

MR RELIABLE *to the rescue*

After 14 years as a volunteer this disaster hero is helping to write the blueprint for others to follow in his footsteps. Alex Bernard interviews *bmag's* next candidate for Brisbane Person of the Year

It is pitch black and the only sounds are metal debris grinding against concrete and the trees creaking and groaning under the pressure of the water. Danny Armstrong is guiding a rescue boat through the treacherous floodwaters of Brisbane. "SES Rescue. It's the SES!" he yells out. "Over here! We need help!" anguished voices call from the darkness. It's a familiar scene for Danny Armstrong, 42, who has volunteered for the State Emergency Service amid some of the worst disasters in our history, including the latest Brisbane flood and Cyclone Yasi.

It was while Armstrong was in Cardwell responding to the crisis following Cyclone Yasi that the volunteer group leader was appointed to his current position in the education and training services division of the SES, where he is now helping to write policy and the training manual for future volunteers. However, he still volunteers for "activations" and attends week night and weekend training sessions.

Armstrong is an affable bloke with a broad smile and kind face that resonates

"Fear is a natural part of the process; if you're managing that fear it keeps you safe, it makes you evaluate things before you do them"

warmth and capability. Watching the Thredbo landslide disaster unfold in 1997 spurred him into action to help others. "I wanted to do something with my time but I didn't want to play golf. I guess I wanted to give back to the community, not just do something for myself, so that's when I decided to volunteer with SES."

Brisbane-born Danny spent much of his early years here but also lived overseas due to his father's military postings. "I guess growing up seeing Dad serve his country in both the army and then air force had a big impact and mum also worked with Blue Nurses. I just felt compelled to do it, to contribute in some way."

Jan Irons, SES group leader of north

eastern group, was the Cyclone Yasi deployment commander and has worked with Armstrong throughout his 14 years service. "When I was put in charge of Yasi, I thought 'right, who's the best person to help me run this show? Danny.' I know what he can do. He just gets in and gets things done and never looks for credit. He's Mr Reliable."

"Danny would have been a great ANZAC. He shares those same qualities; strong, capable, a great leader and still retains his sense of humour under incredible pressure," says Irons.

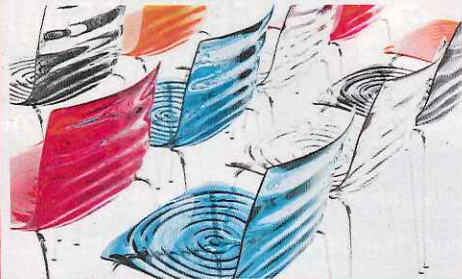
During the Brisbane floods Danny and his team worked to rescue hundreds of people over several days on virtually no

sleep. The experience has left an indelible mark on him. "I don't even know how many people we rescued during those few days. You're under incredible pressure to prioritise who you take first. Children, the elderly...I remember picking up an elderly blind lady and putting her in the boat. We were ducking under the tree branches as we moved out. Of course, normally they'd be metres above your head."

When I ask him about how it affected him, tears prick his eyes. "Um, I had a job to do and I just tried to concentrate on that, but also not knowing exactly what was happening with my own family was very hard. Tears are a part of the job. It's important to have that emotional release to allow yourself to just get on with it."

Danny's face lights up when he talks about his three children, 13-year-old daughter Sarabeth and sons Dylan, 15 and Corey, 18, who all are junior volunteers with the SES. His eldest Corey worked with him from the command centre during the floods. "I was so proud of him and the work he was doing. He

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Danny Armstrong on standby at West End as the floodwaters were rising in January

wanted to be out in the thick of things of course, but he did a great job.

"My wife Clarissa and I didn't push any of the kids into it; they just wanted to do it. I could not be more proud of them for wanting to give back off their own bat." He's also quick to give Clarissa credit for her great support behind-the-scenes, which allowed him to fulfil duties with the SES while maintaining a full-time job until late last year.

Deputy group leader Paul Bunkum is Armstrong's second in command at the eastern group. "I've worked with Danny for about seven years. He is an absolute top bloke. He commands so much respect from the people who work with him. Even from other teams all around the state, they all just think the world of him.

"It's hard to describe the pressure we were under during the Brisbane floods in that rescue boat. We functioned on about six hours sleep over that week, and when we were out in the boat and Danny would

just crack a joke and lighten things up. He just kept everyone going."

But even a seasoned volunteer like Armstrong gets frightened during the course of his work. "I don't know of a member I haven't seen that in. A lot of them won't admit it. Fear is a natural part of the process; if you're managing that fear it keeps you safe, it makes you evaluate things before you do them."

Armstrong's dedication and, passion for his work is evident as is his appreciation of the satisfaction it gives him. "During the floods Corey and I were on our way home for the first time that week and I went via my wife Clarissa's parents' place just to check on them and this woman saw me in my uniform and she just ran down the street and said 'Am I allowed to hug you?' And she said 'Thank God! Thank God for you!'

"They say when you're in SES you bleed orange. I guess I do. It's so much more than a job - you live it."

It's Queensland Week and on Sunday 12 June 3500 people nominated in the state government's Disaster Heroes Program will be presented with a medal to honour their courage, strength and resilience shown during our summer of storms and floods. Fire and rescue staff, police officers and Emergency Services Queensland workers will also be recognised for their efforts with a special service clasp.

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