

East Bay Resident Makes Fire Prevention a Passion

KPIX

OAKLAND (KPIX) — An Bay Area resident who has been a fire prevention activist since she lost her home in the Oakland Hills firestorm 30 years ago, Sue Piper is passionate about disaster preparedness.

The [Gateway Preparedness Exhibit Center](#) educates people on how to prepare for wildfires and earthquakes. It's one of two community gardens she co-founded with her husband, Gordon Piper, after surviving the Oakland Hills firestorm in 1991.

She remembers the harrowing escape, evacuating by car.

"There was fire coming down this way, and it was so hot. I was in the driver's seat with the air conditioning on full blast, like this," she said.

The Pipers lost their home, but gained a new mission.

"I never want anyone to have to go through it again. So since then, both my husband and I have pretty much dedicated our time to wildfire prevention," said Piper.

She co-founded the [Oakland Firesafe Council](#) in 2014. The non-profit teaches people to protect their homes and reduce wildfire risk in Alameda County's wildland urban interface.

Workshops range from home hardening to gearing up for fire safety inspections. The council also persuaded Oakland to make wildfire prevention a city-wide priority.

The organization is also working on an East Bay regional plan to coordinate their efforts.

"The reason for that is the fire doesn't know boundaries. It goes where the vegetation is," Piper

explained.

Having goats eat overgrown brush and weeds is just one of the programs funded through the Oakland Wildfire Prevention Assessment District.

Piper campaigned for the district, then headed it up for a few years before it ended.

As retired aide to former city council member and former Oakland Mayor Jean Quan, Piper knows how to navigate City Hall.

Firesafe Council co-founder Ken Benson praises her ability to get things done.

“She’s committed and very energetic and that comes across,” Benson said.

Piper is also secretary and past president of the United Policyholders nonprofit that gives tips and tools to dealing with insurance before and after disasters.

Piper’s dedication is evident to Katrina Brown and her mother, Linda Hiatt, who visited the Gateway garden.

They were grateful for lessons shared from the Oakland Hills fire.

“We’re better off if we’re more prepared and we learn from people who have been through something like that,” Brown said.

So for years of work as a fire prevention activist in Alameda County, this week’s Jefferson Award in the Bay Area goes to Sue Piper.