

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Fiona Macken

JVN [00:00:00] Content warning this conversation contains details about scenes that emergency first responders encounter. We discuss car accidents, suicide, forest and bushfires. If any of these situations are personal to you, please proceed with caution. Welcome to "Getting Curious". I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by community based bushfire management coordinator and lieutenant of the Diamond Creek Fire Brigade with Country Fire Authority Fiona Macken, where I ask, "How does Australia respond to bushfires"? Welcome to "Getting Curious", this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for this week's episode. So just to kind of set the stage for everyone. We are in Melbourne, Australia, and we are in this really very spacious, get, like getting ready room at the venue where I'm going to do my standup show tonight in Melbourne. So thank you so much for Fiona Macken for coming to talk to us. You are the lieutenant of the Diamond Creek Fire Brigade. This is a very major title. You also are a community based bushfire management coordinator. And you're a volunteer firefighter with the County Fire Authority. So basically, you are very well versed in being a first responder firefighter. You've like been doing this for a-. This is your life. It's your career.

FIONA MACKEN [00:01:27] Well, it is at the moment. But I've only been in the fire service for 13 years, so I'm still a baby.

JVN [00:01:33] A baby?

FIONA MACKEN [00:01:34] Yeah. Absolutely.

JVN [00:01:34] But 13 years is major. That's a lot. That's a good amount of time.

FIONA MACKEN [00:01:37] Maybe to outsiders. But when we've got someone in our brigade who's about to hit 60 years with our brigade.

JVN [00:01:43] Wow.

FIONA MACKEN [00:01:43] I'm definitely a newcomer.

JVN [00:01:45] Well, and I guess in that comparison, since yes, but I think you're an incredibly well-suited person to come talk to us about. And basically, you know, the question today is, is how has Australia combated bushfires? How? I mean, obviously, this year it has been a huge deal with bushfires in Australia. And, you know, your experience in, you know, coordinating bushfire relief and fighting fires, I think is, really lends itself to being able to, you know, to kind of speak to this. But I would love to get some background on you, to get, so everyone to just kind of catch up with, you know, who you are. So tell us. Tell us everything. Start from the beginning.

FIONA MACKEN [00:02:24] Oh, wow. OK. Well, I'm Irish.

JVN [00:02:27] Which I love. I read that. That's so cool.

FIONA MACKEN [00:02:29] Do I need say anything else?

JVN [00:02:30] No. Well, so you're, so you're, so you're from Ireland.

FIONA MACKEN [00:02:34] Yeah.

JVN [00:02:34] And then what happened there?

FIONA MACKEN [00:02:36] Then I finished school and I decided to do a bit of traveling. And I came to Australia to do some ski instructing for a while. And I fell in love with Australia. So I went to uni in Scotland and I came backwards and forwards doing my summer holidays down here in Australia, working as a ski instructor. So I did that for five summers or five winters and then I moved here permanently.

JVN [00:02:57] So. And you also went to-. Didn't? Wasn't there some California in there somewhere too?

FIONA MACKEN [00:03:02] Yeah. There was. So when I was at uni, I decided to do the student exchange program and I went to UC Davis for a year.

JVN [00:03:09] So you have experience living in-. So wait, you went to uni in Ire-.

FIONA MACKEN [00:03:14] In Scotland.

JVN [00:03:15] In Scotland. Yeah.

FIONA MACKEN [00:03:18] Yeah.

JVN [00:03:18] Get it together, Jonathan. So but that's really interesting. So you have experience of living in the United Kingdom, working in Scotland, then coming to the United States and then subsequently coming to Australia. That's very interesting. You've lived in a lot of different places. When did you realize that you wanted to get into the field of being a first responder and of being a firefighter?

FIONA MACKEN [00:03:34] Well, actually, it was in America. So when I was at UC Davis, I decided to train as an EMT. So I did that and I fell in love with everything to do with first responding. So when I came to Australia, first I joined the S.E.S, which is not the S.A.S. Very different. It's our state emergency service.

JVN [00:03:54] What's the S.A.S.?

FIONA MACKEN [00:03:55] Oh well, as in, you know, historical military S.A.S.

JVN [00:03:59] Oh. Americans, we don't know what these abbreviations are.

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:02] Oh, ok, well, let's focus on S.E.S.

JVN [00:04:04] Yes.

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:04] Because that's probably a better thing to talk about.

JVN [00:04:06] Fabulous.

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:06] So the state emergency service, their first responders for flood and storm and also car crashes in some instances. So when I was in the S.E.S., I was up in the snowfields and that was awesome because training meant just hooning around the snowfields on a snowmobile. It was great.

JVN [00:04:23] Is that in Australia?

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:24] Yeah.

JVN [00:04:25] There's snow fields in Australia.

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:26] Yeah.

JVN [00:04:26] Who knew there was snow here that much?

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:29] I know, everybody thinks that the beach and the sun and the hot weather. But yeah, there's some great snow fields here.

JVN [00:04:34] In the north of the country?

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:36] No, here-.

JVN [00:04:36] Or in the south?

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:37] In Victoria.

JVN [00:04:37] There is?

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:39] Yeah.

JVN [00:04:39] And so what happens there?

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:40] Well, next time you come back to Australia, you'll have to have a ski.

JVN [00:04:43] OK. I didn't know there was mountains here. Get it together, Johnathan. So when did-? So you knew in America that was kind of, that was when you trained for it. But like when you were a little were you like, I think I might be in the first resp-. No clue.

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:54] No, really. No, not really.

JVN [00:04:57] I love that.

FIONA MACKEN [00:04:57] Yeah.

