

Angora Fire: 'Being away during the fire was a blessing'

Publisher's note: *This is the first of two stories about people who lived through the June 24, 2007, Angora Fire.*

By Susan Baker

The North Coast is one of the most beautiful places in California, probably the reason we vacation there every year right after school is out. June 2007 was no different. We packed our car with all our camping gear, camping clothes and our dog and set out for a week of abalone diving and rest. Many times the weather on the coast can be wet and miserable, but when we arrived at McKerricher State Park the sun was shining, the weather was warm and I was happy.

Two o'clock Sunday everything changed. I was sitting around the campsite reading, John was in the ocean abalone diving with our friends, and Lola (our dog) was napping in the quiet sun. My cell phone rang and I answered it. That phone call started a chain of phone calls that would end the day with our home one of the casualties of the Angora Fire. John and I have discussed many times since that day that being away during the fire was a blessing.



Susan Baker

When we returned to Tahoe a week later and began the process of rebuilding our lives and emotions, not experiencing the fire firsthand was kind of like reading about war compared to living it. We had none of the sensory triggers like the smell of smoke or the sound of the sirens, which I feel for many handcuffed them emotionally to the experience for years.

When John got out of the ocean, with his limit of abalone, and returned to the campsite I informed him I thought our house had been lost in a fire at home. It took him a minute or so to understand what I was saying. As I think back to that conversation, I see the ocean in the background, I hear the seagulls talking, and I smell the salty ocean air and the conversation is surreal. To process and wrap your head around losing everything material you own is difficult when the loss is right in front of you. I have decided it is impossible when it is not right in front of you. John's first reaction was how did I know and was I sure. At that point I was pretty positive our home was gone, but had not heard definitively, like from the authorities. So, John in his calm manner said let's not do anything rash (not sure what that meant) until we were sure.

We continued fielding calls from our kids and friends that afternoon, until the final call from our daughter told us our home was gone. Sara had talked to a friend who is a firefighter who happened to be the one assigned to our street. It was confirmed only two homes remained on our street and ours wasn't one. John and I sat, looked at each other, hugged and continued with our camping trip. Were we in denial? I don't know, possibly, it was very easy to ignore the reality being 400 miles away. I don't remember being sad or mad, I just remember thinking what now? The only decision we made was when we got home we would live with Sara and Brian, our daughter and her husband.

The next day we spoke to our kids and got a glimpse of the horror the town was going through. They had not slept much, watching the fire, worrying about their homes and their

friends, listening to the media and trying to make sense of the whole disaster. We had decided to stay put and not come home and finally convinced them to come to the coast. In retrospect, that was the best family decision we could have made. The rest of the week we had time to try to make sense of what had happened and plan for the immediate future. The only thing I knew was that I needed to be with family. We had lost everything, but still had each other and I needed to cling onto that, so that was the plan.

The rest of our vacation was perfect; beautiful weather, friends, lots of abalone, walks on the beach and time.



The Bakers' rebuilt house was on the 2010 home tour.

Photos/LTN

The ride home after the week was over we were anxious, not really sure what we were coming home to or how we would feel. It was good to have a tentative plan, but the fear of the unknown was real. We drove directly to our street and took in the devastation from North Upper Truckee to Tahoe Mountain. We pulled up to where our house had been and just sat in the car and looked. I was trying to remember where things had been, our deck, my strawberry garden, the big tree in the middle of the yard, the front door, my favorite spot to sit in the sun and read. Nothing was familiar. We got out of the car and walked around the lot, sifted through a few piles of ash,

talked about what was supposed to be where, began to mentally label what was gone.

A while later our kids showed up and they were more interested in sifting through the ash and actually found a few things ... a few broken ceramic crèche figures, a ruby ring John had given me one Mother's Day, and a few coins. We all left and went to Sara and Brian's.

Life has an interesting way of making amends. After one day at our daughter's house we realized it wasn't going to work. Our friends that we were camping with had offered their vacation home to us right after the fire, but we had said no because I was sure I needed to cling closely to my children. We decided to accept their gracious offer and eight days after the fire moved to our new home on Lake Tahoe for the next year and a half. As we enjoyed our year and a half living on the lake, I am convinced that helped wash away so much debris in our minds from the fire. We are now in our new home which we rebuilt on our lot and back in our neighborhood. Life is good.