



TRIAL BY FIRE

Even when it seems like everything is gone, you still have a lot, say teens who survived the inferno in Paradise, California, USA.

By Richard M. Romney and Eric B. Murdock
Church Magazines

I felt like I was in a disaster movie," says Alex V., 18.

It was 8:30 in the morning, but the sky above Paradise, California, USA, was dark and getting darker. Burning embers fell through the choking, smoke-filled air. Streets were gridlocked.

"Traffic lights would turn red and green, but no one was paying attention," Alex says. "People were screaming and honking, not moving at all. Some of them started driving on the wrong side of the road." And a wall of fire was rapidly moving toward them.

Alex called his mother: "The trees are exploding!" he said. "You mean they're on fire?" she said.

"No, they're *exploding!* They're bursting into flames, the whole tree at once!"

His Dad told him to ditch the car and meet the family in a restaurant parking lot about two-and-a-half miles away, where he was waiting with his truck. Alex has severe asthma, and he didn't have his inhaler. But he pulled over, said a quick prayer, and abandoned the car.

"When I started running," he remembers. "I immediately felt safe." He ran until he met up with his family, and eventually they escaped from the fire.

That was on November 8, 2018. Looking back today, Alex sees blessings that weren't obvious at the time:

- He had clear cell phone reception in areas that usually don't receive service.
- He had service throughout the evacuation, when service is usually so swamped it fails.
- He felt peace about what he should do.
- He was able to "run and not be weary" until he reached his family (see Doctrine and Covenants 89:20).

Like Alex, other Latter-day Saint teens who survived the destructive wildfire can now offer perspective on how they were actually blessed that day and in the days to follow. By looking beyond what they lost, they can also see what they've gained.



Alex, with his parents and sister Audrey, visits what remains of his family's home.

Returning to the burned-out batting cage where he used to practice with his friends, he shows off one of the new uniforms donated to the Paradise High School baseball team. "After the fire," he says, "many of the team members moved away, and we didn't even have a field to practice on." Those who remained, however, rebuilt the team and were still able to complete the season.

Alex even recovered from the ashes a protective face guard he is required to wear for baseball because of a previous injury.



TITLE ILLUSTRATION BY PAULINE GRAYSON; PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD M. ROWNEY



TOGETHER AS A FAMILY

Alex's sister, Audrey, 14, and their mother, also abandoned a car to escape the flames and then went on foot to where their dad was waiting. But their mom had surgical nerve damage in her leg and was walking—then trying to run—with a crutch.

They also had suitcases and a service dog with them. Their dad saw them through the thick smoke, ran to help them, and got them to his truck. But where was Alex? Soon they saw him running toward them. "At that

moment," Audrey says, "I realized that all that was important was to be together as a family. Nothing else mattered." Since then she has thought often about eternal families. "When I get impatient or upset, I stop and think about the feeling I had that day. It helps me remember that, most of all, we need to love one another."



STRENGTH IN THE TEMPLE

"I was excited for my 12th birthday," says McKell C., 12. "My family had plans to go to the temple that day. But the morning before, my mom woke me."

"Get up!" Mom said in a frantic voice. "We have to get up!"

"Mom told me there was a fire coming, that we needed to pack our things and get out," McKell says. "We evacuate a lot. We thought we'd be coming back soon, so no one really packed anything. But the Holy Ghost definitely knew that we weren't. He prompted me to grab some of my special stuff. We stayed at my grandparents' cabin that night."

"The next day, we still went to the temple. I was really excited. I have always wanted to go to the temple. That day, everyone was on their phones texting each other to know what was happening and to make sure people got out alive. There was a lot of stress."

"Right as we walked in the temple, my dad got a text from someone saying, 'Sorry, we just drove by your house and it's gone.'"

"The Holy Ghost definitely helped me that day. I had a happy, relieved feeling in the temple. My cousin baptized me, and when I came out of the baptismal font, my jumpsuit was super heavy, but I actually felt really light. I forgot about how my house had burned down."

"Today, if something bad happens, I know that when I go into the temple, it's easier for me to move forward. It strengthens me every time."



Ellie D., 13, stands in the ashes of her former home. "I was surprised at how little I missed the things that were gone," she says. "They're just things, and you get over missing them."

In the ashes, her family found a figurine that belonged to Ellie's grandmother. "It reminds me that angels are watching over us," Ellie says.



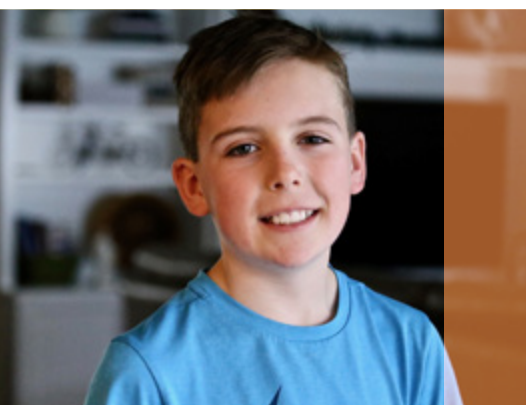
Ellie also learned that it's important to have a quiet place to think. She found one in a small attic loft of the rental house where her family lived after the fire. She hung photos of Church leaders, friends, and family on the wall, and played a guitar donated to her school after the fire. "I learned that quiet places help you think about what's really important, especially after a tragedy," she says. "The scripture says, 'Be still, and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10)."

