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# Fire survivors head to North

FANCY a free trip to tropical Mission Beach, \$17,500 worth of tours and activities and seven nights accommodation at beachside lodges?

A Tully woman and her band of helpers have created the ultimate escape for 50 people who survived the bushfires that obliterated their hometown of Marysville in Victoria two months ago.

The group will arrive in the Far North at the end of the month.

Tully's Cherelle Skelly said Virgin had come on board this week and offered to pay for the flights, making a dream offering a reality for more than 150 Mission Beach, Tully and Innisfail district residents who helped with her plan.

"We've been given \$35,000 worth of free accommodation from bed and breakfasts to resorts, business vouchers and discounts for every-

## Julie Lightfoot

lightfootj@tcp.news1td.com.au

thing from meals to massages, a free coach for tours and free entry into tourist attractions," Ms Skelly said.

"The response from the community has been staggering."

The Djarawong Lodge Bed and Breakfast owner said other members of the public, including a group of school children, had collectively donated thousands of dollars to the cause.

Coming through Cyclone Larry in 2006 without any storm-related deaths had made residents south of Cairns realise how incredibly lucky they were - and what a long, hard slog it was to come back from such natural disasters, Ms Skelly said.

"Marysville people are feeling like a statistic right now," she said.

"We can't possibly understand the depth of people's anguish.

"Some of those coming here have lost relatives and friends.

"We want to give them a break, make them feel special ... and if 50 people can go home feeling replenished they can make a difference."

Tourism Tropical North Queensland's John McIntyre said fire victims and emergency service volunteers would also be coming to Cairns on free Virgin flights as part of an initiative now being shared between Cairns, Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast tourism operators.

About 500 people would be hosted across the three destinations.

The trips are still being organised, he said.