JVN [00:04:58] So then when did you transition from being more like in the-? Because what I think E.M.T. That's more like ambulance-y. Right? So when did you make the transition from EMT to firefighting?

FIONA MACKEN [00:05:08] So when I moved to the place that I live now here in Melbourne, there was no S.E.S. unit nearby, but there was C.F.A. So C.F.A. for us is the Country Fire Authority, that's the fire service that I belong to. And I thought, hey, why not give it a go? I've got some first response skills and something that appeals to me. So yeah. That was 13 years ago and I haven't looked back since.

JVN [00:05:31] And so you have been in Melbourne that whole, the, for that duration.

FIONA MACKEN [00:05:35] Yeah.

JVN [00:05:35] And then I know that the black Saturday bushfires. So basically, I think it's hard for people who have never been in, you know, emergency services or a firefighter or first responder to be able to like really wrap their mind around what that sort of disaster would be like. It's like something that we see on the news. And you think like, you know, I hope it's getting better. And then you look for that like thing on the news or it's like, yay, it's all over, like whatever the kind of disaster is. But I think that for first responders and for survivors of these events, it's like such a different experience because you have lived it. And so I guess to back up before that a little bit, so you you come to Melbourne and what is your experience of being the C.F.A? So what's your experience in that like? I mean, you probably don't know what you're going to get.

FIONA MACKEN [00:06:23] Yeah. So we all carry a pager, like nurses have pagers. And basically when an emergency comes through, our pager will go off and we get a brief little bit of information as to what we're going to. But of course, you know, who knows what's going to happen? So everything's different every time. There's no typical day. And because we're all volunteers in our brigade, as most of C.F.A. is, we're probably off doing something really mundane in our ordinary life. And then the pager goes off. It might be 2:00 in the morning. You might be fast asleep in your pajamas. And the pager goes off and you have to, you know, get up and look semi-decent and get in the car and drive to the station and get your fire clothes on and get in the truck. And you're supposed to all of that within four minutes, so.

JVN [00:07:09] Wow.

FIONA MACKEN [00:07:10] Yeah.

JVN [00:07:10] So does that mean like if you're a part of the C.F.A., are you supposed to like, are you meant to live in a certain proximity to the station so that that's like feasible.

FIONA MACKEN [00:07:17] Exactly. Because we still have to obey the road road rules to get there. So we can't speed on our way to the station. So if you live too far away, you're never gonna make the truck.

JVN [00:07:27] And then it's I mean, is it is it typical that like-. Because I mean, Victoria, that's the state?

FIONA MACKEN [00:07:35] State. Yeah. Yeah.

JVN [00:07:36] That's like a pretty big city. Melbourne's like a gigantic city. Is it typical there wouldn't be an S.E.S. in such a big city?

FIONA MACKEN [00:07:43] So within the inner part of Melbourne, the really sort of residential part, there's another fire service called M.F.B. and they're-

JVN [00:07:52] Metro?

FIONA MACKEN [00:07:53] Yeah. So they're like time career firefighters. They'll be at the station when they're on shift. So they don't have to worry about traveling to the station.

JVN [00:08:00] Because they're-

FIONA MACKEN [00:08:01] Getting dressed. You know, they're there all the time.

JVN [00:08:03] It's so interesting how there's like so many different ways for people to become involved in these services like that, because I think there's probably like I don't know about America. Exactly. I think there's probably some other things, it's just cool. It's like just to say that there's a lot of ways that you can get involved generally. So before we go into the Black Saturday fires, I mean, so you are, your pronouns, I'm she her? Your name is Fiona obviously. So you are a female firefighter, which is amazing. And we love that story. But in my mind, I would think that, like, it is a, it isn't, like an occupation that is more male dominated.

FIONA MACKEN [00:08:37] It's, it is. It is male dominated. If you look at the numbers, we've got about 55,000 volunteer members in C.F.A. Of that, about 30, 33, 34,000 are operational, which means they're firefighters. And now I don't know what proportion of them are female, but it's certainly a really good proportion. But I think the thing that people forget about our fire service and probably a lot of fire services is that it's not just about getting a truck out the door. There's a lot of stuff that goes on in the background. You know, we've got to get everybody fed. We've got to get everyone accommodation when they go away. We've got to get fuel for trucks. We've got to do communications. We've got to do education of the public. We've got to do logistics and planning. And not everybody involved in a fire service is a firefighter, but they're the ones that are seen on the media. And that's what everybody thinks about. But we would never be able to do what we do as firefighters if it wasn't for the army of people doing an amazing job behind the scenes.

JVN [00:09:36] That kind of reminds me of like what we get to do on "Queer Eye" sometimes. And really it's like we wouldn't get to-. I mean, obviously not fighting fires, but we wouldn't get to help any of the people who we get to help if it wasn't for a really large group of people like, you know, on the crew helping us make all of these things happen. So it takes a village to, you know, to have a lot of these things happen.

FIONA MACKEN [00:09:53] Absolutely.

JVN [00:09:54] So because also it's like it seemed, you know, that, and that makes so much sense when you say it, because when you think of it, there was like a fire at a home or there has been like

a massive fire in like a car crash situation that's like next to, you know, a forest where something could happen. Not only are you managing well, especially if it turns into like a bigger bushfire, it's like we're dealing with like losing houses and stuff. It's like once the fire is out, there's a whole other contingency plans, like helping people find resources, helping and not only the people who've lost homes, but also the firefighters who have maybe seen all sorts of different things, which I think is a good place to segue into Black Saturday. So you're minding your own business in Melbourne this day. In 2009?

FIONA MACKEN [00:10:37] Mmhmm.

JVN [00:10:37] And what happens?

