

A job to do as community burns, friends lives unravel

By Susan Wood

When the Lake Tahoe sky turned orange and black over the North Upper Truckee area five years ago, our land of blue was changed forever.

June 24, 2007, started out like any other late-spring Sunday. People were out and about. Some ventured out of town to get an early taste of summer. Of course I remember thinking it was breezy on the South Shore. So when the call later known as the Angora Fire came over the police scanner at 2:14pm, I soon learned what wind mixed with an unattended campfire could do as it rolled over slash piles, trees, brush and hundreds of homes.



Angora Fire -- 5 years later

As the reporter on duty, I threw on the fire suit in the *Tahoe Daily Tribune's* newsroom and headed down Highway 50 toward the Y and onto Lake Tahoe Boulevard. The huge plume of smoke told me this was no ordinary fire. It was indeed unprecedented.

In my many years of being a news reporter, including at large

papers, I've responded to several fires. Nonetheless, being first on the scene brings a lot of responsibility. My truck raced by Sawmill Pond, beating a police barricade erected later. I parked east of the much-destroyed Mule Deer Circle after turning my truck around for a quick escape between Clear View Drive and Coyote Ridge Circle. Embers were blowing everywhere, and houses erupted in flames around me as I walked up Lake Tahoe Boulevard to North Upper Truckee Road – a neighborhood known for its permanent residents. My heart sank.

Homeowners were desperately throwing belongings in their vehicles. People were screaming, and others were running east. I peeked through the houses at what appeared to be a wall of fire mowing down everything in its path. Hot and determined, the fire crackled, groaned an eerie sound and filled the air with smoke.

Stopping to call in updates to the newsroom made it challenging. For one, a microscopic ember curled its way around my safety goggles, burning my left eye. With my good right eye, I saw small fires starting around my truck. As I contemplated leaving, the person I wanted to see most drove up in a U.S. Forest Service truck. It was Kit Bailey, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit fire management officer. Bailey is often serious, but the steadfast concerned expression across his face said it all. The fire was in control and taking many homes on its path as it headed over Tahoe Mountain Road and Gardner Mountain.

I needed to get in front of the fire so I drove back down to Sawmill Road where an El Dorado County sheriff's deputy was holding back a resident wanting to get her cat out of the house and was willing to risk arrest to do so. I felt bad. So many brave stories of neighbors rescuing trapped animals were told later. Some pets didn't make it.

My thought at the time was: What if the fire rolled over Tahoe Mountain and the Angora Ridge to the Fallen Leaf Lake

community? Getting out of there would be a nightmare.

I picked up Sierra Nevada Media Group photographer Kat Allison, whose bravado is larger than her logic. I decided to drive back to Highway 89 and go up Fallen Leaf Lake Road, where another deputy stopped my progress before reaching Tahoe Mountain Road. We turned around, parked and scampered up the ridge in our hiking boots in time to see an army of firefighters from an onslaught of agencies awaiting its fierce arrival. Fire burns faster up hill, and this one was extremely hot as it roared over boulders and houses. Part of the fire had already arrived, consuming at least one Uplands Way house in my peripheral vision.

Upon my return to my office, my heart poured out again. Many homeowners were already emailing me to see if I knew whether their houses were standing. Even my fellow writer, then Sports Editor Steve Yingling, saw me open a topographical map and asked about his home on Boulder Mountain Road. I didn't want to jump to conclusions, but my anxiety rose because I knew the path mowed through that area. And by that time, it was hot and unrelenting.



Susan Wood was the first reporter on the scene of the Angora Fire on June

My colleague lost his home, but found his black cat, which returned days later to the burned-out fireplace hearth.

Randy Peshon, Norma Sprague, Keith Cooney, Solange Schwalbe, John and Louise Simon – so many stories like these with names we know were shared for days, weeks, months and years after the Angora Fire, which consumed 254 homes, caused more than \$160 million in damage and consequently prompted swift changes to stringent environmental regulations and cooperative emergency communication systems. (No local radio reports came over the airwaves, and calls from Lake Tahoe Golf Course were quickly dismissed by the California Highway Patrol dispatch center in Truckee as a “control burn”.)

