

Bill McEwen: In this Oakhurst fire, an order to flee, then friends to help

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By Bill McEwen



Buck Nielsen surveys the shed he was building for his friends Shawn and Pamela Padovich along Old Barn Way a day after the Junction fire swept across Highway 41 in Oakhurst, Calif. Photographed Tuesday evening Aug. 19, 2014.

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OAKHURST — Tom Turner was taking out the trash from his Hodges Hill home in Oakhurst when he saw the smoke early Monday afternoon. Then the phone rang. Evacuation alert. He and his wife, Marlene, would have five minutes to flee the Junction fire.

They went to the Oakhurst Community Center, then were told to go down the hill to the Coarsegold Community Center. But their three dogs -- two cockapoos and a Maltese poodle -- aren't accustomed to kennels. They spent the night in their car instead.

The things that people do for their pets, right?

A walk with one of the dogs resulted in a cut paw. There was a trip to the vet to patch things up, and then it

was down the hill a few miles more to check out cots at the Red Cross evacuation center in Yosemite Lakes Park.

Did I mention that while they were parked on the side of the road in Coarsegold, someone backed into their new car?

"Just 4,000 miles on it," Tom said Tuesday afternoon, 24 hours after their ordeal began.

But there might be a happy ending -- the person who smacked the car left a card with name and phone number.

That was the sum of it: A potentially lethal wildfire, people leaving their homes with little more than their animals and the clothes on their backs, and a community -- indeed, a lot of people in the foothills of Madera, Mariposa and Fresno counties -- pitching in to help.

The Mierkeys -- father Pat, wife Mary Helen and son James -- lost their house and possessions. They are all musicians and among the losses were treasured instruments.

James Mierkey has written the music for two Matt Sconce movies. When the filmmaker found out, he went straight to social media. Three hours after posting, "Lost Everything in Fire" on www.gofundme.com, nearly \$4,000 had been raised, and Sconce increased the goal for the Mierkeys from \$3,000 to \$10,000.

Sconce had reason to pay it forward. He appreciated the rapid response of Cal Fire crews and other firefighters to the blaze Monday and the successful effort to stop it from spreading to the heart of Oakhurst's business district.

"I saw the fire just a little after 2 (p.m.) and I thought it was a house fire," Sconce said. "Then I saw that it was coming down the line and headed toward McDonald's, Raley's and the theater."

Planes were already up in the air. A picture posted online by a friend of Sconce's showed one plane dropping orange-colored retardant on the fire line at 2:32 p.m.

"I am so thankful they stopped the path of the fire," Sconce said.

Thanks to hard work overnight and then much of Tuesday by fire crews and a drop in temperature and steady humidity, the fire was cut in half from Monday's 1,200 acres and was said by Cal Fire officials to be 35% contained at 8 p.m. Tuesday.

And much to the relief of business owners -- and tourists -- Highway 41 had been reopened to Yosemite National Park.

It has been a tough lately for businesses in Yosemite's gateway communities. Last summer's Rim fire burned 257,000 acres in the Sierra Nevada and kept tourists away. And in October, the federal government closed Yosemite for 16 days.

With California in the third year of a historic drought and the foothills drier than last year's Thanksgiving wishbone, people have been concerned that this might be the year that one spark changes everything.

But foothill people (and animals lovers) are resilient and giving. They don't panic. They know that when the going gets tough, others will help them shoulder the load. And do it with a smile.

Offers of help and directions of where to go for shelter were posted all over Facebook and Twitter -- almost from the moment the fire began.

Dave Bente Sr. in Prather offered to move trailers with his big rig. Pioneer Market in Mariposa donated 112

cases of water for evacuees, firefighters and volunteers. Jennifer Anderson Hunsbarger offered space for horses, cattle, dogs, cats and travel trailers at her acreage in Madera Ranchos.

For all the talk that the world -- and America, in particular -- is falling apart, here was evidence that there are plenty of good, decent people still among us.

And social media -- for all its warts and excesses -- is really good at connecting people in need with people offering aid.

"The way Madera County pulled together is really heartwarming," said Erica Stuart, spokeswoman for the Madera County Sheriff's Office.

David Greek couldn't give enough thanks to the Red Cross. He and wife Marjorie had left their Hodges Hill home after a sheriff's deputy banged on the door and told them to evacuate.

"The Red Cross -- you read about it," he said. "But when you're part of it, you really appreciate what they do."

With that, he took their beagle Lady for a walk outside the evacuation center at Yosemite Lakes Park.

The Greeks split time between homes in Oceanside and Oakhurst.

"We came up for a couple of weeks," David said. "This is a different way to spend your vacation."

Yes it is. But they'll have quite a story to tell when when they return to Southern California.

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