FIONA MACKEN [00:10:39] Well, we were minding our business that day, but we were aware of the fact that it was gonna be a really bad day. So we've got reasonably accurate forecasts sort of 7 to 10 days out. So we were expecting this day and we were really on standby. So we had all our members down at the fire station. We had everybody ready to go. And yes, indeed, it happened. We got the fires. They were enormous. They were like nothing that anyone had ever experienced before. And because we had come off 10 years of drought, the ground was so dry and the vegetation was so dry that the fire was very, very intense very, very quickly. So as a result of that, you know, a lot of homes were lost very, very quickly. And unfortunately, 173 people died that day. And I guess as firefighters, you know, you train and you train and you train and you prepare. But then something like this happens. And it's really a once in a lifetime event.

JVN [00:11:33] Right.

FIONA MACKEN [00:11:34] Even the fires that we've had this summer, while they've been hugely extensive and, you know, they've resulted in a massive loss of homes and some lives and wildlife. They're very different to the 2009 fires. So, you know, these intense fires do happen and they're really unfortunate. But we do have the opportunity to forecast the weather and prepare to some extent.

JVN [00:11:57] But the fires in 2009 at the time were an unprecedented scope of fires in terms of severity and acuteness in the way that they came on so strong.

FIONA MACKEN [00:12:06] Yeah, they sure were. So my understanding is that the meteorologists that we're looking at, the weather didn't actually believe that the the conditions could actually become that bad. They've never seen anything like it before.

JVN [00:12:20] So when that, so in-. But the fact that the, like this state had experienced drought in 2009, that kind of set the conditions up to have those particular fires be so bad, wasn't that also the case with these bushfires, like there was kind of months of drought that kind of set the stage for it to become so severe.

FIONA MACKEN [00:12:39] Absolutely. So the weather this summer or coming into this summer has been dry. The other thing that was a factor in the fires this summer is that a lot of them were in really remote areas. And so it's very, very difficult to get in and fight those fires so we can use aircraft to an extent. But if there is dense canopy in in those bushy forested areas, then it's really difficult to put those fires out. Getting crews in on the ground to walk in isn't necessarily feasible

either. And getting vehicles in can be really challenging if the terrain is too steep, too rocky, you know, too dangerous. So often these large, large fires get going. And because of the remoteness of the terrain, it's just too difficult to fight them.

JVN [00:13:21] So back in 2009 on the Black Saturday fires, 173 people lost their lives. That's like an incred-, that's a pretty. That is like a large amount of people. So it was that because it happened in towns or like around towns or like on roadways?

FIONA MACKEN [00:13:36] There was a combination of all of the above. But certainly there were a few townships in particular that were hit really hard. So because the fire came so fast and it was so hot, I think people probably even if they felt like they were prepared, you really couldn't be prepared for a day like this. It was it was just too dangerous.

JVN [00:13:58] So in that situation, like once, you know, you get the pager call and it's like we got to get to this area. Is it a matter of well, I can't really even speculate because I have no idea like what happens. Like what happened?

FIONA MACKEN [00:14:12] Yeah, well, so we get on the truck and what we're looking for is some additional information. So we've got a dispatcher who gives us some more information if they have it. So then basically we've got the person sitting in the front seat. They are the crew leader and it's up to them to determine what their crew does unless they become part of a bigger team, in which case there'll be a leader above them that will help to guide them and give them some instruction. But often what happens on those days is we'll do our absolute best to set it all up in a really structured manner. But sometimes the fire is just so fast and so intense and so chaotic that, you know, really we can often end up just going, "Right. Well, this work needs to be done. We'll go and do it because we haven't been given any other particular task".

JVN [00:14:58] Is that kind of what happened in 2009 with the Black Saturday because it was just like so big. It was like everyone get everywhere sort of thing?

FIONA MACKEN [00:15:04] It was a little bit like that. So my particular station, you know, normally we have sort of three trucks and a couple of other vehicles. That day, we had nothing left in the station. All our vehicles were out fighting the fires. So fortunately for us, nothing local actually happened in our area because now we had no fire trucks. So it's, it's a, you know, like like I said, we can plan as much as we like, but sometimes the reality of the chaos just takes over.

JVN [00:15:35] Fiona, we're gonna be **right back with more** "Getting Curious" right after the break. Welcome back to "Getting Curious", this is Jonathan Van Ness. We are back with Fiona Macken. So in 2009 on the Black Saturday fires, was it, were, were those fires able to be put out in like a day, a week? Like, what was the, what was the cleanup like afterwards?

FIONA MACKEN [00:16:00] The cleanup was extensive as it is with all of these fires. So fires like this, like the ones we've had this summer and the ones in 2009, we call them campaign fires. And what the public often don't see is that it takes weeks and weeks and weeks of work by firefighters to mop up, to clean up, to make sure there's no hot spots in the ground. And then we have our colleagues with tree filing expertise who come in and they remove all the dangerous trees and make sure that the environment is safe before it's opened up to the public again. So sometimes it's difficult for the public to understand why a road is closed for an extensive period of time or why

they might not be allowed back onto their land. But we don't want people to subsequently die of a falling tree hitting them or, you know, another fire starting on the side of the road while they're driving down there. So the cleaning up process can be really extensive.

JVN [00:16:52] And then what about the psychological resources for firefighters? I mean, I would imagine that there is a lot of potential for like post-traumatic stress disorder here, depend-. I mean, I'm sure you would see a lot.

