Entry Guide, 2017 Sigma Delta Chi Award for Deadline Reporting

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SIGMA DELTA CHI AWARD: DEADLINE REPORTING
A truck burns in front of homes early Monday morning in the Coffey Park area of Santa Rosa.

Fire consumes landmarks

Fires leave trail of devastation

Neighbors and strangers took a stand on Baird Road

Area hospitals shift patients out of danger
Neighbours warned, SR family flees

By Bubble

A neighborhood to the north of the Tubbs fire burned in the early morning hours of Sunday, October 8. The fire started near Highway 128 and continued east, destroying homes and businesses. Residents were warned to evacuate and leave their homes.

Residents of the area were concerned about the safety of their homes and families. Katy Masingale, a local resident, said, “We lost everything.”

The fire moved so fast that residents were not able to save their belongings. Sherwood, a local resident, said, “I didn’t think it would happen.”

Several incidents of looting were reported in the area. Daughters of the Tubbs fire, Katy Masingale, and Rajendra Padgett, gathered what they could: “We basically lost everything,” said Padgett.

It was a haunting sequel to the fire that destroyed much of the day. Commercial areas were affected, including the Wildfire Station, where hundreds of firefighters were working to restore service.

For more information, contact Gov. Jerry Brown at 707-521-5285 or PratherDigitale at 707-521-5285.

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SIGMA DELTA CHI AWARD: DEADLINE REPORTING
Inferno kills 7, leaves ‘complete devastation’

By MARY CALLAHAN, PAUL PAYNE, RANDI ROSSMANN, JULIE JOHNSON AND J.D. MORRIS
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A raging firestorm born in the dark of night by dry, violent winds roared down from the rural hills bordering Napa and Sonoma counties early Monday and cut a devastating swath into Santa Rosa from its eastern outskirts, killing at least seven city residents and destroying more than 1,500 structures.

Tens of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes hours before sunrise, when the ruin wrought by flames in several terrifying hours became apparent over a rural and urban landscape spanning more than 50 square miles. In Sonoma County alone, officials said 100 people were reported missing.

For thousands of firefighters and residents trying to protect homes, the fire driven by gusts up to 88 mph was an amorphous, unstoppable force, rampaging through Mark West Springs, Larkfield and Wkiup, and Fountain-grove, where it claimed hundreds of upscale Santa Rosa houses tucked into forested hillsides.

From there it raced on, scorching landmark businesses and school campuses and threatening two hospitals, where hundreds of patients were evacuated. Throwing sparks ahead of its main front, the fire then jumped Highway 101 into a heavily populated corner of northwest Santa Rosa.

In Coffey Park, the destruction was warlike. Block after block, hundreds of homes burst into flames.

“The volume of structures and neighborhoods that have been completely destroyed is incredible,” said Assistant Santa Rosa Fire Marshal Paul Lowenthal, who lost his own Larkfield home Monday. “There are areas where, as far as the eye can see, is complete devastation with entire neighborhoods burned to the ground.”

By nightfall Monday, the Tubbs fire, which began about 10 p.m. near Calistoga in eastern Napa County, was still uncontrolled on many fronts. Its single-day toll made it the worst natural disaster on record in Sonoma County, and among the most destructive wildfires in California history. Authorities said they expected the death toll to grow, and financial losses from the fire — from homes and luxury hotels, to school campuses and wineries — are likely to mount into the billions of dollars.

FOUNTAINGROVE »
Neighborhoods razed in north Santa Rosa

SONOMA VALLEY »
Area ‘like a ghost town’ as fires flank Highway 12

REDWOOD VALLEY »
At least 2 dead as blaze spreads toward Willits

Published October 10, 2017
SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA • PRESSDECOCRAT.COM

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2017

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The blaze, which burned 27,000 acres by Monday night, was the most catastrophic of more than 14 wildfires across eight counties in Northern California. The heaviest activity centered in Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties, where up to 75,000 acres had burned. A total of 11 people were confirmed dead in the local fires, including two in Mendocino County and an elderly couple in Napa County.

In Sonoma Valley, several fires burned 5,000 acres around Glen Ellen and Kenwood, where homes on both sides of Highway 12 were destroyed.

“It has been a horrific and terrifying night for a great many people,” acting Santa Rosa Police Chief Craig Schwartz said Monday during a news conference. Low humidity and strong, inland winds that developed over the weekend helped fuel the firestorm. Cal Fire and the National Weather Service issued a red flag warning that extended through today, though gusts had largely died down by Monday evening.

By that time, the nightmare that many wildfire experts had long feared in Santa Rosa had played out. It was a haunting sequel to the disastrous Hanley fire of 1964, which originated in the same rugged terrain along the Napa-Sonoma border and ripped through what was then mostly rural land. It was halted before it reached the city’s core.

Not so this time. Flames outpaced overmatched fire crews, burning through wooded, rural estates and onto paved city blocks. Desperate residents asked all day for updates on active fire fronts that seemed to have them surrounded. Fire officials pleaded for reinforcements.

“We’ve been wondering, ‘Where in the heck are they?’” Windsor Fire Chief Jack Piccinini said about 6 a.m. “I’ve asked, ‘Are units coming?’ and was told no, they’re going to the Atlas fire (in Napa County). That’s painful news to us. We’re still spread so thin.”

Highway 101 in Santa Rosa was completely shut down in both directions, from Steele Lane to Mark West Springs Road. Thick smoke kept badly needed Cal Fire tankers and helicopters grounded for much of the day. Commercial flights at Charles M. Schulz-Sonoma County Airport were canceled.

