

[Sonoma County fire survivors embrace roles as guides and counselors to latest wave of disaster victims](#)

The Press Democrat

Vita Iskander had no intention of taking a leadership role when she walked into Santa Rosa’s Unitarian Universalist church on Oct. 25, 2017. Seventeen days earlier, her home in Hidden Valley Estates had burned in the Tubbs fire. Still in something of a daze, she attended a meeting held by United Policyholders, whose bland name belies its righteous role as a consumer advocacy group in the murky world of insurance.

Iskander was there to gather information. She could not foresee that night that she would soon become an expert on insurance issues herself, and go on to create a blog and website that would help thousands of fire survivors navigate the ordeal of settling claims with their insurers.

The speaker advised those with the same insurance companies to band together. Iskander looked around at her fellow State Farm customers and waited for someone to take the lead.

“Honestly, I didn’t want to form a group,” she said. “I really wanted someone else to form a group.”

She shared that account earlier this month on a Zoom webinar called Survivor 2 Survivor, moderated by Jenny Chamberlain, district director for Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore. The [conversation series](#), at 6 p.m on Wednesdays, gives recent wildfire fire survivors the chance to engage with and learn from survivors of past infernos — those who’ve “been there and done that,” said Brad Sherwood, like Iskander a block captain in his neighborhood and Tubbs fire survivor.

They belong to a growing club they wish did not exist — a band of fire survivors burned out of their

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Date: November 28, 2023

homes. “It’s a s-t club,” said Iskander, “and we don’t want any more people in it.”

Still, in that Sonoma County club of thousands, the willingness of people like Iskander, Sherwood and others to share their time, advice and empathy with new disaster victims isn’t just generous. These days, it’s increasingly necessary. The frequency of catastrophic wildfires in the region and across the state has created ever larger numbers of people burned out of their homes. And many of those survivors are turning to Sonoma County for direction.

“Unfortunately, you all are looked to as experts in this area,” said Ryan Coonerty, a Santa Cruz County supervisor whose district was badly damaged by the CZU Lightning Complex fires. One of the first calls Coonerty made, after that fire gained a foothold in his district, was to Gore.

Coonerty’s goal: “To get some wisdom from people who have already learned how to effectively respond to this, so we’re not reinventing the wheel.”

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Sherwood and his fellow block captains have heard from survivors from Santa Cruz, Southern California and Oregon. “We’ve even heard from communities yet to be impacted by fires, but they’re trying to

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proactive,” he said.

He, for one, is glad to help. “Other than being with my family,” he said, “there’s nothing I’d rather be doing than helping a stranger who just lost their home.”

‘We can’t help ourselves’

Five months after Iskander walked into that church, she unveiled her new website, [Neighbors Together](#). It is packed with practical information that has saved fire survivors time, heartache and — conservatively — hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Had she always wanted to start a website? “Are you kidding?” she said. “I didn’t know anything about them.”

But she dove in. Her site became a clearinghouse of information for fire survivors. “Then I could direct people to it” so they “were not out there in the cold, possibly getting shafted because they didn’t know something,” she said.

Lately, she allows, the website has gotten “stale.” Between her full-time job and the time demands of renovating her new house in Sebastopol, she has less time and energy for it.

But in the next breath, she talks about how she reflexively sprung into action after the Walbridge fire destroyed more than 150 homes as it burned across 86 square miles of northwestern Sonoma County this month and last. She jumped on the phone with fellow helpers Janet Leisen, Lisa Frazee, Anne Barbour and Pamela Van Halsema, marshaling the supplies they would bring to aid centers for survivors. Jennifer Gray Thompson of the Rebuild Northbay Foundation approved a quick grant to pay for those items.

Said Iskander, “We can’t help ourselves.”

Survivor goes to Sacramento

Lisa Frazee was never “a joiner,” as she puts it. After losing her Wikiup home in the Tubbs fire she became a block captain “for a selfish reason — I needed help rebuilding my house. I could not figure out

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how to get through it by myself.”

But the work became “therapy,” said Frazee, a teacher, who soon became an activist and dynamo. Volunteering at the Healdsburg aid center after the Walbridge fire, she met a survivor who’d just spoken with her insurance adjuster. The woman was relieved: the adjuster had informed her she would receive two years of rent and other payment to cover additional living expenses.

MOST POPULAR

Firefighters work on slowing the spread of flames as the Shady fire takes out homes on Mountain Hawk Drive in Santa Rosa early Monday morning, September 28, 2020. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

Sunday updates: Santa Rosa expands evacuation zones into Middle Rincon area

Interactive map shows evacuation zones in Sonoma County

Evacuation map – Glass fire in Napa County

Map: Evacuation zones in Sonoma County

Map: Glass fire in Sonoma and Napa Counties

Frazee gently suggested that she call the adjuster back. “You have three years, not two,” she said.

And that hard-won difference was no small thing. “It’s personal,” Frazee declared.

In October 2019, many Tubbs fire survivors faced the threat of having their additional living expenses cut off by insurers, even though their homes weren’t yet rebuilt. Frazee took a leading role in shaming insurance providers into extending those benefits, helping organize a rally at Old Courthouse Square in Santa Rosa. While 26 carriers agreed to voluntarily continue those benefits, three of the region’s biggest insurers — State Farm, Allstate and Nationwide — wouldn’t budge.

