

# When the Helpers Need Help

**Marilyn J. Wooley, Ph.D.**

25 July 2018. 113 degrees--the hottest day of the year in the most sweltering July I could remember in Redding, California. My husband and I decided to drive north hoping to shave off a few degrees and get respite from wildfire smoke.

Two days before, a broken trailer wheel sent sparks into the Whiskeytown-Shasta-Trinity Recreational area and ignited the Carr Fire. Summer is fire season in Shasta County, but the rapid response of the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, and CalFire firefighters kept us safe in previous years.

The morning of 26 July, I glanced at the news. The Carr Fire had exploded from 3000 acres to 20,000 acres overnight. "Extreme fire behavior" the headline read, fueled by erratic winds, low humidity, and ungodly heat. We'd practiced fire safety--clearing our acreage of manzanita and wild grasses and limbing the oaks and pine trees—but I was uneasy.

I woke my husband. "We gotta go home." While heading south on I-5, I called our pet sitter. "Put the cats in their crates and the dogs in your car. Get ready to leave." The fire was miles away and there were no evacuation orders for the City of Redding, but I wanted to be prepared.

As we descended into the valley, the surrounding mountains faded into thick haze from the fire. Suddenly, a panicked buck leaped from the smoky forest onto the highway and was greased by a semi-truck. I was trying to block that vision when another deer ran out, got hit, and spun into the oncoming lane.

At home, we organized what to take and what had to be done to protect our home. I put our "go bags" into the car, pulled flammable patio furniture inside, closed the windows and all the interior doors. I felt gratitude that we had time, and foolish that I could be overreacting.

The lights went off. The land line rang. The reverse 911 advised that we evacuate. Outside, a deputy from the Shasta County Sheriff's Department tied a pink polka dot ribbon to our fence post indicating that the house had been checked for residents. The air filled with black smoke making it harder to see, much less breathe.

I ran inside and gave one last look around. A thousand memories flooded my mind with anticipatory grief and loss. Not five minutes later the landline rang again. The reverse 911 pronounced a mandatory evacuation.

We left doors unlocked and the gate open. We drove to our neighbor's home and watched the sky turn crimson and black. Ash and cinders began falling like snow. Nearby homes were burning. It was time to leave.

Our plan was to stay at my office. The main roads were clogged with evacuees, so we wended through neighborhood streets. There was a commotion in the parking lot. A neighbor jumped into her car and said, “We’re leaving.”

Evacuating my office was not in my escape plan. I approached a firefighter. “You don’t want to be here, ma’am. It isn’t safe.” Later I learned that the apocalyptic Carr Fire tornado was eviscerating the neighborhoods across the river.

We were now homeless and scared. My husband called a friend who offered us a room. One couple staying there had run on foot to escape their house as it ignited with their pets trapped inside. No one felt safe—the violent winds could blow cinders across the valley and ignite more fires.

The next morning, we drove through bitter smoke toward our house. A National Guard recruit stopped us at a barricade where an elderly woman stood sobbing. “Are you sure?” she begged. “My house is the blue one with the circular driveway.”

“It’s gone, lady,” he said. “Everything’s gone.”

“What about the houses near. . .” I named our cross street.

“Gone. What didn’t burn last night, will tonight. They can’t get ahead of the fire, even at night.”

We found a hotel room. Personal items were limited to what we had in the suitcases packed for our vacation. My office survived. We made plans to move in until we could figure out what to do.

I called my contact at CalFire to help with CISM of first responders. She said, “Are you crazy? You have your own emergency. We’ll find clinicians.” I felt a little left out but was grateful that my colleagues stepped up.

Later, I counseled displaced employees of a local hospital, a community agency, and a utility company and provided one-on-ones to first responders. I wanted to be more available, but in truth, getting through each day was all I could manage.

Civilians attending a CISM session were initially skeptical about the process, however, once they understood that participation was voluntary, most spoke. Their first warning of fire had been when scorching wind and raging flames overtook their homes. The most valuable aspects of the civilian session were that individuals could tell their survival stories in a safe environment with mutual support and share information about resources.

The most common theme of CISM for the first responders was the terror they experienced during the Carr Fire tornado, a 165-mph, 1000-foot-wide, 18,000-foot high, 2700-degree fire whirl that jumped the barrier of the Sacramento River as easily as a child playing hop scotch. The suffocating smoke made them vomit and erratic winds repeatedly knocked them off their feet. Radios were useless in the roar of the firestorm. Visual contact with crews was impossible. Engine windows blew out. They abandoned the fire and focused on rescue, which meant

screaming at civilians to run for their lives. Some were overcome by a sense of doom or “evil.” One said, “When you look into the eyes of your crew and see terror, you know it’s bad.”

Two LODDs devastated the town. Redding Fire Investigator Jeremy Stoke came off vacation to evacuate people, but the fire tornado overtook him. In his last seconds he called out Mayday for a water drop. There was mortal fear in his voice. Before help came, the tornado sucked him up, mangled his truck beyond recognition, and threw his body so far that he wasn’t found until the next day. One civilian said, “He saved us all.”

Eighty-one-year-old bulldozer operator Don Smith was caught in a burnover on a fire line. He’d requested a water drop. Helicopters braved the fire to drop water and firefighters tried to reach him on foot. Tragically, his dozer burned, and he had no time to deploy his fire shelter.

The fire raged until the 30th of August, destroying 229,651 acres and 1614 structures. Eight people were killed, three firefighters burned. The towns of Keswick and historic Old Shasta burned to ash. Over 36,000 people evacuated. Hundreds of domestic animals were lost or displaced. Smoke from the weeks-long fire spread across the western states. The Carr Fire is rated the seventh largest and the eighth most destructive fire in California history.

Eight days after we evacuated, I was finishing a session with civilians when I received the call we were repopulating. My heart thumped as I drove home. My house was standing, and my 40 rose bushes were blooming bright against the blackened hills! The firefighters inspecting for spot fires watered them and kept them alive in 110-degree heat. The fire had jumped past our house, hit a manzanita forest and flashed, taking out a number of neighborhood homes. When fire has enough momentum, nothing is safe.

A month after Armageddon, I found that I was suffering from symptoms of stress. My emotions had been up and down, and I was exhausted. I sought out a colleague. We did a one on one and I realized the importance of selfcare.

The Redding community pulled together. Everyone had a story—the fire was the common enemy and bonded us. Small acts of kindness eased our pain. Hundreds of signs thanking first responders appeared everywhere. Local animal rescue worked tirelessly to reunite owners and pets separated in the fire. I invited a friend who’d lost everything to “shop” in my closet. The experiences will reverberate for years to come.

People adapt and the land regenerated with fields of California poppies. Looking back, my husband says he learned two things from the Carr Fire. First, when the wife says clear the manzanita and limb the pines and oaks, do it. It doesn’t guarantee that your property won’t burn, but it increases the odds that it will be saved. Second, you have to be prepared to lose all your possessions. It’s just stuff. In the long run, relationships with family, friends, and community are more important than anything else.

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