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Canyon fire re-ignites community action

By Chris Lavin



The Nov. 1 Canyon fire leveled this home. Photo Chris Lavin

In the aftermath of the three-alarm fire that suddenly broke out in Canyon last month, awakening residents - most of whom evacuated immediately to Pinehurst Road and beyond - the community is now coming together to hone battle plans for what may come.

"It's not a matter of whether it will happen again, it's a matter of when it will happen again," said Jamie Barret Riley, president of the Canyon Community Association, at a meeting Nov. 6. About 70 people attended the emotionally charged meeting. "Everyone should be prepared."

The fire on the night of Nov. 1 burned one house to the ground within minutes, and threatened nearby houses and the entire unincorporated area, then in dry conditions. Twenty-seven emergency vehicles from five departments responded to the 10 p.m. fire, including Moraga-Orinda Fire District, ConFire, CalFire, EBMUD, and Oakland Fire Department. The cause of the fire is "undetermined," said MOFD Battalion Chief Lucas Lambert, the commander at the scene, but started in the house.

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Its sole resident at the time, Kathleen Mantha, arrived home with her house already ablaze.

Dylan Huber, her next-door neighbor, was the first to respond. Shortly after Huber's slippered feet hit the ground, Casey Swanson and his son Orion were driving home from soccer tryouts when Orion told his dad to stop. Swanson jumped out of his car to help Huber while Orion ran up the road to knock on every door he could find.

An immediate evacuation became apparent, with neighbors checking on neighbors and residents staging cars on Ridgecrest Road for a possible trip down through Indian Valley and into Moraga, as egress through Pinehurst likely was blocked.

"The first thing I did was bang on two walls that were not yet on fire, yelling her (Mantha's) name," Huber said. When he determined no one was inside, he grabbed a shovel and other tools to try to extinguish the flames. "I looked up and it was suddenly, just, huge. I don't know how high it was. But you can't see the top of a ball of flames."

Neighbor George Schneller had spotted the large orange glow and immediately called 911. Soon, a handful of neighbors had joined the fight as others started to evacuate, with Schneller directing cars coming down near Canyon's post office onto the old railroad tracks as emergency vehicles had blocked the direct way out. Spot fires progressing up the hillside were being put out by Canyon residents when firefighters arrived.

Canyon, the unincorporated community near Moraga that is home to roughly 215 humans and thousands of redwood and highly flammable bay trees, has seen fires in the past. Those who evacuated the scene recalled helping to fight the Oakland Hills Fire in 1991, when it threatened to come down toward Orinda through Indian Valley.

"I've fought some," said longtime resident Ian Llewellyn, holding up four fingers.

At the community meeting following the fire, residents related their experiences and many said they were glad they had "go bags," or emergency bags by the door holding their most important valuables and papers. "Everybody should have one," said Karen Pickett, the association vice president.

The community also talked about what didn't go right. Why weren't the town's sirens set off? Why did the emergency phone tree fall apart? Protocol for the sirens has been changed: Now they mean go out and see what's going on. And many residents who had their phones turned off for sleeping that night decided to figure out how to get immediate neighbors added to their "emergency" call list.

"It was a good exercise for everyone, unfortunately," Chief Huber said. "Canyon is a great community. Everyone really came together that night."

Huber, the first resident responder to the fire, said his wife felt badly about taking their two children and leaving him behind.

"She did all the right things," he said, shaking his head. "I did all the stupid ones."

Chris Lavin is a resident of Canyon. She and her husband evacuated safely along with all other Canyon residents who either evacuated or sheltered in place.

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