

From Now On

THEIR WORLDS ARE FOREVER DIVIDED INTO TWO PERIODS. BEFORE THE FIRE. AFTER THE FIRE.

Before, they were neighbors, friends, community members, employers, workers, “regular people.” After, they have become evacuees, victims, survivors, refugees, or, as faculty member Mandy Feder-Sawyer says, “just fire people.”

Tens of thousands of people lost their homes in the Camp Fire, including at least 310 students, faculty, and staff at Chico State. Before, they had a home. After, they have ashes and memories.

Here, five Wildcats Rise Fire Recovery Fund grant recipients share stories of what their journey has been like in the period of their lives that began November 8.

Recovering from a disaster for which there is no guidebook, they are moving forward the best way they know how. Each navigating the loss in their own way, they share one reality: it will be years before they feel a true sense of normalcy again.

story Ashley Gebb
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CINDY WOLFF

PROFESSOR, NUTRITION AND FOOD SCIENCE
DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES
36-YEAR BUTTE CREEK CANYON RESIDENT

Each morning, Cindy Wolff and her husband would sit on their porch that overlooked Butte Creek Canyon, sip their coffee, and say, “We are so lucky.”

At night, removed from the lights and noise of the city, they could admire the stars and listen to the crickets. Ardent gardeners, their yard was lush with plants creeping in every corner and blooms bursting throughout the year.

“I thought we should be in *Sunset* magazine—it was that beautiful,” she said. “We never had a lack of gratitude.”

Wolff had been evacuated eight times before in the 36 years she had lived in the canyon. She was home alone when the telltale line of red on the ridge grew bright enough to signal it was time to go.

She didn’t bother to fill her car with irreplaceable or important items, thinking, like always, she’d be back. She left artwork, computers, jewelry, their beloved instruments, and drove away as the wind whipped all around her.

“I never thought I’d be standing in a FEMA line. I never thought I’d be homeless. I never thought I’d be sifting through the ashes of my home,” Wolff said. “Now I feel like the whole town is looking at me.”

For a while, multiple families, eight dogs, 12 chickens, two ducks, two cats, and a goose lived in a one-bedroom, one-bathroom house in Chico that Wolff and her husband had purchased a few years ago. While they had many kind offers to stay with other people, they wanted to be with other “refugees,” she said.

Three days after the fire, they got word one by one that their homes were gone.

“I wouldn’t wish this on anybody,” she said. “But a whole town? In our family, it was four homes.”

Wolff knew immediately she would not rebuild.

“It’s like our sense of place on earth is gone,” she said. “This place defined me. It was my favorite place. It’s wrecked all my trust in the world. How could the canyon do this to us?”



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IT’S WRECKED ALL MY TRUST IN THE WORLD. HOW COULD THE CANYON DO THIS TO US?

On a recent visit back to the property, now cleared of the rubble, the green stalks and bright blooms of narcissus and poppies created a colorful contrast against the still-blackened ground.

“I want to tell them to give up, don’t do it, it’s a wasted effort,” Wolff said. “Who is here to enjoy this? I think, to the flowers, ‘You are torturing yourself. You are torturing me in trying to survive. It is a confirmation of everything I can’t have.’”

She wonders if maybe the entire property should just go back to nature. The poison oak can grow rampant. The bear that lives in the cave above where the house once stood can cruise freely and feast on the fruit trees she so lovingly tended.

By late spring, Wolff hopes to be in the house she and her husband just bought—their fifth and hopefully final move since the fire. Overpriced by the inflated housing market, a 1960s fixer-upper with structural and cosmetic problems she calls their “emergency house” was their best and only option.

She's getting used to living with curtains, locking her windows at night, streetlights, the sound of garbage trucks rumbling down the street. Still wearing borrowed clothes, every item she has is loaned or donated. She struggles with anxiety, to get comfortable.

"Everything is new. Every part of this thing," she said.

A private person, Wolff does her best to stay composed at work, knowing she is not the only one there who lost her home in the fire. She sometimes feels like she is pretending to function, knowing she is never operating at full capacity.

When asked about her attention span, she laughs. Her heart and mind are constantly pulled elsewhere, but she does her best not to cry.

"There is too much to do to wallow in sorrow," she said.

Whether it's contractors or insurance adjustors, her phone is constantly ringing. She goes to Bed Bath & Beyond nearly every day to buy basic essentials. The clerks recognize her as a survivor.

