“WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED”

SIX DAYS LIVING THROUGH THE FIRE

Written Thursday Sept 10th through Saturday evening Sept 12

It is Thursday evening at midnight. I am lying on the bed in a rented retreat house 9 miles east of Carlton, Oregon thinking about going to sleep……… but not able stop my mind from slogging through the mud of four days of a war I never thought I would be in. It is the end of day four in the battle that unbelievably has changed my life…our life….your life.

I want to share these thoughts with all of you because I know there are more questions amongst the circle than answers. Knowing what has gone on perhaps somehow helps all of us make sense out of the senselessness of it all.

A scattered narrative at best, but it helps me keep my thoughts settled and organized. So, let’s start with how all this craziness started. There may be some quips/attempts at humor included……it is how we are surviving at this point.

Not only is this a fragile and tender emotional time for Nan and I, but also for our granddaughters and families who were very impacted by our loss. As children continuing into adulthood, their lives have been entwined with our home like ivy on a tree since they were born. Nan and I realized that our loss was also an extended loss for them. And we needed them and they needed us to begin healing. So a getaway house was rented where we could all be together to begin the healing process.

So, Let the games begin!

**Day 1 – Monday** about 4 PM, I received a call from one of my neighbors, Jim, who said he could see a fire up in a clear cut just on the east end of his property that seemed to be burning toward his property. He asked me if the department might respond an engine “just in case” he needed some assistance. I went down to the fire hall and found one of Jim’s neighbors and a fellow firefighter, Dave White, already there as he had already received a call from Jim.

I called the dispatch center requesting a tone out of our department.

We grabbed an engine and drove to Jim’s home located at the end of a short piece of country road nestled into the base of a hill. We backed the engine in near his house (because that is what you always do--back the engine in case you have to leave quickly) and began to develop our defensive plan.

Indeed there was a large fire probably 300 yards in length and about 200 yards wide burning on the hill. The wind was blowing about 10 miles an hour at the time and it appeared to Dave and I that there was only a minimal level of danger to Jim’s property. But given that information, Dave and I decided we would continue with minimal plans “just in case” (we are also trained to think what could happen in the next ten minutes--always).

We decided to wrap the house. That means you lay fire hose all around the structure. At various places in the hose line there are places that smaller hose and nozzles can be attached giving you the ability spray water from all sides of the house.

We had already notified dispatch as to our location and situation. And they were dispatching units to our scene. After about ten minutes, the embers started to fall, the wind picked up to 30-40 miles per hour and Jim’s fields began to start burning.

We are trained to assess a structure and its surroundings to make a decision as early as we can as to whether or not a structure can be saved. If the decision is “not savable” then you immediately leave.

As the wind continued to increase and the fire began to “run” through the fields I made the decision that it was not savable given the conditions we were facing. Dave and I told the owner who agreed and we left our hoses and immediately moved back down the road about a tenth of a mile and began to wrap Dave’s house as we thought we could make a stand for protection.

Let me pause here and say that Nancy and I had a discussion the day before regarding this scenario. We knew given the forecast from the weather Gurus that we had, in our canyon area, the makings of a perfect storm. I told her all we needed was a fire start. The predictions were temperatures around 99 that day and winds down the canyon in excess of 60 miles an hour. Our agreement was that if I called her on the phone and said the word “Go” she was to grab some things she had assembled and get the neighbor Carol and leave immediately.

While moving from the first house to the second house, I made the “GO” call to Nan.

Well I found myself in the middle of our perfect storm--literally and figuratively. We had declared a “BINGO” on our card. All the little squares with a flame inside were crossed off.

Dispatch had been busy tapping out several other units to arrive on site to give us a hand. A brush rig and an engine arrived to assist. The engine I directed down a side road to check on several other houses and get people out. The two guys on the brush rig jumped out and started to assist Dave and I with the wrap (Snoop Dog would have been proud) of Dave’s house.

