

Angora memories: Living with the forest

Publisher's note: *Lake Tahoe News this month will be running several stories leading up to the 10th anniversary of the Angora Fire on June 24, 2007.*



A scorched tree in Joanne Marchetta's back yard is a constant reminder of the Angora Fire. Photo/Tom Lotshaw

By Joanne Marchetta

Ten years later, I recall it like yesterday. "Hey Joanne, come look at this." I stood on our deck and squinted. I could see a wisp of smoke, maybe five miles distant. It was Sunday, hot

and hazy with strong winds. It reminded me of the weather when I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area on the afternoon of the Oakland Hills Fire.

Even though it was a thin wisp, I had an uneasy feeling. Ten minutes later, a more urgent, "come look at this." I climbed on the boulders across the street and could now see a plume of smoke. My uneasiness grew. I went back inside, feeling distracted. Five minutes later, back up to a vantage point for a look. All the neighbors were congregated, shifting and restless. We could see flames now. Someone said, "This is bad." Someone else said, "I've lived here 30 years, never seen anything like this." Another scrambled down and headed to the fire station down the road to see what they could find out.

In 20 minutes, the situation went from concerning to dire, thin wisp to billowing plume, and now a menacing crown fire in trees just two blocks from where we stood. We all gave each other one last silent look and one spoke for the rest, "It's time to get out of here."

I sprinted off the rocks and into the house. Without any conversation, we agreed quickly on what we needed—the dog and the fire safe box with crucial documents. With no time to spare, it was grab and go. From the closet, I grabbed blindly without thought only what I could collect on hangers with one hand. With the other hand, I grabbed one pass of clothes from the dresser drawer. That was it. As I walked through the kitchen to our garage door, I saw the roof of the house behind us on fire. I yelled, "We have to leave now, the house behind is on fire." We each threw our one load in the car with the dog. We didn't have an evacuation pack or emergency grab bag then. We do now.

The neighbors had said, "Let's meet at Raley's parking lot." But when we arrived, we realized it was no safe haven. We exchanged phone numbers and kept driving. We were relatively new to Tahoe and the moment was disorienting. Where should we

head? We drove to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency parking lot near Stateline. As I got out of the car, the first thing I noticed were the burning embers and ash floating erratically in the wind. The haze was now smoky air, making it uncomfortable to breathe. We regrouped, gathered our wits, what little we had in the midst of emotional shock, and said this time, "we need to get out of the basin."

Only two years new to Tahoe, we didn't yet have a deep network of friends to call on. We headed to the only friends we knew in Carson Valley. We didn't know at the time that they were returning from a visit to Placerville and could see the smoke plume from a different vantage coming into the basin. No answer when we called, but we went anyway. That night as we gathered in front of the TV, on the screen was an image I recognized: "I think that's our backyard on fire." I could barely sort my feelings: Fear, grief, loss, sadness, shock, and more.



The Angora Fire ignition point, above, on June 26, 2007. The fire started from an illegal, abandoned campfire near Seneca

Pond on June 24, 2007. Illegal and abandoned campfires continue to be the leading cause of wildfires in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Photo/U.S. Forest Service

Lying in bed, sleepless but exhausted, my phone rang. Norma Santiago, a TRPA Governing Board member and a lead El Dorado County official who monitored the fire response from its start and through the night, had called earlier to ask for my street address. She knew I lived in the county. The call in the middle of the night was beyond kind: "We are inventorying houses still standing. Your house number is on the list." I was incredulous, but relieved. I wondered what condition I would find it in.

It was 10 days before we returned to the house. We stayed two nights with friends in Gardnerville and then checked in at MontBleu, one of the businesses offering help to those displaced and homeless. It became our home away from home, with only the dog and the clothes we carried out. It was laughable what had made its way with us. Sports bras, but no underwear. Mismatched everything. Shorts and one pair of jeans. Dress clothes of little use. The dog was bewildered but goofy, greeting people in the elevator as her new pals.

