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# 'You are not alone': Past Northern California wildfire survivors counsel new members of tragic club

**Jill Tucker**

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Casey Taylor, the executive director of Achieve Charter School of Paradise, imparts useful information she learned in the wake of the Paradise Fire to Mike Heffner (right), the superintendant and principal of Bonny Doon Union Elementary School Ditrcit and Eric Gross, the superintendant and principal of Pacific Elementary School District in ...

Photo: Sara Gobets / Special to The Chronicle

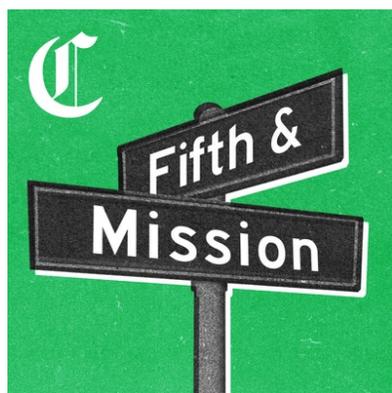
It's been three years since a wildfire tore through Susan Gorin's Santa Rosa

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But, neither does the knowledge and experience that grows out of the ash in the months and years that follow, hard-earned information that Gorin, and thousands like her, are now sharing with yet another year of California wildfire survivors.

They counsel the newest members of a tragic club on the shock, the sadness, anger, frustration and bureaucracy that they face — a roller-coaster ride that lasts at least a year, usually more.



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Its members include the nearly 5,000 left homeless in Sonoma, Lake and Napa counties by the Tubbs Fire in 2017, who then counseled the 13,000 families who lost homes in the Camp Fire that destroyed Paradise in 2018.

This year, so far, more than 1,500 homes have been destroyed in the fires burning in the North Bay, East Bay and the South Bay coastal mountains and beach communities, dozens of blazes sparked by lightning in mid-August.

Each home lost in the current fires is now a statistic, a little red home on a Cal Fire property loss map, an icon that represents countless family photos lost, heirlooms destroyed, charred toys, closets full of clothes and a long road to recovery ahead.

But it's not one they will travel alone.

“We are not happy we are providing this experience,” Gorin said of the exclusive and tragic club. “We wish we never had this experience.”

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Casey Taylor, the executive director of Achieve Charter School of Paradise, describes the difficulties her community faced in the wake of the Paradise Fire to Eric Gross, the superintendent and principal of Pacific Elementary School District in Gross's backyard in Santa Cruz on Aug. 26, 2020.

“But boy, do I have the personal experience to lend any fire survivor.”

She anticipates her knowledge will be in demand this year again as families are slowly allowed to go back into neighborhoods to check on the status of their homes.

Across the Bay Area, Gorin and other survivors have formed neighborhood groups that counsel on community rebuilding plans. They organized informal student groups that gather pajamas for teens who've lost everything. There are politicians guiding other elected officials on fast-tracking building permits. Some teachers and principals are holding the hands of their peers.

Eric Gross, the superintendent and principal of the small Pacific Elementary School District in Davenport, a small coastal town in Santa Cruz County, was trying to wrap his head around the loss piling up around him. Two of three school board members lost their homes in the wildfires as did some of the 140 students and at least one teachers' aide.

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That's when his phone rang. Casey Taylor was calling from Paradise.

Taylor, executive director of Achieve Charter School in the Butte County town, wanted to help. She had been in his shoes nearly two years ago, when the Camp Fire burned down the homes of all her students as well as the school's high school campus.

"You are not alone," she told the Davenport administrator. Gross has a hard time talking about the call without choking up.

"It's sad and it's also pretty amazing how when things get tough people reach out and help each other," he said. "There's going to be a million questions that come up and they're going to give me the answers."

Taylor and Paradise schools Superintendent Tom Taylor, not related, drove five hours to see Gross and Mike Heffner, principal and superintendent of the Bonny Doon school district Wednesday. They answered questions and offered much of the same advice they got from Santa Rosa education officials who reached out to share the knowledge they gleaned from the aftermath of the Tubbs and Nuns fires.

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Mike Heffner, Superintendent-Principal of the Bonny Doon Union Elementary School District, (left) talks with Santa Cruz County disaster service worker Monica Hernandez at the 7th Day Adventist church evacuation center in Soquel, Calif. on Aug., 24, 2020.

It's a long haul, Casey Taylor said she told them. Take turns being strong. Take turns grabbing a break when you need to.

"The trauma and the emotion and the fire brain, as we call it, lasts a whole year," she said, referring to the inability to focus or remember everything in the months after the catastrophe.

You will make it through, she told them.

Taylor advised getting everyone together as soon as possible, even if via video, to laugh, and say hello and cry. She urged them to recognize that people will expect recovery to be fast, but everything will take a long time.

She told them to spend whatever it takes to get families what they need and eventually disaster relief will come through from federal or state funds.

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buses and jumping into the back of pickup trucks to escape the flames.

“Now here they are, wearing a tie and sitting in an office saying you’re going to make it through this and we’re going to help you,” he said.

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In Santa Rosa, Gorin calls the growing wildfire support chain an informal “resilience network.”

She personally has counseled dozens of individuals on what it will take to rebuild, even though she’s still in the process herself.

“I absolutely understand the challenge of the debris cleanup,” she said. Then the months-long inventory process, listing each item lost with details of value and date acquired, following by sheer frustration dealing with the insurance companies. Like many homeowners, she was underinsured, she said.

She urged elected officials to rethink local laws, as well as the permitting process to speed up construction and make exceptions so people can live in trailers on their property, which local regulations often ban.

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It's overwhelming, he said, his voice shaky.

And yet, even in the midst of the shock, fatigue and tears, Gross knows that someday — a day that he can't quite imagine yet — he'll be making that phone call to someone who is reeling like he is now, offering support, knowledge and what will be hard-earned experience.

For now, he said, he's counting on that "light at the end of the tunnel."

"I can't see it," Gross said. "It's like someone else saw it and they're letting me know it's there."

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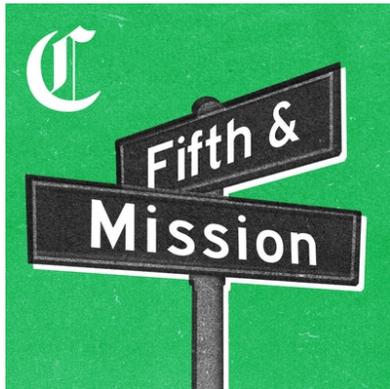
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person that can help you navigate the journey.”

Laughing doesn't hurt.

“Fire survivors quickly learn the gallows humor,” she said of those who've lost everything. “We say, ‘Great outfit. Is that new?’

“It's a testament to people's determined ruggedness to get through this,” she said.



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Back in Santa Cruz last week, Gross was trying to figure out when the power and Wi-Fi would be restored at his schools while waiting for word on when evacuations might be lifted for Davenport. He needed to figure out how he was going to replace district computers needed for distance learning that teachers and students left behind before homes burned.

He didn't know which teachers were back in their homes and which were still at the county fairground shelter or somewhere far away with family. He needed to unravel how to address the trauma and mental health issues mounting from a pandemic and now wildfires. School had only been in session for a few days before they had to cancel classes and evacuate.