The plight of a growing Pacific Islander underclass in Logan, south of Brisbane, was spotlit by a tragedy earlier this year in which 11 of their number perished.

after the fire

Story **Matthew Fynes-Clinton**
Photography **David Kelly**

Tau Taufa opens the door and extends a soft hand. His eyes are moist and gentle. His dark hair has the wave and salt-streaked appearance of an ocean swell. He has bare feet. On his black T-shirt is a photographic montage of 11 faces, and the words: *Forever in our hearts. Families are Forever*.

It is Friday, November 18, the eve of his 66th birthday. For his last birthday, Taufa's wife Fusi threw on a *kiekie* – a ceremonial Tongan skirt of multi-coloured strands – and succumbed to his four-decade request to dance before him. The performance took place at a party on the family's lawn. "This is the first time – and the last time – that I dance for you," Fusi chided. Tau had laughed. ▶

Three-and-a-half months ago, Fusi and ten immediate and extended family members were killed in Australia's deadliest house fire at 60 Wagensveldt Street, Kingston, a suburb of Logan City, 25km south of Brisbane. Taufa also lost his youngest child Anna-maria, 23, who had a Justice Administration diploma and was considering studying law, and three granddaughters, Lahaina, 7, Kalahnie, 3 (Anna-maria's children to partner Misi Matauaina), and Ardelle Lee, 15, the only offspring of his other daughter, sole parent Treicee.

Sixteen people had resided in the five-bedroom timber home, including Samoan Jeremiah Lale and the other six victims: his wife Neti and their five children aged 7 to 18. Neti and Fusi, both originally from Tonga, were sisters. The Lales had been staying with the Taufas for almost a year, after Jeremiah and Neti fell into financial difficulty.

While police continue to probe the cause of the blaze, they were quick to rule it a catastrophic accident. But as Taufa offers me a seat at the plastic dining table of his current residence, I'm as uneasy as he seems calm. The address is 62 Wagensveldt St. In the wake of the midnight inferno that took away his loved ones, Taufa is living in the house next door.

Not that he spends much time in its tiny rooms. He prefers to be out, beating a path between his new and old back yards. No 62 is a low-set, brick, state-owned home that Taufa moved into in mid-October. He says the former tenants were rattled by the terror and carnage of the August 24 fire. "They said they can't stand to be staying as close as that," Taufa explains. "I said, 'Okay, if you move out, I'll come in and stay.' I arranged it with the housing commission, and that's when I started here."

Government builders demolished the damaged dividing fence and constructed a replacement of tall, treated pine. But they did not secure the final 3m-wide panel leading to the rear boundary: the unfinished section leans casually against the palings on No 60's side. "They told me they're going to do it that way to make me have an easy passage," Taufa says. "It was very nice of them."

Threading the opening – and Taufa does it several times a day – is at once daunting, poignant and faintly surreal. A 15m elongated canvas gazebo runs parallel to the back fence of No 60, now a pristine block of freshly laid, ankle-length grass. The navy tent peaks provide cover for a memorial bursting with fresh and fake flower posies, pictorial and written tributes, and dozens of teddy bears and dolls dedicated to the children who perished. Eleven bamboo torches – one for each victim – are spaced across the mouth of the shrine. The middle pole is planted slightly higher in the ground. "That for my wife," Taufa smiles respectfully.

> I have sadness still, but I know they won't come back if you try to find someone to blame.

Aftershock … Police confer outside the burnt-out shell of 60 Wagensveldt St, Kingston, site of August's fatal house fire. (*Opening pages*) Survivor Tau Taufa, who now lives next door.

Every night at 6 o'clock, he comes to light the flares of remembrance, then sits in their pale-gold hue on a fold-out chair. "It's okay," he says, of the wispy flames. "As long as I understand what this fire's all about, and what the other fire's all about." Sometimes he lingers there until 1am. Thinking, meditating. Most of all, talking to God – and listening to God. "The rest of my kids and some friends, many times they want me to go away for a break since this happened and I say no," he says. "I'm going to be [at No 62] all the time from now until I rebuild the house. Then I'll just move back.

"My family are very close to my heart and it's like they're still alive when I visit and decorate and put flowers out the back. Being near them is the only place I feel like I belong."