FIONA MACKEN [00:17:05] Absolutely. I mean, it's a really unfortunate part of the job. But I think I can only speak for the fire service that I'm a part of. But the C.F.A. is really, really good at providing psychological support to its members. So we've got a number of different layers of support. We've got peer support. So there are firefighters, both volunteer and career firefighters, who are trained to provide support to their colleagues. You know, shortly after the incident or even sometimes on the fire ground, we've also got access to chaplaincy, to counseling and to psychology. So the C.F.A. is really good at recognizing the fact that depression, anxiety, PTSD, all the rates of those things, and unfortunately, suicide is higher in first responders compared to the general population. And so they have all these great structures in place to allow people to access support.

JVN [00:17:55] In your time is in being a firefighter and a first responder in the last 13 years. Have you noticed kind of a more of a willingness for the organizations that, you know, are in charge of the first responders to talk about these things?

FIONA MACKEN [00:18:11] I don't know if it's necessarily coming from the people in charge, but it is certainly much more common for people now to talk about mental health than ever used to be. I feel like in my short time in the organization, the leaders have always been really good at encouraging that. But I think it's become much more a natural part of our lexicon now. So, you know, we will as firefighters and those that support us, we will much more readily talk about the fact that I really struggled with that job or, you know, I'm dwelling on that job more than I should or that job brought something up for me that wasn't really healthy for my mental state. And we'll talk about it and we'll bring in support and we'll always encourage one another to seek support as required. So people are much more willing to have those conversations.

JVN [00:18:56] Can I ask what an example of that would be like if, like if, like if a house like lost a pet that reminded you of like, is that like what someone would struggle with more?

FIONA MACKEN [00:19:06] I'll give you an example from one that we went to a couple of years ago. So we turned out to a hanging. So someone had suicided by hanging. And one of the people that I turned out with on the truck had lost a relative to that particular method of suicide. And for him, that was quiet triggering. And he readily admitted it. He said, this is how my brother died. And this, for me is a triggering episode. And he was really open about going and seeking support.

JVN [00:19:34] And I think it's so important for us to be able to say, like, when we need help, when something has been really traumatizing to us. And that is very clearly something that would be traumatizing. But so. But that brings up another question in that example is that like, you know, firefighters in this volunteer brigade are not only being called out to fires, like it could be an incident of suicide. It could, it like, is it kind of one of those things if who's ever there first? Like if the police don't get there first and you guys are dispatched?

FIONA MACKEN [00:20:00] No, it's less about who's available first. We've actually got a really distinct structure by which we run jobs. We've got a whole system that determines which agency is in charge. So it could be the S.E.S. If it's a storm or flood, it could be the police. It could be the fire service. It could be, you know, the air, air safety people. It could be the train people. It depends on what the incident is. So all of that is already determined in a legal structure. And then if one other, if one of the other agencies is in charge, then we as firefighters might be a support agency.

JVN [00:20:34] Got it.

FIONA MACKEN [00:20:35] That if it's a fire, then it's us.

JVN [00:20:37] Got it. So that but, so is to say that in a supportive capacity, there is like a whole endless list of scenes that you may find yourself.

FIONA MACKEN [00:20:45] Absolutely.

JVN [00:20:46] Wow.

FIONA MACKEN [00:20:46] Pretty much, in fact, it is endless because the system that we work under states that if we have the resources or the skills or the people, then we can be a support agency. So there is actually no end to what we could support. It could be an alien invasion and we could support it.

JVN [00:21:00] Yeah. If you have the people.

FIONA MACKEN [00:21:01] Yeah.

JVN [00:21:02] Yeah. Geez.

FIONA MACKEN [00:21:03] Yeah. It's great.

JVN [00:21:04] You need anything?

FIONA MACKEN [00:21:10] It's fun!

JVN [00:21:10] Can I help you with anything?

FIONA MACKEN [00:21:11] It's loads of fun.

JVN [00:21:11] Is it?

FIONA MACKEN [00:21:11] Yeah.

JVN [00:21:10] So what part?

FIONA MACKEN [00:21:14] Oh you've got to have fun. I think you go nuts in this sector if, well we're probably all nuts anyway. But you know, you've got to have fun and we absolutely have fun. Yeah.

JVN [00:21:23] Is that like, is, is, what are like the fun parts of the job? Is it like the camaraderie between everyone?

FIONA MACKEN [00:21:29] Yeah, the camaraderie is amazing. They really become your other family, really and truly.

JVN [00:21:35] And then what would you say to like other little girls, not only in Australia, but like all over the world that are curious and interested in becoming a first responder or going to school or getting further training at it?

FIONA MACKEN [00:21:45] Look, I'd say there's a couple of things. If it's something that they're interested in, absolutely pursue it because there's something there for everyone. You know, firefighting is not just about being macho and, you know, being some burly bloke. There's so much more to it than that. And the thing that I like to really draw people's attention to is that when we go to an emergency, it's an emergency generally, because it's impacting on people. That's why we need to help. OK? Now, if you are the person who's in an emergency situation and needs help, this could possibly be one of the worst days of your life. You've just had a bad car crash or you've just lost your home to fire. So one of the things about emergencies is that they're generally emergencies because they involve people. So someone's suffering something they need help with. And the thing that I like to remind people of is that when we're attending emergencies, the people are the really important part. They are the they are the part that need the looking after the most. OK, we need to put the fire out. We need to, you know, remove the crashed cars, whatever it is. But there's people at the center of all of this that need caring for. And not to say that men can't do this, but I think women bring a really strong element of caring and empathy to an emergency situation. You know, lots of men are fantastic at this as well. But what I see is women naturally gravitate towards helping the people that are suffering and they bring this whole other caring element into firefighting that perhaps the community doesn't traditionally think of. And I know that we've been to incidents where we've, you know, done an amazing job looking after the people at the center of it. And they've come back to us afterwards with gifts and thank you cards. And they've just been so grateful because that hour or two hours of caring right in the middle of it when they've needed it the most, has really, really helped them.

