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## Victims in Wildfire's Path Say, 'Why Me?'

By [RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD](#) and [SOLOMON MOORE](#)

SAN DIEGO, Oct. 23 — Through a dirty fog of ash and soot, a sport utility vehicle dashed up one street and then another, turning around again and again as it met police barricades, fire trucks and finally a wall of glowing billowing smoke.

Just beyond, on the other side of the hill where the smoke boiled up, sat the home of Ben and Marla Martin, who finally pulled over, defeated.

"Look, there's a helicopter, Ben," Ms. Martin said. "That's a good sign, right?"

Four fire trucks raced past and a police officer began closing this street off, too, in an area where the main fire had passed but a sinister arm reached out, reminding the Martins and firefighters that, three days in, the work of one of the biggest wildfires in state history was not quite done.

Off West Bernardo Drive, the capriciousness of the wind-driven blaze left some houses untouched in their glorious peach stucco amid green grass and well-tended flower beds. Next door, twisted, blackened heaps of that same dream lay smoldering, a garden sprinkler still clack, clack, clacking in vain.

Dr. Joe Fiore of Aguamiel Drive saw it all, this fickle, fiery tornado of smoke and tennis-ball-sized embers blasting through as the main fire passed. Propane tanks and dried palm fronds exploded, as one house went up in minutes while another escaped damage.

Dr. Fiore refused to leave the neighborhood off Interstate 15 that he and others never figured would be in danger. He stood on his roof for hours, hosing it down, nearly falling. His wife caught an ember in her eye and rushed to the hospital, while Dr. Fiore, an emergency room physician, battled on, unwilling to abandon the house he has lived in since 1986.

"It was very chaotic," Dr. Fiore said. "That fire came over the mountain in minutes, like nothing I could ever imagine. It was the wind, the wind was like a funnel blowing it right through here and the embers were everywhere. I had like 20 campfires going all around my house I had to put out."

Hundreds of thousands of people did heed orders to leave, many packing a football stadium near downtown and the Del Mar Fairgrounds on the coast. Normally busy Lake Arrowhead, a town where more than a 100 homes burned northeast of Los Angeles, was virtually abandoned to firefighters and emergency workers.

Evacuees grasped for any shred of news, any word on whether they had won the wildfire lottery or lost.

Among them were Kiat Tohsakul and John Becker, who live less than a quarter-mile apart in the hard-hit Rancho Bernardo section of northern San Diego.

Mr. Tohsakul, a television news program manager, rested assured on Monday that the fire was miles from his house after viewing scenes of the area shot by one of the station's cameramen. But on Tuesday afternoon, he sat in his driveway taking deep breaths at the sight of the roof caved in and his possessions charred.

“What did I do to deserve this?” he said, looking at several unscathed homes next to his. “It’s just unbelievable.”

Mr. Becker returned from out of town and talked his way past police barricades to arrive at his house, with only a touch of damage to a fence. “I have no idea why we got saved and others didn’t,” he said.

Local television overnight had fixed on the image of a large house, a 10,000-square-foot Mediterranean-style hilltop jewel, burning to the ground in Rancho Santa Fe, a wealthy area. It belonged to Bob Jaffe, a venture capitalist, who visited the wreck on Tuesday. His Porsche somehow survived.

“Yes, they managed to save my Porsche,” Mr. Jaffe said. “But I’d much rather they had saved my daughter’s stuffed animals.”

The police in the afternoon escorted some residents in northern San Diego to retrieve medicine and urgent belongings. Of course, that definition was flexible.

“Bongos? Why the heck are you bringing bongos! We don’t need bongos!” Gerald DaSilva shouted to his daughter as they raced in and out of their relatively undamaged house and loaded their pickup. “Look at all this stuff — CDs, magazines, come on, what is all this stuff? Get your phone chargers.”

Some residents fumed at what they considered a slow response by firefighters, who have struggled to rush from fire to fire across Southern California.

“Just now they are getting aircraft up there? Unbelievable,” said Rex Houser, who packed his disabled father and four Jack Russell terriers into his old Camaro and watched the fire march on a hillside nearby.

In the burn areas, and even places far from them, a visitor might at first assume the heavy air was the shroud of mist common along the coast. But the acrid smell detectable miles away would quickly disabuse the notion, if not the singed hillsides, closed roads and occasional odd scenes wrought by desperation.

In the otherwise deserted parking lot of North County Fair, an Escondido shopping mall, several horses stood about, hitched to trailers, eating feed and leaving their mark on the pavement. Their owners, who had fled the nearby canyons as the fire approached on Monday, said they had no other place to take them and were not sure the authorities or mall owner would let them stay.

A woman who gave only her first name, Jackie, out of concern over the propriety of this very emergency shelter, walked J. P., a 14-year-old quarter horse, in front of the Macy’s store.

“We have enough food for them for a couple of days, but after that I don’t know,” she said. “Hopefully we can get back by then.”

Any second thoughts about living in a fire zone?

“Not a one,” she replied. “There is no place like it.”

A friend, Richard Sanders, explained, saying, “You are there, in rural hills, and in a few minutes in urban over here, if you want it.” But with the charm of the rural hideaways or the subdivisions with names like Whispering Woods come frayed nerves when the seasonal Santa Ana winds blow.

Mr. Sanders and his wife, Jean, have lived near the Rancho Bernardo neighborhood for 19 years, relishing the smell of eucalyptus and pine and tending their dogs and horses. Then, they evacuated, and Mrs. Sanders stared open-mouthed at the fury of the fire as it descended on their neighborhood, sparing their house but devouring

others.

“The fire just flew over the hills at what must have been at least 30 miles per hour,” she said. “It just hopped the freeway with no problem, caught the grass over there and went straight up the hill and started catching houses on fire randomly.”

She shook her head.

“Part of me says get out of town,” she said. “And the other part says I could not stand to leave.”

*Will Carless contributed reporting from San Diego, and Regan Morris from Lake Arrowhead, Calif.*

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