With hours to go before sunrise, the fire had topped a ridge west of Santa Rosa, lighting the hillside with flames before swooping down into town.

Ted Regan, who lives near Calistoga Road, said he saw the glow from the foothills behind his house about 2 a.m.

“It got brighter and brighter and then we saw flames. That’s when we said, ‘It’s time to go,’” Regan said.

Rachel McKenzie, who fled her home south of Hopper Avenue in northwest Santa Rosa with her son, her husband and a crate filled with pet reptiles, described the frenzied evacuation hours later as she awaited news of her home at an emergency evacuation center.

“It was totally chaotic,” McKenzie said. “I
saw a fire start in my neighbor’s house, and it was fully engulfed when we drove away.”

Work to evacuate patients from Kaiser Permanent and Sutter Santa Rosa hospitals in north Santa Rosa began in darkness as wind-blown smoke blanketed the Highway 101 corridor. In the hills, and later in the flatlands, residents were alerted to the fire’s approach by evacuation orders, made by reverse emergency calls and loudspeaker transmissions, and officers knocking on doors.

“These blazes have taken place at an individual’s most vulnerable time, when they are home and in bed,” State Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, said.

By midday, the evacuation orders included Oakmont — the Sonoma Valley retirement community — Windsor’s southern outskirts and the eastern border of Rohnert Park.

By that time, a large Mendocino Avenue mobile home park was left in smoldering ruins. About half of Cardinal Newman High School was destroyed along with landmarks including the Fountaingrove Inn, the Hilton Sonoma Wine Country and the historic Fountaingrove Round Barn. The Luther Burbank Center for the Arts was partially damaged and Paradise Ridge winery suffered extensive damage.

Sonoma County Supervisor Shirlee Zane, who surveyed the damage Monday afternoon from a helicopter described the burned landscape as “a hellish war zone.”

“It looked like somebody bombed these neighborhoods,” she said.

Pacific Gas and Electric Co. reported 50,000 Sonoma County customers were without power Monday. Cellphone coverage was intermittent throughout Monday as flames knocked out communication equipment in the region.

“Due to wildfires, some wireless customers in Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Humboldt counties and their surrounding areas may be experiencing issues with their wireless services,” said Leland Kim, media relations director for AT&T. “We are working to restore service as quickly as possible.”

Gov. Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency in Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino and Yuba counties as well as others throughout the state. Sonoma County’s two congressmen, Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, and Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, traveled to the area Monday, and Thompson joined Zane in the aerial survey.

He said he already had forwarded photos to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the White House.

The cause of the Tubbs fire remains undetermined, though any small spark could have been fanned into a conflagration by the gusts Sunday night, Cal Fire officials said.

It started near Highway 128 and Bennett Lane north of Calistoga and spread southwest into Sonoma County through heavily wooded areas along Mark West Creek and Mark West Springs Road.

Explosions from bursting propane tanks punctuated the night as flames set the sky aglow. Sunup Monday was otherworldly, with a blood-red sun obscured by smoke, ash blanketing the ground and residents rushing to fill up gas tanks and seek emergency shelter.

“It was like an apocalypse,” said Laura Mills, who lives on Wedgewood Way in Fountaingrove, and was forced to evacuate in bumper-to-bumper traffic to the Finley Community Center. “It was very spooky.”

Evacuation centers countywide filled through the day with anxious, exhausted people uncertain of what awaited them at home. Those awakened for hasty departures the previous night included assisted living and senior home residents.

Roads, schools and businesses around the area were closed as mandatory evacuation orders expanded.

Cal Fire Chief Ken Pimlott said the preliminary loss assessment of more than 1,500 residential and commercial structures was drawn from “very conservative estimates.”

Several incidents of looting had been reported by Monday afternoon, in both residential and commercial areas. Acting Santa Rosa Police Chief Schwartz ordered a curfew prohibiting anyone from being inside a mandatory evacuation zone between the hours of 6:45 p.m. and 7:15 a.m.

Sonoma County Sheriff Rob Giordano said scores of law enforcement personnel, including at least 120 on loan from neighboring counties, would patrol the fire areas in the days ahead, stopping and potentially arresting anyone unauthorized found inside.

Santa Rosa Mayor Chris Coursey was clearly emotional during brief remarks at Monday’s news briefing.

“I’m lucky,” he said. “My house is fine. My family is fine. My city is not. And it’s gonna take a long time for us to recover what’s happened today.”

But the city, he said, is strong.

“We are a resilient city. We’re an indivisible city, and we’re gonna need to hang together as we go through this.”

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SIGMA DELTA CHI AWARD: DEADLINE REPORTING
SR’s Coffey Park neighborhood leveled, displacing thousands

By ROBERT DIGITALE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The wind screamed past the front of Gordon Easter’s northwest Santa Rosa home early Monday as emergency officials drove by and announced over loudspeakers that it was time for residents to go.

Across the street, in the predawn dark, Ben Hernandez and his family prepared to leave as the sky showered down woody debris aglow in flame.

“You could see embers falling the size of quarters,” said Hernandez’s son, Ben Hernandez Jr.

Their neighborhood, a compact subdivision of modest single-family homes built decades ago, was witness to a kind of unfathomable destruction Monday. Whole city blocks were claimed by fire, displacing perhaps several thousand people from an area with more than 1,000 homes.

The ashen fallout was so complete that it left many residents at a loss for words when they returned to survey the damage Monday afternoon.

Fire has long been a threat for residents in the wooded hills across Highway 101 to the east. This time, flames leapt from those hills, across the six highway lanes and frontage streets and rained down on their homes.

