

Camp Fire Memories

Category: Traumatized

written by Aldebra Schroll | December 8, 2023

Five years have passed since the morning of November 8, 2018. As I headed out that day, an unusual cloud formation was developing in the eastern sky, over the foothills of the Sierra Nevada range. My colleagues and I would soon learn a wildfire had been sparked and was engulfing the neighboring communities of Concow and Paradise, California. It would become the state's most destructive and deadly wildfire, killing eighty-five residents, many of whom died in their cars while attempting to flee.

As the palliative care medical director at the regional hospital, I and my team cared for many of the survivors who were urgently evacuated from a hospital situated on the canyon's edge, directly in the path of the fire. People fled in such a hurry that critical medications and lifesaving equipment were left behind. We saw patients with multiple complications, acute strokes, respiratory failure, and cardiac exacerbations; some did not survive their hospitalization. We worked with families grieving the loss not only of loved ones but also of their homes, pets, and communities. There was little time to process the intense suffering we were witnessing.

For days, we lived under a thick cloud of smoke, which blocked the sun and created an endless night. My sister and her husband moved in with us, as we awaited news of their home, ultimately learning it had not burned. It would be months, however, before anyone could return to their homes. The foothill communities, once a refuge, infused with the scent of pine trees, were devastated and unrecognizable. Chimneys stood surrounded by ash, parking lots were littered with burned-out cars and trucks. Trees stood blackened and charred, a dead landscape.

Today, I continue to work with the survivors as a physician with a local hospice agency. For those coming to the end of their lives, the fire looms large. Many of our families remain in unstable housing, living in RVs and trailers. Some are still awaiting financial settlements. Patients continue to process the impact of the fire, often retelling their escapes that morning. Their homes lack the usual personal artifacts—remembrances of a lifetime. They often have a sterile feel, with no personal photos on the walls, no passed-along mementos or heirlooms to recall the departed.

Windy days, the smell of smoke, the sight of darkened clouds all serve as triggers for the community. Many of us periodically relive the trauma of the fire. I often describe palliative care as "walking into the worst day of someone's life." This was especially true during the Camp Fire.

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