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# Camp Fire images

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A keepsake edition featuring  
10 stories that captured the  
first-day horror and inconceivable  
aftermath of the deadliest  
wildfire in state history



DAVID LITTLE — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

The massive plume from the Camp Fire, burning in the Feather River Canyon toward Paradise, wafts over the Sacramento Valley as seen from Chico early Nov. 8 less than two hours after it was reported.





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**November 8**

What was initially reported as a brush fire in a remote area of Butte County grows at an unprecedented pace and quickly becomes the fire long feared by every resident of Paradise.

# PARADISE LOST



KARL MONDON — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Cars burn at a home on Neal Road in Paradise as the Camp Fire sweeps through the neighborhood.



# Multiple deaths feared and up to a thousand homes lost as fire levels town

## Fire tears through Concow, Paradise and into east Chico

*Staff reports*

**PARADISE »** The fast-moving Camp Fire burned up to 1,000 buildings and homes in the Paradise area Thursday and reportedly killed multiple people, then roared into Chico and forced evacuations there.

Cal Fire-Butte County Chief Darren Read said in the afternoon that hundreds of structures in Paradise have burned, perhaps as many as 1,000. Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea said there are reports of multiple fatalities, and authorities are trying to verify how many.

The fire started in the Feather River Canyon near Pulga and Highway 70, then burned west. It jumped to 18,000 acres in eight hours Thursday, ripping across the Concow Valley and into and across Paradise.

Then the fire turned east. It reached Highway 99 near Neal Road by 7:30 p.m. and was approaching Highway 32 near upper Bidwell Park by 9 p.m. Evacuation orders were issued from Bruce Road east, from East 20th Street to Highway 32 along the east side of Chico, and in the Canyon Oaks subdivision farther north. Homes were reported burning on the lower Skyway near Oak Ridge Drive and Spanish Garden Drive.

Tens of thousands had already been evacuated, perhaps as many as 50,000 people, according to the sheriff. The Sheriff's Office also has received hundreds of calls requesting deputies to perform welfare checks on unaccounted people in the fire zone. Officials expected to work through the night responding to those calls.

"This was a rapidly moving fire," Honea said. "And it moved very very quickly from a rather remote area to populated areas."

Honea said he had no estimate when evacuees would be able to return.

Residents in Paradise, Magalia, Concow, Yankee Hill and Butte Creek Canyon were initially ordered to evacuate. Thursday evening the evacuation order was extended from Forest Ranch south to Chico, and later to Cherokee and Oro-Chico Highway near Durham. Then the east Chico evacuations were ordered, followed by an order covering everything north of Highway 70 and east of Highway 149.

Three firefighters and several citizens were taken to hospitals with injuries. Three more firefighters suffered burns.

The fire started about 6:30 a.m. Thursday at Camp Creek Road near Pulga. Read said the cause of the fire is under investigation, and likely would be for "quite some time."

Around 2:30 p.m., Cal Fire said 20,000 acres had burned with no containment. The fire was exhibiting extreme fire behavior, Cal Fire public information officer Rick Carhart said. Firefighters are expecting sustained winds up to 30-35 mph on the fire.

"This fire did move through the town of Paradise quickly," said Paradise Police Chief Eric Reinbold. "We're very grateful for our partnerships with allied agencies, Cal Fire, our agency, the town staff worked as quickly as possible to evacuate, using our evacuation plans. And the things that we've trained for over the years. There is a lot of devastation in town. Just to reiterate, we can't confirm how many structures, but at this point it's very devastating to the town."

### Chaos on the ground

Witnesses and reporters on the ground described a chaotic scene as people tried to leave town.

The fire moved so fast that people were cut off by the flames and sheltered in large asphalt parking areas. Radio traffic Thursday afternoon indicated 300 people were at the Kmart lot on Clark Road, with fire in all directions. Another 100 were at a storage business at Clark and Skyway. Still another group gathered at the Holiday Market parking lot on Skyway.

Photographer Karl Mondon said at 4 p.m. the Safeway parking lot at Clark and Elliott roads was half full of evacuees. Many said they knew their homes were lost.

Wayne and Juanita McLish, 20-year residents of Fawndale Lane, said they fought for two hours to save their home until the water pressure ran out, then made it to Safeway. Wayne McLish's face was covered in soot. The former math teacher looked stunned when he was told it was 4 o'clock in the afternoon, not the morning.

Evacuees who were able to get out of town often found themselves in gridlock. A pregnant woman stuck in traffic went into labor. In the late morning, Highway 99 northbound was clogged from south of Durham-Pentz Road to Chico. A number of people took a U-turn across the median to get off the freeway at Durham-Pentz and head toward Durham, but the Midway was backed up northbound as well.

### Hospital evacuated

According to the Sheriff's Office, Feather River Hospital and all Paradise schools were all evacuated. Hospital patients were sent to Enloe Medical Center in Chico and Oroville Hospital.





BILL HUSA — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

A vehicle evacuating Paradise is on fire along Skyway below Tuscan Ridge Golf Course.

According to PG&E spokesman Paul Moreno, 32,000 customers were without power as a result of the fire in Butte and Plumas counties, which includes those in the Paradise, Pulga and Concow areas. No public safety power shut off has been implemented.

The county set up evacuation centers at Oroville Nazarene Church (2238 Monte Vista Ave.) and Neighborhood Church in Chico (2801 Notre Dame Blvd.), but both of those were reported full Thursday evening. Another shelter at the Butte County Fairgrounds in Gridley still had space. At 8:30 p.m. Thursday, another shelter was opened at the Chico Elks Lodge (1705 Manzanita Ave.).

The Silver Dollar Fairgrounds is being used as a staging area for fire crews and is not open to evacuees. Butte College is also being used as a staging area.

The city of Chico's Public Works Department said evacuees can also head to DeGarmo Park and Community Park off 20th Street in Chico, as well as Durham Park, but not to expect services.

Camp Fire evacuees are being asked to register with Red

Cross' Safe & Well website so concerned family and friends can search those lists at <https://safeandwell.communityos.org/cms/index.php>. Concerned family and friends can also search the list of those who have registered as "safe and well" by clicking on the "Search Registrants" button.

The California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) has activated the State Operations Center to provide assistance to Butte County in support of the Camp Fire.

Cal OES Fire, Law Enforcement, and Inland Region personnel are currently working with various response agencies to address all emergency management, evacuation and mutual aid needs.

Smoke from the fire was reported as far away as San Jose and Fort Bragg.

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*Andre Byik, Risa Johnson, Steve Shoonover, Laura Urseny, Tang Lor, Mary Nugent, Will Denner, Dan Reidel, Sharon Martin, Rick Silva and Carin Dorghalli contributed to this report.*



November 9

# Fast-moving flames make hospital evacuation harrowing

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**By Steve Schoonover and Tang Lor***Chico Enterprise-Record*

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**PARADISE»** Darrel Wilken thought he was going to die. He thought the three patients in his car were going to die.

"I'm a survivor," he said, "but there was nothing I could do to save us."

Wilken is a nurse at Feather River Hospital in Paradise. He was working Thursday morning when word came that the Camp Fire was seven miles away. "Fifteen minutes later, it was on the grounds," he said.

The fire came on so quickly that there were no ambulances available for an evacuation. So he and other hospital employees pulled their private cars up to the ambulance bay, and the patients were loaded in to be taken to different hospitals.

Wilken said he had three patients in his car, two of whom were critical. As soon as he pulled out onto Pentz Road he was immediately gridlocked. Gridlocked, with fire on both sides of the road.

"It was so black and so dark we couldn't see anything. We were completely surrounded by flames and explosions. I thought we all were going to die." He called his family to say goodbye.

He described "slaloming" around cars afire in the road in front of him, and seeing other cars burning behind.

"I've done a lot of things but I've never been scared like this. Five years in the Army was nothing," Wilken said. "This was the most helpless I've felt in my life."

As he weaved through Paradise to avoid closed roads, he came upon two ambulances that were staged, and had them take one of his patients that he thought was going to die. The patient depended on life-support equipment that couldn't work in Wilken's car, but the ambulances were equipped to handle it.

It took four hours to make it to Enloe Hospital in Chico. Late Thursday afternoon as he left the hospital he was still shaking, he said. "It was the most horrific experience imaginable."

He said he had feared his tires would melt on the way out of Paradise, and when he got to Chico he noted they were low. He stopped by a tire shop and they said no, the tires were fine. However they pointed out parts of his car were melted — plastic tail lights, trim pieces and such. "We were really close to catching on fire."

Adventist Health tweeted that all the patients were safely evacuated from Feather River Hospital. Enloe Director of Advancement and Communications Jolene Francis said the Chico hospital had taken in 49. "This is some-

thing we plan for, something we drill for," she said. "Yes it has an impact but we're prepared for this."

Other patients went to Oroville Hospital, including Paradise resident Francine Knowles, who was having gallbladder surgery Thursday morning. When the order to evacuate was announced, she was still asleep from the anesthesia, according to her husband, Cody Knowles.

Knowles said when he and his wife went to the hospital around 6 a.m., they were unaware that there was a fire burning. He had to step outside to see for himself.

He was greeted by darkness and smoke, but could see the flames coming up the backside of the hospital, he said. He called 9-1-1 and was told help was coming.

That was probably around 11 a.m., he said. But he's unsure of the exact time.

"I can't explain every little detail," he said. "Everything was just so crazy."