The fire incinerated houses stretching from a few blocks north of Piner Road almost to Dennis Lane on the northern edge of the city. In the middle of the subdivision, not a home appears to be left standing for three-quarters of a mile.

“It hasn’t really hit me that I don’t have anything I used to have,” said Easter, who has lived on Hopper Avenue for 20 years.

He paused to note the wreckage of a neighbor’s car in a nearby driveway. It worried him that the neighbor, a woman who lived alone, might have failed to escape the flames.

Seven deaths have been reported in northern Santa Rosa neighborhoods from the blaze, dubbed the Tubbs fire, and both Easter’s and the Hernandez’s homes lie in ruins, part of a terrible wasteland in the Coffey Park neighborhood.

Around the city park that gave the neighborhood its name, not a home remains. Coffey Park’s baby swings and blue slide looked untouched, but across the street burned-out cars littered driveways.

The residents expressed disbelief that a wildfire could reach their neighborhood from the hills where it earlier raged.

“It’s not supposed to happen this way,” said resident Gary Padgett. “But it did.”

Padgett’s rented home near Crimson and Kerry lanes was saved by Gold Ridge firefighters along the northwest edge of the neighborhood. Few homes remained to his east or west, though many were spared to the north.

“I’m thankful,” he said. “That’s all I can say.”

Public safety officials urged people to stay out of the evacuation areas, and late Monday city police announced a mandatory curfew in those zones from 6:45 p.m. to sunrise. But the magnitude of the fire’s damage brought out both residents and sightseers Monday to Coffey Park.

Most, like Hernandez, could do little but gawk over what was gone.

“We basically lost everything,” he said, standing near Hopper and Sumatra Drive. He choked up as he recalled that in the hurried evacuation he had left behind his wedding ring.

The fire jumped Highway 101 during the night, apparently near the Kohl’s department store on Hopper Avenue. Three nearby restaurants went up in flames.

In the first single-family neighborhood to the west, which includes Skyview and Crestview drives, only a dozen of the more than 200

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Coffey Park
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Single-family houses remained intact. Among them was the home of Grace Muga, who lives on Skyview with her parents and two siblings.

Muga returned with her friend Farai Jumbe about 8 a.m. Monday to find the home largely untouched. When told how few of the surrounding homes survived, the two women dropped to their knees in disbelief.

Next door, a neighbor’s fence still burned, threatening Muga’s house. A Santa Rosa fire-truck pulled up and a fire crew quickly doused the flames. A firefighter advised Muga that a working garden hose was nearby should she need it. As the crew got back in their truck, Muga prayed aloud, “God, watch over them, please.”

Across the street, chimney after chimney stood alone amid the rubble.

“These are my neighbors,” Muga said.

At the southwest edge of the morning’s destruction, the fire jumped the SMART train tracks near San Miguel Avenue, but it was stopped a few blocks to the west.

At Frida Street off San Miguel, all the homes on the east side remained standing, while nearly all the homes on the west side had been destroyed. Natural gas lines spewed flames.

John Murdick stood atop his home on the east side of Frida and doused the roof with a garden hose.

Asked how long he’d lived there, he yelled, “Twenty-seven years. And I’m not giving up.”

He evacuated in the early morning but returned with his wife, Joyce, before 9 a.m.

A neighbor, Peggy Sharp, soon drove up with partner Steve Balch to confirm that Sharps’ home had been destroyed across the street. Sharp remained stoic until she saw Joyce Murdick approach. The two neighbors hugged and wept.

“It’s unbelievable,” Sharp said of the destruction. “Just like that.”

The burned area’s southeast edge lay a few blocks north of Schaefer Elementary School near Sweetgum Street and Sweetgum Court. Roommates Travis Fuesz and Juan Valencia returned there Monday afternoon, passing by scores of destroyed houses.

“Our stomachs just sank,” Fuesz said of the neighbors’ losses. He recalled thinking, “There’s no way our home is still there.”

In fact, the home and those next to it survived on the south side of Sweetgum Court. However, across the street the fire appeared to have consumed several blocks of homes all the way north to Hopper Avenue.

On the burned area’s southern edge, San Francisco and Santa Rosa firefighters were able to stop the flames near Sansone Drive and Sansone Court, said resident Dan Buschena. Their efforts saved his house two blocks north of Piner.

Buschena returned to his residence about 8 a.m. to see the San Francisco firefighters battling flames consuming his neighbor’s home to the west.

When the firefighters learned Buschena owned the home next door, they sought to ease his mind. He recalled they told him, “We got it.”

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Neighborhood set ablaze

Some residents watch as flames level block after block in one of hardest-hit areas

By MARTIN ESPINOZA AND KEVIN McCALLUM
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Mariana Eakle, 11, woke to the smell of smoke seeping into her Fountaingrove house on Park Gardens Drive and alerted her parents, Lori Barekman and Wade Eakle, about 1:45 a.m.

“We could see so much smoke and all the reflections of the fire from our back deck,” Barekman said.

After conferring with neighbors, Barekman and her family decided to flee. All of her neighbors left, too.

“No one that I know of stayed,” she said. “We were on the top and it was coming toward you. All of our neighbors are out. … The main thing is we’re all safe. We’re all good.”

Fire from the glow she saw from her deck would soon reach the Fountaingrove area, bringing unimaginable destruction to the upscale hillside neighborhood.

While the toll of the firestorm has not yet been tallied, the damage is widespread. Flames leveled block after block of homes in Fountaingrove and destroyed or damaged several prominent businesses, including the Fountaingrove Inn, its Equus restaurant and several structures at the Hilton Sonoma Wine Country.