Taufa does not believe his horrific loss was pre-ordained, but says God was in the process. By that, he means God has brought him comfort, understanding, acceptance. And strength. He, Jeremiah Lale and Matauaina – the three fathers who occupied the incinerated house – all managed to escape, while the women, small children and teenagers remained trapped.

"There is no regret," he says. "Even though I have sadness still, I know they won't come back anyway if you try to find excuses, or somebody to blame. [At one stage] God said to me, 'Why you feel sad and you doubt?' I said, 'Sorry Father, that's in my human nature that I miss them'. And he said, 'Don't worry, I'll take care of them. Let them come to me.'

"That's why I feel strong, you know. Most of the people, they want me to go find some advice or counselling. And I said to them, 'I think I got the counselling straight from God'."

IF LITTLE WAS KNOWN OF LOGAN'S BOOMING Pacific Islander population before the fire, its swarming presence in Wagensveldt St, the gut-wrenching sobs and wails, the overcrowded funeral services and weeks of formal mourning in traditional woven mat garb accentuated by soulful song, gave a hint of the bedrock that helps keep Taufa so still. The prescription is God, family and community – in that order.

But strength can paper over vulnerability. "This is a community in crisis," says Griffith University researcher Dr Judith Kearney, "where everything is put down to God's will. Someone's got to put up their hand and do something and not leave it to God."

Kearney, 56, is not talking about the fire, but a pall of disadvantage that she says is silently overwhelming the lives of thousands of Polynesian migrants in Logan, and the futures of their children. "This group is incredibly excluded," she says. "I'm trying to raise awareness. There are enormous issues."

Kearney's work with the Polynesian community spans more than 20 years, first as a local Catholic school English teacher in the 1990s and thereafter at Griffith University's Logan campus, where she is an academic with the education faculty. "After I joined the university, I'd go out to classrooms and could see 50 to 60 per cent of the kids were Pacific ▶

Islander, then I'd go to my university and watch graduations – and there were no Pacific Islanders," she says. "I started to ask questions."

The result is her evolving bank of research exposing appalling levels of social, educational and economic deprivation, particularly within Logan's dominant Polynesian grouping, the Samoans. Kearney says Pacific Islanders are funnelling into the state's prisons and youth detention centres and have become increasingly visible among the homeless on Brisbane, Logan and Gold Coast streets. Family violence is on the rise, marriages are splintering. It might sound like the regulation detritus of modern living, but the difference is these casualties have been set up for a fall.

Under a unique pact, the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement (TTTA), New Zealanders – including unskilled Pacific Islanders who had immigrated to New Zealand and become citizens there – are free to travel to Australia to live and work indefinitely. But over the past few years, the federal government has quietly rescinded their former entitlements such as unemployment benefits and student loans for tertiary education.

For many, it's like being pointed towards the promised land, then marched off a cliff. "We are creating a sub-class," Kearney says. "We've more or less made it so easy to come here and then we don't tell them what it could be like. These Pacific Islanders are not illegal, but in terms of their rights, they may as well be. They're Australia's Mexicans."

LOGAN CITY, POP. 283,000, IS QUEENSLAND'S most challenged developing metropolis. With high unemployment (12 to 14 per cent in some parts) and a huge proportion of low-income earners and sole-parent families, the last thing it needs is another underclass. The city's 957 sq km, including the suburbs of Crestmead, Daisy Hill, Logan Central, Kingston, Marsden, Slacks Creek, Underwood, Waterford and Woodridge, saw more shop break-ins, arson attacks, dangerous driving charges and offences relating to resisting or obsructing officers in 2010-11 than any other police district in the state.

Around 7000 inhabitants are indigenous. But with 186 separate ethnic cultures represented, Logan is a veritable United Nations where the face of the Pacific Island diaspora is the most conspicuous. More than 20,000 Logan residents have Polynesian heritage, and the bloc is expanding rapidly. Up to 75 per cent of them claim links to Samoa, with Tongans the next largest segment and Cook Islanders and New Zealand Maoris contributing to the influx. In Logan City, the most common language spoken at home – after English – is Samoan.

