States of mind

Kate Riddell is heading to the US to study mental health first aid. By Meagan Weymes

The Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 destroyed the homes, businesses and lives of many people across the Kinglake Ranges. But more than two-and-a-half years later, with much of the physical rebuilding underway, mental health problems have emerged as one of the quieter but just as devastating legacies of the fires.

It was the growing realisation that emergency service workers were not equipped to deal with the problem that prompted mental health first aid trainer and Parade College teacher Kate Riddell to apply for a scholarship to the United States. She wants to improve Australian first aid, by improving mental health awareness.

After working as a mental health first aid trainer for more than two years, Riddell has seen first-hand the problems this lack of training can have.

"A lot of the emergency service volunteers are confronted with callouts to traumatic incidents but are not equipped with any skills to do anything about it," she says.

The Pheasant Creek resident has been awarded one of four Emergency Services Foundation scholarships, and will go to the US at the end of September to draw from more developed mental health first aid programs abroad.

"I'm really passionate about making sure mental health issues are addressed because of their prevalence and the stigma attached, so when this opportunity came up I thought, 'Why not give it a go'," she said.

While in the US, Riddell will meet mental health and emergency services agencies before writing a report with recommendations to bring home.

Riddell says mental health first aid helps people recognise whether someone is in crisis, teaches them to listen non-judgementally and to be aware of what professional help is available.

"It's about what you can do in the immediate aftermath of something like a road accident, bushfires or someone who is in crisis in our area to minimise the impact of their trauma," she says.

But before she sets off for the US, Riddell will continue to support women in the Pheasant Creek area affected by the fires.

In the aftermath of Black Saturday, she helped set up the support organisation Firefoaxes to allow women to connect.

Riddell says Firefoaxes is even more important two-and-a-half years on as mental health and isolation issues have become more prevalent with less support available.

"We've learnt some valuable lessons and recognise that even though the bushfires are largely out of the public eye, there are still people doing it tough and they still need that support," she says.