

New life in Crescent City after California's deadliest inferno

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With 10 chickens caged atop their car - plus five dogs, a turtle and their 5-year-old son in the back - Annelise Huppert and Shaugn McEvoy made quite a sight driving down California's State Route 70, their rusted brakes screeching as flames chased them.

Now, after the deadliest and most-destructive fire in California history destroyed their home in Concow, they've relocated to Crescent City, bent on beginning a new life, though still haunted by their loss.

How is the area where the couple once lived doing now? The Nov. 8, 2018 Camp Fire left in ashes most of Paradise, Concow and some of Magalia, three towns nestled comfortably in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Nine months later, those towns are still in disarray.

That said, the resilient Paradise public school system held its first day of school Aug. 15. "After everything we have been through and overcome, I am so excited to be here," high school senior Shannon Moakley said in a Los Angeles Times story.

And more than 5,000 members of the community recently watched as the Paradise High School Bobcats played their first football game since the fire.

"I give them props for sticking it out and being there for the whole process," said McEvoy. "I couldn't do it, but it makes me happy to see that they're getting everything back online and having football games.

“I have a lot of pride in the people that did [stay], but I wasn’t trying to do that, to wake up and look at charred remains every day.”

Huppert and McEvoy had moved to Concow in 2016, where they rented a farm house perfect for their family of three plus several furry friends. In the ensuing two years there, they experienced several close-call fires, but none caused any serious concern... until Nov. 8.

Huppert awoke early that morning for the usual routine of feeding her horse, chickens, ducks, dogs and cats. Doing so, she saw fire trucks blasting up Highway 70 and checked the Concow Facebook page to find a post saying, “The fire is coming. Get ready.”

She woke McEvoy and they ran outside to see flames growing. He grabbed his tools and began frantically working on getting one of their cars started. Their best car had died the night before.

“I knew we were going to have to get a car running in order to get out of there. So, I’m out there trying to move the battery from one car to another,” McEvoy said.

Meantime, they watched as helicopters dropped water just blocks from their house, and picked up burn victims from their temporary respite at the hardware store across the street. The morning was a frantic mess of phone calls, fear, loud noises and rushed packing.

At 11:30 a.m., a law-enforcement officer drove through announcing it was time to go.

With only one car – their smallest – working, they packed what they could (mostly animals) into every corner of the vehicle. They said goodbye to their beloved horse, cats and pigs, and sped down the highway as the flames grew fast around them.

The fire burned for more than two weeks along 150,000 acres, destroying most of Paradise and Concow and killing at least 86 people ... the deadliest, most-destructive fire in California history.

Huppert took a phone call from a friend three days later with the bad news... their house, horse, cats and one of their pigs were gone. With no renter’s insurance, they had little to keep them going, except the generosity that can stem from communal loss.

Huppert’s employer, Feather Falls Casino, called to say it had a room for the family. They stayed there for three weeks before someone donated a trailer, which they lived in until April.

But they could park their trailer only so long on their temporary property.

They needed stability. McEvoy and Huppert wanted to move closer to Oregon but remain living in California. And they needed somewhere to house their farm animals.

So without jobs or much in the way of belongings, they made their way west to Crescent City, where they settled in a home with enough space for their chickens, ducks, dogs, a new horse, one surviving pig and the eight piglets she delivered after the fire.

McEvoy found a job at a local tattoo parlor. The Feather Falls Casino wrote a strongly supportive reference letter for Huppert to get a job at the Lucky 7 Casino in Smith River. And their son, Odin, began kindergarten at Mountain Elementary School - with another boy whose family had lost their home to the Camp Fire, too.

“So many people were affected,” said McEvoy. “It’s just like you couldn’t really feel sorry for yourself, because you see how many other people are all in the same boat.”

As for their neighbors’ generosity, “It kind of restored my faith in humanity, the way everyone came together to help each other. We wouldn’t have gotten through it, you know, without all the help that we got from the people all over the country donating their time and money.”

But the memories won’t go away anytime soon. Odin asked his parents the other day if they would get a new house once their home in Crescent City burns down.

McEvoy and Huppert hate to see the local fog rolling in; it reminds them of smoke.