JVN [00:23:33] And then I just for whatever reason, I had this intrusive thought in when you were telling you about that. So if if that statement or that anecdote makes, like, you know, 80 percent of girls or women who heard that, yes, I'm going into that. But then what if there's a 20 percent who's like, fuck that, I'm just as strong. And I'll, if there's someone suffering, they can give, I'll call you an ambulance, bitch, I'm a go move this fucking car because like I want to show this dude that like I am actually gonna just-, move big hairy bloke! I'm just as strong as you are". Is there ever any girls like that?

FIONA MACKEN [00:24:05] Yeah.

JVN [00:24:07] I love that.

FIONA MACKEN [00:24:07] But like there's something for everyone. There's no one that's excluded.

JVN [00:24:11] I love that.

FIONA MACKEN [00:24:11] You might not, for whatever reason, whether it's a physical disability, a learning disability or whatever, you might not be able to jump on a truck. But there's so many other things that you can do in a fire service. So if people are interested in emergency services, but they're for whatever reason, not able to jump on a truck, jump on an ambulance, whatever. Just look into it anyway. Because as I said, we can't do what we do without the army of people behind us. So become one of those special people.

JVN [00:24:36] So I have like 19,000 other questions. What, with the Black Saturday fires in 2009. Was there any regulations or laws or anything that were not in place prior to that that ended up getting instituted or anything that that, you know, your brigade learned about like in helping people become more prepared in the event of a bushfire or like if it's the states, a wildfire?

FIONA MACKEN [00:24:58] Yes. So probably less around the law, but more around, we had a Bushfire Royal Commission, which was like a huge investigation into all of the circumstances around the fire and how we could potentially prevent all of those deaths again in the future. And a lot of the recommendations that came out of that have been implemented since. And one of the major things was around better communication with the community. So we've brought in all sorts of different strategies. We've got a really great app that allows people to know about emergency straight away. They can read about information and warnings. So they're getting up to date concise, accurate information. And that's been one of the most really pivotal changes that's happened since that time.

JVN [00:25:38] So I know in the, there were some fires in California when I was doing hair in 2016 and 17. I had one client in particular who lost her home and she basically, like a neighbor, called her at 10:30 at night and was like, girl, get out of the house. Like, look out your window. And she was like, we're fine. Like, we're literally going to bed. It's fine. And she looked out the window and there was like an orange wall, like literally coming down the hill, like with she could visually see it was like getting towards the house. So they got out in like the nick of time. But I think it like, I know that instances where I've heard in the states, it's like a communication issue because it's like in those emergency, like, you know, heat literally the heat of the moment, like sometimes things don't happen. So having seen all the things that you've seen. Like what? Like if you're in an area that's like it all bushfire prone, wildfire prone, as someone has been doing this for like 13 years. What like what apps? I mean, like, what do you think people need to do?

FIONA MACKEN [00:26:32] Yeah, that's a really good point. Your friend's experience with, you know, opening the curtains and there's a wall of fire that is a really common story that came out of 2009. So like I said, we now have a whole agency that's dedicated to overseeing the work of the fire services and also to issuing information and warnings. So I mentioned an app which is great, but of course, that only works if your telecommunication systems are still working, which they may or may not be. But we've also got a system of emergency broadcasters using good old fashioned radio. And so we always encourage people to have a battery operated radio, a backup system, so that if they can't access the app, they've still got information. And the other thing that the community needs to remember is that we've got a whole system of fire danger ratings, which tells us how bad a day will be. And we've got a four day forecast for that. So if we know a bad day is coming. It's not like it's 10 p.m. It's happening at 6:00 in the morning. You know, we've got four days notice and we're really, really keen on helping people to understand that.

JVN [00:27:36] And so like if there is like a warning to like you have your evacuation ready or like definitely be heeding those.

FIONA MACKEN [00:27:43] Absolutely. Yep. 100 percent.

JVN [00:27:46] So we're gonna be right back with more Fiona right after the break. So welcome back to "Getting Curious", we have Fiona Macken, so. That makes sense to me. Another question. Obviously there has been discussion in Australia, not only in Australia, like all over the world, about the relationship between more fires, more intensive fires with global warming. And there's people at the highest levels of government that all have, you know, that are approaching this with varied levels of urgency. What is the feeling like? I mean, obviously, you're not like an official, well, maybe you are an artificial spokesperson, I don't know but, is there, is that something that people care to talk about, like within the community? Is that something like is there ever like, global warming? Like, like, like is there ever anyone inside who's like, "No, it's not that". And other ones are like, "It's that". Like is that ever a conversation within the community?

FIONA MACKEN [00:28:43] So I'm not an official spokesperson on these things. So I'm only going to comment on my personal experience. But I'm fortunate enough to sit within the bushfire team in the C.F.A. when, where I work. So I work my full time job for them as well. And amongst us, there's absolutely no doubt that global warming and climate change are real. Absolutely no doubt. And amongst the communities that I've worked in, it's the same. They're all convinced that climate change is real. So I don't experience people that doubt it. However, I know they exist, but my experience certainly has been that there's no doubt.

JVN [00:29:18] But it's like when you are saying that, you know, relatively you're a newcomer into this and there's people that have, you know, that are in your brigade that are approaching 60 years, which means that when they came in to the brigade, there was probably firefighters that had been there for 40 years, 50 years. And basically generationally, we have not seen these these fires of this magnitude, of this intensity so much together.