An Aside – The forest service had been so concerned about the fire danger situation that they had been staging “Strike Teams” (a company of three brush rigs, two engines, and one water tender for each team) up on the tops of the surrounding ridge lines at various places in the canyon to assist with wildfire protection as necessary. Each of them has a strike team leader who is empowered to make critical decisions about where they go and what they do.

A strike team leader then arrived and asked me if I was in command of this sector. I remember looking over both shoulders and seeing no one else near me, simply said, “it appears I am”. The noise of the fire approaching our point was almost overpowering. He yelled at me and said (pointing to a small field immediately past Dave’s house) that if the fire got into that field we were to get out immediately--cut your losses and run!

Probably no more than two minutes later, I looked up and what to my eyes did appear???????? Well I can guarantee you it was not a “miniature sleigh with eight tiny reindeer” little Bobby!

We scrambled, left hoses and all, and left the site and drove back to the fire hall.

What had developed during this chaotic 45-minute time was a true fire storm in our area. Winds were incredibly high, fire was jumping ahead of itself and starting more fires all along our little portion of the canyon.

Back at the fire hall, a large series of resources were gathering including State Forest personnel, county sheriffs, state police, and additional fire apparatus. The fire had not yet moved into the little community of Gates but was moving toward it from a distance of about a mile and half away.

Representatives from the various agencies held a quick meeting in our training room. The state had already moved in a small overhead team to establish chain of command and make critical initial decisions as to community risk.

The decision to evacuate the community was made relatively quickly. No level #1, or #2, just immediately to #3.

Once the decision was made things took off in a new direction. The county Sheriff has the responsibility to serve evacuation notices. They went to work doing the best they could do given limited officers available. Additional fire resources that had come into the area to do protection work began leaving for an assigned staging area in Stayton 20 miles away.

Dan, our assistant chief, asked me to help him develop a quick action plan for our staff and apparatus. I asked him if we wanted to have our engines leave because they could conceivably offer protection for the fire hall if the fire moved accordingly to become a threat. His perfectly understandable and correct answer was the practical one of “well we may just have get everybody and the trucks out.”

So we sent our rescue and our big engine off with a crew of five our staff, along with everyone else in the town to the apparatus staging area. He and I agreed we would be the last ones to leave and complete several tasks, including locking doors, starting the outside sprinkler system around the building (flowers, shrubs and lawn) etc.

The fire had now arrived on the east end of the City and on the South side. Embers were blowing in. The smoke became unbelievably thick and toxic. The community of Mill City to the west was already having several structural fires develop along the county road that runs between the two communities on the south side of the river. Everyone was gone from the area and Dan and I were standing on the truck apron sort of doing some last minute thinking when the Chief of Mill City requested an engine and tender (we still had at the fire hall that we were going to leave with) to assist his crew trying to stop the fire try to move through a small cluster of houses right on the border line between the two districts. Dan and I without hesitation grabbed our two apparatus and went to help.

So now our fire hall was standing alone. The community of people, other than some still trying to grab a few last minute items, moving stock in trailers, etc. was nearly gone.

I could tell by the glow of red against the black sky to the east of town there were several homes burning as we left our station to cross the bridge and drive to help our brothers and sisters from Mill City to provide support for their growing crisis.

On the way we saw several homes fully involved in our own district (no way to handle those with two trucks and two people). Fires along the road, in the fields, in the stands of trees. It was at this point I realized this might be a really, really, really long night.

So Dan and I worked the next hour shuttling water for the crews from Mill City as they fought valiantly to save an incredibly beautiful huge log home. The two of us also fought fire encroaching on three residences in their district and stopped them from burning. Several of their trucks and firefighters were working along the edge of our district saving several structures that were easy to get to.

Funny how in these kind of crises, the old political boundaries and perceptions simply burn away with the fires.

While filling my engine with more water several times back near the bridge, I could see fires starting in several homes in our City. Knowing you are at the mercy of nature is a humbling and scary feeing to say the least.

