

Video Transcript: Mics & Sirens Season 2 – Episode 8

[Female Narrator] You're listening to Mics & Sirens, the official podcast of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia. DFES acknowledges the traditional owners on the land of which this podcast is created, the Whadjuk people.

[Sirens sound while news footage of fires play]

[Allison Donovan, Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions in Western Australia] That really rocks you. Has a very big impact on how important it is to look after people in fire. It's not really about fire for me. It's about people. We're actually providing different opportunities based on gender, and both genders are missing out on that skill set. We need to continue to support women and build networks for women to be able to have really good mentors, both men and women.

[Female Narrator] They were once a rare sight on the frontline, but women in emergency services are now a rising force. While there is more work to be done, DFES and other fire agencies have made some advancements in gender equality over the years, and we are seeing more women leading the fire fight. One of them is Allison Donovan, from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions in Western Australia, who's part of an initiative aimed at diversifying the frontline. Allison is Western Australia's first female Level 3 Incident Controller, the highest level of incident management in the country. And she shares her insights as a female fire leader and, without thinking, the operational decisions she too has made based on gender.

[Di Darmody, Interviewer] Welcome, Allison.

[Allison] Good afternoon.

[DI] You've been at DBCA for 25 years now. Can you take us back to where it all began in 2001? What was your first role?

[Allison] Yeah, I actually started with the agency as a grad recruit. So, I came into, straight from university, came through the grad recruit program and got a placement in Wellington District, which was in Collie. Had never been to Collie, that I could remember as a kid. And yeah, worked in kind of the recreation type role. I was meant to be writing a management plan for the new Wellington National Park at the time, and ended up working in Parks and Visitor Services, and then also across into the national park type role.

[DI] And what did you know about fighting and managing fires in those early days?

[Allison] Pretty much nothing. A little bit of growing up on a farm, doing a bit of burning of, you know, bracken fern and things like that, but, didn't really know anything about firefighting. Not in the landscape approach of management, of fire across landscape.

[DI] So, how did you progress within the agency and what role did fire play in the jobs you had then?

[Allison] Yeah. I guess, I was sort of all consumed with just doing the national park ranger type stuff, out in the park: looking after visitors, building rec sites, cleaning toilets, things like

that. I was probably a little bit oblivious, to start with, that fire was a real key part of what we do as Parks and Wildlife. And it was a different name back then, but same thing.

But it's really important that everyone in our agency in the regions are involved, because when you get a fire, you need everyone to be involved. So, being a female, I was kind of pretty much just pulled into things like catering and things like that, which was fun. I thought it was great. I was having a great time. I was driving around, giving people meals and drinks and things, but what I didn't realise was I was missing out on some of that operational experience, being out on a truck, you know, learning how fire operates in the landscape. So, although I was enjoying what I was doing, some of the opportunities I was getting weren't really leading me down the path of operational fire for my career growth, I suppose.

[DI] How were you learning about fire then, given that it was an important part of the job you were doing?

[Allison] Yeah, it's a good question. Probably wasn't a lot. But then in hindsight, I was learning about people, and I think that's what drives me to want to be involved in fire is the people. So, I probably learned a lot about things like logistics and keeping people happy. And happy firefighters mean that they're more efficient and effective on the fireground. So, it was probably things I was learning, but they were different things and not that operational, tactical sort of wet stuff on the hot stuff.

[DI] Five years ago, you became involved in the Women in Fire project. Can you tell us a little bit about that initiative: how it works and how your involvement in it came about?

[Allison] Yeah, it was a really great initiative. We, across the agency, realised that we actually had a really good representation - gender representation in the agency. It was sort of about 50/50, I think. But when we looked at fire management, it was really low, like really low, almost zero in some areas. And I can't even remember exactly who decided to sort of pull it together, but there was a few of us that started talking about it, and we got support from our executive director for a few women to kind of get together and actually sort of look into that a little bit more. And we came up with a program to look at developing a Women in Fire action plan.

[DI] And that involves some workshops, I understand. Are you able to tell us about those?

