



THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

MEDIA RELEASE

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Meet the UNDA alumna working in bushfire recovery

When Celina Nunez finished university at the end of 2019, she faced a world fraught with disaster. The year 2020 started with one of the worst bushfire seasons ever seen in Australia and then, as recovery was just beginning, came a global pandemic. Celina has been helping those who were impacted by the bushfires to rebuild ever since.

Celina Nunez first started volunteering in primary school. She took her violin and busked in Pitt Street Mall to raise money for the Salvation Army's Red Shield Appeal. It was daunting, exciting and marked the beginning of her lifelong commitment to helping others, as well as a special connection with the Salvation Army.

Years later for high school work experience, she got the chance to work in the Salvos' support centres and saw first-hand the hope that the organisation's aid offers people in need.

"Volunteering in high school, I learnt the importance of supporting causes for social justice and social welfare. It made me think more deeply about how I could help our world be a little bit brighter," says Celina. So when deciding what university to attend, the University of Notre Dame's offerings in social justice and sociology subjects were a drawcard.

As part of her Bachelor of Arts degree at Notre Dame, Celina undertook an internship with the Salvation Army Auburn Corps' Homeless Outreach program, which provides food, clothing and compassion to homeless people. It was an experience that stayed with her, particularly as a student majoring in Social Justice and Sociology.

Once she graduated Celina was keen to put what she'd learnt at university into practice by continuing to volunteer – this time with the Salvation Army's Emergency & Disaster Management Department based in Redfern, Sydney.

Soon after, the bushfire emergency began spreading across Australia, and Celina was asked to join a newly-established National Bushfire Recovery Team; a group of specialist outreach workers, assessors and general staff that were tasked with supporting the growing number of bushfire victims by offering counselling and care, as well as financial assistance.

By the end of the season, the bushfires saw thousands of homes lost, millions of hectares of land burnt and billions of animals dead. The work of the Bushfire Recovery Team continues even now, more than a year on.

"Through the generous support of the Australian public, the Salvation Army's 2019-2020 Bushfire Disaster Appeal raised over \$49-million, and with another \$19-million in Australian Government funding, we have been able to help wherever and whenever needed," says Celina.

In the first 12 months of the appeal's launch, more than \$37-million in direct financial assistance was distributed to assist over 13,000 people across Australia. Remaining funds are earmarked for distribution to the people and communities affected by the Black Summer bushfires by June 2023 for long-term and sustainable recovery.

Seeing the devastation of the bushfires first-hand and listening to the stories of loss and survival over the last year is an experience that Celina describes as both heart-breaking and eye-opening. "It has been incredible to



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go on field trips to inland NSW to witness the aftermath of what happened and to listen to the confronting experiences of physical, emotional and psychological trauma as people try to rebuild their lives,” says Celina. “It has broadened my understanding of social justice issues and allowed me to apply what I learnt at university in a practical way to help build resilience in the people we help.”

The relief and recovery efforts of organisations like the Salvation Army are vital for people from fire-ravaged communities who have suffered unimaginable loss and distress. Providing help and support for these people on their journey is what motivates Celina in her work. “I feel privileged to be in an organisation that genuinely helps the needy, vulnerable and disadvantaged,” she says.

“Recovery takes time to rebuild lives, not just homes,” adds Celina. “Alongside the provision of food, shelter and clothing, we offer ongoing care. The assistance that I’m directly involved in provides a much-needed point of connection for victims who can call us on our dedicated phone line to share their personal plight and highlight their need for assistance. Outreach workers and rural chaplains have also been assigned to stay within affected communities, while some assessors from our team travel widely to hard-hit regional areas.”

Sadly, some of the communities in Queensland and NSW who were a year ago fighting bushfires have more recently been affected by flooding, and the Bushfire Recovery team is also assisting with flood relief. “The Salvos’ mission has always been to bring hope to victims confronted by adversity or despair, whether from disastrous bushfires or other natural disasters. This commitment to help never stops,” says Celina.

Celina plans to continue her involvement in social welfare activities and has already committed to volunteering to support homeless people this winter. “I am also considering returning to Notre Dame for part-time postgraduate studies, to deepen my knowledge and understanding of our First Nations Peoples,” she says. “With the Salvation Army recently launching its Reconciliation Action Plan to develop respectful and culturally responsive programs and services, I hope to become more involved in strengthening relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

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