

Time fails to diminish the power of the Angora Fire

Publisher's note: *Read the Lifestyle section for details about the Angora home tour.*

By Susan Wood

A slight breeze and blue sky marked a stark contrast in the Upper Truckee region this June, three years and two days after South Lake Tahoe's Angora Fire that in a wind-whipped inferno burned 254 homes, displaced hundreds and caused more than \$160 million in damage.

The 2010 AAUW Home Tour on Saturday brought out many people to tour seven homes rebuilt since the South Shore's tragic event. And although much healing has occurred, the moments of drama, helplessness and fear are charred into my memory forever.



Reporter Susan Wood three years after the Angora Fire.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Chatting with Norma Sprague, the co-owner of a Lake Tahoe Boulevard home on the tour, took me back.

"The flames seemed far away," she recalled saying to her husband, Warren. This was relatively true until minutes later a fire truck roared up to the curb and a firefighter yelled for the couple to get out. That was the scene on several streets branching off Lake Tahoe Boulevard, North Upper Truckee Road and Tahoe Mountain Road.

"We're lucky to be alive," she said with a steely look in her eye. I recognized the look as one from someone who really lived the fire.

As the first news reporter to the over 3,000-acre fire that fateful day, I would agree.

When the 2:14pm call came into the police scanner at the *Tahoe Daily Tribune*, I had almost wrapped up the reporting for the day. It was a tough day. I had discovered that morning one of my nephews had died. I had no plans other than to decompress and grieve.

Unbeknownst to me, I would mourn for my community that day.

There's a level of urgency dispatchers conveyed June 24, 2007, that told me to hop in my truck and head west.

I could not believe the plume of smoke would be so large and so close to the Y. I remembered thinking and calling my editor to say: "This is big. It's in the neighborhood." I believe the word "unprecedented" came across my lips.

I was grateful I had put on a full fire suit. I beat the police barricade at Sawmill Pond and drove the truck up Lake Tahoe Boulevard and, knowing the drill of covering fires, turned it around to park. The wind was raging, blowing embers so hard that a small one lodged between my safety goggles and right eye. I swatted at it but kept walking toward the orange-blackened haze. I'll never think of a crackling fire the same way. The low moan I recognized as the life of the fire.

With embers blowing from roof to roof, houses erupted into flames about 10 to 30 feet around me. People were crying, screaming and running for their lives in the opposite direction of my route. A motorcyclist turned his bike over long enough to stomp on a blaze. Residents were throwing belongings in their vehicles with just minutes to get out.

A wall of fire headed toward Mule Deer Circle with a vengeance and between occasional calls into the newsroom I wondered if the fire would climb up Tahoe Mountain Road and over Angora ridge to the Fallen Leaf Lake community.

I flagged down a U.S. Forest Service truck driven by Kit Bailey, the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit's fire management officer. He said at least 100 homes had gone up in flames.

I performed an about-face to get in front of the fire. On the way down at the base of Sawmill Pond a police barricade had been established and residents were pleading with sheriff's deputies and highway patrol officers to let them into the fire zone. One woman got in the face of one deputy because she wanted to retrieve her dog. He threatened to arrest her. Her look of desperation made me sympathetic. She looked like she was going to make a dash for it.

From there, I picked up news photographer Cathleen Allison and headed up Fallen Leaf Lake Road while fire officials had barked out the suggestion of evacuating the Sawmill Pond area. This was the first time I thought the town could be in danger. The second time came two days later when a back burn jumped Highway 89.

Allison and I were stopped by another barricade, so we parked down the road from the Tahoe Mountain Road intersection with Fallen Leaf Lake Road. We hiked up the ridge to a surreal state of emergency. A tactical tour de force of multi-agency fire units armed with shovels and bulldozers set up a barrier wall to keep the fire from coming up and over the ridge. Fire

burns faster up hill. Flames shooting 30 feet in the air had engulfed at least one home off Uplands Way. My heart sank.

Upon my return to the office, a few dozen emails from concerned homeowners and citizens greeted me because my name appeared on the fire updates. They wanted to know if their homes were still standing.

Solange Schwalbe, whose rebuilt home on Zuni Street was featured on the home tour, was out of town at the time of the fire. She had a captive audience as she recalled returning to find the fire burned so hot through her neighborhood it melted the blue tarp to her Jeep.

Her demeanor has changed drastically in the last three years – from those early days of attending those sobering community meetings, trying to pick up the pieces reduced to ash and plotting her next move.

Healing has occurred. But that doesn't mean we forget the pain that started near Seneca Pond, where an illegal campfire smoldered from the night before and erupted into the Angora Fire.

Even the squeal of a fire engine in summer on windy days puts me on alert these days.

"You're never healed completely. It's like losing a parent. You never quite get over it. You just learn to live with it," Schwalbe explained to the home tour group gathered to hear her story.

As one reporter who has covered the Gondola, Showers and Angora fires, I just hope we're humbled enough to learn from them.