For Tracy Weitzenberg, a peaceful Sunday evening spiraled into a sleepless, nightmarish night that would end with her beloved Fountaingrove home in ashes.

Weitzenberg and her husband, Todd, a physician at Kaiser Permanente, had lived there for 15 years and just sent their youngest son off to college at UC Davis. They got two weeks as empty-nesters.

“No I have a real empty nest,” Weitzenberg said, a moment of levity at the end of a day of both strength and desperation.

She first caught the scent of smoke in the air when she went out on her deck around 10:20 p.m. but didn’t think much of it, believing it was from a distant Napa County fire. But around 11:30 p.m. they got a call from friends who were evacuating from their home off Porter Creek Road and urged them to do
the same.

Her husband started packing furiously, but Weitzenberg remained less concerned, she said.

“I have a pretty positive attitude, so I still wasn’t thinking it was going to happen to my house,” said Weitzenberg, director of public policy for the Santa Rosa Metro Chamber.

But when the power went out and she went to charge her cellphone in her car, Weitzenberg saw her Southridge Drive neighbors gathered in the street looking with concern at a sky glowing ominously. Her younger brother, who lives higher up on Fountaingrove, said he could see the fire approaching.

Worried they could be trapped in their hillside cul-de-sac, the couple scooped up their dogs, Trix and Puka, and went to help their parents evacuate from their homes in the nearby Hidden Valley neighborhood. They made their way down to her father’s law firm, Abbey, Weitzenberg, Warren & Emery, where they huddled in a conference room around 4 a.m. and spent much of the day.

Though she was still optimistic that somehow her home survived, every new bit of information — the loss of a new fire station up the hill, the destruction of the shopping center near her home housing Sweet T’s — seemed to confirm her worst fears.

Then a friend of one of her sons swung by the street and sent a picture of what little was left. In one photo she could see the basketball hoop where her sons, who both played the game in high school, spent so many hours enjoying the only home they’d ever known. Then it hit her.

“It just dropped me,” Weitzenberg said. “We just cried together on the phone. For the boys, being so far away, they just can’t understand how this could possibly happen.”

Santa Rosa’s eastern hills, including the Fountaingrove, Alta Vista, Montecito Heights, Hidden Valley and Brush Creek neighborhoods, have all long concerned local officials and firefighters.

They’re located in what firefighters call a wildland-urban interface, where homes in wooded rural and semi-rural areas are effectively surrounded by highly combustible fuels.

Former Santa Rosa Mayor John Sawyer was a young boy the last time Fountaingrove burned this badly. It was Sept. 19, 1964, and the Hanly fire, started by a deer hunter who flicked his cigarette behind a roadside tavern near Mt. St. Helena, raced over Santa Rosa’s eastern hills.

“I remember there was a great deal of anxiety as the glowing got closer and closer,” Sawyer said.

The fire was ultimately stopped within yards of the former county hospital on Chanate Road, but not before scorching 52,700 acres.

“Ever since then people have been talking about how that area was due for another pretty large fire,” Sawyer said. “This is to me a major wakeup call on a number of levels.”

High up on a hill bounded by Bicentennial Way, Mendocino Avenue and Lake Park Court, a group of local residents worked tirelessly to keep flames and smoldering embers from climbing up the southeast slope and destroying a handful of homes.

Lake Park Court resident Jim Henderson said his father built one of the threatened homes in 1964, a few months before the Hanly fire.

“It was a fire just like this, burned all the way from Calistoga to Santa Rosa and it was the exact same time of year,” he said.

Across the street, residents of the overlook at Fountaingrove apartment complex watched their homes burn Monday morning. Thick smoke clouded the apartments, which seemed to defy the flames until one building, on the southeast corner, caught fire in the rear. By about 10:45 a.m., flames and smoke were soon billowing from the roof of the structure as tearful residents looked on in horror, standing in the parking lot of the adjacent Lucky supermarket and Home Depot.

Near the top of the hill, at the intersection of Fountaingrove Parkway and Newgate Court, fire destroyed the city’s $4 million fire station, Station 5. The station, opened only two years ago, was designed to improve the department’s ability to respond to fire and medical calls in the area. But it was no match for Monday’s fire. Before 6 a.m., portions of the fire station’s front wall were collapsing.

The fire destroyed four Fountaingrove homes belonging to family of the late Gene Crozat, founder of Santa Rosa-based G&G Auto Body. That included sons Patrick and Josh and daughter Jamie Crozat-Keck, as well as their mother Teri Crozat, who recently purchased a home in Fountaingrove to be near her children and grandchildren but had yet to move into it.

Tara Crozat, who is married to Patrick

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NEIGHBORHOOD CONTINUED FROM 11

Crozat, said all the siblings were traveling in North Carolina when they got a call at about 1 a.m. informing them about the fire.

Tara Crozat, who spoke by cellphone just before boarding a plane to Oakland from Dallas, said the family has since confirmed via TV news video that their homes have been destroyed. The family still doesn’t know about the home of a fourth sibling, Shawn Crozat, who lives off Brush Creek.

“We just kept hoping it was a bad dream, that we were going to wake up and it’s not real,” said Tara Crozat. “We’re just kind of in a state of shock.”

SONOMA VALLEY

Caught between wildfires, vineyards, homes destroyed

Officials estimate about 8,000 acres burned, with potential to spread

By MEG McCONAHAY AND RANDI ROSSMANN
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Residents of the bucolic Sonoma Valley found themselves bottled up in their narrow wine-growing region Monday between wildfires that raged across the parched southern hills of Sears Point and leveled lush estates and prized vineyards at the northern end of the valley near the quaint town of Kenwood.