And the industry continued to hold firm against North Bay fire survivors, torpedoing language in Sacramento that would have granted a third year to victims of the 2017 fires. Instead, two years ago,

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Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation granting that coverage to future fire survivors, only.

Thousands more since then have joined that club, and they have Frazee to thank in part for that benefit of extra time.

In April 2018, state Sen. Mike McGuire, the Healdsburg Democrat and ally in the fight for sustained benefits, had asked Frazee to address the Assembly on the subject. Given only 24 hours notice, she still leaped at the chance. On the way to the Capitol, 30 miles before Sacramento, Frazee and her husband pulled off Highway 80. She had a dress, but, more than five months after the Tubbs fire, she only owned tennis shoes.

So they stopped at the Vacaville Premium Outlets, where she picked up a pair of black heels.

'Begin with the end in mind'

Peter Newman was at a cocktail party in San Francisco when word reached him that a wildfire, whipped by offshore winds, was threatening his ranch in the Knights Valley, east of Healdsburg.

The year was 1964. Newman and his friends rushed north and fought the Hanly fire without changing out of their evening finery.

"I felt if there was ever another incident in the valley, I couldn't imagine being a spectator," said Newman's son, Scott, who started training with the Knights Valley Volunteer Fire Company a quarter century ago. After spending much of his adult life splitting time between his family's 500-acre spread, the Jp Newman Ranch, and his home in the East Bay, Scott Newman is now a board member of the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District.

He was not a spectator the night of Oct. 27, 2019, as the Kincadee fire advanced up a ridge behind his family's property along Highway 128. He'd spent the day emptying the family's six homes of valuables, and moving equipment and trucks into the vineyards.

Newman and three other volunteers went to bed early at the fire station. Around midnight, the wind woke them up. They drove two engines to a property neighboring the Jp Newman Ranch.

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With Diablo winds gusting at 65 mph, the hot, fast-moving firefront pushed them off that parcel and onto Newman's property, where the four of them sized up the blaze — "trying to decide if there was anything we could do," Newman recalled. After a pause, he said, "We determined that there was not."

More than 170 homes were destroyed in the wildfire, Sonoma County's largest ever, at 77,758 acres.

Two things made the loss slightly less painful for Newman. His ranch home was not his primary residence. And his family's mementos weren't gone.

Remarkably, he had been through this before. He was engaged in October 1991, when his house was one of 3,000 burned by the Tunnel fire in the Oakland Hills.

After the Tubbs fire wiped out 65 homes in Knights Valley, Newman set up a regular community meeting, and began writing "Periodic Updates," a newsletter forwarding information from Gore's weekly block captain meetings.

His advice to the county's most recent band of fire survivors came in a recent Survivor 2 Survivor conversation: "Begin with the end in mind."

If you do that, and proceed methodically, and don't let anyone rush you, he said, you can start the job knowing that in three years, "you're going to have rebuilt the place better and stronger and more fire resilient than it was before."

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Sucker-punch timing

Until recently, Dan Grout lived on Mill Creek Road, on a 100-acre spread he described as “kind of a living museum, with orchards, two-hand saws, sheep farming, some timber extraction here and there.”

Since 1915 the property has been in the family of his wife, Melissa Pitkin. Four years ago, they moved there, to be closer to her family. A wildlife ecologist, Grout quickly realized he needed to thin the forest and create more defensible space to safeguard the 20-plus structures, plus dozens of legacy fruit trees, from fire.

“So I’ve been chain sawing for four years,” he said.

Grout joined forces with Mark Farmer, who in 2018 co-founded the Mill Creek Citizens Organized to Prepare for Emergencies, or COPE, one of a growing network of neighborhood disaster preparedness groups. After the Kincadee fire, that group felt an urgency to create a protection plan — for the wildfire, they agreed, that would eventually come.

They didn’t know how soon.

Grout, who has worked for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and taught classes at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, wrote the first draft of that plan, which he described as “a cooperative document with Cal Fire, the whole community, and other agencies.”

It listed a dozen or so top priorities. The neighborhood COPE group had begun work on some of those when a dry lightning strike — one of an estimated 12,000 in the state over several days in mid-August — ignited what would become the Walbridge fire. It would go on to char 17,000 of the 19,688-acre Mill Creek area encompassed by the wildfire plan.

Mill Creek had been overrun by wildfire while trying to prepare for that very inevitability.

“I think you have to acknowledge the irony, the sucker-punch timing, in our particular case,” Grout observed.

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Since the fire, he's been dividing his time between helping the community deal with its loss, "and also just sorting through my own family's drama with three parcels, three houses and 100 acres gone."

He might find comfort in the words of Sherwood, the block captain in Larkfield Estates north of Santa Rosa, where most of the homes leveled by the Tubbs fire have been rebuilt. For all of the returning neighbors, marks of the disaster are just about everywhere. But slowly they are overtaken by the march of recovery.

"It's going to take a lot of work, and time, but you will succeed," Sherwood said. "You will be OK. You're not alone."

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