"I'm a 65-year-old woman buying a kitchen spatula, four plates, a few knives, white towels," she said. "No one shops like that at my age."

Months after the fire, Wolff finds that fewer people ask her story or even how she is doing.

"My daughter keeps saying, 'Mom, not everyone needs to know you are a Camp Fire victim,'" she said. "I know I'm oversharing. But it helps to talk."

She hasn't played her ukulele since the fire or ridden a bike or read a magazine.

"There is no time for self, and self-care is gone," she said. "Nothing is like before the fire. I used to do regular things people did to go about their day."

Wolff will retire May 18 and is not sure what comes next. She daydreams about watching her grandkids splashing in the pool at her soon-to-be-home, reading a magazine on a sofa, and picking flowers from her yard. She looks forward to a vacation, playing the piano and flute, and kayaking and camping.

"I'm looking to do the things other people do, those people who were not burnt in the Camp Fire," she said. "I want to live like they do."



KELSEA KENNEDY

STUDENT, LIBERAL STUDIES
LIFELONG PARADISE RESIDENT

As an ambassador for the Office of Admissions, Kelsea Kennedy always starts her campus tours the same way. Even in the last few months, she's never wavered in her script.

"Hi. My name is Kelsea, and I'm from Paradise," she says with a smile to prospective students and their families.

"Every time I say it, people turn and look at me," she said. "It makes them uncomfortable. They want in their heart for your house to be OK."

Kennedy has tried her best to return to regular life, but the loss of her home and everything she owned just weeks before she graduated in December has been devastating.

A lifelong resident, Paradise is ingrained in her identity. She was born at the town hospital, attended local schools, and opted to stay in her Cherry Lane childhood home while attending Chico State. Her grandmother lived just down the road, three of her uncles were also Paradise residents, and her dad's business, a glass shop, was in the heart of town.

The fire destroyed it all.

On the morning of November 8, Kennedy got up extra early to leave on a road trip to Oregon with her friends. When her dad called to tell her he was evacuating, she asked him to save her graduation stole, tassel, and memory shadowbox.

Mere minutes later, flames were coming out the window on the other side of their house and her dad fled with the few items he managed to grab. Upon their return weeks later, the white picket fence bordering her street looked pristine, as did the trailer they had put in the back of their lot that fall. Everything in between was rubble.

"It was strange driving in. It was a little unrecognizable," Kennedy said. "Literally, everything I would look for is gone. But it still feels like home."

She beelined for the backyard, where she found the Kennedy Avenue street sign that once hung on a patio post. Gently, she set the fire-scorched relic aside. It was one of the only salvageable things that remained, along with an equation-themed coffee cup her sister gave her for her 18th birthday when Kennedy thought she would major in math.

"It was crazy to know that before today, we were not allowed to be here," Kennedy said. "I left that morning and never thought I wouldn't come back."

Her family moved into a townhome in Chico in the first few days after the fire. The final weeks of her last semester were rough.

"Your professor is talking about your final paper and how it's really important," she said. "And you think, 'Actually, this isn't important in my life at all right now.'"

But she pushed through, finding solace and a welcome distraction in the normalcy of sitting in class. For the first time in her college career, she earned a 4.0.

Because her parents owned the home and were the policy holders on their insurance, Kennedy feels both grateful and a little guilty she has been somewhat isolated from the exhausting process of recovery. She did go to the FEMA Disaster Recovery Center a few times, to obtain a new birth certificate and social security card, and has slowly been buying clothes and other essentials.

What's most difficult, she said, is how people struggle to relate with her.

The curiosity, discomfort, horror, and extreme sympathy can be as awkward for her as it is for them.

"It's easiest to talk with someone else from Paradise who can also give their perspective. It helps to have someone else talk about it and who understands," she said.

And yet, recounting it over and over is hard.

"Now, it's like, 'OK, we've had this conversation before. Do we have to bring it up again?'" Kennedy said. "I just want to get back in the swing of things."

She continues to work 15–20 hours a week for the Office of Admissions. She meets her church

friends for coffee on Tuesdays, since they no longer see each other at Sunday services. And she spends a lot of time at home with her family, their bonds never stronger.

When she saw a photo in early January of lots being cleared, she was struck by the serenity that replaced the devastation and all it represented.

"It looks peaceful. There is no chaos, no burnt stuff," she said. "Although, it's kind of sad to see it shoved into a bin and rolled down to the dump. That was someone's whole life once."

