

Prepared

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"What are your plans for the weekend?" asked the principal of the high school where my husband and I work.

Without hesitation I replied, "We'll be at home on fire watch." It was Friday October 24, 2003, the day before the Cedar Fire started. We didn't know of course how events would unfold that Friday afternoon, but we knew that the scene was set. It was dry, really dry. And hot. Powerful Santa Ana winds were predicted with wind gusts as high as 60 miles per hour. San Diego County was experiencing severe drought, its landscape tortured from the long dry spell. With the humidity less than 3%, coupled with the preceding facts, my husband and I were intensely aware of the need to be on "fire watch."

We make a point of being alert and aware. Our home sits in the midst of chaparral country, on acreage with a 25% grade. The only way out is either up or down the canyon on a windy two-lane street designated as a rural collector road. In the wilderness and urban survival courses we teach, we have a simple motto, "create awareness without precipitating panic." We encourage people to be prepared, to act responsibly by taking precautions, and to learn to take care of themselves in an emergency situation. This type of proactive behavior takes the pressure off our emergency personnel, particularly in an urban setting. As is the case in many large cities, San Diego County emergency personnel departments are strained on a regular basis to take care of the population, let alone in a crisis situation.

Every year we spend many months weed whacking and clearing brush, creating a "defensible space," a space even wider than the fire department recommends. And as we thinned the brush, we planted succulents to cover the ground creating a "green zone" around our house. We installed the required 5,000-gallon water storage tank that gravity feeds to the house and a fire hydrant. I remember the day the tank and hydrant were approved. Instead of feeling safe in case of fire, it was quite the contrary. As the Fire Marshal checked his approval list, he said, "You are on your own, way out here." He added, "By the time the trucks arrive, it might be too late. You may want to consider taking personal precautions as well in order to be better prepared." We told him we understood.

"We teach kids preparedness," we told him.

He smiled. We had a sense that he was thinking, *at least these folks get it.*

For over 15 years we continued to be alert to the possibility of fire, the need to evacuate if circumstances dictated, and the necessity of making our home as fire-safe as possible. Every summer we went through fire drills. Our best time to gather, load, and be out the gate was seven minutes. One year we had just completed our drill and returned home, congratulating ourselves on a job well done, when a fire broke out north of the property about 300 yards away. We were back in the vehicle in a matter of moments, faster than usual, still in escape mode from the drill. That fire was put out in a matter of hours and we returned home before nightfall, but with all the experiences and effort

we still felt vulnerable. We felt that we needed to do more to protect our home. We were great at running away, but we needed to know that we'd have a home to come back to.

In 2002, my husband Tom and I reassessed the potential of fire engulfing our home. We knew that even with appropriate defensible space established, a composite shingle roof, and exterior stucco walls, the wooden deck surrounding our home preserved our vulnerability to flying embers.

Tom makes things when he can't find what he wants in the stores. He designs it, builds it, tests it, and re-designs until it is just right. He decided the deck needed some sort of sprinkling system, but nothing was available that met his specifications. So he purchased copper pipe and some landscape misters and created a misting system that attaches to the metal roof of the deck. In operation, the water covers the entire span of the deck and seeps through cracks, soaking the ground up to four to six feet away from the house. We felt we were finally prepared for the firestorm, whenever it would come.

On the night of October 25th we went to sleep on our deck about 9:00 p.m., a normal pattern for us in the summer. Around 1:00 a.m., I woke up coughing and choking. Ash was covering our faces, our blankets, and the deck. I turned on the radio to the local emergency news channel. Nothing. Then on the hour, during the regular two-minute news program, the announcer said there was a small fire located in the four corners area of Ramona. That was it. Nothing more.

With wind gusts already up to 50–60 miles an hour blowing toward us from that location, and the amount of ash already at our house, I knew we had a problem and woke my husband. "Tom, I have a bad feeling about this."

We got up and got ready. We didn't wait for someone to tell us to go, we never have. But because we have evacuated several times before and the fire went the other way, we delayed so Tom could drive the quad up our dirt road to the top of the property and take a look. At first he didn't see anything. But then, like an apocalyptic nightmare, it began. He heard it, a strong rumbling sound like a runaway freight train. He saw what looked like the sun rising. It wasn't the sun; it was the entire landscape on fire for as far as he could see. He turned to view Wildcat Canyon Road, our only exit, and was dismayed to see that it was bumper-to-bumper traffic. Our chances of getting out were abysmal. But by the time he got back to the house the traffic had suddenly vanished. The road was clear. Tom yelled, "Susan, it's time to go. Now!"

The last thing we did before we left was turn on the misting system. It was connected to the 5,000-gallon water storage tank that gravity feeds to the house. Mistlers would continue to pump out water until the storage tank was empty. This independence of the city's system was important because we knew that during a fire electrical lines would burn down and power would be cut off.

The next 36 hours were a blur. We watched from the shore of Lindo Lake as the fire raged across our canyon, heard propane tanks blow, and knew in our heart that our home was gone.

After the firestorm passed and the smoke had cleared a little, a friend, who also happens to be a Los Angeles fire marshal, took my husband back up the canyon to see what was left. As they slowly drove passed burned power lines and destroyed vehicles, they could see some structures had survived the fire. Not many, but some. They entered our property, much of it still on fire, oak trees smoldering, the ground smoking. Some of the oaks continued to burn for weeks before they fell to the ground. They passed two

From "Fire, Chaparral, and Survival in Southern California." By. R.W. Halsey 2008.

burned vehicles, a melted recreational vehicle, and the smoking remains of our neighbor's house. Our outdoor classroom was reduced to twisted metal and several outbuildings were gone, with nothing to show that they ever existed. It didn't bode well. But around the corner, standing in an oasis of greenery, stood our geodesic dome. As they walked closer, they could see the fire had surrounded the place, burned the landscape logs, and was still smoldering right up to the back door. But the deck was untouched. 5,000 gallons of water from the misting system had soaked an area nearly six feet wide all around the house. "My God," our friend said, "the fire couldn't work against the humidity of the wet earth. The misters saved your house (photo 22)."

I called several radio and TV stations and pestered the newspapers to do a story, sharing with others how a simple misting system played an important part in saving our home. None appeared interested. Perhaps they just wanted horror stories, the tragedies, not stories of survival. I don't know.

We returned and camped out in our home after the fires were finally extinguished. It took 11 days for running water and power to return and seven weeks for telephone service, but we got on with our lives and were back to work within a few days. We consider our selves extremely fortunate. Several of our canyon neighbors were killed while fleeing the flames.

A week after the devastating fire, the principal at our school reminded me of our conversation before I left work on that Friday, the day before it all happened. "How did you know?"