Knowles said he and his wife were probably among the last patients to be evacuated as she couldn't be moved until she was awake. When they tried to jump into the last ambulance, it was already full. Knowles also had his car ready to go, but they decided to get into an employee's car — a surgeon, he believes.

Even then, they were stuck in the parking lot for 15-20 minutes, he said. By the time they got onto Pentz Road, the fire felt close.

"You could just feel the wind blowing and could feel the heat in the car," he said. "We're just so lucky we made it out alive."

The Knowles are currently at Oroville Hospital where Francine is recovering.

Cody Knowles said, "I just have so many different emotions right now. It felt like a movie and we were surrounded by fire."

He's unsure if his home on Boquest Boulevard is still standing. But he's thankful for the hospital staff and the emergency responders who stayed to help.

"It's just a bad situation. I don't even know if the hospital is still standing, but those people, they didn't have to stay but they did anyway."

Adventist Health Administrative Director of Marketing and Communication Jill Kinney said the main hospital core is still standing, though some outbuildings burned, mostly small offices.

"At this stage, we are still assessing the damage," she said.

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*Paradise Post reporter Amanda Hovik contributed to this report.*



**November 10**

The fire destroys an iconic covered bridge while roaring through Butte Creek Canyon.



STEVE SCHOONOVER — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

Nothing but supports remain from the historic wooden Honey Run Covered Bridge in Butte Creek Canyon on Friday after the Camp Fire roared through the canyon. The bridge, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was built in the 1880s.



# Covered bridge destroyed; many canyon homes burned



BILL HUSA — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

A few fall colored leaves remain on a tree as Butte Creek slowly begins to swell below the Honey Run Covered Bridge as a little bit of rain falls in Chico in 2016. The historic bridge was destroyed in the Camp Fire.

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**By Steve Schoonover »** *Chico Enterprise-Record*

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The two Butte Creek Canyon-based firefighters didn't yet know if their homes were safe, but they had to stop.

They walked Friday out onto the northern abutment of the Honey Run Covered Bridge and looked down at the wreckage lying in the creek.

"Oh man, Tom," said Bob Frecolli. And then he and Tom McAdams just stared for a few moments, like they'd lost a friend.

The two and their water tender had been on the fire lines in Butte Valley and Concow since the Camp Fire broke out Thursday, and they were back in the canyon for the first time in more than a day.

Three other firefighters who stopped by the bridge Friday were among those who had been in the canyon Thursday evening. They said the fire had raced down the ridge to the south so fast that everyone staged in the canyon to fight the flames was ordered to move to safety. They declined to identify themselves.

All that was standing Friday of the old bridge were the pillars that had lifted the bridge above the creek, and they were leaning. The corrugated metal from the roof lay in the creek among cables, hardware, and still smoldering bits of wood.

The bridge was built in 1886, back when Honey Run Road was built as the first road between Chico and Paradise. It was used for vehicle traffic until 1965, when a truck crashed into the southern span and damaged it.

A new bridge was built upstream, and the county had planned to destroy the old one, but residents rebelled and

formed the Honey Run Covered Bridge Association to take possession of it and maintain it.

McAdams said when the Humboldt Fire burned through the canyon in 2008, the canyon firefighters told their bosses if it came down to saving their nearby Fire Station 26 or the bridge, to save the bridge. Both were saved as it turned out, when a tanker came in low and blanketed the area with retardant.

They weren't yet sure if the fire station had been saved this time.

They then noticed the caretaker's home had also burned. "He was the best caretaker the bridge ever had."

Frecolli retrieved some caution tape from the truck, and marked the edges of the abutment. "You can't replace this stuff," he said.

Then they drove off to see what else had been lost.

Butte Creek Canyon was a spooky place Friday, filled with smoke that got more dense the deeper you went in, until day turned to night.

By that point, homes along Honey Run Road that had been destroyed by the fire outnumbered those that had survived, but there was no rhyme or reason to which had survived and which had not. At one point, a burnt-out car sat in a driveway, five feet from a house that appeared untouched.

Convict crews were at work clearing fallen trees and power poles that had fallen into the road or were still hanging over it. At a number of points a power pole dangled from the wires above, burning from the bottom up.

There was no word as of deadline as to the fate of the Colman Museum at Centerville, or the level of devastation farther up the canyon.



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## November 10

The first report of PG&E possibly being linked to the ignition of the fire.



KARL MONDON — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Fire smolders under high voltage towers in Pulga near the reported start of the Camp Fire blaze that destroyed the town of Paradise.



# Power lines may have sparked Camp Fire

**By Matthias Gafni and Andre Byik**

*Bay Area News Group and Chico Enterprise-Record*

**PARADISE»** Downed PG&E power lines, amid high winds, may have sparked the deadly Camp Fire that has destroyed the town of Paradise and killed at least five people, according to firefighter radio transmissions reviewed by Bay Area News Group.

At about 6:33 a.m. Thursday, firefighters were dispatched to a vegetation fire “under the high tension power lines” across the Feather River from Poe Dam, where Cal Fire officials have pinpointed the fire’s origin on the agency’s incident page, according to hours of radio transmissions reviewed by this news organization. The first fighters arrived there at 6:43 a.m. and noted the fire was being buttressed by 35 mph winds.

“We’ve got eyes on the vegetation fire. It’s going to be very difficult to access, Camp Creek Road is nearly inaccessible,” one firefighter told dispatch. “It is on the west side of the river underneath the transmission lines.”

The utility, which has already been criticized and sued in a number of other large and deadly fires across California, had announced beginning Tuesday that it might shut down power to the impacted parts of Butte County amid forecasts of high wind and low humidity. But it never did.

Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey said Friday that his office has been in discussions with Cal Fire to preserve the fire scene and any potential evidence for a possible criminal investigation.

Ramsey said he had no information that the Camp Fire was intentionally caused. He also said it was too early to know whether the cause of the fire could have been negligent in nature.

Cal Fire, Ramsey said, will investigate and determine the cause of the fire. Should a criminal case arise from the investigation, the District Attorney’s Office would be the prosecuting agency. The district attorney said it was not unusual for his office to become involved in fire investigations where there is loss of life.

Cal Fire spokesman Scott McLean emphasized the cause is still under investigation, but added that probe would include “electrical equipment.”

PG&E spokesman Jason King said no cause of the fire had been determined.

“We can’t speculate on the cause of the fire, there will

be an investigation,” he said.

After the first radio call, an immediate, multi-alarm response was sent to the area by Pulga and

Camp Creek roads, near the dam which is popular with kayakers and one of PG&E’s 10 hydroelectric stations along the north fork of the river. Google satellite images show PG&E transmission lines above Pulga and Camp Creek roads.

“The (reporting party) is calling from Poe Dam looking across under the high tension power lines. There’s a possible power line hazard,” a dispatcher alerted responding crews, including six engines and a number of more personnel.

At 6:34 a.m. and about eight miles west, another fire crew was dispatched to a report of a branch taking down residential power lines in the neighboring town of Magalia. During last year’s Sonoma and Napa county fires, within the first 90 minutes of the fires’ origin, Sonoma County dispatchers sent fire crews to at least 10 different locations for downed wires and problems with the electrical system amid high winds.

As firefighters rushed to the Poe Dam fire early Thursday morning, each truck acknowledged over the radio, “Copy, power lines down,” as part of safety protocol for firefighters.

The first firefighter at the scene quickly recognized the seriousness of the situation and called for an additional 15 engines, four bulldozers, two water tenders and four strike teams and hand crews.