[Allison] Yeah. We wanted to get out across the State. It's a pretty - Parks and Wildlife works across the entire State of Western Australia, and we are very regionally based service. And so, we wanted to talk to people about what they thought the barriers were. You sort of hear from people the sorts of things that we might be able to put in place to increase what - increase the percentage of women involved in fire. And, I think it was also a little bit about allaying some of the fears. You know, those sort of, that fear of if you're going to give a job to a female, then I'm not going to have a job anymore. They're not overly rational fears. But they were definitely real to people thinking, why are you doing this? Why don't you want men in fire anymore? Those sorts of things. And that wasn't really the reality.

So, the workshops gave an opportunity for us to talk about why we were doing it, and talk about how important diversity is. And that if we've got diversity across our workforce, we're better representing the community, and we can do a better job if we're better represented. And I think I talked about some of my own unconscious bias. I kind of thought throughout my

career, I hadn't really been overly impacted by the fact that I was a female. But this project made me reflect on quite a number of things. I learnt a lot through the process. I learned a lot about conscious and unconscious bias.

And I think most of the issues come from unconscious bias. And I was able to talk about my own experience, in terms of the opportunities that I offered the staff that were working for me at the time. And just a sort of example that I use was, as a duty officer, every morning, you plan for the day. If there's going to be a fire, you have a pre-prepared structure, basically. So, you have an Incident Controller and Operations Officer, Planning Officer, and you know, some of the key roles underneath that structure. Basically you put names in boxes. And so, if you get a fire, you can just go as soon as the fire starts. I had a bit of a look back through the box names that I put in the boxes, and I was actually pretty shocked to realise that I'd applied unconscious bias to most of those decisions. I had a team of rangers: 50/50 male and female. The women were far more experienced operationally than the male rangers at that particular time. But I had almost 100% of the time, put the blokes in a truck and the girls in a more administrative or less operational role. And that actually made no actual sense, from an operational perspective. But that's what I'd done.

So, I just shared those sorts of experiences with people to say, you've got to be conscious of some of the decisions you make, because you're not necessarily making them on purpose, but they are having potential impacts on both men and women. We're actually providing different opportunities based on gender, and both genders are missing out on that skill set.

[DI] How was that for you to reflect and look back?

[Allison] I think it's really good. I love reflection. I think self-reflection is one of the most important things that we can do as humans. If we lose that self-reflection, we just don't grow. So, I actually love finding my blind spots and reflecting on what - on feedback from people. So, I think - and then that also allows others to reflect because they're not feeling attacked. It's not a, 'you need to do this.' It's a, 'hey, this is a bit different.' Like look at how this opportunity isn't provided to one particular gender, for example.

[DI] You mentioned in those workshops, there were lots of conversations and some fears came up. But, what did you actually discover from women about what was holding them back from jobs in fire?

[Allison] Yeah. Look, I think one of the big ones is you can't be what you can't see. That's for me. I hadn't really thought about that a lot, but young women coming through the ranks, and if they're not seeing women in any of the leadership roles or any of the women in trucks or any of that, the community - little girls aren't seeing women in trucks, they're not going to think, I'm going to be a firefighter. It's just not an option for them because they're not seeing it. So, I think that's one big thing.

But also, you recruit what you're used to. So, if everyone is a particular gender, everyone has the same skill set, when you go to recruit for a particular role, say a firefighter role, or in our agency, they're conservation employee roles, you look for the same person, the same type of person. And that's why diversity is so important, because the more diverse your workforce is, the more likelihood you are of employing different kinds of people from different backgrounds that can then represent the community better.

[DI] Once you then identified that women were under-represented in the agency, specifically within the fire space, can you give us an example of what was put in place to try and change that?

[Allison] Yeah. Look, there were some really basic things, and it's almost embarrassing to think that we had some work locations where the office had male and female toilets, but the crew shed, for example, where the conservation employees were working, you actually had to walk past a urinal to get to a toilet cubicle. And we just never even thought about it. Mainly because there'd been no women in that workforce. So, you just hadn't fixed some of these really basic things.

So, when you've got a young female who finally got that job, she was faced with really uncomfortable situation. And the men in the workforce were also faced with that. So, just some of those really basic physical things, we were able to fix some of those.