We were among the lucky ones. Our house was still standing. Insurance covered the smoke damage and the \$32,000 dry cleaning bill. We had to have every piece of cloth and clothing in the house laundered to remove the smoke smell. But that was nothing compared to friends, colleagues, and strangers who now felt like friends who were left with nothing. People who lost lifetimes and had to start over. For me, it was miraculous, really. I thought I would return to nothing. There were clues when I did return home what luck means. My and my neighbor's garden hoses were strung together, still extended out across the length of the backyard. Someone, a good Samaritan or firefighter—I'll never know—fought the fire at the back end of our lot and prevented it from reaching

the home and the deck. Thank you. I will pay it forward. Where once I could only see a dense thicket out the back windows, now the view is open so we see through clear to the nearby road and a trail behind the house. The whole landscape morphed. It was almost unrecognizable.

There was no pattern to who was lucky. Two houses across the street burned to the ground. On another, the siding melted. At the house behind us, the roof burned. The fire had moved so fast, stoked by high winds and tinder dry conditions. It is almost unfathomable how an ember did not ignite our house. There was a house with an old cedar shake roof across the main road, still standing like ours, defying all odds. How could that be, when just next door there was nothing but a pile of ash left of a new home built the year before. Fire is humbling, capricious, mean. Terrifying in its strength.



Joanne Marchetta on the boulder pile where she and neighbors watched the Angora Fire. Photo/Tom Lotshaw

The outfall from the fire also consumed TRPA and its employees. We concentrated on nothing else for well over a year. It brought all other work to a stop while our employees, just like the rest of the town, picked up their lives, recovered from the terror, and brought life back to some semblance of ordinary. We had been working toward forest policies that would help prevent and protect against wildfires like Angora. But it was slow. The Angora Fire kicked everyone into high gear. TRPA and other agencies improved regulations and practices. And TRPA organized with nearly two dozen other agencies to better collaborate as the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk. Now it's easier for property owners to remove trees and brush for defensible space, and fire preparedness and forest health are top priorities for the agency.

We saw and experienced all sides of humanity after the fire. Mostly we saw a community come together to help those most in need, to make sure all were cared for and had something to fall back on. Care and concern from all corners emerged. There was the other end of the emotional spectrum, too. Anger and hatred as people searched for someone to blame for the fire. TRPA and its staff absorbed a lot, publicly and privately. The agency received death threats by phone, causing us to take special security precautions for the safety of employees and our building.

During those early days after the brave first responders brought the runaway blaze under control, the aftermath set in. I went to public meetings. And it was my first feel of the decades of pent up hatred against TRPA. We didn't know then that an illegal and abandoned campfire started the wildfire that perfect storm winds fanned into an unstoppable conflagration. It was this early experience that caused me to question why some people in Tahoe are so angry. It also led me later to champion remaking the agency's reputation into a partner rather than an adversary. We have changed ourselves

over the last decade for the better, becoming part of and a supporter of our community, not it's foil.

The Angora Fire changed everyone it touched. I can still recall the feelings like they were yesterday, smell the smells, hear the sounds, see the sights that are pressed into my memory, imprinted like a reverse image on the insides of my eyelids. My beloved dog Zin died last year. But I still recall the years after Angora when we'd return from a long walk to Angora Creek through Washoe Meadow when I'd have to wash the finely ingrained soot off her paws and fur. It rose like fine dust, permeated everything, even years later. The fire burned so hot it left inches of nothing but ash, with no organic matter to bind the earth together.

The lessons I have taken from Angora are deep and enduring. We live in the forest. We came to make this home after the trees had grown up. It is our responsibility to live fire safe, to create defensible space, to prepare our evacuation pack, to live responsibly on a sensitive and fragile landscape that we all call home. I learned that we at TRPA are part of this community. I committed myself to make an agency that serves the community and protects the special environment we call home. I committed to dedicate myself to make it better for all of us. And Angora showed us all that fire is part of Tahoe's life. It will remain long after we are gone. All we can do to live in harmony with what will inevitably be the next fire is to change ourselves and adapt.

Joanne Marchetta is executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.