

MY UPDATE ON THE CALIFORNIA FIRES AND WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THEM

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Over the last few days, I've received calls and emails from people concerned about my proximity to the Brea and Yorba Linda fires. I want to assure everyone that my home in Fullerton (Brea's immediately to the north and Yorba Linda to the east) is safe.

On Saturday, I was judging a karate tournament at American Martial Arts Academy when I learned about the fires. A pall of thick smoke drifted our way, causing consternation. When I heard about the proximity of the fires to my boyfriend, Don's, home in Yorba Linda, I left the studio because I wanted to get our two dogs inside. (Luckily my part of the judging was over.)

Don beat me to his house, so I changed directions and headed to my home. I surveyed the outside of my home and realized the wind had blown a lot of dry leaves against the house, and the ground and plants were bone dry. My friend, Jennifer, watered down the lawn, bushes, and trees, while I worked in the yard to make the outside safer. At the same time, we kept an eye on the sky, knowing if the smoke became much worse, we'd need to go indoors.

In listening to the news, I heard the Red Cross had turned the Brea Community Center into a shelter, so I showered, changed, and headed over there. But before I left, I packed up my treasured personal items and favorite photos, and placed them in my car. I made sure the cat carrier and some food, water, and bowls, stood ready near the door of my house. Jennifer volunteered to keep watch and take care of my two cats. This way, I didn't have to worry about what was happening at my home and could focus on my work at the shelter.

To my surprise, the community center wasn't teeming with people, maybe because there were several shelters in the area, or because people sought a haven with friends or family. About fifty people took refuge at the shelter, but some came and went, so the actual numbers were probably larger.

One of the best parts of the center was they had an animal shelter. I felt very reassured to see people walking their dogs on the way to the animal area. What a relief for pet owners to be able to keep their animals with them!

The shelter was well stocked with food and water, including some of my favorite junk food snacks, which I pretended not to see. Several local restaurants also delivered fabulous meals.

A big-screen television in the lounge stayed tuned to the news, and most of the people congregated there. Staff set up low red cots with stiff gray blankets in the gym.

I mostly worked in the "health center," although no one seemed visibly upset or needed my services as a crisis counselor. Instead I helped the doctors with our "patients," mostly the elderly, who needed some extra care.

Later, I took charge of “bedtime,” juggling to figure out which people should have the special needs cots--a black lounge chair type bed--with a cushion. These cots were higher than the red ones, and the back could lift to a sitting position. I had ten people who needed them, and only nine black cots. Finally, I determined that a ninety-year-old man could use a red cot, because he didn’t have any physical disabilities, like the others. Then I had to arrange the cots in a big room, according to which friends or neighbors wanted to group together and who needed caretakers to stay with them (on the red cots.)

Somewhere in the preparations, we lost an elderly couple (the wife had MS) for whom I’d prepared one black and one red cot. The wife had been insistent they return home. Everyone told them they couldn’t because the roads were blocked into their evacuated neighborhood. But I’m afraid they made the attempt. I searched the whole center, then combed the parking lot, but never found them. Perhaps they returned after I left at 10:00 pm.

That evening, I received a call from a major corporation requesting I go to their offices on Sunday to counsel any of their affected employees. So, I didn’t spend Sunday at the shelter.

Sunday morning, gray ashes covered the street outside my house, and smoke cloaked the air. As I drove south on the 57 freeway toward my job site, the sky lightened to a normal blue shade.

It wasn’t until Sunday night that Don confessed that fires had burned three houses two blocks from his, and that he was supposed to have evacuated, BUT DIDN’T! He chose to stay home because of concerns about looters. (There were some looters arrested. Horrible, isn’t it, that people would take advantage like that.) He hadn’t told me because he didn’t want to worry me when I was busy helping others. (Translation, he didn’t want me to nag at him about something he wasn’t going to do anyway.)

Although I consider myself well prepared for disasters, I still learned some from this one (which is still not over).