THE SPIRIT TOLD ME

While her mom and dad were out of town, Aliza H., 18, was taking care of her younger siblings. It was a clear day at first, but soon the sky started getting darker and darker, the wind picked up, and small whirlwinds filled with ashes started spinning.

"I had a really strong feeling, like, 'Don't drop them off,'" she says. So she went back and checked her eight-year-old brother out of school. While she was waiting for him, she heard one of the office staff on the phone with the police. "When she hung up, she said, 'You'd better call your parents and figure out where to go, because the whole town's being evacuated.'"

Because of that spiritual prompting, her brother was the first one checked out of school, Aliza was able to avoid traffic jams, and with the support of Church neighbors, she was able to get herself and her siblings to safety. "I will always remember what the Spirit told me that day," she says.



TWO FAMILIES BECAME ONE

Because of the fire, two families that were already friends became even better friends sharing the same house as brothers and sisters in the gospel. "When we learned their house had burned down, we said, 'Why don't you come live with us in Chico?'" says Luke B., 11 (above left).

"Sometimes it's been a little crowded, but we've learned a lot about sharing and being kind," Luke says.

Grady B., 14 (below left), says, "When we have home evening together, I always try to share a scripture that has helped me understand how faith can help us get through trials. I've learned that there's a lot of comfort in the scriptures." Just as there is comfort in helping each other.





I LOVE SEMINARY EVEN MORE

"We ended up living in Yuba City," says Rachel W., 17, "and so I had to get up an hour earlier just to make it to seminary in the morning. Maybe it's because of that little sacrifice to get there, but I've noticed that since the fire I love seminary even more. My day is always better and I like being with all the Paradise kids again. It's amazing to see how everyone's testimony has been strengthened after the fire."



WE'RE ALL CHILDREN OF GOD

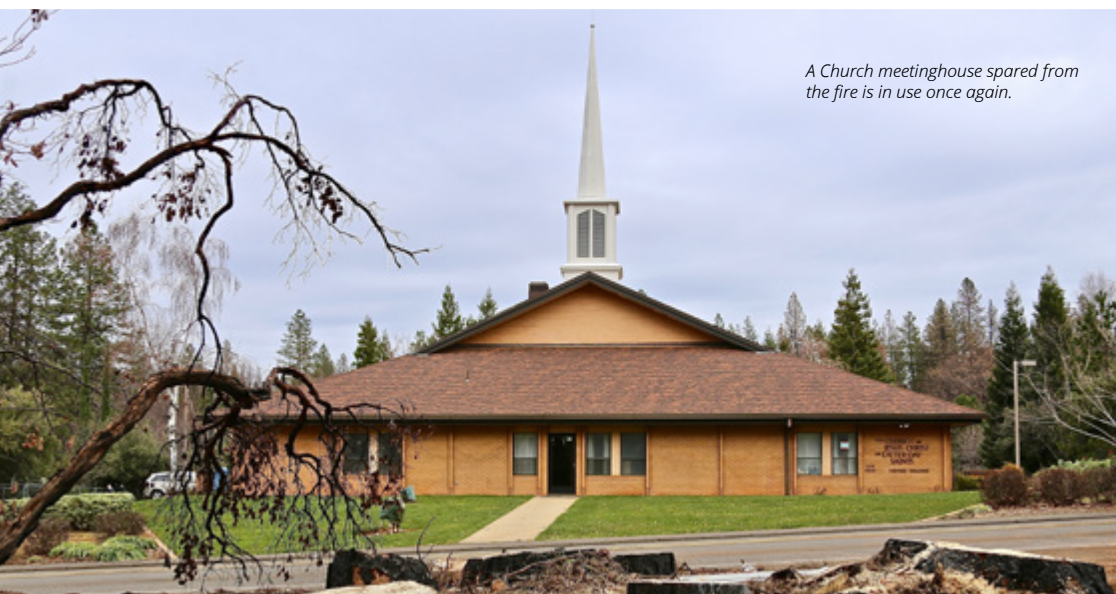
"Grandma and Grandpa live in Oregon, so we went up there for a while and stayed with them," says Billy A., 14. "I was impressed by how kind people were to us while we were there. Now I'm back here, and I can see the community starting to rise from the ashes. It's great to see how, when people get thrown together, they do their best to help each other. It reminds us that we're all children of God."



COUNSEL FROM PRESIDENT NELSON

Two months after the fire, President Russell M. Nelson visited the area and gave this counsel: "There are challenges, but with faith—keeping the commandments and knowing that God's in charge—all will be well in the long run. . . .

" . . . Your hope, your joy, and your future will all be shaped by your faith in God and by your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ" (in Sarah Jane Weaver, "President Nelson Visits and Comforts California Fire Victims," Jan. 14, 2019, news.ChurchofJesusChrist.org).



A Church meetinghouse spared from the fire is in use once again.



Even though damage to the forests and the town of Paradise was severe, there are signs of hope. In Paradise, grass is sprouting through the ashes.

A PROMISE TO THE FAITHFUL

To those who remain faithful despite loss, the Lord promised "to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified" (Isaiah 61:3). **NE**