After administering Samoa (then Western Samoa) from 1920 to independence in 1962, and utilising Samoan labour in the 1960s and '70s, New Zealand granted once-off citizenship in 1982 to all Samoans then living within its borders. Additionally, a "Samoan Quota" allows up to 1100 Samoans to be granted New Zealand permanent residence annually. The applicants, drawn from a ballot, must show they have a valid job offer in New Zealand, though unskilled work will suffice.

In turn, Australia's TTTA has been in place since 1973. The "open door" policy, forged to reflect the close ties of Australia and New Zealand, permits – some would say encourages – each country's citizens to live and work for as long as they like in the partner nation. For the first 13 years of the agreement, incoming Kiwis automatically qualified as permanent residents – guaranteeing entitlement to the full complement of social security payments. In 1986, a six-month waiting period was introduced. Then, ten years ago, the Howard government clamped down, complaining Kiwi citizens were costing Australia $1 billion a year in unemployment benefits and aged, veterans', invalid and single-parent pensions. There was a supposed reimbursement scheme between the countries, but the New Zealand contribution of $130 million fell desperately short of the Australian claim.

From February 27, 2001, New Zealanders arriving on the so-called Special Category Visa have been treated, incongruously, as long-term temporary residents with curtailed welfare provision – no longer eligible for the dole, pensions, most government and employment training programs, even disability services.

"If I gave birth to a child with cerebral palsy," says Vicky Va'a, a Maori and Gold Coast community worker, "because I'm not a permanent resident or a citizen of Australia, my child is not classed as one either. So I wouldn't be able to get help with rehabilitative services for the baby. I wouldn't qualify for a carer's payment."

However, Va'a and her Samoan husband Chris, an IT consultant with whom she and their two children emigrated from Wellington in 2007, proudly call Australia home. They say they have worked hard and paid taxes to the Australian Government, which, by virtue of the TTTA, has invited them into the country with "arms wide". With their professional abilities, the pair is in a better position than many and will soon be ready to stump up the $7500 required to apply for permanent residency – also the prerequisite to Australian citizenship.

But of the 35,000 New Zealanders sucked through Australia's open door each year, a distinct cohort has no chance of becoming permanent residents by the only means available since 2001 – meeting criteria for skilled migration. Pacific Islanders are disproportionately represented among New Zealand's unskilled. Yet to Australia's shores they still come, to reunite with family already here or in hope of brighter opportunities.▶

"These Pacific Islanders are not illegal [immigrants], but in terms of their rights, they may as well be.

Word of God … Pastor Andrew Schmidt officiates at a Pentecostal Voice of Christ church service in Marsden.

They come because they can. In Logan, scores of them are driving taxis. Others are toiling in factories, stacking shelves. Much of it is casual work, vanishing whenever the economy looks like sneezing. Then the trouble starts.

JOHN PALE, 61, WAS THE UNFLAPPABLE FIGURE who fielded media inquiries amid August's chaotic scenes in Wagensveldt St. He and a circle of Samoan co-elders make monthly mentoring visits to the Brisbane Correctional Centre at Wacol, west of Logan, and the Borallon Correctional Centre, near Ipswich.

"It's amazing the number of Pacific Islander people we see in jail," Pale says. "No job and [committing] armed robbery and bashing people to survive, or because there is nothing else in their lives. I've been to homes and those people who came after 2001 … some of the parents are not working, the father's been laid off. They are not eligible for any assistance and the little money they have is trying to stretch to pay the rent, to buy food. It's shocking."

Pale is president of the Logan-based peak group, Voice of Samoan People (VOSP). He says more and more families are pooling resources under the one roof, just like the Taufas and Lales did. While Polynesian families are culturally inclined towards communal living, it's rarely under such stressful circumstances.

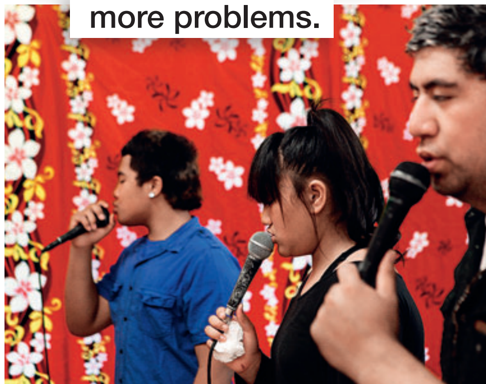
"This is dangerous in many ways," Pale says. "If anything happens like that fire, there's just no way out. There's no money, no space and tempers are frayed. It's great to have family but this is *real* life. We've had people who've just moved from one family to another. If they don't get any work, and if they come with children, that's quite a burden. They cannot contribute, so they're welcome, but only for a short time."