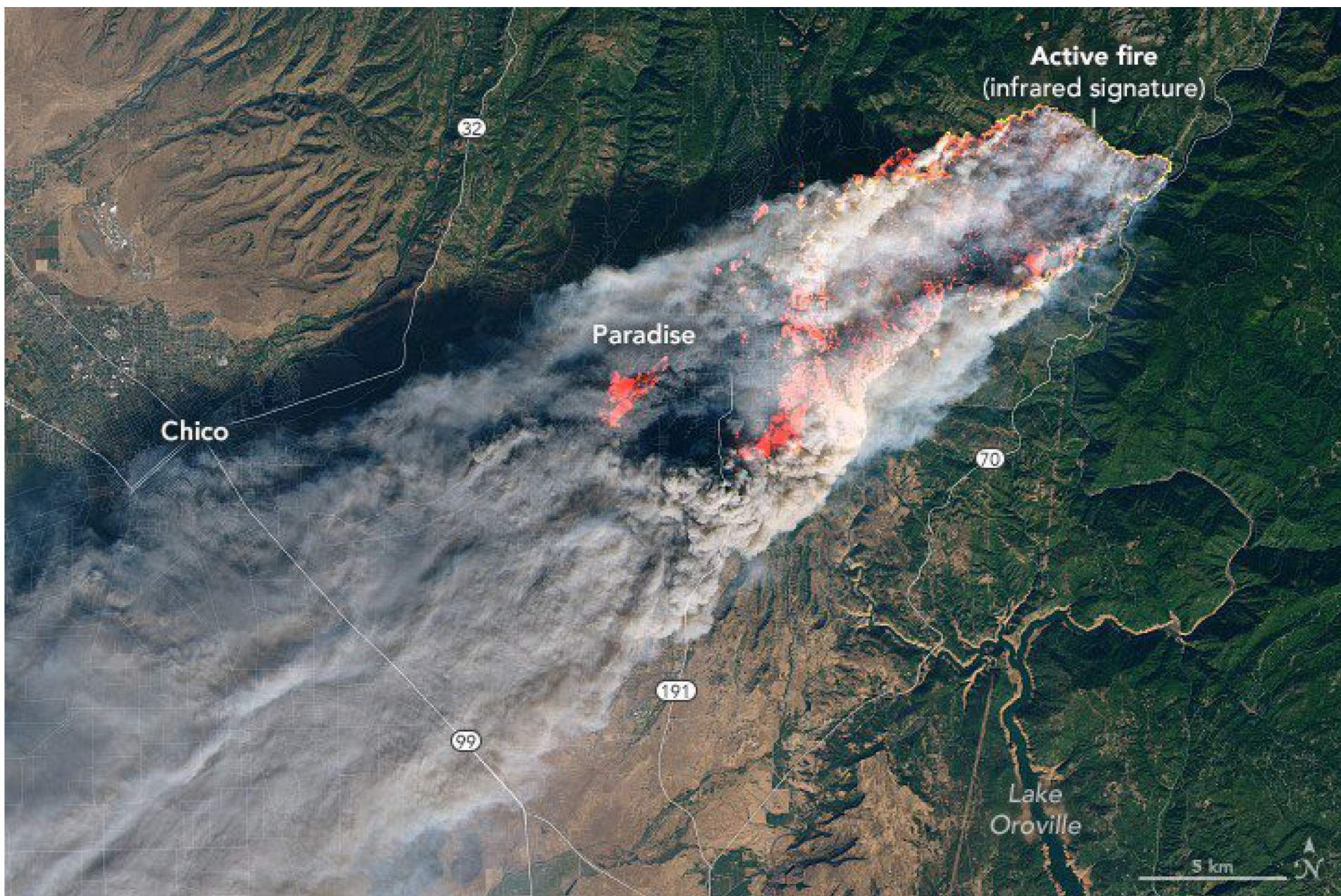
“This has got the potential for a major incident,” he told dispatch, alerting them to evacuate Pulga, the town immediately southwest, and to find air support.

On Tuesday night, PG&E first tweeted that power might be shut down to certain counties, including Butte County and about 26,500 customers in cities and towns including Berry Creek, Forest Ranch, Magalia and Paradise.

Over the next 48 hours, the utility tweeted out 17 different warnings of an impending Thursday morning shut-off. It even tweeted out a warning at 7:56 a.m. Thursday, more than an hour after the fire was reported under one of its downed power lines, that the shut-off was still an option.

PG&E released a statement Thursday afternoon, almost nine hours after the Camp Fire first sparked, calling off the shut down “as weather conditions did not warrant this safety measure.”





NASA

Satellite image of the Camp Fire taken at about 10:34 a.m. on Nov. 9, 2018.

"We want to thank our customers for their understanding and for their actions in preparation of a possible Public Safety Power Shutoff," Pat Hogan, PG&E senior vice president of Electric Operations, said in the statement. "We know how much our customers rely on electric service, and we will only consider temporarily turning off power in the interest of safety and as a last resort during extreme weather conditions to reduce the risk of wildfire."

On Friday, King declined to get into specifics about why PG&E called off the shut down, saying only: "We chose not to implement the public safety power shut off in any location."

In its warnings, PG&E had warned of sustained winds of 20 to 30 miles per hour, with gusts of 40 to 50 mph forecasted overnight Wednesday into Thursday, lasting until late afternoon.

When implementing a Public Safety Power Shutoff the utility factors in strong winds, very low humidity, critically dry vegetation and on-the-ground observations.

PG&E's stock plunged Friday by almost \$8 a share, a more than 16 percent drop amid the fires blazing across the state. The decline wiped out PG&E's entire gains for the year and was the biggest one-day decline for the stock since 2002.



November 11 | Editor's column

# Butte Creek Canyon can't dodge this bullet

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By David Little » *Chico Enterprise-Record*

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I remember as a child sitting on the back porch at Grandma's house, watching smoke billow above the rim of Butte Creek Canyon, wondering just when we should evacuate.

This was before reverse 9-1-1 calls, before an emergency broadcast system, before Twitter and Facebook. Before computers even. We didn't even have a television because there was no reception in the canyon anyway. So you had to be self-sufficient and decide for yourself when it was time to escape.

The canyon dodged many bullets over the years.

There was no dodging the Camp Fire.

Firefighters were spread thin on a fast-moving fire. They weren't firefighters at first, not in that descriptive sense of the job title. They were rescuers, just trying to get people out alive. There were precious few resources left for the canyon by the time the fire swept in.

Two days after the blaze swept through, the canyon was still smoldering. Power lines were on the roadway. Power poles burned until they fell. Trees were still on fire. Old homes that I knew from my childhood were gone. Some were miraculously spared for no apparent reason.

I drove through with Bay Area News Group photographer Karl Mondon to get photos and video for our ongoing coverage. I only cried three times. I thought I did pretty well.

Where the Honey Run Covered Bridge stood for 132 years, there was a heap of metal siding and burned wood forming a dam in the creek. Mondon and I were all alone, until Rep. Doug LaMalfa appeared out of the smoke. LaMalfa just looked at the bridge and shook his head.

There is no other reaction.

We saw just one canyon resident. He was standing in his driveway. No residents have been allowed back in, so I knew he had been there the entire time. I asked him why he stayed.

"Like everybody else up here, I'm underinsured," he said. When his insurance company reduced coverage years ago because of the fire danger, he consulted with Cal Fire and created what firefighters call "defensible space."

He removed fire-hazard trees hanging near the house, grew lawn, eliminated dry brush and bought a generator to run the sprinklers for when the eventual fires came. And Nov. 8 it came, a storm that he said was shooting hot embers sideways in the air.

All around him were burned homes as the man told the harrowing story. Behind him was his green lawn, his dogs yipping at the two strangers on the property — and a house, untouched by fire.

The homes still standing mostly had that defensible space. The ones that burned were often tucked back into shady oaks that provided respite from the canyon's summer heat but fuel for a November fire.

Not many people have lawn in the rural country setting, but several who do were wise enough to park vehicles or RVs in the middle of the lawn before they evacuated. Those vehicles were fine.

In many other places, there were reminders of the random nature of the fire. Near the old mining community of Diamondville, a beautiful classic car and a pickup were parked in dry grass. Somehow the dry grass didn't catch fire. The vehicles were fine.

Two hundred yards away was a home burned to the foundation.

We drove to Grandma's house, the place where I grew up. It stood untouched. Then we went to my brother's home. The fire burned his guest cottage, a trailer and a lawnmower all to nothing. The lawn and ivy were scorched as the fire traveled up to his back porch — and then for some reason, stopped. The house was still standing.

My brother died 12 years ago. His partner still lives there and had no idea for 48 hours whether his home was still there.

I don't know why the fire stopped right there at the back door. I'd like to think my brother had something to do with it.



November 12

# ‘This is when I die’

## Tales of escape from the Camp Fire



KARL MONDON — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

An abandoned vehicle sits in a ditch on Pentz Road in Paradise after the neighborhood was evacuated in the wake of the Camp Fire.



## “When you’re contemplating death, you say, ‘Am I ready to die?’”

— Zetta Gore

**By Julia Sulek and Annie Sciacca**

*Bay Area News Group*

**PARADISE»** It’s the terror, the sheer terror of being stuck in a vehicle in bumper-to-bumper traffic with flames closing in and nowhere to go that haunts them most.

On the main road that locals affectionately called “the Skyway to Paradise,” many of those trapped in the nerve-racking slow-motion evacuation Thursday morning said their goodbyes, whispered their prayers and wondered, is this the end?

“I thought, this must be what hell’s going to be,” said 87-year-old Beverly Fillmore, who drove out of Paradise with her 91-year-old husband, Jim.

“We were going to be cremated when we die, but I thought, this is it, I’m going to be cremated right now. This is when I die.”

The inferno has claimed at least 23 people so far — six in vehicles, another just outside one — as the Camp Fire roared to life Thursday morning, decimating this town of 27,000 people in a wildfire that has become the most destructive in California history.

More than ever, it seems, those trapped by wildfires aren’t just the stubborn few who refuse to evacuate. California wildfires are increasingly wicked fast — with year-round fire season colliding with late-autumn near-hurricane strength winds — giving people little time to think straight, much less escape.

The identities of the ones who died in Paradise and exactly how they died are still unknown. But those who barely made it out alive tell stories of paralyzing fear and harrowing panic, of trust, of love, of loyalty.

Richard and Zetta Gore abandoned their vehicle and, with the fire bearing down, decided to slide down a deep canyon, clinging to bushes, and hike out about seven miles to safety. Angie Van Blaricon and Jessie Smith, a school bus driver and teacher’s aide, hunkered down for seven hours with a 7-year-old autistic boy in a Save Mart parking lot, while his mother feared he was dead. The Fillmores, married for 67 years and sure the end had come, ran out of gas — but, thankfully, piled into their son’s car and got away.

The photos alone of abandoned, incinerated vehicles strewn across Skyway give a sense of the chaos that preceded them. In many ways, they look like scenes from the town of Oroville just a year-and-a-half earlier. There was no fire then, but people fled fearing that a damaged Oroville Dam spillway could unleash a wall of water into nearby towns. It forced residents into an epic traffic jam with the threat of being overrun at any minute.

On Thursday — with fire, not water — that nightmare came true.

