

RISING FROM THE ASHES

by Connie Saverino

Where were you on Sunday morning October 26th at 3 a.m.? If you were like most of us you were fast asleep, unknowingly enjoying the calm before the firestorm. Lori (Mallory) Bellante, a fourteen-year veteran Community Living Facilitator at TMI however was scrambling to save the lives of her family members and their many pets. The phone rang around 3 a.m., a neighbor's warning that the fire was perilously close and moving fast. Lori looked out her window and was confronted by a wall of flames. There was just enough time to throw on some clothes and for her and her husband, Lonnie, to grab their two daughters, Melanie and Lindi and two of their three dogs and GO! They piled into Lonnie's truck and took off toward Wildcat Canyon Road. Their home, along with cabins that they rented to others, sat on rural acreage just outside of the Barona Indian Reservation. Once they reached the end of their driveway it was quickly evident that Wildcat Canyon was not going to be an option. Lonnie turned the 4-wheel drive toward a nearby pond with the hope of avoiding the fire. It wasn't long before the truck died. Carburetors need oxygen to run and this was in short supply, being consumed by the fire around them. They abandoned the truck only to pile back in a few minutes later to try again when it was clear that the fire was gaining ground. Miraculously the engine turned over and they were able to drive another several hundred feet and roll down a hill before it was clear that the heat was melting the tires. This time the engine caught on fire as they were exiting the truck. Getting out on the passenger side of the truck, Lori found herself dangerously close to flames. In the smoke and confus-

ion the girls started to run toward the fire and Lori and her husband had to get them and together the family huddled near a pond. Their frightened pets would not follow. They waited for almost three hours before a neighbor found them and took them to be helped. Lori's arms were covered with second-degree burns and she spent almost two weeks in the UCSD Burn Center.

A day or two after the fire Lonnie went back to the property to survey the ruins. Their home was gone. Their rentals were gone. Most tragically, four of their five tenants had not survived the fire. The Bellantes had three dogs; all had perished. Lonnie had assumed that their five cats had met the same fate, so you can imagine his awe when he saw two of them wandering among the ashes. The beautiful land, homesteaded by his family over 100 years before, was decimated. His property was uninsured because it was located in a non fire-protected area. The family had escaped with the clothes on their backs and even those were damaged or, in Lori's case, had to be cut off at the hospital.

Lori is out of the hospital, though not yet back to work. The girls have returned to their same school and the family is living with Lori's mom in Lakeside for the present. They hope to rebuild there one day. Lori's many hospital visitors, this writer included, could only marvel at her resilience and strong spirit. No doubt the enormity of the entire event has not fully sunk in yet. She and Lonnie have been overwhelmed by the generosity and concern of others, but often at a loss for how to respond when asked how people can help. We at TMI have convinced them that people will appreciate a concrete way to contribute. To that end we have

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asked the family to register at TARGET. This will allow us all the opportunity to get them something they really want, since we already know that they need everything! Anyone who chooses to help in this way can drop off their gift at TMI, where they will be stored until they get settled. Currently, Lori's mom has run out of room to keep items being donated.

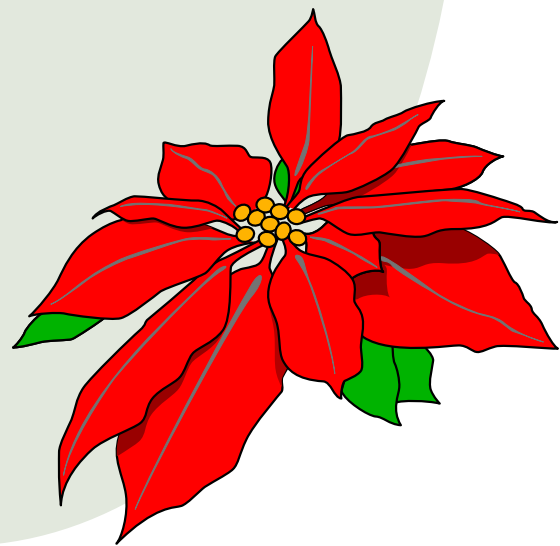
It seems that almost everyone has been touched or personally knows someone who has been impacted by this devastating event and yet people have been able to reach past their own pain or loss to help others. In addition to the stories highlighted in this edition of the newsletter, at least three people supported by TMI have family members whose homes burned or were damaged by the fires. We at TMI and all across San Diego County have learned a great deal about what it means to be community and what it means to be our "Brother's Keeper". On behalf of all of the TMI-connected victims we want to thank everyone who has expressed their concern and demonstrated their generosity!



Lori Bellante

HOW CAN YOU HELP???