And in the middle, in the heart of the Valley of the Moon, firefighters battled to save the landmark town of Glen Ellen, the historic home of Jack London, making a stand at key points in the village core as the hillsides around them erupted.

“We picked good spots we thought we
could engage and make a stand,” said Bob
Norrbom, battalion chief for Sonoma Valley
Fire who helped manage the effort. “Glen El-
len is not out of the woods yet, but it’s looking
pretty good.”

Sonoma Valley fire officials early Monday
estimated a total of about 8,000 acres burned
with the potential to spread to 20,000 acres. No
update was available Monday night, by which
time two smaller fires also had burned in the
valley.

The Glen Ellen blaze, called the Nunn fire
for its origin during the night near Nunn’s
Canyon Road and Nelligan Road, spread down
along Warm Springs Road to Sonoma Moun-
tain Road and the Sonoma Developmental Center. By Monday evening, the most active
arm of the fire was burning farther east, be-
tween Trinity and Cavedale roads in steep
terrain.

“We just don’t have the resources. We have
very, very limited resources because of the
sheer volume of fires,” Norrbom said.

While firefighters tackled that front, an-
other group battled flames in nearby Ken-
wood. That front moved west toward Bennett
Valley and Monday night still was spurring
evacuations on Santa Rosa’s eastern out-
skirts.

Large estate properties and beautiful-
ly manicured homes — along Highway 12,
on Treehaven Lane and Court and parts of
Greene Street — were reduced to rubble.

“This is the disaster we’ve all dreaded,”
said Jay Gamel, who has lived in the Sonoma
Valley for more than 35 years, and whose own
home up Adobe Canyon Road — on the road
to Sugarloaf Ridge State Park — remained
under threat.

Kenwood was like a ghost town under slate
skies, with most of the 1,200 residents evacu-
ated and businesses closed down. A handful
of people with dazed looks moved among the si-
lent smoky streets in cars and pickups, check-
ing on neighbors and searching for stray pets.

Caregivers helped safely evacuate six frail
residents from a board and care home on
Treehaven.

Homeowners on the east side of Greene
Street saw the wildfire halted within a 100
yards of their homes.

Doug Clemo said he spent early Monday
hosing down embers that touched his roof,
while his neighbor, Ron Folia, fought off blaz-
es that torched his trees. Both of their resi-
dences were intact in the morning.

“We were just up all night, running around
yard to yard,” Clemo said.

The night’s mayhem was punctuated by
exploding propane tanks.

“You could hear them blowing,” Clemo said.

Bijan Kazemi said he called in friends from
Marin County and other places and pulled to-
gether a team that spent the night saving his
home on the east side of Highway 12.

“I had a fire extinguisher, water stored
and a generator,” he said, crediting two young
firefighters from Bodega Bay, who his girl-
friend had flagged down, with steering the
fire around the house and saving it.

“I’m going to find you, Emily and Justin, and
thank you,” he promised.

On the south end of Arnold Drive, High-
way 121, flames crested Cougar Mountain
behind the Sonoma Raceway as dawn broke.
That fire was still visible to midday motorists
on Highway 37, which had been closed earlier
in the morning.

Steve Page, president and general man-
ger of Sonoma Raceway, issued a statement
saying, “Our facilities team and a number of
local fire companies have been battling grass-
land fires on Cougar Mountain and elsewhere
around our property, and at this point it does
not appear any of the raceway’s structures or
other facilities are at immediate risk.”

Flames also menaced the end of rural
Norrbom Road in the Schell-Vista fire dis-
trict. That fire burned up to about 200 acres.
“That caused a lot of consternation because
it’s so close to the city of Sonoma,” Sonoma
Valley Fire Chief Steve Akre said.

Yet another fire that started in Napa Coun-
ty burned south to Highway 121 near the old
Stornetta dairy and damaged several struc-
tures in the area, Akre said.

Many roads in Sonoma Valley remained
closed. They included Broadway east of Wat-
maugh in Sonoma, Arnold Drive in Agua
Caliente and Calistoga Road in Rincon Valley,
up to Mark West Springs Road.

An emergency shelter at Sonoma Valley
High School on Broadway reported nearly
500 evacuees. A second center at Ramekins
Culinary School on Spain Street was serving
more than 100 evacuees.

Back north, Sugarloaf Ridge was almost
completely cloaked in smoke most of the day.
Flames ripped through the deeply wooded
canyon, leveling at least 10 homes, Gamel
said.

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Chuck Easley, who owns a home and a small winery, La Rochelle, on Adobe Canyon Road, credited his dog with nudging him awake in the middle of the night and possibly saving his life.

“I woke up to Armageddon. This entire place was in flames. They were everywhere,” he said. Outside it looked as if it were the middle of the day. His brick and cinder block house survived, but his vineyard burned. Fortunately, he had already harvested his grapes.

“I pride myself on being a lucky person. But the fact we lucked out makes me feel guilty,” he said, lamenting that immediate neighbors were not so lucky.

The face of the historic Chateau St. Jean Winery off Highway 12 building appeared to be standing through heavy smoke cloaking the valley. Homes around the winery were destroyed, among them the picturesque Sonoma Lavender Farm and Barn just to the north.

Rebecca and Gary Rosenberg, who had developed the property over 30 years, were vacationing in Utah.

“We’re not lamenting everything that is lost,” Gary Rosenberg said. “The most important thing is our kids and our dogs and each other, are all fine.