### The precipice

Richard and Zetta Gore stood on a rock outcropping at Bille Park, on the west side of Paradise, overlooking the deep canyon below. The wind shifted and the flames were closing in, as they looked into the ravine.

“I said, ‘Zetta, it’s time,’” Richard said. “We both prayed together and asked for God’s protection and took off.”

“This was the moment we knew it was do or die,” Zetta said.

Minutes earlier, they had been stuck in the interminable traffic on Oliver Road, just a couple blocks from their Paradise home. They hadn’t moved for a half hour. Cars sped along the shoulder. People ran by with bandanas on their faces. One man said he had a gun — and although he confided in the Gores that he had fled without ammunition — he was ready to threaten anyone who tried to steal his vehicle.

“We were sitting ducks to be burned in our vehicles and if I was going to die in a forest fire,” Richard Gore said, “I would rather die with my wife, trying to get away, than sitting in a vehicle dying.”

They headed to an overlook at Bille Park. As the flames came within 400 feet, they called their 32-year-old son in Ukiah.

“Zach, this is it. We’re going to make a run for it on foot,” Gore said. “This could be the last time we ever talk to you.”

Into the deep ravine they went, each holding bags with lap blankets and water bottles they could douse if the fire overcame them. They grabbed for vines and bushes as they slid. A family of deer and turkeys cobbled by.

The couple have been married 39 years. They met when they were teenagers working at a summer camp in Southern California. For years, they volunteered for the Riverside County fire department.

They made it to the bottom of the canyon, waded through the creek, then followed the dirt road for 5 miles before they hitched a ride out.

“When you’re contemplating death, you say, ‘Am I ready to die?’” Zetta said.

A peace had come over the couple as they descended the cliff. “We both were ready to die,” Richard said, “but we were not going to die without putting up a fight.”

### Unsung heroes on the bus

The fire started at the most chaotic time of day for school bus drivers — just as they were dropping off students at school. When the Camp Fire roared into town, Paradise Unified School District transportation director Rubina Hartwig couldn’t reach some of the bus drivers because the radio system was undergoing maintenance.

She was frantic when she couldn’t contact Angie Van Blaricon, who along with aide Jessie Smith, was driving the mini school bus that normally carries 12 children with special needs.

“I started worrying right away. Where are they? What are they doing?” Hartwig said. “I didn’t know if her bus was full. I didn’t know if her bus was empty.”

She also didn’t know whether most parents had picked up their special needs children from Van Blaricon’s bus at Ponderosa Elementary — or that Bethann and Joseph Jauron were stopped at roadblocks from reaching the school to get their 7-year-old son, Liam, who is autistic.

“Please, you have to let me get my son!” she pleaded with an officer at a blockade. “He’s on the spectrum. He needs his mommy.”

Liam’s mom raced back home and received a call from Jessie, the teacher’s aide.

“Bethann, I’ve got him. I promise you I won’t let anything happen. I promise,” Jessie told her. “Then the phone lines went dead and the power went out.”





RAY CHAVEZ — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Vehicles sit burned on a dirt road at the end of Edgewood Lane in Paradise.

Ponderosa Elementary was burning. But Van Blaricon had moved the minibus to a safer spot at a Save Mart parking lot. Still, for another several hours, they couldn't be reached.

"We knew that everything was burning around them and initially I thought the worst," Hartwig said.

Liam's parents wouldn't find out until later that firefighters were protecting the mini school bus and others stranded in the Save Mart parking lot, or that Van Blaricon and Smith were keeping Liam entertained with graham crackers and stories.

"Our little guy, our special needs boy, was happy as could be, keeping us all in high spirits," Van Blaricon, 74, said.

It was until 6 p.m. that Liam and his guardians were united with his mother. "I held both of them and kissed them and thanked God for them," Jauron said.

### View from a dead end

On Edgewood Lane, Gabriel Fallon was trying to save his parents' house and barn and 14 horses, when four vehicles drove by, their drivers in a panic: A woman and a teenage boy was inside one. An elderly couple in separate cars following each other were in the others.

"Is this a way out?" drivers would ask him, one after another.

"No," he would say, "it's a dead end."

He didn't know what happened to them. He didn't know if they escaped. But on Saturday, a half dozen vehicles were smoldering carcasses on the end of Edgewood Lane. Three of them were touching, as though they had collided. Who can know what really happened in those final moments of fear when there's no one left to tell the story?

Fallon saw the coroner arrive, but he didn't know how many bodies were retrieved. Authorities would only say that four people had died in their vehicles, some on Edgewood Lane. Another was found outside a car, presumably trying to run away.

The fire just moved so fast, Fallon said.

"Everyone started grabbing stuff and trying to go," he said, "but it was almost too late already."

The Fillmores, the elderly couple stuck on Skyway who were certain they would perish, passed Edgewood Lane as they escaped. When they ran out of gas, their son was nearby and picked them up.

"You couldn't see where you were. All you could see was flames," she said.

They finally made it out, passing the "Welcome to Paradise" sign. It was burning.

"I don't ever want to see a tree again, ever. I know it's going to catch on fire," Beverly Fillmore said. "We're not going to rebuild in Paradise."





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November 28

# Inside the Camp Fire repopulation effort

‘We don’t want a tragedy  
upon a tragedy’

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By **Andre Byik** » *Chico Enterprise-Record*

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**PARADISE** » A group of some 20 officials, including Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea, huddled Monday around a large paper map of communities that remained evacuated in the aftermath of the Camp Fire.

The group, which includes representatives from local fire and law enforcement agencies, utility companies, public health workers, water officials and more, was meeting in Chico for a daily 3 p.m. repopulation meeting.

The meetings are held to gather information about pending and completed work that could lead the Sheriff’s Office to lift evacuation orders that still cover thousands of residents nearly three weeks after the deadly fire sparked, including orders for the town of Paradise and communities of Concow, Yankee Hill and portions of Magalia.

On Monday, officials targeted evacuated areas above Magalia toward the Stirling City area, working through a checklist of safety precautions undertaken to allow residents to return home. Were compromised trees checked? Were downed power lines removed or rewired? Could a wall somewhere fall over and kill someone? Has the area been searched for human remains? How could lifting an evacuation order for one area affect another?

Officials for PG&E, AT&T, the Sheriff’s Office and multiple other public officials chime in, detailing the work their crews have done or are expecting to complete, tasks involving hundreds of workers.

“It’s all about managing risk, guys,” Honea said. “We can never say with 100 percent certainty that anything is safe. It’s about mitigating risk.”

Satisfied that an area is OK for residents to re-enter, an “O” marking the evacuation zone on the map is crossed with an “X” and shaded in with blue marker. On Monday officials marked as safe the Stirling, North Couto-

lenc, Lovelock, North Firhaven and Nimsheew C evacuation zones. The Sheriff’s Office lifted evacuation orders for those areas Tuesday, allowing residents back in starting at noon.

“We have to check with our partners here to make sure that it’s safe for people to go back in,” Honea said, understanding the frustration of those who still have not been able to see what remains of their homes. “That’s when we say it’s safe, because if we don’t do this, people could die. People could die.”

The number of people killed in the fire remained at 88 Tuesday when no human remains were found. The number of people still unaccounted for after the fire dropped from 203 to 158.

At a press conference Monday, PG&E officials said thousands of burned trees in Paradise were a hazard and still need to be removed, one of the biggest problems associated with repopulation. The ravaged town of 26,000 residents has been closed to the public since officials ordered residents to flee wind-whipped flames Nov. 8. The sheriff, in public statements at news conferences and in interviews, has not offered a time frame for when evacuation orders there could be lifted.

During the repopulation meeting Monday, the sheriff did brainstorm and craft a statement regarding work being done to open an important artery connecting such communities as Magalia and Stirling City to the valley floor — Pentz Road.

“There is an effort to focus along the Pentz Road area so that we can provide access up into Magalia,” Honea said. “And good progress is being made, but we’re hoping to do that as soon as it’s safe.”

When the upper ridge zones opened Tuesday, residents could not take the usual route through Paradise. They had to travel up Highway 32 to Butte Meadows, then over to Inskip and Stirling City down the Skyway. It’s a long commute but the only route that’s open.





ANDA CHU — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Cal Fire Butte County Capt. John Gaddie, standing near a low-hanging power line, describes some of the hazards that still exist following the Camp Fire in Paradise.

Officials have avoided providing specific time lines or estimates on when evacuated areas might be reopened, they say, because plans could change by the hour. An unexpected problem could pop up, such as plastic culverts throughout the town of Paradise that may have melted, or inclement weather could shut down work, delaying progress.

"As the fire is now contained, it provides some degree of certainty, but there's still a lot of unknowns," Honea said. "Like the culvert issue. The culvert issue popped up on us."

John Gaddie, a fire captain for Cal Fire-Butte County, facilitates the daily repopulation meetings, and on Tuesday he guided this newspaper through the town of Paradise, noting the hazards that remain there and the work that continues to be done before residents can be allowed back in.

Gaddie, maneuvering his white Cal Fire pickup around tree removal and trimming crews and utility workers, pointed out low-hanging phone lines, utility poles that have been sheared at the base but remain suspended in the air by wires, and small sinkholes and "stumpholes" that dot properties and roadsides.

"There are just so many hazards after a fire goes through," he said. "And so all these people are working tirelessly. They were here almost immediately after the fire. PG&E trying to clear the roads, first and foremost, and then dealing with the subsequent power line issues afterwards."

