

## Fire Story

By Max Beaulieu

Fires are all too common in Southern California, with dry wind, and long periods of less than humid weather. A single bolt of lightning, a mismanaged camping stove or a careless cigarette butt can destroy hundreds of acres and, in the process, thousands of lives.

Not even our pristine Santa Clarita Valley is safe, as many of the residents near the top of Camp Plenty Road found out. Luckily for them, and for us, as a city, we have some of the best firefighters in the world working and living in Santa Clarita and the surrounding area.

The McLinns had just returned from vacation when they saw the fire burning on the opposite hill. As they unloaded their suitcases, Jerry McLinn, a former forest service employee, predicted the fire would avoid his house due to its burning pattern, however the local palm trees had other plans. Upon catching fire the trees shot embers into the wind which began to carry over to the houses on his side of the hill.

As quickly as they could, Jerry and his wife, Shelli, grabbed their valuables and many of their daughter's toys, and packed them, along with their vacation suitcases, into the back of the car and drove off. Jerry stayed behind to grab the dog and move the motor home.

All seemed lost, until the valiant firefighters of the 149th engine company from Castaic arrived. Working with near perfect form, the fire company was able to contain the fire to the roof portion of the house, and in doing so saved much of the house from total destruction. The fire company did so well that the recorded footage of their amazing efforts is now part of a fire department training video.

After an initial stay with her parents, Shelli's insurance agent, Robb Nelson, made sure that they were well taken care of, getting them a rental house down the street and offering any other assistance he could. The Red Cross attempted to help the McLinn's, however they turned the help down so that it could go to families with greater needs.

This was not Shelli's first fire. Her parents' house had burned down a year and a day before their own home. As such, Shelli learned to keep everything important in a fire safe. It was actually this preparation that allowed Shelli to save many of her important documents and valuables.

The house, though saved from total destruction, was in need of work. The bedroom of five-year-old Delaney McLinn was still in decent condition. Jerry and Shelli worried that the fire might have traumatized their daughter, however she seemed relatively unphased. "Our house burned down but my room is okay!" she often said, as the family settled into a rental property down the street.

The McLinn's rebuilding process moved forward at a rather rapid pace. Luckily, the family knew a builder, Mike McGeorge, a specialist in rebuilding houses that have suffered fire damage. Mike was the same builder who had rebuilt Shelli's parent's house. Over three months, Mike, Jerry and Jerry's father worked long days and nights to get the house up and ready to live in.

Surprisingly, they got their work done and to code in just three months. Jerry remarked about how amazed he was with the City of Santa Clarita staff, who, though they made no exceptions to the SCV building codes, were prompt and informative in their responses to Jerry's questions.

There were a few snags. At one point it seemed that the McLinns might lose thousands of dollars due to a hiccup in the paperwork with the utility company. But luckily, Diane Green from the SCV Disaster Coalition straightened out the problem.

The McLinn family's support was so overwhelming, that Shelli had to even start turning donations of toys and clothes away, directing generous donors to other families. Nonetheless the family was glad to move back into their old house. The rental was not really "home" for them and the family dogs knew it. Often they would escape the new rental and go and sit in the ruins of the old house.

The McLinn family says they are more focused on what is important now. They are not done yet – Shelli is still plugging through her house making lists of the little things, like cosmetics, she took for granted when she had them. Jerry is slowly working his way through the garage, drawer by drawer documenting what he lost. Otherwise, life seems to be returning to normal for the family.

Unlike so many of us, they seem to realize that family and memories are the most important parts of life, that goods are replaceable.

Unfortunately, not all stories end so happily. John Lewis, his wife, Teresa, and their Dog, Giddyup, all escaped their house unscathed when flames reached the property. The Lewis family left the house and headed to Fresno, where they stayed for dinner with some friends there. John returned to the house around to find it, for the most part, in ruins.

Even more unnerving, after an initial examination, looters had taken advantage of a bad situation and stole a few petty items and some jewelry.

The real trouble, however, came from John's insurance company. John's agent has had him jumping through hoops in order to get his house fixed, fighting him every step of the way. John says the company in question, (he refrains from using the name), misquoted the amount owed to him, and then refused to cooperate when he asked for more.

Not all has ended badly, however. John's contractor got the house finished in six months. The organization CARE, (Community Assisted Recovery), helped and is helping John continue to deal with his insurance company. The Lewis family is back in its house – complete with fire resistant features. The future is looking up for the family even if they still have some rebuilding to do.

Outside on Camp Plenty Road, there are no palm trees anymore. They were quickly and quietly removed by the City a short time after the fire. Saplings of what will become beautiful trees sit, waiting to grow. The landscaping isn't done on many of the houses yet, but eventually lush, green lawns will grow in front, thanks to the ashes provided by the fire.