

Serendipity: In the Path of the Tea Fire

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Disasters remind us we're one community, and that together we're sustainable.

In the long run, living in a high fire area isn't sustainable. But I'm living in the short run, which put me in the path of the Tea Fire. Dave was traveling that evening: My first inkling came from a friend's call.



Karen Telleen-Lawton

"Are you evacuating from the fire?" Chris asked. "What fire?" I responded, switching on the television and Internet. I quickly swung into action. But what action? I was directionless at first, calling neighbors and grabbing stuff on our evacuation list. First I needed to spray the house with fire foam. Or should that be last?

I ran to the basement to get the goo we had purchased years before. It's a biodegradable soapy foam, which we had practiced with a couple, well, I guess quite a few years ago. I grabbed the containers but left the nozzles and instructions in the garage, so I ran back downstairs to get those. Why were there so many little parts?

The wind was howling as I wrestled with the hose. Suddenly the instructions were terribly confusing. I gave up and jumped from the foaming task to the evacuation proper.

The evacuation list was a godsend. I didn't need to think; just go down the list methodically and gather things into the car. Photo albums. Files. Jewelry. Kids and pets had aged out; all there was to lose was stuff.

Brian and Chris arrived. Brian assembled the nozzle, but a plug of hardened gel clogged the intake tube, from our long-ago practice run. He wanted to try trimming the uptake tube, but I overruled, dumping the sticky solution onto the wood deck, the most vulnerable part of our house. (Mistake!)

Chris was monitoring the television and said we needed to move. [Westmont College](#) already had lost departments, dorms and faculty homes; the fire was racing west. We turned off the gas to the house, using my head lamp and the wrench at the gas line. My list had blown away somewhere. It was time to go.

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We stopped across the street to evacuate my neighbors, Sid and Harriet. Fortunately, they came laden with only a purse and briefcase; we squeezed them in among my boxes. The sky over Mount Calvary was an ominous red-orange; the wind was terrific. I feared we would be stuck in a clutch of cars at the intersection with Tunnel Road, but the evacuation was very orderly.

Safely settled at Chris and Brian's, we watched the horror unfold on television. The Westmont story we were watching "live" was already history. The fire by that time had reached Rattlesnake Canyon.

Neighbors who stayed saw Mount Calvary burn, then a dramatic pause as the fire burned its way down Rattlesnake Trail. When it crested, surrounding St. Mary's, the flames appeared to be 300 feet high. Fire trucks roared up Las Canoas Road just as the fire seared the wall on the house two doors down. Firefighters knocked, laid out hoses, arranged ladders and turned on lights. Miraculously, every house on our street was saved.

Two weeks out, we're updating our lists. The evacuation list: Add cell phone charger, add underwear. The grateful list: Add firefighters, add friends.

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Or maybe not. I returned home this evening to yet another reverse 9-1-1 call. Rain is due tonight, and we are under an evacuation warning for potential flooding.