Gaddie stopped his truck at a hard roadblock at Pentz Road, where multiple crews were trimming trees. He said work along Pentz Road was emphasized during a repopulation meeting Tuesday.

"Really trying to get Pentz Road open so that we have an access route from the valley side to upper Magalia and Stirling City and all those areas so (residents) don't have to go up and around" through Butte Meadows, he said.

Gaddie said he's been in the fire service for 22 years, and he did not believe he would ever see devastation to the extent that the Camp Fire brought. He called the scope of the work being undertaken to clear the area for residents to return "unprecedented" and "monumental."

He noted utility crews that have been called in from Florida, Texas and other states to help the effort.

"We've lost almost a whole town," the fire captain said. "It destroyed 18,000-plus structures. That includes the county area. I mean that's over three times more than what happened last year in the Santa Rosa, Sonoma and Napa fires. And it happened within 12 hours."

Gaddie said he feels for those who haven't yet been able to see what remains of their homes, in Paradise or elsewhere.

"They want closure. I get why they want to come," he said. "They want to see it with their eyes and close that chapter and move forward, hopefully. Whether they want to come back or not. I get it. But we want it safe for them. Period. We don't want a tragedy upon a tragedy."



December 4

# Law enforcement couple from Paradise recounts dispatch to Camp Fire

**“It’s not like I was questioning whether we were going to do it. I knew we were going to do it. There was no question of us doing it. But I’m like, how many more lucky chances do we get?”**

— Tiffany Larson

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**By Risa Johnson** » *Chico Enterprise-Record*

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**CHICO** » Butte County Sheriff’s deputy Bobby Larson has been shot at before. He would take that any day over returning to a scene like what he experienced on Nov. 8.

That day he saw the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California state history destroy his home and his hometown.

“After being through that, I’ll take being shot at any (expletive) day,” he said. “I’ll go out the door right now and be shot at if I don’t ever have to go back to something like up on that mountain ever again.”

Larson is one of the dozens of Sheriff’s Office employees who lost their homes in the Camp Fire, continuing to serve the community through it all.

That morning, Larson had just about an hour of sleep after working a night shift when he received a call from his wife of 11 years, Tiffany Larson, a special victims unit detective with the Sheriff’s Office. She told him there was a fire in Pulga. It was all hands all deck, and he might get called in.

He went back to sleep. Shortly after, another call came — he needed to pack up the animals and get out of the house.

Larson rounded up their four dogs and got them in harnesses, threw on sweats and grabbed a pistol. He was only able to get one of their three cats. The others bolted.

Like nearly everyone else fleeing, Larson got caught in gridlock traffic and witnessed cars ablaze. Knowing the town well, he was able to take a bike path to speed up his route to Chico. There he dropped their animals with a friend.

Then he got ready to work.

By the day’s end, Larson would think to himself “I’m

going to die” an estimated 15 to 30 times.

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While her husband headed toward safety, Tiffany Larson was en route to evacuate a retirement home by Feather River Hospital. At this point, she knew this fire was an exceptionally bad one.

“We’ve always said we’re fine because they’re never going to let the flames get to the hospital,” she said. “They can’t. Our hospital can’t burn down.”

Larson arrived to a chaotic scene, with fire right up against the retirement home. She started running to get the residents into vehicles.

“It was crazy,” she said. “It was so loud. It was windy. We got stuck in the wind vortex.”

Larson tried to get out of town in her unmarked SUV headed northbound but couldn’t make much headway. She was directed to turn around and go south.

“This sounds like a cliché but I see the wall of fire that we’re going to have to drive through, and I know that my car’s not that great, and I don’t know if we’re going to get through it,” she said, her voice growing quieter.

Larson had an older man, an evacuee from the retirement home, in her backseat. She turned around to face the stranger who had been riding with her for just five to 10 minutes.

“I’m like, ‘Hey I know I don’t know you and you don’t know me, but I don’t know if we’re going to make it out, so can you just hold my hand?’”

She briefly told him all of the “little things” she has been taught to do — turn off the air, roll up the windows, keep breathing, avoid touching metal because of downed power lines and have water ready. It was pitch black. She guesses she had about two feet of visibility.





RAY CHAVEZ — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

A charred vehicle was left Friday in the middle of Honey Run Road in Butte Creek Canyon.

“The embers are popping off my car,” she said. “My windows are getting hot. We probably go, I don’t know, it felt like 10 miles but it was probably only maybe a quarter mile, and we got through the flames. It kind of opened up. It was super surreal.”

There she saw her partner, standing with her sergeant. They were out of the worst of it.

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When Bobby Larson dropped his dogs and cat off at his coworker’s house, he found that his friend, also a deputy sheriff, was suited up. Neither of them had orders but they decided to go to Paradise on their own accord.

They drove through driveways, ditches and yards lining Neal Road to get to the Larsons’ home. Larson needed his uniform. When they got there, they found the neighborhood on fire.

“It was hot,” he said. “It looked like lava.”

With the power off, Larson ran his hands over the familiar walls of his home to find the flashlight he knew was in the bathroom. He grabbed his belt, two pairs of boots and his lunchbox out of habit. He could see his lawn on fire.

He paused to collect himself.

“Yeah I didn’t think we were going to make it,” Larson said.

They made it to a clear parking lot, and he called his wife. The house was gone.

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When she got the call, Tiffany Larson was on traffic control.

“I could hear in his voice that things weren’t good,” she said.

She almost threw up. She told her partner the news. Then she had to get back to the job.

One of Larson’s colleagues asked her to drive his car to Oroville to gas it up. When she got to the gas station, she broke down. She started dry heaving — something she had never done before but has found herself doing over the past three weeks.

After exchanging cars, she helped her partner evacuate one of his family members. Then, they went to evacuate the remaining patients and staff at the hospital.

They were going back into the fire. Larson was slightly incredulous.

“It’s not like I was questioning whether we were going to do it,” she said. “I knew we were going to do it. There was no question of us doing it. But I’m like, how many more lucky chances do we get?”

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It was still bad. Power lines and trees were down. Transformers were in the middle of the road. But there wasn’t a “fiery tunnel” like there had been before.



It was around 2 or 3 p.m. when they got to the hospital. With other law enforcement officers and nurses, Tiffany Larson and her partner loaded up a transport bus and personal vehicles to get the last people out. The nurses were covered in soot.

"They're amazing," she said. "The nurses are their own set of heroes. Their boots are melted. Their name tags are melted."

After giving everyone a quick briefing to prepare themselves, Larson and her partner led a caravan of over 10 vehicles away from the hospital and headed south for Oroville Hospital. The fire started to flare up again.

"You didn't know how bad it was until you were already too far into it," Larson said. "You didn't have a choice to turn around. You had to just chance it and hope that there wasn't something on the other side that was going to stop you and get you pinned."

They made it through the flames and pulled off to the side before running out to catch the attention of the other drivers, so they would keep coming. Counting each car, there was just one left, driven by a nurse who just wasn't coming out. Finally she made it.

"Within 30 seconds, the flames overtook the road," Larson said.

Around 10:30 p.m. she finally "tapped out" and went to her friend's home where her dogs were.

Larson was back at work at 6:30 a.m. the next day. She was assigned to the coroner's unit and has lead crews searching for bodies. So far, a total of 88 people have been confirmed dead.

Bobby Larson was assigned to the Magalia area for his night shift.

"It was like a war zone," he said. "That's the best I can describe it. Stuff you see on TV. These guys fighting overseas ... they drop a bomb and it just wipes (expletive) out."

Driving through town, he said he "could not comprehend" what he was seeing. His hometown was being wiped out. He saw flames that seemed to be 300 feet tall.

While in Magalia, Larson received an assignment to evacuate the small unincorporated community of Stirling City which has just a few hundred residents. He headed north, but then fire blew over the road. Voices on the radio kept telling him to go north but he couldn't. He turned around to go south, but the fire had crossed that exit, too.

"I'm like (expletive) we're trapped," he said. "We're going to die."

Suddenly, a clearing appeared. He was able to evacuate the communities of Lovelock and Stirling City.

Throughout the night, Larson evacuated people and updated the command post. He loves the adrenaline of being a sheriff's deputy, but he has never thought he would die so many times in one day.

His colleagues who have served in combat told him that their experience in war "had nothing" on this fire.

"Knowing that people didn't make it, that we could not get to them and save them, is horrible," he said. "It was horrible."

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Now, Bobby Larson wishes he had taken some videos or pictures. He was wearing his body camera but didn't turn it on.

"I never even thought to roll it at all," he said. "I don't think there was very many guys that did. I know one guy that did because he thought he was gonna die."

Throughout the day and night, Bobby and Tiffany Larson heard their colleagues calling out for help. Their cars had caught fire. Officers were loading evacuees into fire trucks and bulldozers. Others were forced to shelter in place with citizens.

"None of us were thinking about us," said Tiffany Larson. "We're thinking about how many more people can we get to the other side of this. We're going to take these people and save them. And if we don't, I'll be going down with 'em."

Larson remembers hearing her partners in Concow on the radio screaming for air support because they were with about 50 citizens trapped by flames.

"We know we're dealing with some (expletive) but we know that our partners are very close to being killed," she said, getting emotional. "We can hear it all on the radio while we're working. At that point I'm not worried about me."

Another voice that sticks with her is that of an officer from a nearby city who was on Skyway.