FIONA MACKEN [00:29:41] Yeah, there's certainly an incidence of the number of really bad fires. But the other thing that we're seeing is a much longer fire season. So traditionally in southeast Australia, where we are, January and February were the bad months. And if we could make it through those two months, then that was pretty much it. The fires that we saw this summer started in September.

JVN [00:30:01] Wow.

FIONA MACKEN [00:30:01] You know, and except for all the rain that we've had. We actually originally expected them to be going into April or May, which is like November for California.

JVN [00:30:10] Right.

FIONA MACKEN [00:30:11] You know. It's crazy.

JVN [00:30:12] Yeah. Like it was like in the middle of the fall here, the fires started here. That's really a hugely long season.

FIONA MACKEN [00:30:19] Yeah. So we've gone from like two months of really bad weather to focus on to almost six months.

JVN [00:30:25] So then I guess, OK, so then that's that. So then that kind of brings us to these bushfires. And so you're just saying that your full time job is also with the-

FIONA MACKEN [00:30:35] C.F.A.

JVN [00:30:36] Which is-

FIONA MACKEN [00:30:37] Country Fire Authority.

JVN [00:30:38] Yes. Thank you so much. I'm just acronyms aplenty.

FIONA MACKEN [00:30:41] So my job's actually to run a community based bushfire management project where we have project officers that go out to the community and basically say, you're at risk. How do you want to deal with it? So traditionally as agency personnel, we've stood up at the top of room in a uniform and we said to people, alright, you're at risk and this is what you're gonna do and this is what you're gonna do. And we'll give you a brochure as well. This is totally turning it on its head and it's taking much more of a community development approach to it and sitting down with the community and saying, OK, how do you guys want to reduce your risk? What would you like to do to stay safer?

JVN [00:31:18] So how did that happen?

FIONA MACKEN [00:31:20] So we have a whole program of work called "Safer Together", which is a government funded program, basically getting all of our agencies and stakeholders in bushfire to work better together. And that includes putting community at the center of everything that we do. And all of "Safer Together" came about after a fire that escaped, basically a planned burn that escaped. And so our our whole philosophy is about, as I said, putting the community at the center of everything that we do and asking them how they'd like to reduce their own bushfire risk. And they may or may not take an option or route that agency particularly like. But agency also need to understand that this is what is important to the community and this is what matters to them. And when we give them the power to make the decisions about their own safety, they'll own it and they'll really run with it. So when they're faced with a fire, they'll do the things that they had planned to do. And then when we've all planned around that together, then it works much better.

JVN [00:32:20] So but basically I was, where I was trying to get with like what you're like your full time in in coordinating and working in firefighting like all the time? Like that's what you, like working with communities.

FIONA MACKEN [00:32:32] So I've got my full time job, which is like running a project 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. Then I've got a casual job on the side which is running community meetings, helping people to stay safer. Then I've got my volunteer roles and they're sort of squeezed in wherever they can be.

JVN [00:32:47] Yeah. But like. Yes. So you are slaying the helping people fight fires and recover from fires game is what I'm trying to say.

FIONA MACKEN [00:32:56] My life is 24/7 fire and my partner is also in the fire brigade and my dad lives with us and he's also in the fire brigade.

JVN [00:33:04] Ah! A family of firefighters. That's so cute!

FIONA MACKEN [00:33:08] Well, we never get a break though. I'm sick of fires sometimes.

JVN [00:33:11] I would imagine. What do you do, I mean, that's a really good point. Like, what do you do as a first responder for self care and for breaks? Like when and if you ever get to have one?

FIONA MACKEN [00:33:20] I'm a bit obsessed with the gym. So for me, it's about staying fit.

JVN [00:33:23] Love it. So that's a really gorgeous way for self care. So we love that story. So when you talk about, you know, it takes a lot to run-. It takes a lot to run like a volunteer organization that sends out fire trucks and coordinates fire trucks and helps people, you know, setup resources. And I think one thing that came out of this, which also like we can 100 percent not talk about this, but I think it's we can edit the fuck out of it. But I think it's important to note is that when, so like so when I was coming to Australia and realized I got the opportunity to do this tour and then I realized that the bushfires were going on at the same time. And obviously from America, I saw, you know, just how much was a need and Celeste Barber was doing such an incredible job with her fundraising efforts. And so I wanted to help there. And we, I urge people to donate through Celeste's efforts. And then after that, I was like, let me work with the RSPCA and the Australian Red Cross for donations to have at the shows so that, and we could send money from the states and anyone that comes here to just help along. And there was a lot of press around the, you know, the 10 percent that Australian Red Cross takes for its backlogs. And I thought about that because I had so many people that were not Australian sending me really intense shitty DMs about that, basically because they had read an article or two. And it says that there's controversy on something which really all you ever need any more to start controversy is like one tweet and then like all of your good work was for nothing and you're like a shitty fucking person forever. According to Twitter, which is, you know, fact. So I'm kidding. But it's like when you're thinking about-, if someone's like, well, 10, 10 percent and they just got, you know, 10 million dollars from for how horrific these are. To me. It's like, yeah, that makes sense. Like it's a bigger, more unprecedented fire than you've ever had, which means that you're probably working with more people than you've ever had and it's more coordination than you've ever had. And you need to get water, firefighting resources, food, shelter, all of these things like that will cost more than ever. So I guess I just asking like that doesn't happen for free.

FIONA MACKEN [00:35:26] You're exactly right. Yeah. And I think in C.F.A., obviously, we're fortunate that the mass of our work force is voluntary. So that is for free, essentially. But when you donate to something like the Red Cross, they're not volunteers for the most part. You know, they've got staff that need to be paid. And this is the career that these people have chosen. And we can't expect them not to put a roof over their head or not to feed their children and not receive their salaries. So I can't speak, obviously, on behalf of an organization such as that, but I absolutely think they're justified in having a certain proportion set aside for their own costs because otherwise it's gonna be chaos.