The other one was opportunities for people to network. So, one of the things that I sort of championed early on was we've got, in the forest regions, around 300 FTEs for conservation employees, our firefighters. And it was, I think, less than 5% of those employees were women. So, I think it was like five people, across multiple work centres. Pretty much no work centre had more than one female and most had none. So, that's a really hard space to be in if you've got challenges or unique issues that you want to discuss, and you've got no other female to discuss that with, who do you turn to? So, we had a workshop and we invited all the female conservation employees to that. So, this was about a year into the project. So, we'd gone from about five employees to about 20. So, that was a massive increase already. And of the 20, 15 of them were brand new, and five were very much not new. And yeah, we just got them together and we talked about opportunities and challenges, and we just listened. And so, we could take some of those things away and put some improvements in place just to help. But I think mostly, that connection. Someone you could pick the phone up to and go, "Hey, I'm dealing with this issue, how have you dealt with that? Have you come across that issue? Who can I talk to?" So, building a bit of a peer network across the female conservation employee work group.

[Male Narrator] If you're listening to this episode, you're probably already familiar with the Emergency WA app. But did you know the tool that helps you prepare with confidence, now has a new feature where you can make a plan for storm, flood and cyclones, not just bushfire? The app will prompt you to put your plan into action when you're confronted with an emergency. Download Emergency WA from the App Store or Google Play, and create your emergency plan today.

[DI] So, over the course of the project, you made a number of changes. You've mentioned a couple of them, but what do you know about the numbers now of women working in fire across the agency? What has changed because of this project?

[Allison] Yeah. There's been some significant increases, which is really good. So, I'll just read some stats out here. I've got down here, we have: so in 2019 when we started the project, fire management positions. So, the kinds of positions within sort of the office and the planning type space, we had 17%, we've now got 26% in this year, 2025. Frontline firefighters, so the conservation employees I was just talking about, they were 5%, they went up to 10% in 2024. Duty officers, so in our agency, we have regional and district or state,

regional and district duty officer structure. So, they're the person that's sort of responsible for a fire and ensuring that it gets actioned in the first instance and people are deployed. So, when we started, we had 4%. I think that was probably just me at that time.

[DI] [Laughs]

[Allison] And we've got 21% now. So, that's a pretty big increase as well. We had zero Level 4 Fire Operations Officers, level 4 and above. Absolutely no females in that cohort. We've now got 22%. So, another pretty decent increase. And the conservation employees have a crew structure where they have an overseer, so a person in charge. So, level 3 or above. We had no women in that cohort. In 2024, we were up to 7%. Unfortunately, we're back to 1% this year. But notably in there, we've actually had some women come through the structures and actually move into higher leadership positions. So, it's not all negative; they've just moved out of the exact sort of fire stream and into a higher level leadership role. So, there's positives that come from this initiative across the board.

[DI] And would you say then it's been a success?

[Allison] Yeah. And I think you've got to keep pushing. So, you can't implement something and then just drop it and walk away. You've got to continue to encourage people to think about diversity, because you can quickly, easily, very easily just fall back into what you used to do, I suppose. And I think, perhaps, some of the stats that we're looking at the moment maybe showing that we're - we've taken the foot off the pedal a little bit. And you've just got to keep that up, ensuring that that is being fed down, and that all panel members on interview panels have that front of mind, that they're thinking about diversity when they're recruiting.

[DI] Not only has the Women in Fire project helped other women rise within the agency, it was actually the impetus for you to push yourself as well, wasn't it?

[Allison] Yes. It's very easy to just sort of go with the flow and not push yourself. And Meg Williams was one of the people that was instigating the Women in Fire Action Plan and got to know her really well through that process. And she's always pushing me, [laughs] and the reason I'm here today, [laughs] and why the reason I'm talking. So, but I think that's really lovely.

I think, you know, women building each other up and encouraging each other to, you know, to continue to do things. And it's that understanding that although you might not feel like, you know, you just feel like yourself, I guess, and you're doing what you're doing, but you are inspirational to other women who can see that you're doing it and they can potentially do it as well. And so, that's, yeah, I think that's a bit of a driver, I guess. And you know, I hope that there's lots of younger women that can do this role a lot better than I'll ever do it, but they just need that encouragement and inspiration to see that they can do it.

[DI] And I know that's something that you feel a little bit uncomfortable with being in that space that, you know, "inspirational space." But you have become the first woman to be a Level 3 Incident Controller. Can you tell us, first of all, what qualifies as a level 3 incident?

