



The Wildfire Recovery Project: Empowering Communities With Creativity

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

Though a year has passed, memories of the firestorm of October 2003 are not far from the minds of over 3,000 San Diego families who lost their homes. One year has not been enough time to rebuild, and many homes and hearts are still in a fragile state.

The Wildfire Recovery Project, a project of the county of San Diego, is funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It has assisted approximately 2,000 families by connecting them with resources and providing creative outlets for communities.

They Needed to Tell Their Story

Darcy (the project allows staff members to be identified by first names only) was involved with the project from the beginning. “Right after the fires we went to all the areas, knocking on trailer doors, leaving brochures and trying to get to the people who were in need of immediate help. It was very crisis-oriented at that time,” Darcy says.

In the weeks immediately following the disaster, most people who lost their homes were not yet ready to do art. “They really just had to tell their story,” Darcy says. “Our program has shifted from listening and supporting to moving on and doing more hands-on activities.”

Fire Flags

Darcy developed a project called Fire Flags: “We gave the kids little 4- by 6-inch pieces of canvas and fabric pens. The kids drew whatever they wanted. One quarter of the kids were drawing burning houses at first, and by July we saw more mountains and trees,” Darcy says.

Mosaics

Darcy is currently assisting in doing community mosaic groups, inspired by artist Annie Norton.

Norton’s original project, “From Ashes to Art: Mosaic Memories for San Diego County Fire Victims” grew out of a request to help one person who had lost her home. “When I received the initial request, I thought, ‘If I can offer it to one, why can’t I offer it to all?’” says Norton.

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From April to July, Norton donated her time to meet with fire survivors three mornings a week helping them learn to create mosaics from the wreckage of their homes.

“It was a respite from the daily horrors they had to face, not only of reliving the fire, but also of the rebuilding,” Norton says.

“It was a time to relax, though they did have to deal with looking at pieces of memories. We recaptured memories that otherwise would have been lost. And Darcy took the ball and ran with it, which was wonderful.”

Karen began working with the Wildfire Recovery Project last January as the administrative assistant, and started as a counselor in September. “It was Norton’s idea that you could make something for your new home out of fragments from your old home. Darcy had started some groups in the community, so I joined her,” Karen says.

Some people thought they had nothing left to work with. But Karen explained that after they saw what other people were doing, they went back to their lots and usually found something to use for a mosaic.

“Even people who think they aren’t artistic can do this,” she says. “People have commented that it’s the first thing they’ve been able to start and finish because they have so many overwhelming tasks. It’s rewarding; you’re cleaning pieces and someone will say, ‘Oh, this is something I got on my honeymoon 30 years ago.’”

“One man had a collection of Hummels, and they had all been destroyed. There were at least a hundred of them. So he did a mosaic, and there’d be a little piece of a face or a hand or a bit of a skirt.”

People would bring in pieces of china, part of a teapot, a glob of metal had been part of their car, bits of toys and Christmas ornaments, melted money, Pyrex. “Things they never cared much about now have a lot of meaning,” Karen says.

Karen remembers when one woman from a mosaic group said, “I cried so much when I left that I thought, ‘Why would I come back? It’s so painful.’ But I thought about it and I was sad and I needed to cry. And then I couldn’t wait to come back.”

“They share their experiences while they’re doing it,” Karen says. “It’s a two- or three-step process and you can’t get it all done in one day. So they come back several times. One woman came in very excited; she’d been to the Goodwill and had found the same type of dish that another woman was working with. She was so glad to give it to her so she would have a whole dish.”

Girl Scout Troop 6726 of Harbison Canyon

Darcy and Karen also worked with Girl Scout Troop 6726, making mosaics to put in a Harbison Canyon school garden the scouts helped design. The girls created stepping stones with supplies donated by the San Diego Foundation.

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Painted Tiles

Darcy and Karen also were instrumental in launching a multi-school painted-tile project to commemorate the anniversary of the fires. The tiles will decorate designated walls in participating schools and in Crest they will go in the new community center.

“Kids and community members paint the tiles and then we fire them,” Karen says. “We’re doing this project in the schools in Ramona, Harbison Canyon and the East County Academy of Learning. Some people have chosen to paint flowers or trees for new life. Harbison Canyon’s theme is ‘Out of the ashes we show our true colors.’” Harbison Canyon was among the most severely impacted communities; 75 per cent of the homes there were lost.