“We’re going to rebuild. But for now our whole energy is going into figuring out where we’re going to live for the next two to three years.”
FIRESTORM NIGHTMARE: How we covered the early hours of California’s most destructive fire

Raging wildfires driven by dry, violent winds roared into neighborhoods in Sonoma, Napa, Lake and Mendocino counties in the early hours of Oct. 9. Combined, the firestorm destroyed 6,190 homes and killed 40 people in the region. Thousands fled as the massive Tubbs fire raced into dense neighborhoods in Santa Rosa where many residents had little or no warning to evacuate. It was the most destructive fire ever in California. The Press Democrat used its website, live video feeds, social media channels and cellphone push alerts to dispatch real-time news on this disaster as it unfolded in the middle of the night.

ABOUT 10 P.M., SUNDAY, OCT. 8 » As the wind howls outside his Windsor home, photographer Kent Porter turns on his scanner and hears crews talking about a brush fire 13 miles away off Tubbs Lane on Highway 128 near Calistoga. He grabs his gear and takes off.

As he passes over Mark West Springs and Petrified Forest roads, he can see the glow of fire in the hills. “The wind was just going crazy,” he said later. “Grass was burning. Vineyards were burning. Power poles were going back and forth, and electrical lines were sparking. It was pandemonium.”

10:42 P.M. » One of Porter’s first photos is a ghostly image of a firefighter racing through the yard of a home near the origin of the Tubbs fire. The flames would soon begin devouring rural homes in the valleys bordering Napa and Sonoma counties, racing west toward the region’s largest city. “This thing is going all the way to Santa Rosa,” a fire official tells Porter.

11:50 P.M. » Porter sends a text message to Managing Editor Ted Appel: “Ted this is going to be in Santa Rosa in a few minutes. I strongly suggest you get a reporter out.” Appel begins waking up reporters and preparing the first story.
Wind-whipped fires broke out across Sonoma County late Sunday night and early Monday morning, forcing the evacuation of rural neighborhoods northeast of Santa Rosa as firefighters attacked the blazes.

Mandatory evacuations were ordered from a wildfire reported between Calistoga and Santa Rosa, to the east of Porter Creek Road and Petrified Forest Road, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office announced shortly after 11 p.m.

Evacuations were ordered along Porter Creek, Petrified Forest, Franz Valley and Mountain Home Ranch roads. Deputies were dispatched to help firefighters and CHP officers with evacuations.

“If you live in this area, please be alert for the danger,” the Sheriff’s Office said shortly after 11 p.m. “We are not on scene yet and haven’t been able to determine the best evacuation route.”

Many trees were down on Calistoga Road and 911 lines were inundated with callers reporting smoke. Dispatchers asked the public to refrain from calling, unless they were facing an immediate emergency.

Multiple fires broke out Sunday night as strong winds buffeted the area. In Sonoma County, fires were reported in Santa Rosa, at Mark West Springs and Riebli roads; in Windsor at Shiloh Road and Conde Lane; in Sebastopol at Highway 116 and Fredericks Road; in Kenwood, on Lawndale Road; and in Glen Ellen, on Dunbar Road.

In Napa County, firefighters were battling a 200 acre fire off Atlas Peak Road south of Lake Berryessa, Cal Fire reported.

Check back later for more details.

Porter reports that another fire is burning in the Sonoma Valley. He files images from the scene at 12:40 a.m. and posts an image on Twitter.

The main story on The Press Democrat’s home page is updated to include new fires in Sonoma and Napa counties. A link to the updated story and new photos is posted on Facebook.

Multiple structures were burning early Monday near downtown Kenwood, where the fire had crossed over Sonoma Creek. Fires were burning on both sides of Highway 12 in swirling winds, with gusts of 50 to 60 miles per hour. Multiple structures were also burning on Adobe Canyon Road, east of Kenwood across Highway 12.

In Napa County, firefighters were battling a 200 acre fire off Atlas Peak Road south of Lake Berryessa, Cal Fire reported.
1:30 A.M. » The impact story at pressdemocrat.com is now a rolling update including fresh photos and video from staff and readers. Reporters and photographers in the field feed information to reporter Julie Johnson in the newsroom, where she updates our online report through the early hours of the crisis.

It would be updated 18 times between the initial post and 6 a.m.

2:16 A.M. » Porter has returned to Santa Rosa and begins sending photos from the Fountain-grove neighborhood, where 1,519 homes would burn. The smoke is so thick he navigates by driving on the raised pavement markers in the middle of the road. He continues posting to Twitter.

3:12 A.M. » While enroute to the newsroom, Executive Editor Catherine Barnett is forced to detour by closed roads. She encounters bumper-to-bumper traffic heading to an evacuation center that had already been declared full. “There was a man in a vest out front refusing to let more people into Finley,” she said later. She stops at the center and files a brief item for the rolling update:

Cars thronged the parking lot at Finley Center on West College Avenue in Santa Rosa shortly before 3 a.m. Monday and traffic was stopped trying to turn into the center, which was designated as an evacuation center.
3:46 A.M. TO 3:53 A.M. » Porter sends six photos showing flames devouring the Round Barn, Willi’s Wine Bar, a building near Hopper Lane, and Skyfarm in the Fountaingrove neighborhood.

4:22 A.M. » Reporter Martin Espinoza shows viewers destruction of Journey’s End mobile home park, where two people died, and Coffey Park, where four died, in a 31-minute Facebook Live video.

See the video: bit.ly/2mPxK5p
Ten major fires broke out after 10 p.m. Sunday in Sonoma, Napa, Lake and Mendocino counties, said state Sen. Mike McGuire.

“These blazes have taken place at an individual’s most vulnerable time, when they are home and in bed,” he said.