- ◆ Go to Target Club Webb Gift Registry for Lori Bellante or Trista Stier. Gifts can be dropped off at TMI.
- ◆ For those who would rather make a tax-deductible donation to TMI, specifying its use for TMI fire victims, they can use the form enclosed in this newsletter along with the envelope provided.
- ◆ Monica Johnson, who was fully insured, requests that people concentrate on helping Lori or Trista!



THANK GOODNESS FOR SAFETY PLANS

by **Monica Johnson**

I thought it was a typical Sunday afternoon-that is until I received a phone call. My neighbors called to inform me that the police were out front and there was a raging fire that just jumped the freeway and we needed to evacuate our home NOW. As soon as I hung up the phone, I told my oldest son, Malcolm, just as we had practiced many times, to grab a trash bag, put some clothes in, grab a game system and 2 games, and place the items outside the front door. We only had five minutes to evacuate. The next step was to grab some clothes for my youngest son, Michael, a couple of toys, bedspreads, food, flashlights, the new puppy and food. Malcolm asked if he could take his school ring and his diploma as well. He grabbed the items and placed them outside the front door! We all vacated the home and decided to leave in one car so that we wouldn't get separated from one another.

The street was blocked so we got in line with everyone else to leave the neighborhood. It took us an hour and a half from our place in Harbison Canyon to go around Sycuan and through Dehesa to Alpine. Alpine was one big traffic jam! The other side of the freeway was black and the fire was coming toward the gas stations. Everyone was making u-turns and we were getting nowhere. The freeway was closed. Eventually the freeway reopened, as that was the only way out of the danger of the fire. We drove to Viejas while the roads were closed behind us, so we couldn't return. We continued driving to Golden Acorn Casino where everyone else from our neighborhood ended up. Once again, the freeway was closed. We then continued to drive east to the first hotels and they were

unfortunately all full. We started calling ahead and located a vacancy at a hotel in Calexico. Off to Calexico we went. Once there, we settled in our room and began making phone calls to our family. The fire came and went through the canyon in about 2 hours, destroying everything. That night and the next day, the only thing on TV was about the devastation north of San Diego. We heard nothing about our neighborhood!

On Monday evening my sister, who lives in North Carolina, contacted us to let us know that she had read on the Internet that 150 homes in Harbison Canyon had burned. Other family members, located in San Diego, still couldn't get any information and the freeway to Alpine was still closed. After dark that evening, our family members were able to drive to our property only to discover that our home was destroyed. They called us and confirmed our worse fear. We then had to inform our neighbors of the damage as they were with us in the hotel. We did not believe that when we left our home that the fire would ever get to our house. Thank goodness, we had just practiced our fire drill earlier in the week.

On Tuesday morning we picked up new boots, masks, water and headed back to our home. When we reached Descanso the freeway was full of fire trucks because Descanso was on fire. The freeway opened again and we continued on our way. We were not prepared for the devastation that we encountered as we got off the freeway. My family was waiting for us at our property. It was too much. There were still areas of our property which were burning. At that time we thought we could get our photos and papers out of the safe. Unfortunately,

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REBUILDING

by Colleen Thornton

Trista Stier has worked at TMI for almost a full year. She has been a great addition to Community Living Services providing Independent Living Support to nine people. She lives with her parents and her younger brother and, until the fires at the end of October, they shared a four bedroom rented house in Alpine. They had lived there for twelve years. Trista's father owned his own hauling business which was based there as well.

On the day of the fire the family was given a 45 minute evacuation warning. This gave them time to gather their dogs and a few personal belongings. Unfortunately they had to leave their three miniature horses behind. Imagine the mixed emotions when they returned to the property after the fire to find that their home, business and all of their belongings had been lost, but somehow miraculously their horses had been spared! They commuted to the property for several days to feed and care for them only to arrive one day to find that they were gone! Their first thought was to check with the animal rescue center which had been set up in their area, but the horses were not there. It has been several weeks and the horses have not been found. It is unthinkable that someone has stolen their horses, especially since it was clear that they belonged to a family that had lost everything else in the fire!

Like many people, the Stiers did not have renter's insurance. Unlike so many other victims, they lost not only the family home and all their belongings but they also lost Dad's business. However, in the process of sifting through the ashes and the rubble, Trista's mother did recover a treasured ring which had special significance to her.

For now the Stiers have been fortunate to have friends and family who have provided a place for them to stay. Their hope is that the owner of the property will rebuild and they will again be able to live there. They are truly starting from scratch and without insurance it will be very slow. In order to give people an idea of how they can help, TMI has encouraged Trista to register at Target. For more information on how you can help see page 3.



PROGRAM NEWS

Community Living

News & Congratulations

Sarah H. and Kathleen C. have new jobs. Way to go!