[Allison] Yeah. So, level 3 incident is sort of the most complex, most challenging incident that we deal with, in Australia. So, in different countries that have different ratings, but in

Australia, we have a level one, which is a relatively simple fire. Level two, which is more complicated, requires more agency involvement and more people. And then level 3, which really has that potential impact on people and communities.

[DI] And what kind of support did you receive to follow the path to become a Level 3 Incident Controller?

[Allison] Yeah, a lot of support. I've been - I still am a shadow Incident Controller on our preform teams. They're an interagency preform team between DBCA and DFES. And I've been filling that role and shadowing both DFES and DBCA Incident Controllers for the last sort of three or four years. And that's been an awesome experience and I'll continue to do that. It just means now that I'm accredited, if I need to fill in for a shift, I can do that. And becoming accredited doesn't mean you're the expert. [Laughs] You're not the best person to do the job, but it's part of that step. And you have to do a heap of training, you need to learn, as a DBCA officer, you actually need to learn a lot of DFES processes. Because you actually work for the DFES - the FES Commissioner - when you're a Level 3 Incident Controller. So, it's a bit different to when you're managing a national park fire at a lower level.

[DI] How do you feel about being the first woman, Allison, to achieve that Level 3 Incident Controller position in WA?

[Allison] I don't know, it's kind of cool, [laughs] but it's also - I feel like we probably should have - someone else should have been there sooner than this. I feel, you know, across all agencies, we probably should have had a female Level 3 Incident Controller before now. So, it's kind of a little bit of a mixed emotions, I guess, in terms of we probably could have done better, but you've got to start somewhere. And I'm pretty proud for our department - that it's our department that's provided that person. Yeah.

[DI] So, you're now someone that other women see working in the highest levels of fire management. What responses have you had from other people? I know there was a video that was made about you and the fact that you had become a Level 3 Incident Controller. What was the response you received following that?

[Allison] Yeah, that was really lovely. And I think that was really cemented for me that your own achievements aren't always just about yourself. I think most of your career, you do things, and you learn things and you achieve things, and most of that's about you and what you've done.

But yeah, that video, there were young women who. I almost, you know, maybe only know by name, you know, saying things like, "oh, you're an inspiration to me, and this is fantastic." And it was just really nice to see that that was inspiring young women to want to be in this space, really.

[DI] Currently, 6% of firefighters in the Career Fire and Rescue Service are women. Do you have any insight into what we can do to improve that representation?

[Allison] Yeah, I think we just need to continue to challenge what we've always done, because sometimes there may be barriers and challenges in place that we're just not aware of. So, I think we need to challenge our biases, both conscious and unconscious, and make changes where we think that we can remove a barrier. We need to continue to support

women and build networks for women to be able to have really good mentors, both men and women. All of my, well, not all, but most of my mentors, especially in the fire space, are all amazing men that are leading in fire space. And they've been awesome mentors to me. So, providing those kind of mentoring opportunities, and recognising where people have that ability to do a particular job, and nurturing that and supporting that person, and encouraging them, pushing them, because I don't think I would have done the Level 3 Incident Controller course if I didn't have people every year, "Come on, Ali, you've got to do this." [Laughs] And finally, you know, making myself do it. So, I think that's how we support women to continue to progress in their careers in fire.

[DI] You mentioned those great male mentors in your career. What have they said to you about what you've achieved so far and what they hope you'll do in the future?

[Allison] Oh, yeah, look very encouraging. I met some of the DFES guys who I did the level 3 course with just yesterday and, sort of said, "Oh, you could get up and help me do my presentation tomorrow." And you know, it's really nice. It's a really supportive environment. And yeah, like some managers that I've had, you know, that might have been retired for the last ten years, still, you know, sending me a little message on Facebook and making a comment of, you know, "great to see you've achieved all of this." And, yeah, that's really nice.

[DI] What would you say to women who are listening or watching this today about - if they're in fire, and they would like to progress, what's your message for them?