Kennedy's parents are still undecided on rebuilding. She's torn herself.

At first, it's all she wanted, because it was all she knew and so much of what she had loved. It was where she envisioned coming home for holiday breaks from her master's program.

But their neighbors are not rebuilding. And she has no idea how long it will be before it's a functional town again.

For the first time in her life, Kennedy looks forward to leaving Paradise behind as she pursues a career in higher education and explores new horizons. Among them are graduate schools in Arizona, Georgia, and Colorado.

"I always have the opportunity to come back," she said.

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KELLY SHIELDS

STAFF MEMBER, UNIVERSITY FARM
4-MONTH PARADISE RESIDENT

As a young boy, a mentor shared a sentiment with Kelly Shields that he has carried all his life: “Life is wonderful, even at its worst.”

It’s a mentality he clung to after living through the Northridge earthquakes. One that resonated with him last March, when his home in south Chico was destroyed by an electrical fire. And it’s been a daily reminder since November 8, when, just seven months later, another fire claimed nearly every other material possession he had left.

“It’s kind of a dream—a real bad one. Two in a row,” he said. “All you can do is smile about it. We are pretty hardened now. What do you say to someone who has lost not one but two homes to fire? The first one sucked. This one really sucked.”

He and his wife, Sandy, moved from Los Angeles onto a friend’s property in Butte County six years ago. When their house was destroyed by an electrical fire, they moved into a 26-foot travel trailer for three months before falling in love with a home in Paradise. From the property’s 37 trees to the magnificent stone fireplace in the living room, they were eager to start rebuilding their lives.



JESSICA BARTLETT

“**WHAT DO YOU SAY TO SOMEONE WHO HAS LOST NOT ONE BUT TWO HOMES TO FIRE? THE FIRST ONE SUCKED. THIS ONE REALLY SUCKED.**”

When the Camp Fire broke out, their son was headed for class at Butte College and Sandy was on her way to work. Shields loaded up their dogs and prepared to evacuate, not giving great thought to their blue bungalow and towering trees as he drove away.

“Our whole thought is we would be back in a few hours,” he said.

Upon their return, the only thing standing was the stone fireplace, which they never even had a chance to use. Gone were the two expensive guitars Shields has had for 30 years that hung on the mantle, a painting by his grandmother, and his mother’s bronzed baby shoes, as well as every salvaged family photo and other treasures that somehow survived their first fire.

“We knew there was nothing left. We just had to see it,” he said. “If you ever wondered what a nuclear bomb looks like when it went off, this is it.”

Laying on top of a pile of debris in the kitchen was a ceramic plate with the image of a little girl. It belonged to his grandmother. They marveled at how it could have survived the explosions, the heat, the collapsing roof, and yet there it was, nearly pristine except a little heat discoloration.

Even before the fate of their home was confirmed, Shields had committed himself to rebuilding.

“We’re just not going to let it beat us,” he said. “This was our home, and we were just getting started with it. We wanted to retire here.”

They’d only made four mortgage payments before the fire but they used the insurance money to pay off the property and now own it outright. The rest is going toward a modular three-bedroom, two-bathroom house that could be ready in as little as six months, if their Paradise property is ready by then.

They are busy making it into the home of their dreams. They added French doors off the dining room to let in fresh air during dinner, a wide back deck for summer barbecues, and a luxury tub in the master with a backyard view.

They learn about new things every day, like property surveys and taxes. Every weekend they shop for some replacement item. Shields has been cycling through the same five sets of winter clothes but now that it’s spring, he’s realizing he’ll need to update his wardrobe for warmer weather.

Life moves forward, with the support of their family, friends, and colleagues.

“It’s because we have each other,” he said. “It’s us and the dogs and the kids that helped keep us sane.”

Ironically, they are back on the property where their home burnt in March, living in an above-garage studio completed weeks before the Camp Fire. With three people and three dogs sharing the small space, beds are pushed into two of the corners and a big-screen TV sits on a folding table along one wall.

Sandy cooks dinner every night, and at least one of their children will usually swing by to join them. They tease their son about playing video games, watch *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Gomer Pyle, USMC*, and laugh as the dogs wrestle with their toys.

“That’s the bright side right there,” Shields said of the dogs, as they continued their antics, clueless about the upheaval in their lives or the level of loss. “There is something to be learned from them. They don’t care about anything but being with us.”

