

Survivors Speak: Observations from a Teenage Wildfire Survivor

Part of the *“Survivors Speak” Tip Series*

I was 15-1/2 years old when my family lost our home in the 2007 San Diego wildfires. At this age, I had one foot still in childhood and the other moving into adulthood as a sophomore in high school. There had been so many changes already taking in my teenage life and the loss of my family’s home affected me in more ways than my family and others could have anticipated. I did not have the coping skills of an adult. Even with the post-disaster counseling, which was helpful, I experienced a void that my parents struggled to recognize, partly because of their own grieving and their intense, focused effort on trying to rebuild our lives and home. I share these points in the hope that I can help other families prevent this disconnect.

I am now a 21 year old junior in college studying for my bachelor’s degree in nursing. We have a strong family unit that I have never felt closer to. Now living in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and seeing the aftermath of the June 2012 Waldo Canyon wildfire (five years after my family lost our home), my emotions came flooding back as if my loss were only yesterday. Recovering from this type of trauma is a slow-healing process. It does not go away a year or two after it happens—or even after your home is rebuilt. On the surface, we look like we are whole again, but inside there is still a lot of uncertainty and instability that only time and a strong support system can heal. I hope that the following observations of what can help teenagers and their families make it through this very difficult period will help others see that a loss as great as this requires a strong family unit over everything else.

Make sifting through the ashes a family affair. When it comes time to go back to the property and sift through the ashes that were once your home, do it with the entire family. Insulating kids in an attempt to protect them deprives them of a key part of the recovery process. Going through this emotional toll as a family unit keeps you bonded and able to support one another. The pain and recovery of this trauma requires multiple steps that can be best taken as a family rather than separately where parents try to shield their kids from suffering more pain. But pain is part of the process to make it

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through the grieving process, just as one would when a life has been lost.

Adults and kids/adolescents process emotional trauma differently. At this age, high school adolescents are very self-absorbed and do not know how to empathize or reach out to their peers unless their parents have the unusual foresight to guide them. Teen and preteen friends of disaster victims simply will not be able to offer the same mature support as adults. Adult-level support does not always work for kids. In fact, in their inability to address a fellow student struggling with a loss like this, many teens may actually do nothing and ignore the person altogether because it makes them uncomfortable. They don't know what to say, so they say nothing, which leads to avoiding the person altogether in that person's greatest time of need.

Schools may not respond effectively. Parents, please be aware that your child's school may try to intervene to help the students affected by the disaster. However good their intentions, they may not do it in the right way or at the right time. Administrators at my school gathered a group of impacted students who may or may not have known one another before the disaster. Assuming our common bond of experiencing a traumatic loss would unite us, they asked us to talk openly about such a personal event. It went nowhere. Far better would have been to establish a private, personal connection with each affected student *before* asking us to open up about something so personal in front of a group of strangers. Losing a home is like losing a family member, and in many children/adolescents cases, the loss of a childhood as a whole. People who have not gone through the loss or partial loss of their home do not realize that some parents and their children have lost wedding albums, photo albums, and children's memorabilia that had been collected over many years. Every Christmas reminds you of the homemade ornaments you made or were given that you used to hang on the tree, or those few favorite baby clothes that as a mother/father you kept. Every trip to the store reminds you of special things you once had. That's why this type of a loss lingers many years after the event.

Make sure the rebuilding (and refurnishing) process includes the children, too. This may seem such a small or unimportant point, but involving the children in the planning and decision making process plays a large part in keeping the family connected, communicating and working together. In my case, it was very important for me to voice that, regardless of any floor plan changes, my room be kept in the same location as our previous home. We went shopping together for my new bedroom furniture. Also, despite looking forward to moving into a brand-new home with new "stuff," don't forget we lost so many possessions and comforts of our past, so we need to be collecting some new "memorabilia" to go in this

new home. Like our parents, we, too, had family heirlooms, special gifts from grandparents, academic and sports trophies, old toys and souvenirs that won't be there when we move back home. We need to plan what will go on those empty bedroom walls that will make it feel homey again.