JVN [00:36:06] And it's like who's the who in who fills that void? Because there's so many governments all over the world that like don't fill that void. And it is places like the Red Cross and volunteer organiza-, or-.

FIONA MACKEN [00:36:16] Well, they might be volunteer staff, but they're still having to be organized by career staff.

JVN [00:36:20] That's what I meant.

FIONA MACKEN [00:36:21] Yeah.

JVN [00:36:22] Yeah. Like you still have people that, like have to-. And if in the absence of them, you think someone else is gonna like do it for free?

FIONA MACKEN [00:36:30] Exactly.

JVN [00:36:30] Like we have to help people.

FIONA MACKEN [00:36:31] Exactly.

JVN [00:36:32] Yeah.

FIONA MACKEN [00:36:32] And C.F.A., although it has lots of volunteers, still cost the government a lot of money. You know, we've still got all of the staff in the background doing all of the non-firefighting work. I'm a staff employee. You know, there's there's all of that stuff that has to go on to support the volunteer workforce. So, of course, it costs a lot of money. So the other thing to bear in mind is outside of the charities like Red Cross, the Australian did, not the Australian, the Victorian government itself has actually established a bushfire relief funds and they're going to donate 100 percent of the moneys that come into that to those that need us. So rather than 10 percent of that money going to cover the overheads associated with charitable causes, they are going to cover those overheads as a government and they're going to give 100 percent of the donated money to the community.

JVN [00:37:20] Werk! So I guess if you're listening to this episode and you were particularly miffed about the 10 percent that the Red Cross of Australia is taking, honey, the Victorian government is not. So just going over there to make your little donation there. Yes. Yes. Yes. So here's the other thing. At the end of every episode I like to do-. You said you were into fitness? Have you ever been to a yoga class?

FIONA MACKEN [00:37:38] I'm terrible at yoga.

JVN [00:37:40] There's no such thing!

FIONA MACKEN [00:37:40] I have the worst hamstrings in the world.

JVN [00:37:42] But do you know that there's no such thing as terrible at yoga? The only way you can be terrible at it is like not to go.

FIONA MACKEN [00:37:47] You haven't seen me.

JVN [00:37:48] No, seriously. Do you know that yoga has nothing to do with how you look on the outside? Like literally zero. Yoga literally means the definition is "union" or like "to yoke" and it's meant to like bring together your movement with your breath. So the only way you could actually like quote, be bad at yoga is if you were dead because you can't breathe. Like if you, if you can breathe.

FIONA MACKEN [00:38:09] I can probably do that.

JVN [00:38:10] Yeah. I'm not like saying you got to go but anyway, the point of that story is that my favorite yoga class that I used to go to, this teacher would say like, "OK, it's time for Yogi recess", which basically meant like if you came to yoga and you were really hoping that he was going to teach you how to do like forearm stand. But like he didn't hit it that day. Like he would give you like two minutes to go to the wall and do whatever you wanted to do. Now, here's the caveat. I want you to be able to say whatever you want to say. If there's anything we haven't touched on. Comma, I am just remembering that I didn't ask you about the differences in the types of bushfires, that there are just different fires, which I think is kind of like interest. So if you have anything you want to speak on and if you could also just ask that question.

FIONA MACKEN [00:38:48] OK.

JVN [00:38:49] Or answer that question.

FIONA MACKEN [00:38:49] I can probably answer that question for you.

JVN [00:38:51] Yeah.

FIONA MACKEN [00:38:51] So there's a few different types of fires that we think about. So when I think in America, you guys refer to them as wildfire.

JVN [00:38:58] Yes.

FIONA MACKEN [00:38:58] So those are outdoor fires. And we would probably use the word bushfire more. But bushfire really talks about where the bush and the forest and things were on fire. But of course, we can have grass fires as well. So we have bushfires and grass fires. We can scrub fires as well, often down on the coast. We've got more scrubby kind of vegetation.

JVN [00:39:16] Oh is that like on the beach?

FIONA MACKEN [00:39:17] Yeah.

JVN [00:39:18] Yeah.

FIONA MACKEN [00:39:19] Yep. That kind of thing. And then they're structure fires. And I suppose the one that most people would think about would be a house fire. But of course, lots of other things can be structures as well. And then there's other non-structure fires. So a non-structure

fire might be a car crash that's resulted in a car fire. So we've got lots of different classifications of fire.

JVN [00:39:39] That just brought up another question. I'm so sorry. So how do you train for all those different kinds of fires?

FIONA MACKEN [00:39:45] It's module by module. So the first training that you do is more of your sort of bushfire type firefighting skills. So really basic stuff. And then you build up from there, you learn to do some sort of attacking structure fires, but from the outside, then you build up to attacking a structure fire, but actually going into a burning building and that includes learning to wear breathing apparatus on your back. Then you you go on and you'll gain other skills. You might gain driving skills or crew leadership skills. You know, it goes on and on. There's no end, really.

JVN [00:40:18] But you've got all that stuff. You're like the lieutenant. You're like, you're, you're like, you're all the way up.

FIONA MACKEN [00:40:23] No, there's a few that I don't have that I'd like to get.

JVN [00:40:26] Like?

FIONA MACKEN [00:40:27] So I would like to become a structure crew leader. So I'm a crew leader, but not in a structure fire situation. But that's quite hard to find, that course. And I'd like to become a strike team leader. That's where you go out and you lead a group of trucks when there's a bushfire.