“Life is wonderful, even at its worst,” he said, with a glance at his grandmother’s plate on the kitchen counter. “Now we know it to be true. You just can’t let it stop you.”

SABRINA HANES

STUDENT, CHILD DEVELOPMENT
11-YEAR PARADISE RESIDENT

“Believe there is good in the world.”

“Love is all you need.”

“Exhale fear. Inhale courage.”

Sabrina Hanes’ trailer living space is covered with uplifting messages. Every wall, every open space is covered with lettering or small prints or paintings that help get her through each day.

“I look at them and think, ‘I can do this. I got this,’” she said.

Last fall, she was working steadfastly toward her degree in child development. As a single mother who had faced many hardships throughout her life, her determination propelled her, with a dream of one day opening her own child care center.

On November 7, the day before the Camp Fire, she and her daughter, Aroara, celebrated their four-year anniversary in the mobile home



“**MY HARDEST THING IS PEOPLE TELLING YOU THAT YOU HAVE TO GET OVER IT.**”

they were renting. Less than 24 hours later, they were fleeing down Clark Road, flames in the rearview mirror.

Aroara kept urging her, “Mom, it’s gonna get us, it’s gonna get us.”

“I said, ‘We are going to pray.’ We prayed to protect us, to protect our friends, to protect our town,” Hanes said. “All of our life was here in Paradise.”

Six months later, she’s living in a trailer in a mobile home park about 20 miles north of Chico.

Finances are her enduring struggle. She was on disability before the fire, the checks just enough to scrape by and meet her basic needs. Renter’s insurance, even at \$30 a month, seemed an impossible expense, so she went without, which means every material aspect of recovery is her responsibility.

“It just seems like it keeps piling on,” she said, tears welling. “Some days are better than others, but it feels hopeless at times. Before the fire, I thought I had everything figured out. I was good about where we were standing, and now I have no idea.”

Generous donations enabled her to buy a few basics and try to return some familiarity to her daughter’s life.

“She just keeps telling me she wants her old life back,” Hanes said. “That’s the hardest thing to tell your 5-year-old, that I don’t know if it will ever be like it was.”

Often, Hanes cannot help but think about everything she lost. Her grandmother's ring, a Care Bear collection she had since she was 2, Aroara's first Christmas dress, the cap and gown from her Butte College graduation.

She had about \$500 in change she had been saving to take her daughter to Disneyland. In digging through the ashes, all she could find were a few warped coins.

"You sit there and think, 'God, why didn't I grab this?'" she said. "I had extra time but I was frozen."

Hanes' return to Chico State was hard. It was her first day away from Aroara since the fire.

"I broke. I cried all day. It was the first time I didn't have to be strong for her," she said. "'One foot in front of the other,' I just keep telling myself."

She finished the semester better than she expected, relished in a few weeks off for the holiday break, and returned to school in January with just two semesters left to complete her degree. About three weeks in, Hanes made the decision to file for an educational leave.

"As the semester kept going, I realized I was not OK," she said. "Day-to-day life was just overwhelming me."

She was struggling with the grief and depression so common in those who have experienced trauma. Some days, she struggles to get out of bed. Tuition, transportation, childcare, and access to Internet away from campus added to the emotional challenges.

"I just needed to take the time to heal, and that was hard," she said. "School has been so big for me, but I didn't want to push myself where I could fail."

Hanes hopes to return to her studies in the fall, but right now she feels she needs to be present for Aroara, who also is struggling with trauma. Her tantrums have become full-blown meltdowns, she regresses to toddler behaviors in her transitional kindergarten class, and she acts out for seemingly no reason.

"Are you having a hard time today? Is it just one of those days?" she asks, and Aroara nods. "You know I love you."

"It's hard when your kid needs you there," Hanes continued. "That's what keeps me going—it's her. We are working to make new memories, positive ones."



They ride bikes and are starting a small garden near their trailer. Hanes brings Aroara with her when she practices with her belly dancing troupe, and sometimes they have mother-daughter dance parties in the small space between the trailer's kitchen and sofa.

"My hardest thing is people telling you that you have to get over it," she said. "I have to talk about it. I have to talk about how I'm coping. And it's about sharing. People have to understand what this is like."

MANDY FEDER-SAWYER

FACULTY, JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC RELATIONS
25-YEAR PARADISE RESIDENT

A career journalist and lifelong writer, Mandy Feder-Sawyer has never struggled to find the right words.