Barbara Williams has a new grand baby. Congrats!

Laverne B. is new to Supported Living, as well as Derek C. and Fred H. who are looking for roommates and places to live.

Teresa P. is moving into her first apartment by herself!! We wish her all the best.

Robert F. is moving into a new apartment in a new community. Hillcrest will never be the same!

Ricki G., Wilma L. and Daniel E. all received Section 8 vouchers and are all looking for new places to live!

Cynthia B. purchased a brand new large TV. Enjoy!

Guy L. went to a Charger's Game. Go Chargers!

The East County Support Group hosted their annual Thanksgiving dinner. There was a good turn out and great food!



Employment Solutions

News & Congratulations

Peter K., Paul P. and Anthony G. have started work at Ace Hardware in Hillcrest. Good Luck!

Target has hired Crystal S., Cathy C., and Derek T. Way to go!

Jose L. has started a new job at Longs Drug Store, Matthew N. has begun working at Toys R Us, Delia G. and Rudy A. are now working with Job Options, Trinity F. has a new job at Las Villas Del Norte, Target has hired Dorothea B., Eric C. has started working at Chili's Bar & Grill and Kathleen C. has a new job at Job Alliance US Customs. Congratulations to all of you!!

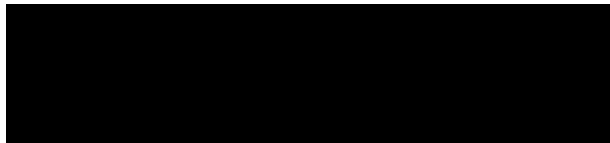
John and Martha Ocegueda have a new baby boy. Aidan Patrick Ocegueda was born October 30. Best Wishes!

Dino P. was recognized as Employee of the Quarter at Marshall's. Congrats!

SAFETY PLANS

Continued from page 4 - Safety

the safe contained only ash. That was devastating. We talked with our neighbors and drove to the Red Cross evacuation site at Santana High School. We got a quick bite to eat, a couple more blankets, and toothbrushes. We called our insurance agent and located a motel in El Cajon. We purchased groceries and then decided what the priorities were. We are glad to have insurance and plan to rebuild. We are lucky to have our family intact. We made it together through all of the devastation. We are very thankful for our evacuation plan and believe me when I say, "Evacuation Plans Can Save Your Life"!



New Staff

New To Administration:

Rachelle Gibson and Julie Hadley have joined Community Employment Solutions as Division Managers. They are a welcome addition to the TMI admin team.

Tiffany Bennett has been promoted to Assistant Coordinator in Community Living. She has been with TMI for three and a half years. Way to go Tiffany!

David Cieslak will stay on as a full-time Coordinator in Community Living. Good to have you back full time David!

New To Community Employment:

Sherry Conard, Timothy Cooper, Tammy Shanks Fargo, Daniel Garcia, Brian Hoolihan, Michael Jones, Shannon Noriega, Anthony Nuncio, David Rodriguez and Gina Silva.

New To Community Living:

Ala Banarji, Brenda Dixon, Kent Hartman, Kerry Houghton, Heather Larrabee, Yolanda Marrujo, Magda Millanes, Elaine Miller, Jorge Palacios, Victor Palacios, Laura Quintana and Lisa Schult.

Welcome to all of TMI's new staff!

Board of Directors:

Karen Mitrovich-Dotson has joined the Board. She is the mother of a young son with autism and has experience with event planning and fundraising. She is an energetic addition to the Board. Welcome Karen!

Also new to the Board as Staff Representatives are Maureen Burris and Lindsey Roberge. Maureen has been with TMI for nearly 14 years, previously with Community Living and is now with Community Employment. Lindsey has been with Community Living for a year and a half. The two bring experience and a fresh perspective to the Board. Welcome to the Board Maureen and Lindsey!

Goodbyes

Christy Stanley and Erica Gardner are no longer with TMI. We will miss them and wish them all the best with their future endeavors.

THANK YOU!

TMI Employment Solutions would like to thank the following employers recently invited to our corporate office who are supportive in networking with TMI for the employment of people with disabilities:

- Case Molenaar – JOBSUMMIT.com
- Robin Lackie – Viejas Casino
- Janet Loomis – UCSD
- Rosie Mendez – UCSD
- Deborah Moser – Elite Show Services
- Alfred Johnston - Citibank



OUR MISSION

It is the mission of TMI to support the value, right and responsibilities of all people with the support of their advocates, to make informed choices regarding how they live, work and express their membership in community. We accomplish this by providing personalized supports to people in their own homes, workplaces, schools, families and neighborhoods.

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