

AWEN Member Interview

With the storm season coming to a close this month, Queensland Chapter Lead Alicia Palmer caught up with Townsville Emergency Management Officers – Bec Torrissi and Brittany Saunders – who together, make up 66.66% of Townsville’s Emergency Management Unit.

Bec and Brittany have been experiencing what can only be described as a baptism by fire. Since starting in their roles with Townsville City Council, they’ve had to contend with a global pandemic, a water supply emergency, and tropical lows – to name a few. The young guns share their experiences as sector newcomers and offer their advice to others finding their way.



Brittany Saunders (left) and Bec Torrissi (right) in the Townsville Local Disaster Coordination Centre

Alicia: Let's start at the start. You are both fairly new to emergency management, tell me about this journey you're on and your experience since coming into this sector?

Brittany: It's been positive, engaging and has involved a lot of learning on the run. Since I started, we've experienced four minor disasters, and it's been a whirlwind experience, but it's good to see how everything works without having a major disaster.

Bec: Coming into the emergency management team, I'd been here four days and then COVID hit. My role involves a lot of community engagement, so that went out the door as restrictions came into place. My role became very focused on business continuity. It really opened my eyes as to how critical our roles are within Council. My previous role in Council was an administration background – so this was very new and required a lot of on the job training! You can't train for this kind of stuff, you just have to adapt and go with the flow.

Alicia: So Bec, your background is in business administration, and Brittany, you've come through from project management, how have those skills help with these positions?

Brittany: Coming from a projects background, you're already exposed to so many different things on a daily basis, you have to meet project milestones, but things chop and change in that industry as well. Things don't arrive on time, things go wrong, so you have to adapt. I think that experience has helped me in this role, particularly in a disaster. You go in with a plan of attack, things change, so you adapt. When things are going a hundred mile an hour, you just join the train and keep going.

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Bec: When I finished school I got a traineeship for business administration, so I've done that ever since I left school. So, in this role, we develop and modify plans, and learn from each event, and a lot of administration goes into this kind of work – everything from budgets and meetings, to coordinating the Local Disaster Management Group meetings. I've been able to bring those skills into this role, and years of being in administration for Council has really helped me hit the ground running. It's been an interesting field to get into, if someone had asked me 15 years ago if I thought I'd be working in disaster management, I would've said "no way".

Alicia: You've both stepped into these roles from diverse backgrounds, now that you've been in the roles for a while, is this something you would recommend to others as a career pathway?

Brittany: You have to be a certain type of individual to work in this field. You have to be that person that is happy to go the extra mile, because you're going to be working long hours. Everyone that I've met in this industry is so passionate and they love it – I think that's a really big thing. Some people might come and go quite quickly because it's not for them. The people that you see in this field are in it for a long time. You're a special kind of person to be in this field because to see what they've been through and what they go through...is incredible. They're all very good people.

Bec: And the skills you gain in this work opens opportunities to work in other organisations, such as QFES or QLD Health. So that's quite unique in that that there are a lot of other doors you can access working in this field.

Alicia: You could say that this has been a baptism by fire for both of you, coming in when we've had a pandemic and multiple other events that have really stretched business continuity for Council, along with other multiagency events. What do you wish you had known before coming in?

Bec: I don't think anything can really prepare you. You get things thrown at you every day, and they're not the same. To come into this space you need to be proactive, adaptable, and you need to have an open mind. One thing I really have learnt is to not take things personally in here. When it's on, it's on, and people say things, but it's not personal – it's the heat of the moment. This kind of work is for some, and not for others. And you learn that pretty quick.

Alicia: What has been your experience working in what has traditionally been described as a male dominated sector?

Brittany: For me, I see it as a fairly female dominated area.

Alicia: That's so interesting! So, your experience with all the different agencies you liaise with in your roles has been that women are represented around 50%?

Bec: It would be about half and half, particularly our core members of our Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) meeting, and we have Madam Mayor that chairs the meeting.

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Brittany: Seeing the Mayor at the head of the meeting is a big thing. I know that she's the Mayor, and she already holds a lot of power, but seeing her at the head of that meeting is amazing.

Bec: Our advisory members are predominately men, but I guess the world is changing. A lot of women are coming into very professional positions, and they're been treated as professionals. The world is changing altogether, not just in this area, but everywhere - we're not coffee makers.