He was stuck with about 30 people surrounded by flames and was yelling for water. No one could get to him because he wasn't familiar with the town and didn't know where he was on the roadway. Thinking about it still gives her goosebumps.

"The amount of terror that I would have, having to be in that (expletive) and not knowing exactly where I was, I couldn't even imagine," Larson said.

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Nov. 8 was the most traumatic day of Tiffany Larson's life. Right now, she is grateful just to be alive and for her work.

"We're pushing forward," she said. "For me, a body in motion stays in motion."

The couple's days off are spent getting their lives back together. They are in escrow on a house in Chico.

"I will say, throughout all this, I'm homesick, and it's not just for my home," she said.

Larson worked for the Paradise Police Department for five to six years before transferring to the Sheriff's Office about two years ago. She has lived in Paradise from age 3.

Bobby Larson was born at Feather River Hospital and has lived in Paradise his whole life. He married his high school sweetheart, who he met at Paradise High School. The couple is in their early 30s.

Tiffany Larson has some survivor's guilt. Throughout the interview, she stopped herself several times, when talking about what they lost. She doesn't want anybody to feel sorry for them.

"How do we even have the audacity to be upset or complain when we have these people who lost their lives?" she asked. "They didn't just die of old age. They had the most hellish death you could ever imagine."

Larson said she still couldn't believe that her colleagues all made it out.

"Everybody prepared themselves for dying that day," she said.

The two just celebrated their 11th wedding anniversary. Bobby Larson delivered flowers and chocolate to his wife's office for her to find when she came into work. They went out to dinner with friends.

"I tried to make things halfway normal," he said.

"It was perfect," she said.



December 18

# Warning system failure

## In disasters such as the Camp Fire, high-tech communities reduced to 1940s-era responses

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By Lisa Krieger » Bay Area News Group

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Residents of Paradise bitterly complained in the wake of the Camp Fire that Butte County's early warning system failed them, and now a detailed Bay Area News Group analysis shows just how thorough that failure was.

The review revealed that thousands of critical cellphone messages were missed, delayed or lost — a disturbing reminder of the fragility of our electronic notifications systems, even as more of our lives move online.

"The system failed. Technology, the thing I trust most, failed," said Lisa Parr, an accountant who had signed up to get the county's emergency alerts but never received one. Hard at work on her computer and phone that fateful morning, she was unaware of approaching flames and escaped with just moments to spare. "The system that was supposed to help save us — it didn't."

This news organization's review found problems at every level — many residents didn't sign up for the system, officials didn't trigger warnings for every neighborhood, and overloaded or damaged cellular networks often failed to deliver warnings to the intended recipient. Meanwhile, flames engulfed the region with stunning speed, leaving little room for error.

A Butte County spokeswoman said Sheriff Kory Honea will conduct an analysis and issue a report when time allows.

"I wish we had opportunity to get more alerts out, more warning out," said Honea during a community meeting on the third day of the fire. "We try to use as many systems as we can. ... But in the heat of this, it was moving so fast, it was difficult to get that information out."

To better understand how the failures occurred, this news organization requested evacuation alert records from the Paradise and Chico police departments and from Butte County, as well as cell tower information from the California Public Utilities Commission.

A review of alerts issued by the county and Paradise police in the hours after the fire started on Nov. 8 shows that no evacuation orders were issued by the county to one six-square-mile swath of the city. Another four-mile stretch of town received merely a warning; the actual order to flee came 7.5 hours later, long after homes were reduced to ashes.

Prior to the Camp Fire, only an estimated one-quarter of the region's residents had signed up to get emergency messages — but even when they signed up, many calls didn't reach them. Success varied from geographical zone to zone, generally deteriorating as the fire spread and the infrastructure was damaged or overwhelmed. Even in the best-performing zones, 25 percent of alerts did not make a connection to the resident's phone. In the worst zone, the call failure rate was 94 percent.

Seventeen cell towers burned that first day, according to records obtained from the CPUC. During the first two weeks of the fire, a total of 66 cell phone towers were damaged or out of service, causing phones to go silent or calls to be dropped as surviving towers became overloaded by traffic.

"We really need to get better at this," said disaster expert Kelly McKinney, author of the book *Moment of Truth: The Nature of Catastrophes and How to Prepare for Them*. McKinney urges the creation of a state system to provide a notification template and backup help for local responders.





RAY CHAVEZ — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Krystin Harvey, left, comforts her daughter Araya Cipollini, 19, as they look at the remains of their property on Grinding Rock Avenue in Paradise. Harvey along with her husband, their three girls, 19, 17, and 16, her cousin and two dogs survived the fatal Camp Fire even though they didn't evacuate.

“The public needs to understand what to expect — what will happen, when it will happen and who is accountable for making it happen,” said McKinney, who is senior director of emergency management at the medical center NYU Langone Health and former deputy commissioner at New York City’s Office of Emergency Management. “If you don’t have those three things, it is wishful thinking. And wishful thinking always fails you in a disaster.”

Paradise and its surrounding communities — where 86 people perished in the fire — is not the only place where planning has not been up to the task. In other California disasters, alerts and evacuations have fallen short, including the 2017 flooding of downtown San Jose and Tubbs Fire of Sonoma County, which killed 22. In last January’s mudslides in Montecito, a message was issued while hillsides already were collapsing, killing more than 20 people.





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In the San Francisco Bay Area, the public warning systems are a patchwork of technologies, personnel, media, vendors and policies, and there are both duplications and gaps in their coverage, according to a 2017 report by Bay Area Urban Areas Security Initiative, a federally-funded project to improve the region's capacity to respond to catastrophic events. As a result, the messages people receive in one city are often different than those in another.

"California's alert system is, in reality, 58 county alert systems duct-taped together, with 58 different processes and capabilities," McKinney said. "If we're going to remove the duct tape and bolt and wire it together, so it's all one machine, the state has to do it."

California counties' individual warning systems sprang up ad-hoc to address various threats. While there's been a trend toward integrating systems at the federal level, local systems are still fragmented, driven by competitive marketing among commercial vendors. Almost all of our warning tools must be activated one-by-one and do not support simultaneous activation using a tool called Common Alerting Protocol. The protocol, adopted by the federal government, allows warning messages to be sent all at once across many platforms.

This creates otherwise avoidable delay, additional workload, and opportunities for error for warning originators, according to the report. And there are few explanations of different warning methods, what those methods mean, and what steps should be taken when a warning is issued.

New state laws aim to improve notification in the future. One mandates statewide guidelines and training programs for local governments. Another authorizes counties to automatically enroll residents into emergency notification systems, gaining access to phone numbers through utility bills and other services.

In Paradise, only residents who had registered for CodeRED, the county's alert system, had any chance of knowing what was happening during the Camp Fire. County logs from Nov. 8 show that messages reached 16,683 phones but failed to reach another 10,869 despite repeated attempts. Paradise Police reached a total of 4,855 phones but did not reach 4,099. Combined, authorities also sent more than 6,000 texts and 6,700 emails that first day, with additional alerts issued in the days following. An estimated 38,702 people lived in the towns of Paradise, Magalia and Concow, with others scattered in more rural parts of the county.

Butte County used a commercial system similar to those used in most Bay Area counties, connecting to landlines, cell phones, emails and social media.

There is a second type of alert system, also available to Bay Area counties, where notifications such as Amber Alerts can be sent to cell phones regardless of whether residents have opted-in. This system, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA), blankets an area with a warning.

But WEA's geographical targeting, based on a labyrinth of cell towers and a honeycomb of tower signal "sectors," is not terribly precise. Any WEA alert will likely overshoot or undershoot the desired alert area.

Both systems are vulnerable. They rely on local officials, who are inevitably overwhelmed in the early hours of a catastrophe, scrambling to save lives and get resources to the danger, according to McKinney. As the fire consumed Paradise, thousands of calls poured in to 911 —

where only two dispatchers were working.

In Paradise, officials issued evacuation alerts for 10 different zones in the city in just one hour, between 7:47 a.m. and 8:43 a.m. But alerts were not sent in four other zones, equally at risk. The Butte County Sheriff's office, which issued the alerts throughout the county, referred questions about the four zones to Paradise Police, who did not respond to a request for comment.

"It'll never be perfect, when there's limited time," said Daniel Gonzales of the RAND Homeland Security and Defense Center, who led a 2016 study about warnings for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. But with review and more pre-planning and practice, "it should be possible to do much better than what happened in Paradise ... to minimize errors that might happen during a very stressful set of conditions."

To improve matters, officials will have to solve one weakness of any electronic alert system: its dependence on electricity.

Even during a power outage, messages that are sent to a landline have a better chance of landing. That's because power is sent to the phones through copper wires, which are more heat-resistant. Phone company offices have extensive battery systems, as well as backup generators, according to Santa Clara University School of Law professor and former CPUC commissioner Catherine Sandoval.

But cell phone coverage is less reliable. Cell towers need electricity to operate, but there is no requirement to have backup electrical power at cell towers. Also, cell service relies on fragile glass fiber optic networks to route calls from the base stations to switching stations, then to customers. And because the systems are designed in a straight line, when one tower goes down, incoming calls reverse direction and bounce back.

Rural areas are especially vulnerable, with more limited networks, said RAND's Gonzales. And emergency officials are not told which towers are down or which carriers have lost service.

"The current technology gives us ubiquity, but not great resiliency," said Jamie Barnett, former chief of the Public Safety & Homeland Security Bureau of the Federal Communications Commission.