- 1. Have your affairs in order.** Make sure you have up-to-date insurance coverage. Several people who lost everything in the major apartment fire did not have renter’s insurance.
- 2. Keep important papers in an easily accessible place.** I have several folders in a file cabinet. It took seconds for me to grab the insurance folder and the two that hold my documents for this year’s taxes. (I’m self-employed, so that’s important.)
- 3. Have a mental list of what’s most important for you to grab on your way out the door.** Years ago a firefighter friend surveyed the brushy hillside I live on. (A golf course is on the bottom of the hill.) He told me, “If a golfer tosses down a cigarette during the Santa Ana winds, you’ll have four minutes before the fire reaches your house.”

Four minutes! Immediately, I created a mental plan, based on how much time I have. Here’s the top twelve on my list:

1. Grab the cats and throw them in the car. (If I have slightly more time, stick them in the cat carrier first.)
2. Purse, cell phone, and organizer (I usually keep them together.)
3. Computer.
4. Paperwork.
5. Great-great grandmother's silver creamer and sugar holder.
6. Large crystal cut-glass vase.
7. Grandmother's cups and saucers.
8. Grandmother's blue cut-glass dish.
9. My other grandmother's chocolate cups and saucers.
10. My jewelry box
11. Old family photos—parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and one of my formal college portraits. Every other important photo, someone in the family probably has a copy of, or they are on my computer.
12. A painting by a dear friend now deceased.

As you can see, most of these are not valuable, so much as sentimental. I have possessions that are far more valuable, but they can be replaced. These can't. These are the ones that would really hurt to lose.

When I needed to pack up things before leaving for the community center, it only took minutes. I didn't have to stop and think about what I wanted. I'd already programmed the choices into my mind.

4. Keep a list of your medications in your purse or wallet. Keep a minimum dose in your purse and/or in your car (if heat doesn't affect them.)

At the community center, we had several elderly people who needed their medication, but didn't have it. One wasn't even sure what drugs took. Luckily we had two doctors on staff who did important detective work to figure out the drugs and dosages and a wonderful local pharmacist at CVS who dropped off the needed medication after her shift on Saturday.

5. Keep a change of clothes in your car. I learned this lesson when I had to unexpectedly stay overnight for a crisis job. Ever since, I've carried a complete change of clothes, an extra jacket, pajamas, and toiletries in a bag in my car.

Because of the heat outside, many people weren't prepared for the air-conditioned shelter and had to wrap themselves in the stiff blankets. Most also didn't have any clothes or toiletries besides what they wore or carried in their purses.

I also keep a soft blanket in my car trunk and some bottles of water. I'm going to add a pillow. While the Red Cross supplies cots and blankets, the lack of pillows will make sleeping difficult.

I already keep wax earplugs in my purse, and that's another thing to store in your purse or car.

6. Know that kindness is vital to helping those affected get through the evacuation experience and/or loss experience. The efforts of all who pitched in makes a huge difference in supporting peoples' spirits and brings hope and support to all involved.

Here's a small list of those who come to mind. Obviously, there are more people involved than I can think of or know about:

- Thanks go out to our beleaguered fire fighters and police officers. In the midst of battling flames and keeping order, they take precious minutes to comfort people or save a few possessions from burning homes.
- The shelter staff and Red Cross volunteers who work so hard to make shelter life comfortable for the victims.
- The restaurants that donated food.
- Individuals and organizations who gave donations to the shelters.
- Church pastors/members who ministered to those effected or donated supplies and money.
- Insurance agents who arrived at the shelter to help any who lost their homes.
- Friends who opened up their homes so others could stay for a night or two.
- Neighbors who patrolled the streets, rushing to water down stray embers. (Many homes were saved by the efforts of civilians.)
- Neighbors and strangers who offered hugs to those affected.
- People in the community, and those across the nation, who donated or will donate money to the Red Cross for the victims.
- Those who prayed or sent positive thoughts to all involved
- The local and state government officials who either physically helped or who will help through their policy decisions.

As you know by watching the news, the devastation isn't over. Those who lost (or who will lose) their homes will have a long time of emotional healing as well as an arduous path to rebuilding their homes and their lives. These fires swept into their lives, and they will never be the same.

My heart goes out to all the victims.

Dr. Debra