

# Community Comeback:

**Kelley Rebro--A Teen's Frontline Experience  
7180 Buckingham Blvd Fire Survivor**

*Then and Now*

Although it has been 30 years since the Oakland Hills fire, that day will forever remain ingrained in my mind and my heart. I was a 15-year-old sophomore at *Bishop O'Dowd High School* and my parents were on vacation in Molokai. While away, my parents had arranged for me to stay with one of my closest friends (who lived at the nearby *Parkwoods* apartment complex). At the time, I was a responsible, smart and trustworthy adolescent, yet I also longed for a taste of independence and freedom. I was not alone. A group of friends and I thought that it would be a fun idea to spend the night at my house, while telling our parents that we were staying elsewhere. We had all been friends since elementary school. Our parents trusted us and no one questioned our story and our lies. There had been a grass fire (caused by an illegal burn) that day behind the home of a neighbor but it was extinguished by the Oakland Fire Department and we were not worried. We met up at my house, ordered pizza, played video games and stayed up late, talking and gossiping like teen-agers do. Some friends came and left while six of us spent the night. I woke up first the next morning and made pancakes. We were all still in our pajamas, groggy from the late night.

I was standing in the kitchen rinsing syrup from plates when I began to smell smoke. As I opened our back door and walked up the back stairs towards the street, the smell intensified. Once on the street, I not only saw the smoke but I saw fire. Brush was burning directly across from my house with no firefighter in sight. I remember running down the stairs, yelling out to my friends while calling 911. I remember no one answering the 911 call. I hung up and called back. Someone answered this time and said help was on the way. I did not hear any sirens and wondered how quickly help would arrive. I remember standing in the middle of my bedroom thinking about what I should take. I realized that nothing was worth it and I just needed to get out of the house. At the time, we had five cats, two of which were kittens. In the chaos, I found the kittens hiding under the bed. I put them in a pillowcase and ran out of the front door, barefoot and still in my pajamas. My friends were outside waiting for me. The firefighters had just arrived. There was a fire hydrant nearby but the firehose did not fit. There was a lot of confusion and it was clear that there were problems. I remember realizing that we could not stick around and wait for a solution.

The six of us ran down Buckingham Blvd. and onto Tunnel Road. Once on Tunnel Road, I remember looking back and seeing a lot of smoke billowing above and around my house. I became paralyzed in many ways. Although cognitively I knew that I should keep running, I struggled with the idea of leaving my home and the unknown behind. I remember cars speeding by, as we stood on the side of the road, scared and alone. Three of my friends decided to continue on, and they cut through the terrain of the hill to *Parkwoods* (where one of them lived) to seek help and safety. My other two friends stayed and tried to convince me to keep moving. I do not know how long I stood frozen before my neighbor, who was fleeing her home with a toddler, stopped and demanded that we get in her car. The three of us and a pillowcase of squirming kittens got in. She dropped us off at *Parkwoods*, where we ran to my friend's



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apartment and reconnected with our group. This was where I was supposed to have been staying all along. I remember as I was running out of my house, grabbing the piece of paper that had my parent's hotel information on it. I tried reaching them in Molokai. No surprise but they were not there. I left a message with the hotel receptionist. I have no idea what I even said. My friend's mom was not home so everyone else in the group began calling their parents, in hopes of getting us a ride out. It was around this time where we looked outside and noticed that the apartment building at the back of the *Parkwoods* complex was on fire. Once again, the six of us ran. We ran out of the apartment, down the stairs, across the parking lot and onto the street, and we watched as car after car frantically raced to get out. Finally, our ride arrived and it was our turn to leave. We piled in (kittens included) and fled.

Gratefully, I held on to the piece of paper with my parent's contact information as I transitioned to another friend's home and waited. I cannot imagine what they must have thought when we finally connected by telephone and I told them what happened. Being on the remote island of Molokai and without news broadcast capabilities, it was difficult for them to comprehend the reality of the situation. I remember my parents asking me if I thought that they should end their trip and come home early. Tearfully, I replied, yes, and in my heart, I knew that there would be no home to come back to.

At times I still think about the "what ifs" and I recognize that my five friends and I could have been a part of the tragic death toll that day. What if we had slept in? What if we ran in a different direction? What if my neighbor did not stop and insist that we get in her car? What if we were not picked up at *Parkwoods*? It is hard not to wonder, when 25 others were not as fortunate to escape. As a survivor of the Oakland Hills fire, I can only hope that lessons were learned and plans are in place to avoid another preventable tragedy from occurring again.

While we lost everything in the Oakland Hills fire, one of the most difficult parts for me was the loss of security and belonging. 7180 Buckingham Blvd. was the only home that I ever knew. Replacing material items takes little effort but feeling a sense of safety and comfort takes time. Despite the trauma of the fire, the Oakland Hills will always hold a special place in my heart. So much so that I chose to raise my family in Montclair, where we have lived for the past 12 years. I do get anxious on warm, windy fall days and I do wish there were fewer eucalyptus trees in my backyard but most days, I feel at peace, and I feel at home.