I had been working when I returned with Dan wetting down some brush behind a residence in Mill City when a member of our fire district pulled up and said “I just got a call from a friend who said the fire has jumped across the river and is moving up the hill right behind the fire hall. Don’t know if you can save it.” We gave him some hose off our truck to wrap his Dad’s house and he took off.

That was a major, major “hit home” moment for both Dan and I. Here we were helping our neighbors and we had to make a decision. There were only the two of us with a 1000 gallon engine and a 3000 tender. We simply stood and looked at each other for a minute and Dan said “well, what do you think?”

My response was more of a babble I suppose but the thoughts in my mind were 1) we have to try, we have to give it our best shot and if we can’t make it work, we get out of Dodge!, and 2) if we lose the fire hall, what can there be left to help our community down the road, to serve people in their times of crises. So I said “let’s go”. Dan got this big smile on his face and said “well you know we are already in really big trouble (meaning we didn’t leave when they ordered us to)” and I knew by the look on his face what he had decided. So I said “what are they going to do--fire us”?

When we got to the hall we knew we were in for a fight. But we also knew we had a safe exit if we needed it. Our size up told us the fire was encroaching up a bank to the back wall of the truck bays. It was also pushing and moving through the grass, shrubs, brush and trees toward another portion of the building which is used as the community/administrative center.

I grabbed 1 ¾” attack line from my truck and pulled it down the east end of the truck bays about 200 feet. Dan grabbed hose rolls from inside the building and extended a 2 ½” line down the breeze way between the two buildings. He connected it to the hydrant near the building; my line I charged with the truck pump. About this time a young man who we knew, had been up to get a couple things from his parents’ house stopped by as he was leaving and asked if we needed some help. Dan put him on the big line nozzle and for the next 90 minutes he fought fire with us. Dan engineered both trucks. I worked on the east/back side.

The fire was coming up over the bank, and had caught a small storage building on fire at the rear area of the truck bay building about eight feet from the back wall, and it was full involved. It was also burning across a small area of grass and shrubs at the rear of the building. There were so many embers we had difficulty seeing the back of the building and the roof.

Working diligently and with, let me tell you, one of the most intense feelings of the need to achieve success, our outcome could not have been better.

We saved the facility-- with no damage--still standing--still fully functional. Already continuing to serve as an information center for the public, meeting room for deputies etc., sleeping quarters for two of our firefighters who lost their homes (Dave my buddy was one of them). Since Wednesday morning, six firefighters of the Gates Volunteer Fire Department have made the station their home 24/7 working every day to respond to additional calls for service.

After Dan and I, along with our helper, had got the initial thrust of fire settled down, we stopped to re-group. We thanked the young man (Nathan) for assisting us, gave him a change of clothes (soaking wet he was), and told him he could leave. He stayed with us for the next twelve hours, helping Dan and I when morning arrived with responses to houses burning, spot fires, whatever we needed. Courage and volunteer service at its highest level. And he didn’t even live in our community. He had nothing at stake, he suffered no loss. But he made his choice to step up.

**Tuesday – 7:30 AM and through the day.**

Couldn’t even tell if it was day or night. Sky completely black, ash falling like a volcanic eruption. Even into the truck cabs when no windows were open, just drifting in when you opened a door.

We got dry firefighting gear on, began to put our facility back together inside, setting up a couple of tables with chairs as a place for people to rest--kind of odd because the only people to do so were Dan and I and our helper! Fires burning all across out little community. Our response capability had to be constantly evaluated because what we could do was incredibly limited--for our own safety.

Observations –

Nothing like watching your community start through the process of destruction--sitting and watching with resources too limited to allow you do a damn thing about it. We worked all through the day doing what we could. Had a few great saves, but more losses than saves.

Wondering about citizens who might not have made it out. Were there survivors, were there people trapped, were we facing body recovery at some level?

I am tired – no sleep since Monday morning before this all started. Remember self that you need to work hard to keep your sense functioning at a high level because you are in a position of maybe making critical decisions.

