

Rays of hope as Middletown residents return amid Valley fire

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The Valley fire had spoiled Eric Lopez's marriage proposal, but the story took an astonishing turn Saturday as he and his partner, Annette Perez, returned to their demolished Middletown apartment, armed with a shovel and rake to search the ashen remains of their worldly possessions. Lopez, 20, spotted it right away: The small box holding an engagement ring he had surreptitiously saved for more than a year to buy, then hidden about two weeks ago on the metal stand behind their television. It was right where he had left it. The ring a tad scorched; the box warped by the heat of the conflagration that spectacularly destroyed the Middletown Manor apartment complex on Sept. 12, the day the killer fire erupted on nearby Cobb Mountain. "It's a miracle," said Perez, 21. "When I told her it was still there she started crying," Lopez said. The couple's joy — obviously tempered by their otherwise complete loss, including the birth record footprint of their 10-month-old son, Eric Jr. — came as Middletown was reopened to residents on Saturday, marking a turning point in the battle against the 74,500-acre wildfire. Mandatory evacuation orders for two small communities — Aetna Springs and James Creek in Napa County — were also lifted Saturday, and the Hidden Valley Lake, Jerusalem Grade, Grange Road and Butts Canyon Road areas were set for reopening to residents at noon today, Cal Fire said. Cobb, Loch Lomond and Anderson Springs and the area along Highway 175 down to the outskirts of Middletown remain closed, along with other small areas within the fire's 116-square-mile footprint, said Paul Lowenthal, a Santa Rosa assistant fire marshal and Cal Fire spokesman. The majority of people covered by evacuation orders have now been allowed to go back to their property, he said, but couldn't give a specific number. A firefighting force of 4,275 continued to build lines around the fire that has scored about 75,000 acres and killed at least three people. Firefighters had achieved 50 percent containment by Saturday night, Cal Fire said. The day's bad news was the tally that 888 homes have been destroyed, a huge jump up from the 585 homes Cal Fire had been reporting for several days. The increase was due to reports coming in from teams that are assessing damage throughout the fire zone, and not more homes being burned Saturday, Lowenthal said. That work is ongoing and the official tally of homes lost could

increase, he said. The fire, however, is no longer spreading but continues to smolder and burn primarily in isolated pockets, Lowenthal said. Much of the firefighting effort is around Cobb and Loch Lomond, where steep, rugged terrain makes it harder to build containment lines, Lowenthal said. There were stories of loss and good luck as Middletown returned to a semblance of normalcy Saturday, with the downtown largely untouched but adjoining neighborhoods pockmarked by blackened lots next to sound structures. Julie Alioto confessed to a bit of “survivor’s guilt,” she said, since her apartment was unscathed, just a block away from the demolished Middletown Manor complex. In November, Alioto and her son, Nick, moved from the ill-fated apartments. “It was a relief,” Julie Alioto said. “Now this community is going to be even more tight. I’m going to be here to help it rebuild.” Nick’s alternative school, Loconoma Valley High, burned down while the adjacent Middletown High survived the fire. He’s got an indefinite break from class, but the lost days “will probably get added on at the end,” he said. At Hardester’s Market and Hardware in downtown Middletown, Jon Maurus cheerfully told a checker, “My house burned down, but I’m all right.” Maurus visited his rural property Saturday and found one of his two cats, a gray feline named Hoss, hiding under a pickup parked in a field. He took a philosophical view of the loss of his cottage, barn and mobile home. “Well, you know, I believe in providence, that everything happens for a reason,” Maurus said, describing himself as a “student of metaphysics.” “In a way, I feel kind of freed up,” said Maurus, who is staying at a friend’s home in Pleasant Hill. He plans to chain off his Middletown property and come back to it in six months, he said. Ross Hardester, co-owner of the family-owned market, a Middletown fixture since 1943, said he was happy to see residents return to town and come in for the usual groceries and hardware. “People just wanted to get back so badly,” he said. The store was busy Saturday, with customers, including residents and firefighters in their yellow clothes, buying milk, meat, produce, cold drinks, ice and gasoline cans. Along Middletown’s main street, Highway 29, it hardly seemed as if a disaster had passed through — but for the prevalence of red fire engines and blue PG&E trucks. A flatbed truck rolled past the market carrying the hulk of a fire-scorched pickup. Lopez had planned on proposing to Perez on Oct. 7, the anniversary of the day he asked her to be his girlfriend. The ring was tucked behind the TV; the family was in Clearlake when the fire broke out and they were stopped on Highway 29 when they tried to return home. So he confessed to buying the ring, and they’ve been living in a tent at the evacuation center in Calistoga ever since. Turns out that Perez had noticed the diversion of some of their income, and had asked Lopez what he was doing with the money. “I wanted to give her a surprise,” he said. Aside from the ring, the couple salvaged only a scorched candle holder and a toasted Xbox from the rubble at Middletown Manor. The tale of the ring, however, didn’t apply throughout the complex. Tamie Snow, the manager, lost nearly everything but the photographs, cash and two cats friends were able to save when the complex was leveled by the wind-

driven flames. Snow, who was away when the fire broke out, poked through the ashes Saturday, but couldn't find her grandmother's wedding ring. "She was my best friend, too," Snow said.