

Community Comeback:

Fighting the Fire , Knowing that You've Lost Your Home

Mark Hoffmann, Oakland Fire Fighter and Fire Survivor

Then and Now

I was a lieutenant in 1991. I had just awakened when my parents called. I saw the black smoke outside my kitchen window in Montclair near Broadway Terrace. I had my wife take our young children to my parent's home by the lake where I grew up and I went into work.

When I got there, I was given a staff assignment—they needed people to manage what looked like a hiring hall in a fire house. There were fire fighters from near and far standing in their turn out gear and offering their services. Because we had no transportation, I ordered buses from AC Transit, pulled a couple of the people who showed up, and asked them to make a list of names, putting anyone who worked in Oakland to the front and using the others to support us. I worked for about 20 minutes organizing things, and then passed the reins on to Engineer Weir and reported to the Deputy Chief in the Dispatch Center. I brought him up to speed and told him I wanted to be on the first bus out.

I was in the first bus with 19 other fire fighters and assigned to cover the area around Margarito and County Club in Upper Rockridge. It was surreal—there were homes on fire around us, we had a team of 20 and no fire engine or truck. A fire fighter from 19 Engine told us he had a spare hose wagon around the corner we can work off of if we could grab a crew.

With a hose wagon and crew of 5 we were assigned to the Hillcrest School neighborhood. We had our "dream team"—one fire fighter had grown up by Holy Hames High and knew the streets, another young "stud" was great for heavy lifting. Our driver had returned to us from Charing Cross, he had been on the rig where Battalion Chief Riley jumped off to help a fleeing resident up on Charing Cross, and saw him electrocuted by downed wires. He was noticeably shaken but

There were homes on fire all around us. Because our truck had hoses but no pump, I ran up to the ridge above the school to find a hydrant. I looked across the Warren Freeway where my home was located and everything was burning. When I left earlier that morning, I didn't think the fire would get to my house. I'm glad I didn't stay to fight the fire alone—all I would have had was a garden hose and that wouldn't have stopped the fire.

The driver of the truck had turned around and was backing up to the ridge, so I ran down to hill so he could see me. By then it was so smokey you couldn't see 5 feet in front of you and everything on this side of the school was burning quickly, so we went to Plan B and used the school yard as a fire break and tapped into the hydrant by the school.

We cut all the landscaping around the school—that was how the fire was communicating—the heat would dry out the fuel, the fuel would catch on fire and spread to a fence or building. There were also fire brands starting spot fires, but basically, the fire was so hot it was burning through everything.

A strike team with 5 engines from San Jose showed up. They wouldn't split up their unit so they made a stand on the street below the school. But there was room for only 4 engines, so the fifth engine with a pump drove up to where I was so we could spread more lines than we had been able to do with just a hydrant.

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A guy ran up to me saying “Thank God, you are here. Will you be able to save my home?” His home was uphill from the school and his street was engulfed in flames. I told him that we wouldn’t be able to save his house. Then he said, “How can I help you?”

We were using axes to cut the vegetation. I told him if he can find chain saws, we can cut fences and trees and then we might have a shot at saving homes.

He remembered that a commercial tree trimmer lived two blocks away. He broke into the man’s garage, loaded up a kids’ wagon with chain saws and gas, and came back. We were able to cut down fences and landscaping that we pulled away into piles that we could wet down. And we were able to save his house and other houses. They were the few properties we could save.

Between the wind and fire brands and the amount of fire—it got super hairy for about 30 minutes. And then the fire just stopped—the winds died, and the fire then ran into stucco homes that didn’t have pine trees and other vegetation to burn between them. We, other strike teams and neighbors with garden hoses were able to slow the fire down to where you could stop it. But basically, until we had more resources, things burned.

Yes, I lost my home in the 1991 Fire. But once I left my home, I was committed to my job. Saving my house was not a priority. You do what’s good for many, not for the few.

Now 30 years later, I think the most important lesson is “when in doubt, get out”. The bottom line is be prepared to get out, have an idea ahead of time of what you will grab and have an exit plan. The moment’ there’s a doubt, it is probably your body telling you to get out now. People died in this fire.