"Cellular networks allow us to have voice and data communications nearly everywhere now," he said. "But cell phones are really just little radios, and they are dependent on the viability of the cell tower and the viability of the 'backhaul' into the network."

In the eastern Paradise neighborhoods first hit by fire, about 56 percent of the 4,272 emergency alert calls failed due to what CodeRED manufacturer OnSolve calls "operator intercept" or "timed out," meaning that the phone has been disconnected, the number changed or no longer in service, or — most likely — the network didn't find sufficient signal strength or bandwidth to make the call work, due to cell tower failure.

By 1:30 a.m. next morning, evacuation orders were nearly futile for residents of the old logging town of Stirling City and other rural communities up on Paradise Ridge, north of Paradise. Records show that a stunning 98 percent of the phone calls made to that area to evacuate never reached a person.

"This has been a growing issue with emergency communications — fostered by transition to more and more people using cell phones and other systems that are reliant on fiber," said Sandoval.



December 18

# 'I want my mom back'

## Survivor recounts final moments with mother

By Bianca Quilantan » *Chico Enterprise-Record*

**PARADISE** » They fought about everything that morning.

They argued about the neighbor, showering, paying the phone bill, packing the safe, talking to a woman named Mary, the bumper-to-bumper traffic outside, the severity of the fire and God.

They argued over evacuating.

Christina Taft fled Paradise with tens of thousands of others who managed to escape the path of deadliest and most destructive fire in California's history. Her mother, Victoria Taft, stayed.

It was the last time they would see each other.

The Camp Fire roared to life on Nov. 8 around 6:30 a.m. near Pulga. By 8 a.m., the inferno had ripped across the Concow Valley and burned into Paradise, consuming the earth at the rate of a football field each second. Alice Blair, the only neighbor Christina and Victoria knew, knocked on their apartment door around 8:30 a.m. to warn them to get out. Blair's granddaughter had seen flames approaching while driving to work and called to urge her to evacuate.

There were no official calls, door knocks or evacuation alerts — just Blair's warning. Elliott and Copeland roads, where the duplex they lived in sat, were quiet. Christina said she saw police drive by, but they didn't say anything to anyone.

She hopped in the shower. Her mother stayed in her pajamas, picked up the phone to talk to a friend named Mary who lived in town and wasn't evacuating, and sat down to pay the AT&T bill.

Thirty minutes later, cars congested the streets, and smoke consumed the sky.

"It was pitch black — like night in the day," Christina remembered.

Her mother began to lightly pack then stopped. Christina told her to look at the traffic and darkness outside.

Victoria took a quick glance.

"Well, you took a shower," she replied facetiously.

Christina packed the car, cursed and talked about the gravity of the situation. Victoria didn't like that, so they fought.

"She just wanted me to be quiet," Christina said. "She was recoiling... In denial... Didn't think it was going to be that bad and said I needed to calm down."

Christina continued packing. Victoria still wanted to wait until noon — or until they heard word from an official.

She handed Christina a jacket, some squash soup, pillows, an umbrella and her phone book. Christina grabbed photos, tubs with documents in them, clothes and the safe.

Victoria looked for her birth certificate to give to Christina, but couldn't find it. Instead, she handed her an ID that expired nearly 10 years ago — before she partially lost her vision and had to stop driving.

Then the power went out.

Victoria lit candles and Christina blew them out. Her mother just lit more and stayed on the phone with Mary.

Feeling defeated, Christina left. She turned on her headlights and drove away around 10 a.m. She later learned the blaze had ravaged her home and claimed her mother's life sometime between 11 a.m. and noon.

### The drive

Much was said within those 90 minutes. Christina replayed the fight in her mind as she drove to Chico. She was angry and frustrated, yet the overwhelming feeling that she should've turned around to force her mother out of the apartment and into the car consumed her.

"I didn't give enough time, I was seriously packing up the car with all of this stuff — it was completely full and not enough of her stuff really," she said. "And then she didn't want me to take her laptop, like 'No don't touch that...Don't touch the suitcase!'"





KARL MONDON — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Christina Taft holds a photograph of her mother, Victoria Taft.



She blasted music in the car so she wouldn't think, but there was one thought she couldn't shake.

"I probably wouldn't see her again," she said as her voice broke. "... And that was it."

She drove from Copeland Road to Nunneley Road to Pearson Road to Skyway. Vehicles crawled in gridlock traffic. She couldn't turn the car around.

"I had a chance to save her and I just didn't do it," Christina said.

## The Tafts

They lived their whole lives together — just them two.

Christina, 25, is a business major at Chico State University and is expecting to graduate next fall. Her mother, though listed as Victoria Taft in reports of those who died in the Camp Fire, was known as Vicki by everyone.

Vicki, 66, was a stay-at-home mom. She was born Nov. 11, 1951 in Pennsylvania, but grew up in Los Angeles.

Her family was immersed in the entertainment industry. Vicki's mother did some modeling and her father was a cameraman. Her half-brother was a screenwriter.

She attended UCLA but never finished. She worked in real estate, and was actress and a stunt double until she got injured on the set of "Dick Tracy" around 1989.

Her IMDB page says she is known for her roles in the 1991 film "Checkered Flag" and the 1981 film "Malibu Hot Summer," which also featured Kevin Costner. But, Vicki often wouldn't share the details of her past life with Christina. She would simply say she didn't remember.

When they moved to Paradise in 2008 after spending 12 years in Arizona and three in Southern California, Vicki joined the Lions Club for a time and enjoyed making friends at the free church lunches in town.

Vicki liked to watch old sitcoms — mainly comedies and romances, anything lighthearted. She was the type of person who would draw smiley faces on the manager's rent envelopes.

She would research things online and could talk for hours on the phone. Often, she would leave notes around the house of things she had to do or even just thoughts. She wrote a book called "Tara" once, Christina remembered, and enjoyed writing cards.

"We may have our ups and downs and all arounds but deep in my heart I'll always love you and cherish you!" Vicki scrawled in a card to Christina for her 23rd birthday.

It now hurts to see her mother's handwriting on cards and the backs of photos she managed to save.

For Christina's 25th birthday — less than a month before the fire — Vicki ordered a Hawaiian pizza and stuck a candle in it because Christina didn't like cake.

It would've been Vicki's birthday three days after the fire started.

They were never apart for long periods of time. Christina tried to move out once for six months in the fall of 2013 — it didn't work for Vicki. She missed her daughter, so Christina moved back in.

They would sometimes fight, especially when Vicki would rearrange things in Christina's room or when Christina would suggest they move to Southern California, but she had never seen her mother recoil the way she did when they argued over evacuating.

Especially because it wasn't the first time they had to do so.

In 2008, the Humboldt Fire swept through southern Paradise and burned from Highway 32 across Skyway. It scorched 23,344 acres and destroyed 87 homes, but no

one died. It was the same year Christina and Victoria had moved to Paradise into a place on Skyway.

"The first time it was her getting me out," Christina said. "But it was 10 years ago and she could drive and could see and we had calls to leave."

There were no calls this time.

While her mother was social outside the house, they mainly kept to themselves. They didn't have any family in Paradise to call and warn them like their neighbor's granddaughter had.

"By not having many friends or family, we were more at risk of dying," Christina said. "It was all on us to find out what was going on."

## The search

The drive to Chico took nearly two hours. Once in the city limits, Christina pulled over to the side of the road and frantically started calling 9-1-1 to get help for her mother.

The Butte County Sheriff's Office logged her call at 1:26 p.m. It listed that her mother was on Copeland Road, blind, unable to drive and would need to be transported out.

Christina said she tried calling 9-1-1 for six hours.

"I told them she had disabilities and they were like, 'Why didn't she leave?'" She said. "She didn't know it was a mandatory evacuation and they were questioning me on why she didn't go."

Every time she would explain why her mother didn't go with her, Christina would become more frustrated. She began to text her friends to say that her mother was probably going to die.

She soon met up with a friend she had made at the university. With her mother's expired ID in hand, Christina went searching for Vicki at the evacuation shelters and put her on the missing list.

Around 6 p.m., on the way to the Oroville Nazarene Church shelter, they saw a California Highway Patrol officer on the side of the road. She pulled over to ask him for help. He called her evacuation request into the command post.

"I didn't realize you could only do it in person or they wouldn't care," she said. "I realized that too, but you know too late...Hours too late."

They checked the last shelter around 10 p.m. — nearly 12 hours after Christina had left Vicki behind. There, Christina said she could feel her mother's waves of energy around her.

She knew her mother was dead. Her friend told her to keep looking.

Christina received a call a few days later from Alhambra County officials to go in for a DNA swab — remains had been found on the property.

## The call

Thanksgiving morning was when Christina was told the remains found on the property matched her DNA. But officials wouldn't tell her if they were found inside or outside of their apartment.

There were two calls.

She was driving to Nevada City to spend Thanksgiving with a Paradise adopt-a-family when officials first called her to confirm the DNA match. The second call — though Christina doesn't fully remember it — was to confirm Vicki's time of death.

Officials told her they suspected the fire had hit Copeland Road between 11 a.m. and noon.



"I only had one to two hours to get her out," Christina said. "When I was calling it was pointless because it was too late anyway."

Vicki's name was released on the fatality list the Monday after. Christina still didn't know if her mother had died inside or outside of their apartment.

It was only in person that she saw the caution tape roping off a block of the space where her mother's body was found. It was where their living room once was, Christina said. Probably by the window.