Finding a way to quiet myself to suck mental and emotional stillness out of a smoke-filled fire truck bay while the big generator for the facility is still running at a kind of loud level.

Trying to think of a way to get our other two trucks and four people released from the staging area in Stayton and get them back to help us serve the community.

Dan driving around doing assessments. Arrives back at the hall and walks toward me with an expression on his face that says he knows something I don’t but will know soon. He had gone up to our house. He said “your house is gone. Your shops are Ok for the moment.” Hearing the words, letting them move into a level of consciousness you don’t know if you are ready to deal with. But you do. Wondering in the next 24 hrs. How many others will be standing with you in that immense feeling of loss that washes through you?

Thoughts shifting quickly of how am I going to tell Nan? So I knew I needed to see the end results for myself, I told Dan I would be back in thirty minutes that I was going up to my house. The road was filled with downed power lines, fallen trees and brush, spot fires all over along the road, very slow drive because it was still totally dark and so smoky the visibility was about twenty feet in front of the car. I checked our neighbor Carol’s house first because no one knew whether it was still there--it was.

I called her from the driveway to share that good news with her (she was with a friend in Salem). Then I drove across to our house.

First was a sight that moved me to tears, not because of destruction, but because of joy. My studio, shops, new garage with sports car were not damaged in any way. That meant that my business operations were secure. I had several large windows in various stages of restoration from two churches in my studio and I had wondered whether or not they were ok. Then I drove further up the hill.

It was like sitting in your car at a drive-in theater watching a science fiction movie unfold. Trees blackened, fence sagging in, ground completely black, no standing building. Only the faded silhouette at the end of a debris pile of a standing chimney and fireplace. Incredibly eerie--other worldly--not that hard to grasp because in the back of my mind I think. I had thought about it enough ahead of seeing it that it was exactly what I expected to see. Heavy smoke, total silence, no air moving—just--nothing!

Stopped in my studio and found an extra charging cord.

Back to the hall shifting my mind as I went to begin moving forward to next steps.

Jacob, one of our younger firefighters got in touch with me on the radio and ask me whether or not I wanted him to come to Gates and help. He had finished his shift working for an ambulance service and was not encumbered at the staging area. I said absolutely. He is a kid with a great sense of humor, a belief that he can do anything, and when he arrived at the hall, it gave us a real lift in resources availability. We were now three, not two. He arrived around 10:30 PM. Dan had gone home to rest through the night. I had stayed solo at the hall, so having Jacob arrive helped my spirits a lot.

We talked a lot through the early morning hours as houses continued to burn throughout the town. Nothing we could do but be a bit frustrated; but we also sat in a state of knowing that given the right situation, we could actually do a lot. We drove around some looking at the fires, did what we could with some specific attacks on spot fires. He is a fine young man--with so much to learn about life and all its twists and turns. He will end up doing well.

**Wednesday morning 7:30 AM –**

Connected by phone with Nan who was staying at a motel in Salem with all of the kids. At about 9:00 the rest of our crew and equipment arrived back from staging. Everyone was glad that we were back together as a team in the battle. As I would have expected, they went immediately to work, triaging properties, responding to spot fires, etc.

At that point I realized I could step out of the game. Told Dan I was going to now leave and start working on my own situation. He understood my plan. One quick trip back to the house site. Heavy smoke, much like fog--standing on the front porch, total silence--looking straight up was an incredible sight--bare trees--straight vertical black lines silhouetted against a deep yellow sky. A moment of strange tranquility and beauty--peace!

I headed to Salem to connect with Nan and family.

Let’s now shift to something more personal.

Nan and I have shared volumes about this most challenging situation we find ourselves in. Our thankfuls and our sorrows, successes and--well there are no failures! We refuse to view any of this experience in those terms.

No one can build a roller coaster that can create feelings like we are going through. However--and this is a big one--our strength to stay level is coming from our family and friends.

It is an unbelievable feeling!