The hills surrounding Santa Rosa glowed red early Monday and evacuees fleeing the fire clogged West College Avenue at 3 a.m., as officials opened additional shelters. Multiple fires burning in densely populated areas at night propelled by winds gusting up to 50 miles per hour severely strained firefighters, McGuire said.

“Of great concern is Kenwood, Glen Ellen and greater Santa Rosa,” he added. Darkness made it difficult to determine how many acres had burned and impossible to fight the fires from the air. McGuire said that hundreds of firefighters were en route from throughout the state and that aerial attacks would begin at first light, with winds expected to ease by 9 a.m.

The Finley Center was crowded with hundreds of evacuees as of 4 a.m. The city of Santa Rosa directed residents to go there in the fire’s aftermath. Many seniors from nursing homes from the hillside region were being brought to the center.

Ted Regan, who lives near Calistoga Road, said he saw the glow from the foothills behind his house about 2 a.m. “It got brighter and brighter and then we saw flames. That’s when we said, ‘It’s time to go,’” Regan said.

He, his wife, two adult sons, two dogs, four cats and two birds all got in his car and left immediately.

Rachel McKenzie, who lives on Tuliptree Road, started to evacuate at 2 a.m. with her 12-year-old, Bryce Ward, and her husband, Kevin Ward. They left with their reptiles and dog as they fled their house. Pulling out, their neighbor’s house was fully engulfed.

“It was totally chaotic,” McKenzie.

Her neighbor later called her and said her house burned down.

Laura Mills, who lives Wedgewood Way in Fountaingrove, was forced to evacuate with her husband at 2 a.m.

“It was very spooky. It was like an apocalypse,” Mills said of the bumper-to-bumper traffic as she left her house.
4:54 A.M. » Espinoza joins Porter in Santa Rosa’s Coffey Park area. Amid explosions and hissing of natural gas, Espinoza begins a stunning 9-minute Facebook Live video from the heart of the burning and evacuated neighborhood.

See the video: bit.ly/2Dd74Ff

5 A.M. » Reporter Robert Digitale updates a list of evacuation zones and provides details of evacuation centers in four counties impacted by the fires. bit.ly/2rp6pLZ

5:02 A.M. » The paywall is lifted at pressdemocrat.com.

6:41 A.M. » First of the day’s nine push alerts is sent.

6:43 A.M. » Sports columnist Kerry Benefield reports on damage to local schools and closures across the region. bit.ly/2xsJF0k

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7:01 A.M. » Espinoza and reporter Guy Kovner cover the evacuation of patients and personnel from Kaiser Permanente and Sutter hospitals. Photographer Beth Schlanker files images of evacuated patients at a nearby shelter: bit.ly/2DjyOos

7:37 A.M. » Update details the destruction of Santa Rosa landmarks including schools, hotels, restaurants and a historic site. bit.ly/2mSK8kf
**9 A.M.** The first gallery of reader-submitted photos is posted to pressdemocrat.com.

**9 A.M.** Reporter Randi Rossmann files a story about a Larkfield family that alerted neighbors and narrowly escaped the flames. bit.ly/2mUM0K2

**10 A.M.** Digitale files a story about residents returning to their devastated neighborhoods. Reporter Nick Rahaim posts a video of Yvette Lopez outside her destroyed home in the Coffey Park neighborhood.

Story: bit.ly/2DSK6Rq

Video:youtu.be/T97tI-v0ecl

Over the next 10 hours, as reporters and photographers continue filing from the field and our news team begins planning for print coverage the next day, Press Democrat staff post 11 new stories and a photo gallery with 68 images documenting the firestorms’ toll. Stories are updated throughout the day and into the evening with new information, photos and videos.
11 A.M. » Staff reports road closures and impacts to the region’s transportation network. bit.ly/2Bqugx5

11 A.M. » Reporter Bill Swindell reports on the impact to Napa and Sonoma wineries. bit.ly/2DRFX0i

NOON » Our online producers create a photo gallery to share images of the day. bit.ly/2Dh8nj5

1 P.M. » Rossmann reports on the deadly fires 65 miles to the north in Mendocino County, and officials’ fears the death toll will climb. She then teams with reporter Meg McConahay, working from the Sonoma Valley, for a story on the fight to save Kenwood and Glen Ellen. bit.ly/2mSmXGZ

3 P.M. » Death toll rises to 11 across Sonoma, Napa and Mendocino counties. Johnson and reporter J.D. Morris warn it will continue to increase. bit.ly/2DxfYWO

3 P.M. » Fire evacuees shared their worries and fears in a story by reporters Christi Warren, Eloisa Ruano Gonzalez, Rossmann and Rahaim. bit.ly/2mUwZrd

3:29 P.M. » Rossmann reports on another fire burning 25 miles to the north of Santa Rosa. bit.ly/2EXku5B

7 P.M. » Reporter Kevin McCallum teams with Espinoza to chronicle the devastation in the city’s upscale Fountaingrove neighborhood. bit.ly/2DrCClV

7:25 P.M. » Digitale captures the unfathomable destruction of Coffey Park, using satellite images of the neighborhood before the fires to count the number of homes in the perimeter. He determines more than 1,000 homes had been leveled — far more than official estimates at the time. bit.ly/2rJErs8

8 P.M. » Morris reports on emergency restrictions to public water consumption in Larkfield. bit.ly/2DjPNa4

Social Media

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Sonoma County’s worst natural disaster: Firestorm leaves 7 dead, 1,500 structures destroyed

A raging firestorm born in the dark of night by dry, violent winds roared down the rural hills of Santa Rosa, Napa and Sonoma counties early Monday and cut a devastating swath into Santa Rosa’s neighborhoods, undermining homes and forcing tens of thousands to flee their homes hours before sunrise.

