

### WITNESS STATEMENT OF BROOKE BURKE

I, Brooke Burke, of [REDACTED], Morwell, Victoria, state as follows:

#### Personal background

1. I am 31 years old and currently reside at [REDACTED], Morwell.
2. I have lived in Morwell all my life.
3. I live with my husband, who is an apprentice boilermaker, and our two children aged two years and six weeks old. At the start of the fire in Morwell I was 32 weeks pregnant.
4. Together with my business partner I own and manage the Gippsland Academy of Dance which is located at 8 Driffield Rd, Morwell. The Gippsland Academy of Dance has approximately 150 students ranging in age from 2 to 18 years old and operates six days per week. I am one of the managers and teachers at the dance school.
5. I am also a qualified primary school teacher. I have worked as a full time primary school teacher for approximately seven years. More recently, I have been working as a relief teacher one day per week at Commercial Road Primary School as well as occasionally at other schools in the community.

#### My experience with the Hazelwood Mine Fire

6. On 9 February 2014, I was with my husband in Warragul looking for a builder to assist us to build a house on a block of land we have purchased on the other side of Morwell. My son was being cared for by my parents.
7. At sometime during the afternoon, I received a telephone call from my Mum advising me that there was a big fire in Morwell and that we may have trouble getting back into town. After the call, I checked Facebook which told me that the fire was near the dance studio. At this stage the studio was my main concern.
8. My Mum and Dad went to check on the studio for me. They told me that the fire was close but not at the studio. Mum and Dad grabbed a few of the dance costumes from the studio (we have almost \$40,000 worth of costumes) and anything else they could. They were then told to leave the street. Mum and Dad then went to our house which is nearby and collected all our valuables and returned to their house on St George Terrace, Morwell.

9. We returned to Morwell around 9.30pm and went to my parents' house. I was glad to be reunited with my son, however remained very concerned about our house and business. My business partner was away from Morwell at the time.
10. The next morning things had calmed down, however there was still plenty of smoke in the area from the fires. We tried to go home, however it was too smoky so we returned to my parents' house. The smoke was like any bushfire. There was haze from the waist up and it was like there was a fog inside our house. I did not want myself or my family to be exposed to that.
11. We did not open the dance studio on Monday 10 February 2014. We re-opened the studio on the Tuesday.
12. We stayed at my parents house for a few more days and then returned home. A few days after we returned, I came home from the dance studio and noticed that the house was very smoky. I immediately had trouble breathing and felt short of breath. I was not sure if this was due to the smoke or the pregnancy, however felt I had to leave. I woke up my son at 10.30 pm and we went to my parents' house. I felt much better at my parents' house.
13. The next week there was a lot on social media about the smoke and we did not know what to do with the dance studio. The children would turn up on some days and not on others due to the smoke. Some parents contacted us and said that we should close the school. There was no official advice that it was unsafe but we were still worried. My business partner and I did not know what to do. It was a very stressful time.
14. I contacted the Shire to ask if there was someone to speak to about what local businesses should do. They said there wasn't anyone appointed at this stage.
15. My business partner and I decided to leave the decision up to the parents about whether their child would attend the classes.
16. Between 9 February 2014 and 22 February 2014, my family went to and from my parents' house and also my brother's house in Traralgon. We went home on some occasions when the air was clear.
17. Our house was covered in ash. Attached to my statement at "BB-1" are photographs of our front porch in the days following 9 February 2014.
18. My parents' house was a newer house than ours and whilst there was smoke around it was nowhere near as bad as our house. It was also on the other side of town away from the mine. I was reluctant to go home as I was not sure if it was safe.

19. On the days when we were at home, some days my house was smoky, but the studio was clear. On other days the house was okay but the studio was smoky. It depended on which way the wind was blowing.
20. On the weekend of the 15 February 2014 and 16 February 2014, we had rehearsals scheduled at the studio. At this stage, the information to the public was that it was safe to be in Morwell. Some parents chose not to send their children anyway.
21. On the morning of 15 February 2014, it looked like a normal morning. We had around 60-70 students attend the studio. However, during the day the conditions worsened and people starting coming to us talking about high carbon monoxide levels.
22. At 1.02 pm on 15 February 2014 I received the following message on my mobile phone "*Watch and Act Morwell residents indoors immediately, close windows/doors/vents. Seek further info via radio*". My business partner and I decided that we had to get all the kids out. A fireman drove by and said that everything was fine but to keep the kids inside.
23. I immediately ensured that all the kids and staff were inside and shut the doors. We then sent a text message to all the parents and asked them to collect their kids.
24. We waited with the kids while their parents came. Unfortunately some parents lived over an hour away so it took some time for them to get to the studio. During this time I started to feel a bit light headed. Some of the kids seemed a little bit off. Towards the end of the time I felt funny, it could have been anxiety, I felt that it was harder to breathe. It was very scary.
25. Prior to the 15 February 2014, I was a bit sceptical and felt that some of the parents were overreacting about the smoke. However, after this day I knew the situation was serious.
26. At 6.46pm on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2014, I received the following text message "*Watch and Act – can go outside and open doors and windows*".
27. We decided to cancel the planned rehearsal for Sunday 16 February 2014. The conditions looked fine but the hysteria in the town was high. That day I started seriously ringing around looking for assistance with the business. The Shire were unable to help. I also called the EPA a couple of times. The guy from the EPA said it was fine and the levels were safe in the building, however he did not recommend any strenuous physical activity. We then decided to run a modified dance schedule with less physically active classes such as ballet.