The ramifications are being felt as far away as the CBD. Fortitude Valley-based Brisbane Youth Service CEO Annemaree Callander says the past six months have seen a "significant increase" in young Pacific Islanders – males and females aged 14 to 22 – sleeping rough in the city. She says they have drifted in from Logan and Inala, to its west. "Quite a few are there because of a level of tension, disagreement and violence that's in their home environment," she says. "That sort of conflict doesn't happen without other pressures on the family in terms of poverty and unemployment."

Heightening her concerns, Callander says the group is proving abnormally difficult to assist. "Generally, we can link homeless youth with Centrelink and some income, and help get them public housing," she says. "But a lot of the Pacific Islanders don't have Australian residency, therefore they can't access any income support, such as Youth Allowance, and they're not entitled to go on the public housing waiting list. Even an unaccompanied minor who's come in as a refugee is better off in terms of status."

Songs of hope … Solicitor Annie Smeaton (*centre*) in church with partner Lotomau Faagutu, seated behind the pastor's wife, Lagi Schmidt, who is holding their baby Lagise.

> The churches are the community centre. They are helping to prevent more problems.



The only bright light, it seems, is church. Based at MultiLink Community Services in Logan, Ofa Fukofuka – a Tongan who is the state's Pacific Island advocacy coordinator – says faith alone may not be an agent of desperately needed change in his constituency. "But the churches," he declares, "are the community centre. They are holding [overseeing] a lot of the kids and preventing more problems."

One Sunday morning I visit Vaa Alofipo, the secretary of VOSP, and like Pale a "talking chief" or "orator" from his Samoan village. I arrive at 8.40, just as his wife Fati, at the wheel of a Yellow Cab, pulls into the driveway of their unassuming Kingston home. She's stopping off for breakfast during a shift that began at 3am and will probably end about four in the afternoon.

A father-of-seven, Alofipo, 52, arrived from New Zealand in 1987 to immediate permanent residency. He took Australian citizenship two years later and went on to work in property development sales. Now he is at Griffith University as a project officer, trying to find ways with Judith Kearney of elevating his people. "In my village, we had five churches," he says. "But we have no village here, so we treat churches as the village. They have ministers and councils of elders; they are a place of fellowship and a place to help each other. A point of contact."

As we drive across the suburbs to Marsden, Alofipo says up to 60 separate Samoan church congregations meet in Logan – many at schools while money is saved to build a church – and they embrace the gamut of Christian denominations. We attend a soaring three-hour service at the Pentecostal Voice of Christ Full Gospel Church, underscored by a symphony of drums, keyboards and pitch-perfect choristers, blustery sermonising in Samoan and English, and two rounds of the velvet offering bag. When it's over, the congregation mills under the awning of the improvised chapel – a converted old shed on acreage. Around the corner lies an earth oven of rocks for roasting pigs and other festive food.

Solicitor Annie Smeaton, 41, is in the crowd. A white lawyer with a teenage daughter from a previous relationship, she and her hulking 45-year-old Samoan partner Lotomau Faagutu met almost two years ago. She was a passenger in his cab. "He had this really loud Samoan music blaring in the taxi," she says. "I thought he was funny." The couple has a baby girl, ten-week-▶

old Lagise. “I think Australians could learn a lot from the culture,” Smeaton says. “It’s sharing, kind and really generous. It’s about the group. You just don’t think of yourself.”

But soon, the big laughs and smothering hugs are tempered by anxious conversations over perhaps the community’s greatest perceived hurdle. In 2005, expatriate New Zealanders were banned from the HECS-HELP loan program for university students. The scheme – which defers tuition fee repayments through the Tax Office until a graduate has joined the workforce – has been left open only to Australian citizens and permanent humanitarian visa holders. Pacific Islander children are welcomed into a free public school system. Come the end of Year 12, they stream from the Logan classrooms they heavily populate, destined for anywhere but higher education. To get there, they would need to find tens of thousands of dollars in upfront fees.