Pace yourself when working on the list of personal property losses. One of the hardest processes throughout this entire trauma was the requirement to list all our personal belongings in order for insurance to reimburse for it. But think of it as actually part of the grieving process that can help you heal. So pace yourself, be methodical, but make steady progress before your memory fades (and it fades quickly!). Going through my closet and remembering the clothes, Beanie Babies, and other memorabilia was painful and tedious. Include the family to help you through this painful mental exercise that reminded me of everything I would never see again and was never getting back. For teenagers, this process can be harder to deal with because friends of this age may think this is so "cool" because you get to have all new things. That is the way an adolescent's mind works, but there was nothing "cool" to me about losing every possession I valued.

Counseling is critical for children and adolescents who go through this type of a trauma.

Receiving counseling is absolutely necessary. Counseling as a family can really help, because it helps to know that you're not going through the roller coaster of emotions alone. Be sure to ask your kids if they would like some sessions to be individual or all as a family. Adolescents may be embarrassed by the idea of counseling, which is why doing even one session as a family will help them see this process as normal and necessary. Check with your local recovery group to see if there is counseling specifically available to fire victims that may have been funded by local donations.

Watch children closely for the signs of a very real developing depression. This is especially true for adolescents and children after an emotional trauma because they don't have adequate coping skills for something this big. While mood swings are typical even in a normal teen/preteen, they can be much more pronounced in a depressed teen. Look for changes in interests, friends, sleeping routines, and their level of family communications, which are indicators of how they are really coping. This is a time they may be tempted to turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms, but a supportive and involved family can help prevent negative behaviors from starting. For me, I turned to the unhealthy side of coping that involved the use of drugs and alcohol outside the home. Over the 18 months after the fire (even while I was still in counseling), my depression deepened, my coping mechanisms weakened, and my new "friends" were my enablers. I shut out my parents. I had to hit rock bottom to finally realize I was in trouble. For me, that

rock bottom—and the true beginning of my recovery—was a juvenile DUI at 17, which came with a one-year driver’s license suspension, attorney costs and fees, a terrifying court visit, extraordinarily high car insurance rates for the next 10 years, virtual house arrest, a loss of my enabler “friends,” a return to counseling, and the diagnosis of moderate depression, for which I took antidepressants for the next 12 months. Parents may still be distracted by rebuilding the home, but it is important to be on the lookout for these signs and act quickly to intervene even if you suspect something is not normal.

Accept the fact that the general public cannot really understand what you are going through.

People who did not personally experience the trauma of a catastrophic loss are often oblivious to their insensitive words and actions. Most people mean well but just do not know better. For weeks after the fires, there were banners hung around the community saying “Thank you firefighters,” but those of us who lost homes weren’t feeling particularly grateful and, in fact, we felt resentful at times. Many homes were saved, but so many were also lost. On a shopping trip to the mall a few days after the fires to find new replacement clothes, I saw a few of my school friends, and, while they knew I had lost my home, they talked about how scared they were during the evacuation and how they couldn’t decide which things to take with them. On my first day back to school two weeks after the fires, we were given an English assignment to write a letter to thank the firefighters for their efforts. Of course, the instructor immediately relieved me of this assignment when I explained my situation, but it’s an example of people just not connecting with the circumstances.

Blessed are the many others who simply asked, “What can we do for you?” so that they could truly help my family in a meaningful way. And, rather than try to be brave and refuse help, we accepted anything people were willing to do for us. Not only did we experience an incredible outpouring of support from friends and total strangers, they, too appreciated the opportunity to contribute and be part of our recovery. There is a saying, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” I believe the disaster and its aftermath, through all the hardship, made us better people, too.

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This “Survivors Speak” publication was written by Robyn Walery, a 2007 Witch Creek Wildfire Survivor and UP Volunteer.

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Additional Reading: [Coping with loss, Valley Fire impacts victims' school success](#)

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