"She probably couldn't get out," she said. "It was disgusting imagining her dying."

## The return

Vicki liked Paradise. After living there for 10 years, she didn't want to leave.

"She would've been fine with just me and her, her whole life and I was getting to be fine with that too and then this happened," Christina said.

She went up to Paradise twice to see the remains of their two-bedroom apartment and doesn't want to go back.

"There's nothing there," she said.

All that was left in the rubble of the apartment they had lived in for seven years were broken cups — including one that had "love" written on it. Christina had given it to Vicki as a gift for her birthday or Mother's Day.

There was also the caution tape.

"Twice is enough," she said.

## The life after

Christina's memory of Nov. 8 and her conversation with her mother a month later is sparse. But, she thinks about it constantly and runs through scenarios of what she could have done to get her mother to evacuate.

She could've disconnected the phone. She could've called 9-1-1. She could've said, "I love you, I don't want you to die — begging her."

The first two weeks she was angry with law enforcement officials for not doing enough. The second two weeks she began to blame herself.

"Eighty percent of me was saying no and then that 20 percent that wanted to just run away and think about myself won," Christina said. "Now it's just that 80 percent of me that's just dying inside every day."

Days following the fire, Christina watched and read reports of people fighting off the fire with hoses and surviving. She saw videos of people driving through raging flames and surviving. She said she didn't know she could do that.

"I thought if fire got in the street, you'd die right then, but apparently not with all these other people staying with fire in their yards," she said. "It's my fault that I didn't stay."

"Everyone says no, but I was responsible for her...They got their people out — their family out — and I just left."

Christina now spends most days getting to know her mother. She reached out to her estranged half-uncle in Arizona, Vicki's friends, and searched for movies she was in. Most recently, she watched "Malibu Hot Summer."

"I had asked her before and she said no she wasn't in it," Christina said as she cracked a half smile. "I watched it and it was her — just thinner and younger, you know?"

Christina is staying at University Village until May — thanks to a donation from a Chico State business program alumnus — but she will need to find a place to stay

**"I left my mom there and she died, that is the worst thing I could have ever done. I'm going to regret this my entire life."**

— Christina Taft

while she finishes her degree in the fall.

After graduation, she wants to move to Southern California or Arizona and maybe work to develop an emergency communication platform prototype to improve centralized communication during emergencies. She wants to name it after her mother.

Often, she is busy gathering resources or going to school. At first, her financial situation made her feel insecure, she said, but now she mostly feels guilt.

"I left my mom there and she died, that is the worst thing I could have ever done," Christina said. "I'm going to regret this my entire life."

## The memorial

They never talked about what Christina would do if her mother died.

"It was just her and me," she said. "She didn't have insurance or any of that stuff — we thought it was creepy. She didn't expect to die."

A memorial is scheduled for Jan. 12, 2019. East Lawn, a memorial and mortuary service in Sacramento, donated their cremation and memorial services. Cremation was always what Vicki's family had done and Christina doesn't want to leave her mother in Butte County when she leaves after graduation.

Many people have been helping her plan the services, but it is difficult for her to process the details.

"That was really hard for me to look at and finalize it," she said. "I want my mom back all the time constantly and I can't do anything — it's a nightmare."

Christina doesn't know who will come to the memorial — her half-uncle and some adopt-a-family friends in Sacramento might. Vicki's phone book is full of first-name-only entries, making it difficult to find her friends. Some aren't in the phone book, including Mary, the last person Vicki probably talked to on the phone that day.

The memorial in Sacramento will be a tribute to Vicki's life. Christina also wants to have one in Chico in the spring for her mother's friends in Paradise to attend. She wants her mother to be remembered through photos and stories — even though it won't bring her back.

"She'd rather be alive than sit in articles, she'd want to just be with me — alive," Christina said. "She had things to do, she had a life."

If the Camp Fire hadn't happened, Vicki Taft would have turned 67 that weekend. She would have seen her daughter graduate, get married and have grandchildren — she had already bought the baby clothes.

Christina's eyes welled with tears. She had forgotten about the baby clothes — but now they were gone too.

"She didn't deserve that ending," Christina said.



# What Now?

The Camp Fire in November devastated the town of Paradise and left an indelible mark on the entire region. Friends, neighbors, faith communities, support groups and total strangers banded together to provide assistance to those in need. It is in that spirit that builders in the region are joining to provide discounts, special financing and bonus upgrades to people in need of homes in the aftermath of the fire.



## 1 CASELMAN PROPERTIES

1,508 to 1,835 sq ft  
Up to 4 bedrooms, 2.5 baths  
From the \$380s  
7874 Messara Way, Sacramento  
916-759-7234



## 2 RIVERCHASE

Anthem United  
1,477 to 2,137 sq ft  
Up to 4 bedrooms and 4 baths  
From the mid \$300s  
3218 Crane Ln., West Sacramento  
916-462-6888



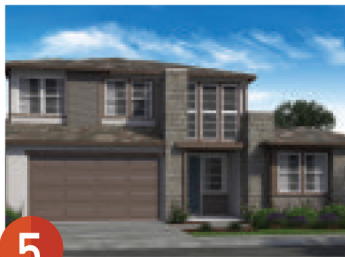
## 3 HERITAGE

AT DEL PASO NUEVO  
1,571 to 2,184 sq ft  
Up to 4 bedrooms and 3 baths  
From \$295,900  
640 Ford Rd., Sacramento  
916-223-0643



## 4 WILLOW

Anthem United  
2,535 to 3,172 sq ft  
Up to 4 bedrooms and 3 baths  
From the \$480s  
4432 Juneberry Dr., Sacramento  
916-462-6883



## 5 Woodside Homes

BETTER BY DESIGN  
The Ridge at Paradiso  
1,857 to 2,539 sq ft  
Up to 4 bedrooms, 3.5 baths  
Coming Soon!  
4393 Solaire Drive., Roseville  
916-597-4079



## 6 Woodside Homes

BETTER BY DESIGN  
The Hills at Paradiso  
1,729 to 2,228 sq ft  
Up to 4 bedrooms, 3 baths  
Coming Soon!  
4393 Solaire Dr., Roseville  
916-597-4079



## 7 Woodside Homes

BETTER BY DESIGN  
The Cottages at Spring Valley  
1,794 to 2,249 sq ft  
Up to 5 bedrooms, 3 baths  
From the \$430s  
1384 Larkspur Dr., Rocklin  
916-597-4079



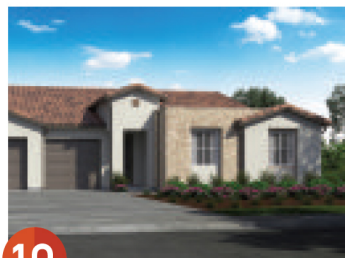
## 8 Woodside Homes

BETTER BY DESIGN  
The Villas at Spring Valley  
2,205 to 2,657 sq ft  
Up to 5 bedrooms, 3.5 baths  
From the \$470s  
1307 Larkspur Dr., Rocklin  
916-597-4079



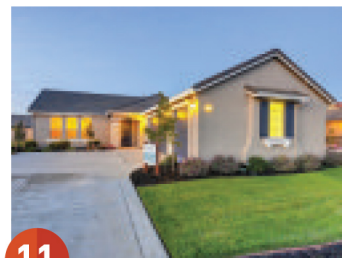
## 9 Woodside Homes

BETTER BY DESIGN  
Tramonte at Twelve Bridges  
2,808 to 4,004 sq ft  
Up to 5 bedrooms, 4.5 baths  
Coming Soon!  
2898 Anastasia Way, Lincoln  
916-597-4079



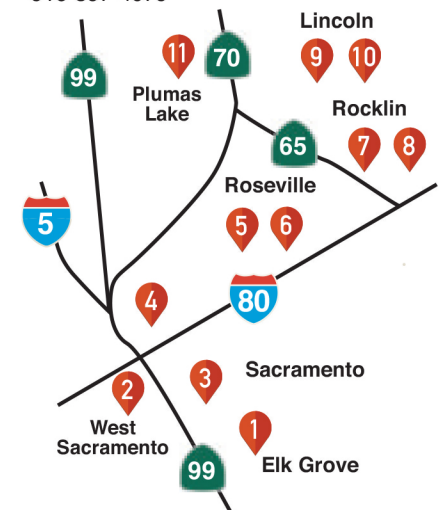
## 10 Woodside Homes

BETTER BY DESIGN  
Piamonte at Twelve Bridges  
1,729 to 2,228 sq ft (all single story!)  
Up to 4 bedrooms, 3 baths  
Coming Soon!  
2836 Romano Dr., Lincoln  
916-597-4079



## 11 CAPITAL VALLEY HOMES

Water's Edge  
2,104 to 3,280 sq ft  
Up to 5 bedrooms, 3.5 baths  
From the \$380s  
1323 Hidden Creek Way, Plumas Lake  
530-749-2771





# BUTTE STRONG

Last November, our community survived a disaster. As we watched the Camp Fire events unfold, many of our friends and neighbors stepped to up help, even as their own livelihoods, property and families were at risk. We'd like to thank all those who put our community first during those troubling times - all those with the sheriff's department, the fire department, EMTs, and all other first responders, along with our staff, who helped as people sought refuge at our hotel and KOA campground.

We are proud to be part of this strong community - **BUTTE STRONG!**



**FEATHER FALLS**  
CASINO & LODGE