home on the lawn'

Today was the first day that my brother-in-law Jack — who's more like a father to me and has lived in the house since 1969 — came down to assess the damage to his home.

"It's as bad as I expected, and then 100 per cent worse," he told me.

Later this afternoon, we sat around and shared many moments of laughter as we reminisced about family stories. It was a welcome end to the day.



Residents in this street have all their belongings on their front lawns. (*Supplied: James O'Brien*)

I had earlier checked on the welfare of some near-neighbours and visited the former Union Street home of my late-sister Nancy, who died last year.

The floodwaters in the street reached the guttering of several houses.

The residents of these homes now have their household possessions sitting outside on the front kerb awaiting assessment of what can be saved and what will go to the garbage tip.

A woman named Cathy lives in what was my sister's home.

Cathy told me she'd bought the house last year and, after significant renovations, only recently moved in. She said the ordeal has been horrible.

"That's my home on the lawn," Cathy said.

"I can never go through this again."

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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