[Allison] I think the message is you can do whatever you want to do. Just keep trying and reaching out, and taking on opportunities, learning from people around you. I sort of mentioned that I didn't have a lot of operational on-ground experience early on in my career, as I sort of learned that a bit later, but I actually learned a lot of it from the people around me, really experienced operational staff, who shared so much information and knowledge with me. And I learnt a lot from them, I didn't actually physically do it myself, but I learnt a lot from the things that they shared with me. So, absorb everything you can from whoever's willing to share it with you, and take on the opportunity.

[DI] Any advice to emergency services personnel on how they can best support the women around them in their roles?

[Allison] Look, I think a lot of it is the same as anyone. You know, it's a challenging job. I think we need to support each other. I think both men and women are, you know, exposed to fire, have challenges throughout that process. I think support each other is a bit of a family. We know what we've all dealt with at different times. And yeah, support each other, that's probably the biggest part of it.

[DI] What are your goals for the future, Allison?

[Allison] Bring lots of women up so I don't have to do this anymore. [Laughs]

[DI] Do you mean the talking to me? [Laughs]

[Allison] But just bring more people through. The more people that are doing fire, the more that can fill all of the roles competently, the easier it is on everybody. Fire seasons are

getting longer, busier, more stressful, and the more people are doing it, the more we share the load. Sounds great to me.

[DI] In this series, Mics & Sirens, we speak to fire and emergency services experts from all around the world, and they all bring their vast depth of knowledge and a wide range of experiences. But all of our guests are like you, Allison, and they're connected by a personal drive improve how we respond to and manage emergencies. So, we like to ask you some personal questions about your experiences. Is there an incident that stands out in your mind even today that you could share with us?

[Allison] Yeah. Well, look, without a doubt, the Black Cat Creek fire is the one that will never leave me. And I'll probably almost get emotional; I'm going to try not to. It's a very significant fire. Not really from a fire perspective, but from the impact that it had on the firefighters.

I was based in Walpole, and obviously the fire was over towards Albany, but we had both Albany and Walpole crews there. So, one of the two trucks that we impacted was one of the trucks from my crew in Walpole, and I actually wasn't at that fire. But the lasting impact that that had on everyone connected to that was just, it just never goes away.

And I think that's part of what drives me to continue to support staff and be in these kinds of incident controller roles, is that, making sure people are safe, and as safe as they possibly can be.

Yeah that - having one of your staff members, finding out after they've got out of hospital that they turned 25 in hospital, and they had a 50% chance of living or dying. That really rocks you. And that's after we've lost Wendy. And so, has a very big impact on how important it is to look after people in fire. It's not really about fire for me. It's about people.

[DI] Is there something about the work that you do in emergency services that keeps you up at night, or that's at the forefront of your mind?

[Allison] Look, I don't think I'd do this if there was. I mean, that's a little bit counter to what I just said, but I think you have to be able to separate your thoughts. If you can't get to sleep, it's probably not the space that you're going to want to work in for long term. So...

[DI] What technological development do you think will have the greatest impact on the future of firefighting and emergency services?

[Allison] Yeah. Look, I think this week at AFAC, there's a whole heap of things being presented. But I guess, I always say that it's about people and it's people on the ground. And although technology will help us in all sorts of different areas of firefighting, you can't put a fire out without firefighters on the ground, trucks and machines tracking the fire. That's the most important thing. So, yeah.

[DI] And what's the most rewarding part of your job, Allison?

[Allison] The people. It's, yeah, that's why I do it, working with people.

[DI] Well, it's been so lovely to talk to you today. Thank you so much. I know this is not your favourite thing to do. [Laughs] You've been pushed into it, but it's been a delight to hear more about you and your career. So, thank you for being with us on Mics & Sirens.

[Allison] No worries. Thank you very much.

[Male Narrator] Are you looking for fast, accurate and official information that helps you to make informed decisions to stay safe during an emergency? The Department of Fire and Emergency Services Emergency WA app lets you set up watch zones for places important to you. So, if an emergency happens in your watch zone, you'll receive alerts and warnings. The best part? It's sent direct to your mobile device. Download DFES' Emergency WA app from the App Store or Google Play today.

[Female Narrator] That was Allison Donovan on the future of women in fire and emergency services. You've been listening to Mics & Sirens, the official podcast of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia. If you've enjoyed season two, please follow, rate and share, and explore season one for more stories behind the uniform. Thank you for joining us. Until next time, stay safe.