AT 4PM ON THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17, TWO hours before her Marsden State High School graduation ceremony, Puleitu Tumama is acutely aware of this fate as her younger cousin Cynthia lends a hand with her hair. Her mother Safata has constructed an impressive Ula Lole, a celebratory Samoan lei infused with lollies and small chocolate bars, and $5 notes stuck on like sprockets.

Puleitu has wanted to be a lawyer ever since she was a little girl. “I think it’s being a voice for those who don’t have a voice,” she says thoughtfully. She’s a scholar with above-average results, and is prepared to get to law school via her second choice, arts, if necessary. But it’s strange making plans for an illusory goal. “I knew there was HECS-HELP only for Australian citizens,” she says. “I was worried, but I thought if I get an offer, maybe I can just get a job and save up for the money to go to uni. I start work on Tuesday, at Hungry Jack’s.”

Puleitu’s brother Namu, 18, struck the same roadblock two years ago. He was Marsden High’s school captain, scored an OP 9, but his family could not afford the $8000 for his first year of landscape architecture. As a contingency, he had wisely completed an automotive school-based traineeship in Years 11 and 12, which led to his joining a car dealership as an apprentice mechanic.

The siblings have a brother, Aviata, 11, and a sister Porirua, 5. Safata earns $1600-$1700 a fortnight with overtime as a machine operator. Her husband Faleata, a cab driver, has not worked since April while recovering from a mini-stroke that hospitalised him for three months. Families such as his, who came to Australia in 2004, are covered by public hospitals and Medicare. “But not sick pay, or disability or unemployment benefit,” Faleata, 48, says. “I’m just staying here. I’ve got no money at all.”

> **I need a job so I can save up for the money to go to uni. I start work on Tuesday, at Hungry Jack’s.**

TAFE is also off-limits for Puleitu, and her parents, should they seek to improve their skills. Again, New Zealand settlers on Special Category Visas are ineligible for Commonwealth TAFE student loans, known as VET FEE-HELP, the preserve of Australian citizens.

Ofa Fukofuka says the conditions will produce intergenerational poverty for Logan’s Pacific Islanders, as more families arrive and even greater numbers of desultory adolescents exit the school gates. “If you allow people to come here, for God’s sake, train them, give them opportunities,” he says. “Don’t just give them hardship to face. That is insane.”

But a spokesman for the federal Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations Minister, Senator Chris Evans, says the government is not considering any policy change. “We’ve made it easy to come here, that’s true,” he says. “But they’re coming of their own choice, and we are saying only move here if you feel like the benefits outweigh the costs. These are the most generous entry rights to one of the most sought-after countries. They do get access to the family tax benefit and a free education for their kids in one of the best education systems. I mean, do they see themselves as having the raw end of the deal?”

FROM TONGA, TAU TAUFA ALSO ENTERED Australia via the back door of New Zealand. He can’t remember exactly how he acquired NZ citizenship, only that it was “fairly easy in those days”. He and Fusi arrived in 1980, and bought 60 Wagensveldt St in 1987 for $45,000.

Taufa did factory work, seasonal fruit picking and ran a small importing and exporting concern before semi-retiring. He has a son in the nearby suburb of Kuraby and another in Sydney. The two boys have provided him with seven surviving grandchildren. He resides with daughter Treicee but, having lost her child, mother, sister and two nieces, she may not remain. “She doesn’t want to live too close to the thing and if she goes, I’ll stay on my own,” Taufa says. Treicee and her boyfriend had also lived at No 60, but the couple was out when the fire ignited.

Taufa says the ravaged house was uninsured. However, community fundraising and donations from the building industry will ensure a new residence goes up. Preliminary plans are with an architect.

“I can still see everyone,” he says, gazing out from the memorial to the void where his home once stood. “The way I remember them when they’re playing around here. I can feel them.” He says he came to Australia for “something better than in New Zealand”.

“Better future for me,” he says, “and especially the family.” ■

Graduation day … Puleitu Tumama (*centre*) with family members (*from left*) Porirua, mother Safata, brothers Namu, Aviata and father Faleata. Puleitu hopes to study law.