Angora today: Watching a neighborhood come to life

Publisher's note: ***This is the second of two stories about the Angora Fire.***

By Renee Gorevin

Fortunately for her, my daughter still had her bags packed, just recently returned from a study abroad program in Paris. Investigating the source of the smoke, my son and his friend had ventured out behind our house, creating a little angst inside my chest when I'd heard. My husband and I were at our good friends' house on Golden Bear assisting them in a home project. Our closest neighbors, John and Susan, were out of town camping.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when my daughter called, insisting I should head home. Why, I inquired calmly, responding to her fearful tone. "Mom, go outside!" she urged. As I stepped out onto Golden Bear to view the horizon in the distance, my neck immediately flexed, carrying my gaze up, up, up, following the gray smoke column to its summit, directly overhead! That visual was worth a thousands gasps. I hung up and immediately said, "Mark, we need to get home!"

The Gorevins' neighborhood days after the June 24, 2007,

fire leveled
their friends'
homes.
Photos/Renee
Gorevin

My car, as I later found out, was the last one allowed past the sheriff's post at Sawmill Pond. Driving up Tahoe Mountain Road my eyes bounced from flare up to flare up on either side of the road, our inadequate asphalt fire line. I was mesmerized, stunned, looking in disbelief, gasping for breath.

Turning onto this cul-de-sac 12 years ago to look at a house that had just come on the market, I gasped then too; but out of joy and expectation – this is just what I had envisioned, trees, lots of them, space, lots of it and just enough neighbors to make it a home. Twelve years ago we purchased one of 12 houses on this street, certain it would be for good as the location, house and neighborhood had everything we had hoped for moving from the Bay Area. Susan and John welcomed us as we moved in, happily discovering Susan and I were both teachers and John and Mark were both in the construction trades.

Now, smoke and amazing, frantic wind blowing in every direction and speed along with the weight of uncertainty pressing on me, I drive to our house. Driving past all our neighbors, running with arms full, placing yet another precious load in their car, I lock eyes with one of Susan and John's daughters' as we drive past each other, communicating many emotions with that gaze. Both of their daughters along with friends were transferring their family keepsakes into their cars. A sprinkler was left on next to the house in hopes of rescue. Later I was amazed and touched with Susan's recount, "I told my daughters to just come up and join us camping, what could we do there anyway?" Susan's positive acceptance of the fire, a seeming "hiccup" in her life (I take

liberty here as I truly don’t know the extent of heartache she experienced), impressed me again and again over the next two and a half years as they sifted, leveled and rebuilt on their lot across the street. I recall a “heart in my throat” smile as I heard Susan found a ring of her mother’s in the ashes.

Both my son and daughter had packed their car with belongings and the pets by the time I arrived. We took our computers with our scanned family photos in them and I grabbed the important paperwork. They insisted it was time to go, yet I stood in the middle of our great room, looking around, what should I take? With a quiet acceptance I walked through the door and we caravanned down our street. Mark was running toward us on foot. He was not allowed by the sheriff to drive his car, instead ran the half-mile to our house, but wouldn’t get in the car. He needed to go back and get his camera.

Why did our house not burn? There is no reason in this human made earthly hell that it should not have. Valiant firefighters removed flammable material from under our deck, obviously helping to save our house. Ten out of the 12 houses on our street burned completely to the ground. To this day I still shake my head and have no answer. How do you respond to the families whose homes did burn? What must they be feeling? I can’t imagine. I smile and give Susan a big hug when I finally see her; she is smiling. Mark and John discuss what’s left of the snowplow truck we all reaped the benefits of and look at what little is left of his snowmobiles. The four of us have a guilty chuckle over the charred trailer carcass, all that is left of the cigarette boat parked at the vacation home next to Susan and John’s. Yes, we will rebuild and we’ll be back she says with utter confidence and her ever present smile. We love this neighborhood, she says. I am quietly thrilled!

Mark and I were one of four households living in our greater neighborhood area of 40-plus homes, pre-fire, that first winter, the lucky ones who had a home to stay in. We even had

pine trees left on our lot! We braved the loneliness, the wicked wind with no trees to hold it back and the hope for our neighborhood to return. Ruth finished her house first, then Susan and John, then Christine and Colin. The full timers on our street were all back home. We were ecstatic to have our neighbors return!

I recall many times turning on our street during the two plus years of rebuilding with a heavy heart, sadden by the loss of trees. Those trees gave our neighborhood a grounded, safe, comfy feeling. Toward the end of that rebuilding time, as I turned down our street once again, I suddenly gasped as I looked out over our neighborhood with a big smile, tears forming in my eyes. I realized at that moment that it had not been just the trees I had been missing; it was the homes and the neighbors as well! I looked around and saw all the houses that had been built for our neighbors and, that grounded, safe, comfy feeling that I so treasured, had returned.

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