Birdhouses

Jaron, a counselor, has been facilitating groups at high schools for the past year. Jaron says, “The high school culture is about fitting in; they have to be cool. It can be hard for them to talk about emotions, especially boys.”

“So I was going slowly, trying all these therapeutic interventions. They’d participate but they didn’t really want to be there. So I finally said, ‘What do you guys want to do?’ Someone said, ‘I like to build things.’ So we decided to build bird houses.”

For the teens, making things was preferable to the emotional intensity of being in a sharing circle. “You’re making something and talking about what’s going on in your life. It’s less threatening in a lot of ways. They all made their own artistic statements about what a birdhouse could be, and painted them in their own ways. One theme was rebuilding their house. The birdhouse is something they can have at their trailer and eventually bring to their new home,” Jaron says.

Jaron says that a lot of the students’ fathers are construction workers. Many teens are going to school and then coming home to hammer nails and redo the foundation of their own house.

Remembering Lost Pets

Jennifer, a counselor, works with elementary school kids in Crest, many of whom lost pets in the fires. “We asked them about the happy times they remember with their pet. Whenever they feel lost or sad, they can bring those happy thoughts back and think about the time they did have together, and it’s soothing.”

Puppet Shows

“We do a puppet show and incorporate fire safety elements and what to do in an emergency. We also play games and incorporate talking about feelings and how it’s okay to have feelings. Some things come out that are associated with the fire. I think it’s very de-stressing. We see the same kids every week so we have a good rapport with them,” Jennifer says.

Ruth, a counselor, started with the project in April. The puppets, she says, create a safe place. “With the puppets, it’s not you talking, but it is you talking. There’s process in getting silly. For the most part, especially in front of their peers, kids don’t want to go to too painful a place. So it’s all about play but there’s still a healing process in it.”

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Material Belongings

Jennifer reflects on how much she has learned from working with the children who survived the fires. “I have a whole new perspective on material belongings in my life. As I came home from work, I started sorting through things and thinking ‘I could give this to someone who would be using it right now. Today.’ And it wouldn’t just be sitting in my closet and making me feel secure that I have it.”

Karen marvels at the resilience of the fire survivors. “After everything they’ve been through, they’re standing there, somehow laughing about it, talking to each other. Everybody’s at a different stage, but everyone wants to help someone else.”

Empowering Communities

I ask Ruth how she feels about the Wildfire Recovery Project’s scheduled end in December. She says, “It’s very sad. There are very few other resources. We’re developing a curriculum to train community members as peer crisis counselors, so volunteers can respond to any crisis, whether it’s for the community or an individual. So there is some self-empowerment there.”

San Diego Fire Survivors Are Still in Need

Ruth explains that many people are just now beginning to deal with the more emotional aspects of their loss. “It’s not just because of the anniversary of the fires. They’ve all been rebuilding. You can’t think about how you’re hurting emotionally when you’re worrying about how your kids are going to have a roof over their heads. So they’re starting to get some of those basic needs taken care of and feeling safer, and now more feelings are coming up. Some who lost family members are only now coming forward and wanting to deal with [their intense feelings].

“Our emotions are poured into the disaster of the day and a lot of the recovery effort is driven by emotional investment. If the public emotion begins to wane, everyone loses interest.

“The fact is that there are still a lot of people right here in San Diego with great need,” Ruth says.

The Wildfire Recovery Project’s creative energy is a light in the hearts of all those they assisted.

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How to Help

These are two all-volunteer based organizations that assist those who remain in need after the fires:

The Heartland Foundation, www.heartlandfdn.org. Since 1998, the Heartland Foundation has been serving low-income residents of San Diego County with issues such as career development, healthcare, disaster relief and education. Project Restoration is currently directing items directly to fire survivors. In need of tools, including power tools and donations toward wood chippers for residents who are required to clear their land of dead brush and trees. Donation of working cars, laptop computers, holiday toys, and gift certificates for restaurants, movie/Zoo passes would be gratefully accepted. 619-593-3924.

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ARDON, A Resource Development and Organizational Network, www.ARDONLinks.org. Since 1991, ARDON has facilitated the exchange of resources for nonprofit organizations and the individuals they serve. Weed eaters, plywood, and other building supplies are needed. Household items and phone cards are needed as well.

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