



Family of fighters save four houses

EVONNE BARRY
 IN HUMEVALE

WHEN the fire brigade could not get to Humevale on Black Saturday, the Draper family simply formed their own.

Led by David Draper, this DIY brigade saved at least four houses in bushy scrubland.

And now, the six-man team is the toast of this otherwise-devastated settlement on the outskirts of Whittlesea.

Mr Draper summoned his two sons, Scott and Andrew, son-in-law Scott Brander, life-long mate Les Ainsworth, and nephew Steve Catania early on Saturday morning, well before fire threatened.

Then he rang his boss at the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, asking to borrow some heavy-duty equipment suitable for fire-fighting.

But despite being fully prepared,

Mr Draper was shocked by the furnace that ripped through his town later that day. The ferocious blaze ultimately claimed the lives of at least six locals.

"I have lived here all my life, and I am very aware of bushfires," said the grandfather of five.

"But I have never, ever seen anything like this before. I have been on the fast train in Paris, and I can tell you – it was going faster than that."

Not that that was enough to stop Humevale's makeshift fire brigade.

Armed with a grader and a 14,000-litre water tanker – and after being told the CFA could not access their remote town – the Draper clan got to work.

They spent almost two hours battling the blaze along Parker Rd.

"The CFA are just fantastic, but it was local people who saved a lot of people around here," said Joanne Russell, whose home was saved by the Drapers.

"They really are heroes, but they are so matter-of-fact about it. They don't think it's about them being heroes. They just did it. We are so fortunate."

Mrs Russell fled the fire with her husband Jamie and their youngest son Jay, 13. Their eldest son Luke, 18, was already far from the blaze.

Mr Draper's wife Liz was also full of praise for her husband and sons.

"I am very, very proud of my boys," she said.

"It was a terrifying day, but I was confident that they knew what they were doing and that they wouldn't do anything stupid."



THANKS, MATE: Jamie Russell (left) with David Draper, who risked his safety to save neighbours' houses.
Picture: Andrew Henshaw