JVN [00:40:42] Ooh. Strike team. So you'll be the one that's like, and then so basically would you have like a map and you would like know where all of the fires were, and you'd be like, "No, take this highway because like then we can get this triangulation".

FIONA MACKEN [00:40:51] Yeah, sort of. But-

JVN [00:40:52] Interest-

FIONA MACKEN [00:40:54] But less about the highway, unfortunately.

JVN [00:40:56] Why because you have to like drive in the forest?

FIONA MACKEN [00:40:58] Yeah.

JVN [00:40:58] Really?

FIONA MACKEN [00:40:59] Yeah.

JVN [00:41:00] So you off road?

FIONA MACKEN [00:41:01] Oh yeah. Absolutely. None of it's on roads. Well very little.

JVN [00:41:05] Wow.

FIONA MACKEN [00:41:06] Yeah.

JVN [00:41:06] So, with the, how do you train for like when you-, is there like some big like football field that you guys like get to light on, or that they light on fire and then it's like okay you five like-?

FIONA MACKEN [00:41:19] Not so much a football field, but we've got some training grounds where they've got simulations. So they've got like simulated petrels, what do you call them? Gas stations.

JVN [00:41:30] Uh huh.

FIONA MACKEN [00:41:31] Simulated buildings, simulated cars. So those are awesome. We get to practice all our skills in a really safe environment. The other thing that many parts of Victoria do is they do plan burning. So where they actually plan to do a burn in in a part of a forest, for example, as a way to reduce the vegetation. And that's really great training for people that are new as well.

JVN [00:41:53] For whatever reason that just reminded me of this story that I feel like would be so hard to train for as a firefighter. In my hometown, when I was growing up, there was this massive flood and then this gas station that was like submerged blew up and there is a fire on top of the river on this gas station. Have you ever heard of that?

FIONA MACKEN [00:42:11] Wow. Yeah. Absolutely. If it floats and it's and it's flammable, it will go on fire.

JVN [00:42:15] OK, now I have one more question. Then we can be done. Unless you have another yogi recess, or it wasn't your yoga recess. Focus. What is like the most like unusual fire that you've ever had to respond to?

FIONA MACKEN [00:42:26] Oh, goodness. Does it have to be fire?

JVN [00:42:28] No.

FIONA MACKEN [00:42:29] Because I can tell you about some other fun stuff.

JVN [00:42:30] Yeah.

FIONA MACKEN [00:42:31] I've been to someone with their hands stuck in a toaster. That wasn't that long ago, actually. And, you know, she was trying to do. She's trying to rescue a gummy bear at the bottom of her toaster.

JVN [00:42:40] I wonder if it was like an edible gummy bear and it's hard to get in Australia. So she was like, bitch, I can't waste my-.

FIONA MACKEN [00:42:44] No, it fell out of her cupboard and it landed in her toaster. And rather than turn the toaster upside down, she shoved her hand inside.

JVN [00:42:50] No.

FIONA MACKEN [00:42:51] And then it got stuck. So we had to cut her out of that. We've been to a cat stuck in a tree.

JVN [00:42:58] Ah! Did you get it?

FIONA MACKEN [00:42:59] Yeah, but the hose is really handy in a situation like that.

JVN [00:43:02] And then what happened?

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:04] I'm sure it just went home.

JVN [00:43:06] You, you just sprayed the hose and it was like "Oh, I don't like that branch". And then you've got it to come down by, like, spraying-.

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:11] Yeah.

JVN [00:43:11] That's smart.

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:13] We went to someone who reported a scratching noise in their wall and there was a bird stuck in their wall cavity.

JVN [00:43:20] What about snakes? Like some fucking like Australian ass snake.

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:22] You know, we've got a great snake hunter in the suburb where I live, so we don't need to worry about snakes. We've got someone else who can do that for us. But often when we open up the cover on a hydrant.

JVN [00:43:32] No.

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:33] There's snakes in there.

JVN [00:43:34] No. No! How many? What's the most you've ever seen?

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:36] Oh, I've only seen one. But we know-.

JVN [00:43:38] Was it the black adler?

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:40] No, we tend to get tiger snakes where I live.

JVN [00:43:42] Are those poisonous?

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:43] Yeah.

JVN [00:43:43] Oh my god.

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:45] Or red back spiders they're the other ones.

JVN [00:43:47] No!

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:47] Yeah. They like hanging out and hydrants too.

JVN [00:43:50] Do you have brown recluses here?

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:51] No.

JVN [00:43:52] Those are very scary spiders in the Midwest, honey.

FIONA MACKEN [00:43:54] We've got plenty of scary things.

JVN [00:43:56] There's so much, you guys, you got like the the spades of the scary things in Australia.

FIONA MACKEN [00:44:00] And I come from Ireland. There's nothing scary in Ireland.

JVN [00:44:03] Your accent has really become like a beautiful little specimen. She's like a little Irish. It's a little Australian. It's like such a treat. I can't wait for everyone to hear it. So is there anything else that, is there for your yogi recess where I won't inundate you with questions. Is there anything you want to end up on?

FIONA MACKEN [00:44:18] No, I don't think so. I guess my parting message would be to just remember there's something for everyone. So, you know, don't be afraid to approach the fire services or the emergency service because we're awesome. We're like another family.

JVN [00:44:32] What a good way to end. Thank you so much. You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week with Fiona Macken. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. If you need help managing trauma related to these issues, please see the description of the episode for resources. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quin. Thank you so much to Quin for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter at CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. "Getting Curious" is produced by Colin Anderson, Julie Carrillo, Chelsea Jacobson, Rae Ellis and me, Jonathan Van Ness.