But when it comes to the Camp Fire, six months later, she still can't articulate how it left her reeling or how she's moving forward.

"There is so much that is going on in my head," she said. "I keep waiting for these things to come, to put it together, but it's just too immense."

Feder-Sawyer bought her three-bedroom house in lower Paradise at age 28. It's where she raised her children, left, returned, left, and returned again.

"The reason I kept that house was so that my kids always had a place to go home," she said.

She was home with her husband, Larry, her daughter, son-in-law, 4-year-old granddaughter, and 2-month-old grandson when the fire swept in. She and Larry were sitting outside having their morning coffee around 7 a.m. when they realized the dark cloud in the sky was actually a fire. They checked the news and an evacuation warning was in place. That soon changed to a mandatory evacuation.

"By 7:45 a.m., it was game on," Feder-Sawyer said. "You could hear the fire at that point. It was a roar."

She grabbed a knit blanket her aunt made her and the pair of hand-painted Converse sneakers next to her bed. She figured she'd find the essentials later.

Before she left, she unplugged the Crock-Pot of split pea soup cooking on the kitchen counter.

"I didn't want to burn the house down," she said, a wry smile on her face.

"You've got to laugh," she continued. "Or you are going to cry."

Desperation, anger, hopelessness—she's felt it all. The grief itself can be overwhelming. Combined with a lack of permanent direction, she's watched the suffering destroy marriages and families of some of her neighbors.

"If something was just hanging on by a thread, this was the scissors that cut it," Feder-Sawyer said.

In early December, she was still working to make sense of how many friends had lost homes, how many animals suffered, and how many people died. She's tormented in knowing her neighbor perished in the fire and by guilt that she could have possibly saved her. Her dreams are haunted by flames and the terror of the evacuation.

After decades covering fires as a reporter and serving as a public information officer during Lake County's Valley Fire of 2015, she said she has the unfortunate insider's look at how the aftermath evolves, as fundraisers and donation drives give way to traffic complaints, allegations about spikes in crime, and questions about why people aren't "moving on."

"People feel really loved at the start, and now they are feeling forgotten," she said. "I think the empathy is getting farther and farther away."

Feder-Sawyer doesn't like the terms "fire victim" or "fire survivor."

"They both imply something," she said. "A lot of people who 'survived'



A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO 'SURVIVED' THE FIRE ARE BARELY SURVIVING. AND 'VICTIM' SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT HOW YOU ADJUST TO TRAGEDY. WE ARE JUST FIRE PEOPLE.



the fire are barely surviving. And 'victim' says something about how you adjust to tragedy. We are just fire people."

Now living in Butte Creek Canyon, in a home that withstood the fire, she reads books to her granddaughter to hear her bubbly laughter and travels to Portland, Oregon, once a month for Larry's business. For her birthday, Larry threw her a giant party, inviting all her friends from Paradise and other places she's called home. One friend who lost his home in the Lake County fires came and stayed with them for three days.

"It felt good to have someone else who understood," she said. "You innately know what other people need."

She only had 16 months left on her mortgage. With the insurance money, they bought a home in Red Bluff for cash, but she's holding onto the Paradise property with considerations of eventually rebuilding.

Her new house in Red Bluff is a 2,500-square-foot 1889 Victorian, with a sewing room for her daughter, a music room for her husband, and a fenced-in yard for her grandchildren and dogs to play in.

"I think it'd be nice to not look at [the fire] for a while," she said.

Feder-Sawyer is only teaching one class this semester, which helps her focus on fire recovery. Each day, she commits to doing three things—a call to insurance, an inspection of the property, laundry at a laundromat—to ensure they can revel in small victories without getting overwhelmed by the magnitude of what's still ahead.



"We don't know how we are going to feel, moment to moment," she said. "I think I survive off the hugs."

Her students, she said, help her get through, with their sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and kindness. They texted her as she was evacuating and told her they were praying for her, gave her gift cards when she returned, and wrote her kind notes.

"One said, 'If you can go through this and still smile, I know I can do anything,'" Feder-Sawyer said. "It's so special, because it connects this experience to who I am as a teacher."

After she let them interview her for a project in her "Writing for Public Audiences" class, five students switched to journalism majors. Sharing her passion with the writers of tomorrow continues to be among her greatest sources of strength.

"It was good to get back to anything that was normal, and it was an opportunity to show my students you can persevere and move on," she said. "There are just a million stories. Everyone has their own." 🍷