28. A few days after this the local swimming teacher cancelled her lessons. I was very concerned about what to do with my business.
29. On 22 February 2014, we went on a planned holiday to Merimbula and returned on 1 March 2014. We then returned to my parents' house and also stayed at my brother's house. We still did not feel safe to return home.
30. My business partner watched the dance school while I was away on holiday. She told me that she called the EPA every day to make sure it was safe to run. On Thursday 27 February 2014, my business partner called me and was very upset. She told me that a lot of the parents were saying that we should close the dance school and that the kids and teachers were getting sick. We agreed to close the dance school.
31. On 28 February 2014, I saw the notification from the government to relocate those in vulnerable groups. I felt happy that our decision to close the dance school seemed to be the right decision.
32. That weekend we spent time ringing around trying to find a different venue for the school. It was difficult as we needed a venue with three studios. We were lucky to find a venue in Yallourn North.
33. We relocated the business on Monday 3 March 2014 for three weeks. We were required to pay rent for our old building and the new venue during this time.
34. When my family returned from our holiday, I went to the Neighbourhood House to see whether we would receive any assistance. I was told that they couldn't help me. I was then advised that we would be able to get some assistance and was given a relocation payment.
35. One week later, I received a call asking whether we had relocated away from our home, which we still had. I was then provided with a second relocation payment.
36. As we relocated our business, I rang the Shire again to ask about assistance or information for our business. The Shire didn't have anyone for me to speak to but took my name. About one week later, I received a call from the Shire and was told that there was an information bus for small businesses.
37. My business partner and I went to the information bus and spoke to a man who told us to apply for the small business grant which would be announced soon. He was helpful. He told us to put on every single loss we had suffered including the extra time we spent at the business caused by the fire.
38. Overall, we estimated our loss at approximately \$11,000 and we applied for a business grant for this amount. We were awarded \$5,000 on 24 April 2014.

We have been paid the money, however I understand that the business will be taxed on that amount.

39. We had insurance which may cover some damage to the costumes from the ash. However, it has taken some time to put all the information together and I wonder if it is even worth it. We did not have any business interruption insurance.
40. On 17 March 2014, the Chief Health Officer said that it was safe to return home. However, I couldn't go home straight away because our house was full of dust and ash.
41. On 19 March 2014, I went into labour and was admitted to hospital. I gave birth to my daughter the next day.
42. I have not heard anything from GDF Suez in regard to the mine fire or clean up process.

#### **Health**

43. During the fire I developed headaches and sometimes I had trouble breathing. I also started to get a bit panicky as I didn't know what was going on, but I knew it was not good to stay in the smoke. As soon as the smoke cleared, I felt much better. Not long before I had my daughter, I went to the health centre to get checked. They checked my blood pressure and carbon monoxide level and I was told everything was fine.
44. During the fire period I also noticed that many of the kids at dance school were unwell. They complained of headaches and were coughing.
45. I haven't noticed any long term health effects of the fires other than I have noticed that my children now sneeze a lot. I think this is because of the ash that is in our roof.
46. I am concerned about what is in the air and the long term effects it may have on my family and myself. In particular I am concerned about my daughter who was born just after the fire was put out.

#### **Cleaning**

47. On 20 March 2014, the day I had my daughter, I rang the Shire to see if we could get help cleaning our home. I was advised that it was only just announced and that I would probably get something. Later on I was told this was wrong and the help was only for people on pensions.

48. When I was in hospital with my daughter, my Mum came to our house and cleaned everything for our return.
49. We also had our carpets, couch and curtains professionally cleaned which cost around \$440.
50. Sometime after the fire the Shire came and cleaned the footpaths. Unfortunately, when they did this they sprayed the dirt and ash onto my newly cleaned fence and car. I advised the Shire of this and they told me I could have a car wash voucher due to my experience. It was really disappointing as the cleaning of the footpath was the only assistance we got from the funded cleaning process and they didn't do it right.
51. Attached to my statement at "BB-2" are photos of our front fence and my husband's car after the Shire's clean up of the footpaths.
52. I know that the local school threw out all wood products including posters and cardboard. No one has told me how to clean our house properly and if we also have to throw out the wood products. We have had little guidance about how to clean up effectively and safely.

### **Insurance**

53. My insurance company (GIO) initially said it wouldn't cover the damage to our house because it was not within 10 metres of the fire. I rang the insurance company again later as the media said to push, but had no luck.
54. Later on I spoke to the insurance council who were putting together a group claim and they said I needed to get a formal letter of decline from the insurance company.
55. I spoke to the insurance company again and asked for the letter and was told it would take five days. Some time later, and after I called again, the insurance company advised that they would send an assessor out to our home. I was upset because by then my Mum had already done the cleaning work.
56. I am very concerned about our house and the ash left in the roof. Since we have returned home the kids have been sneezing a lot and I think it was because of the ash in the roof. I visited the recovery centre for assistance and they told me to have a look in the roof, but also said to be careful with the ash as it should be treated like asbestos.
57. I recently got the roof cavity checked by Karvacorp and they said that it would cost just over \$5,000 to clean the roof cavity. We cannot afford this. The

insurance company sent an assessor but he said he didn't need to look in the roof because he had seen other houses in the street. I have made a claim to have the roof cavity cleaned and have submitted the quote I received.

58. I have not received a formal response from the insurance company yet.
59. We were planning to sell our house soon and so that we can build on our new block of land. We had our house valued in January 2014 and it came back as \$185,000 - \$190,00. I am really concerned about what it would be worth now and how much money we will need to spend on it to be able to sell it.

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