Nan and I are so deeply touched by the words and thoughts of every one of you who have touched in. We never had imagined that losing our home would trigger a response of this magnitude. We realized along the course of the next couple of days that the experiences we have all shared in the past have touched everyone deeply. Losing the house was a loss for all of you too. Times together have a value perhaps we all tend to minimize by the challenges of life. But attached to those memories of time together in a significant way are, on some occasions, the places where we are in when we share.

Such apparently was our home, known to most you as Passages. One person described it as being like walking into a giant hug! Nan and I like to remember it that way too!

So we recognize the pain you are feeling too. Your experiences in our home means that our home is a part of you also. This page of thoughts is one way we can provide information to you that-- maybe in some ways--helps.

All of you have made offers--asked questions about helping--what can you do for us. The reality is--we are good. We are blessed to have the means to take care of ourselves through this crisis. We recognize the importance of realizing that perhaps others don’t--we wish we could do something for them.

What you can do for us is simply keep us in your thoughts and send us your blessings. It is your energies and your caring that lifts us up.

Indeed the most blessed gift you can give!

We will be fine. We are leaving this house tomorrow, the kids will all be going to stay with their other family members as none can return to their homes this point.

Have started the process of discovery with the insurance company.

We are purposely not making decisions about re-building questions, etc. as we do not have the library of information we need to make that decision. The irony of it all is that I don’t even know the questions to ask to gather information about issues that I don’t even know yet exist!

Our community of Gates? Well it is roughly 80 % to 90% destroyed--flat on the ground. For those of you who might know the area, the Sierra Restaurant is standing, the little coffee shop is standing. City hall is standing, and the Fire Hall is standing. There are some homes left, many because the firemen simply refused to give in. But overall it is total devastation. The tomorrows for this little community are simply unknown.

The surrounding little area has less damage overall but still significant loss of homes and buildings.

**Family (I am writing this part on Friday evening)**

They are fine and they have started healing. They needed us as we needed them and our choice to scurry them away with us couldn’t have been better. It reminds us of what really matters through all of this: love that flows through, smiles, tears, the laughter of little ones who play, the tender moments of hugs and holdings. Their gift to us was their support, ours to them was to be sure we kept the granddaughters level, positive, and hopeful. Part of our security is knowing they will do anything for us in our crisis at a moment’s notice.

Nan and I went back to the house yesterday afternoon. It was a bit emotional, but re-enforced our insistence to each other that we team and move forward. We are fully aware of the fact that our loss is simply one of so many. Others are suffering more than us. We have means--so many do not, and will not.

**Saturday evening 8:00 PM**

Today we left the retreat house and went our separate ways. Kids to their homes in Stayton, Nan and I headed back to Gates to take a couple things to the Fire Hall. Went to the house site to get some needed things out of the studio office, checked on the neighbor’s house, and then came back to Salem to check into our hotel.

Leaving the retreat house was tough. We had spent Friday evening for about two and a half hours sitting together with the kids around a table where we all told stories and memories about the house and all of our feelings about being there. Incredible emotional time, but so strong a base was built for healing. Some tears--a truck load of laughter!

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Our home was called, as many of you will remember, “Passages”. Through the years it has played out so very many times that the messages within the walls remind us that we are passing through the challenges and changes of life every day. Such a time is now facing us.

I know myself and I know Nan. There is no direction but forward, no direction but holding each other, no direction but trying to lift others in their times of need.

If you have read all of this you are a word warrior! Hopefully this will help you all in some small way.

Put your worries to bed about us. Get some sleep. Believe me I know the value of that this week!

Feel free to call either of us anytime. Your voices will be a soothing balm. We can talk of Cabbages--and Kings--and Sailing Ships-- and Sealing Wax. Of things gone by --and things to come.

Life will go on for all of us. We chose long ago to welcome “passages” as a part of our life. And we are going to do the best we can to move forward, always forward.

Blessings to each of you. Know you are loved deeply.

Gary (503-930-9011) and Nancy (503-510-4141]