The hope is we’ve learned a lot from the experience. (Hence, a first-of-its-kind study examining the communication, prevention and recovery of wildfires is being drafted by the University of Colorado. Read about it June 17 as this writer took part in the study’s questionnaire.)

The aftermath resembled ‘the last days’

After a near sleepless, emotionally draining night, I returned Monday morning to what seemed like the scene of a crime. As I drove up Lake Tahoe Boulevard to North Upper Truckee, power lines were down. Ash filled the air and blanketed the ground. A few people were out sifting through debris. So many sites were simply marked by a fireplace or burned out vehicle. I talked to homeowners, but felt as though I wanted to back off and just take it all in. The scene was nothing short of devastating. The neighborhood was gone.

How would we recover? Would the fire take more with it as it mowed through Gardner Mountain and threatened South Tahoe High School structures before making its way down to Highway 89?

Placing priority on home

Tuesday was marked as yet another day of picking up the pieces of our community and writing about it. I was emotionally drawn to the point of the fire's origin and arranged a special visit with the Forest Service's law enforcement team. I stood motionless and quiet at the illegal fire site near Seneca Pond – a favorite party spot for teens – with utter amazement as I was told how the fire from Saturday night had sparked up and was carried in the wind the next day. My thought was: Whoever did this would have to live with themselves and could they?

That afternoon I was tested as the scanner in the busy newsroom erupted again. A backfire jumped Highway 89 and landed in the West Way area. I gulped to think of the inadequate Lukins Water system serving that area. Evacuations in a heavily populated area leading into Tahoe Keys were under way. I had to get home to evacuate. I live outside the Keys.

Getting home was much of the adventure that afternoon as motorists found plenty of curbs, fences and easements to roll over in their haste. Tahoe Keys Boulevard resembled a parking lot as yet another round of panicked residents felt displaced. Surely, an emergency evacuation plan was in order for an area I later learned was deemed in the red as an extreme fire hazard, according to the California fire marshal's office. (To this day, there is no designated evacuation route for the South Shore. It depends on the emergency.)

You know what people ask: What would you take if you had to evacuate in a matter of minutes? The answer for me was clear: Things I couldn't replace. Bailey, our black Labrador, went into my truck camper bed first. She was later surrounded by documents, photo albums and even the Olympic torch that I carried on Sierra Boulevard in 2002. I threw in camping gear to be mobile. But which bicycle was a more perplexing question.

There's indeed a psychological benefit to watering down your house, fence and trees with a garden hose waiting for a fire

to arrive, but that's about it. You can bet a fire of this magnitude would dry out whatever I doused as it forced me out, and I knew this.

I remember being ever so thankful that my neighbor John Poell is a very skilled firefighter with Lake Valley Fire. He fought it at the highway before that danger was diminished.

Frayed nerves – that's how I would describe my community's initial reaction in the first few weeks of the most significant disaster on the South Shore of Lake Tahoe. After the fire was mopped up, community meetings showed angst, anger and concern.

Still, even in the face of trying to find those responsible, working through insurance plans, dealing with survivor's guilt, clearing debris and avoiding unscrupulous contractors, the community pulled together with donations, moral support and even a bistate Blue Ribbon Commission headed by then Republican California and Nevada Govs. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jim Gibbons tasked with making constructive changes to handling fire fuel reductions in the basin.

As part of a small effort to clear our hearts and minds, a makeshift parade was organized to celebrate the living spirit of our town.

For me, the catharsis of the disaster was encapsulated by a visit down Coyote Ridge with *Tribune* colleague John Simon and his wife, Louise, a longtime teacher with Lake Tahoe Unified School District.

I drove the two of them beyond the police barricade days after the fire, so they could see their home. As they surveyed the wreckage of their completely destroyed home, they found solace in little items and minor things that survived. I'd never see John cry. But in such a brave, cleansing act, he felt OK to embrace Louise in front of me and sob like a baby. I wrapped my arms around both of them, and tears came streaming down my

face. They were looking for her wedding ring (which later was miraculously found).

I wished my tears could have drowned this fire. I sobbed thinking of so many displaced, scared and without essentials. I had held it together until then. There was so much to grieve and little time to allow for it. One of my nephews had also died on that fateful day.

You can bet I won't forget it.