

By Michael Carlston, M.D.

## A year after the fires, where are we? How did we get here? Where do we go from here?

Dwelling on the details of the challenges of the last year — fire, dislocation, FEMA fraud, insurance companies, builders — is largely a pointless activity when we are too busy working to pull our lives together, and the associated pain is still too easy to trigger.

I want to recount and reflect only so far as that process helps you and me go forward. The lessons so far are what we need to hold onto.

### This event binds us all, not just those of us who lost our homes.

**We are all in this together.** If you didn't lose your home, most likely you still felt that your life was threatened. That experience has a real and lasting impact. At a different time in a different setting, you would have been considered a victim. Please recognize that and take care of yourself as we all heal together.

I detest the "V" word and want nothing to do with it. Admittedly, I lost essentially everything I ever possessed in the fire. I have had very few nights of decent sleep since then. High winds still rattle me more than they shake the trees. However, I am a survivor. I am not a victim.

As we mark this one year milestone, my wife, Melanie, and I are now back in Sonoma County after initially having to find housing in Marin. Life is much better. No more eating from a plastic box of lettuce with our fingers in our car, side by side with other fire zombies in the Safeway parking lot.

Paper bags are no longer considered extravagantly oversized clothes closets.

Most of us have found homes to rent for the time being. We no longer have to test the generosity of our friends and the comfort of their spare bedrooms, or floors. Most of us are still nomads, but our homelessness was merely temporary.

We are still negotiating with our insurance companies for help in rebuilding our lives. That is an annoyance. However Melanie and I can now too easily imagine what it would have been like had we not had insurance at all though, so we're thankful.

### The fire isn't over though. Far from it.

Santa Rosa is no longer like a war zone with hugs, but there is a long way to go. Fire survivors are all different, but one unifying characteristic is that none of us is past the fire. Every day most of us have some fire-related administrative work. Those practicalities confront us over and over with the memory of the violent, abrupt change in the course of our lives.

A few are still dealing with their insurance companies demanding proof of the possessions they lost. Right after the fire, our insurance company representative told me I had to document everything, all the way down to how many nail clippers I had, how much they cost and, oh yeah, they needed receipts too.

Cataloging every item, mentally walking through your destroyed home, looking through every drawer and closet, seems a lot like demanding that a rape victim

recount every moment of their attack.

For eight months we were on the rebuild path. We spent hundreds of hours obtaining original house plans, developing new ones, working with suppliers of cabinets, flooring, windows, plumbing, etc. Insanity or serious illness seemed much closer at hand than a rebuilt home. We never received an estimate. A friend in our neighborhood told me he fired his contractor after he gave him an estimate of \$1,050 / sq. ft. to rebuild his home. For perspective, the first estimate our insurance company gave us per policy coverage was roughly \$230 / sq. ft.

With all of this plus trying to imagine life back in our wonderful home, albeit enduring a surrounding construction zone for years and with beloved neighbors all around, but others gone, with gorgeous views, but the views now reminding us of the path of the fire, we vacillated back and forth.

### Do we rebuild? Do we buy a different house?

The day Melanie and I changed our minds every hour, it was clear we had to just throw in the towel, choose the easier path, and find another house — which we finally did. We're now "home"...at last.

The iconic family mementos, the physical reminders of lives and experiences that prior generations had carried through their lives and carefully passed on, vanished in minutes (four minutes per a neighbor's video). Our descendants will never see or touch them.

My great-great grandmother Josephine's wedding silver, forged in 1831, gone. So is the tatting made with her own hands. Pictures, souvenirs from special times and places, a stone from a beach in Ireland, my wedding ring, ceramics my wife's ancestors brought with them from Poland and Lithuania, all incinerated. The list for us is as long as it is agonizing to contemplate.

However the greatest lessons of the past year are about people who both humbled and surprised us with their acts of caring. Strangers, acquaintances, friends, and family from all over the world reached out to help us. Their gifts of clothing, furniture, household items, and cash were amazing. Their affection and supportive spirits sustained us.

### Thank YOU for whatever you have done for survivors and for the community.

That "we" is why so few have left, and why I am optimistic that the community will more than recover in due course. I expect that—with time—we will make Santa Rosa, Sonoma County, and the North Bay even better than before.

**NOTE:** You can read the complete version of this article on [SonomaCountyGazette.com](http://SonomaCountyGazette.com). Immediately following the fires, Dr. Carlston was asked by the Washington Post to write an account of his ordeal which was subsequently syndicated, including to the Press Democrat.

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# Post-Fire, One Year Later