By sunset, the Tubbs fire, which began in Napa County, was still uncontrolled on many fronts. By nightfall, the Tubbs fire, which began in Napa County, was still uncontrolled on many fronts.

A Cazadero firefighter struggles to protect a home from catching fire Monday morning in the Coffey Park neighborhood of Santa Rosa. Tens of thousands of residents were forced to flee their homes before sunrise early Monday as flames raced through neighborhoods. By nightfall, the Tubbs fire, which began in Napa County, was still uncontrolled on many fronts.

The wind screamed past the front of Gordon’s house, the ashen fallout was so complete that it left the wooded hills across Highway 101 to the north as a ghost town.

The ashen fallout was so complete that it left the wooded hills across Highway 101 to the north as a ghost town. People heading home after an anxious day’s trek to shelter were able to survey the damage Monday morning.

For thousands of firefighters and residents trying to protect homes, the fire driven by gusts up to 68 mph was an amorphous, unstoppable force, rampaging through Russian River Valley, Lakeland and Willow, and Fountaingrove, where it claimed hundreds of upscale Santa Rosa houses tucked into forested hillsides.

From there it raced on, scorching landmark businesses and the hilly campus of the Sonoma State University, where hundreds of patients were evacuated. Throwing sparks ahead of its main front, the fire then jumped Highway 101 into a heavily populated corner of northwest Santa Rosa.

In Coffey Park, the destruction was warlike. Block after block, hundreds of homes burst into flames. "The volume of structures and neighborhoods that have been completely destroyed is incredible," said Assistant Santa Rosa Fire Marshal Paul Lowenthal, who lost his own rural home Monday. "There are areas where, as far as the eye can see, is complete devastation with entire neighborhoods burned to the ground."
How we used Facebook Live and YouTube

The Press Democrat

VIDEO:

How we used Facebook Live and YouTube

SEE THE VIDEO COMPILATION: http://bit.ly/2DCmK1S

Staff Writer Martin Espinoza was covering the evacuation of 130 patients from Santa Rosa’s largest hospital, Kaiser Permanente Medical Center, at 4:22 a.m. when he saw the orange glow of fire over a parking garage and headed toward the flames. He captured the destruction of Journey’s End mobile home park, where two people died and 140 homes were leveled, and interviewed survivors in a 31-minute Facebook Live video shot from the garage roof.

Staff Photographer Kent Porter joined Espinoza at the hospital and they drove just over a mile to the northwest to survey Santa Rosa’s Coffey Park neighborhood, where four died and 1,347 homes were destroyed. At 4:54 a.m., amid explosions and hissing of natural gas, Espinoza streams a 9-minute Facebook Live video from the heart of the burning neighborhood.

Later, Porter uploaded video to YouTube documenting the opening minutes of the most devastating fire near its origin point outside Calistoga, 12 miles northeast of Santa Rosa, before midnight on Oct. 8. He also filmed the destruction of Santa Rosa’s Fountain-grove and Coffey Park neighborhoods as homes burned to the ground, and the remains of Coffey Park after sunrise.

This compilation ends with aerial video shot by Porter on Oct. 25 showing the damage in Fountain-grove, where two people died and 1,519 homes were destroyed. This 19-second clip, which was not published in the first 24 hours, should be viewed as supplemental information.

The resolution on the Facebook Live video is grainy, but it provided an invaluable tool to get information out immediately to a public desperate to understand the danger.

Espinoza’s two Facebook Live videos have been viewed nearly 600,000 times and drawn more than 4,200 comments. Many were from viewers grateful for our coverage — and concerned for the safety of our journalists. “Martin & Kent Porter, thank you for your coverage. Stay safe!” Jodie Stevens Bissig wrote.

ORIGINAL VIDEO CONTENT AS PUBLISHED ON OCT. 9 » NEXT PAGE

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FACEBOOK LIVE VIDEO PUBLISHED OCT. 9

From Kaiser Medical Center

From Coffey Park

From Home Depot

From Fountaingrove

Interview with fire victim who lost house in Coffey Park

YOUTUBE VIDEO PUBLISHED OCT. 9

Coffee Park burns
https://youtu.be/LqTcc-bLClk

Kmart burns
https://youtu.be/U4bBzFqG9tM

Applebee's burns
https://youtu.be/CC7dqX4o8Kk

Fountaingrove burns at night (1 of 2)
https://youtu.be/bhTGQL_tyZA

Fountaingrove burns at night (2 of 2)
https://youtu.be/KGjgDwE-YSg

House burns on San Miguel Road
https://youtu.be/rlilikkIMQ0

Fountaingrove burns at day
https://youtu.be/GxJGz9LNe3w

Daylight reveals damage in Glen Ellen (1)
https://youtu.be/cBVeXk-dEUU

Daylight reveals damage in Glen Ellen (2)
https://youtu.be/NfVWgfTCSo4

Daylight reveals damage in Glen Ellen (3)
https://youtu.be/XfpoqDwa8g

Gas leak, Journey's End mobile home park
https://youtu.be/HjSh_YsCEvg

Daylight reveals damage in Larkfield-Wikiup
https://youtu.be/L6FIEDECytw

Damage to Cardinal Newman High School (1)
https://youtu.be/UjvDItlg-Bo

Damage to Cardinal Newman High School (2)
https://youtu.be/17X8icX7xO5

PHOTO GALLERIES PUBLISHED OCT. 9

24 images accompanied our main rolling update on the fire http://bit.ly/2DicoEX

52 images accompanied our story on people returning to discover the damage in Coffey Park http://bit.ly/2DSK6Rq


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