

MVFD Fire History Project

Lisa O'connor, Trinity Resident
Interviewed by Jennifer O'Mahony

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Lisa-O'Connor by JO Oct122018

[Start of recorded material]

Interviewer: Okay. I'm with Lisa O'Connor. Lisa, if you don't mind, can you say your name and your address and that you agree to be recorded?

Lisa O'Connor: Lisa O'Connor, 3001 Trinity Road, and I'm fine with being recorded.

Interviewer: Thank you, and thanks for doing the interview. So we'll start with how long you've lived in the area; what the area around your house is like; whether, in the past, you had wondered if something like a fire might happen; and the preparations you had made.

Lisa O'Connor: Well, we moved to our property, which is about three and a half acres and about three miles up Trinity Road in February of 2000. And funny enough, a month after we moved in, I guess it was in March, there was -- I used to work from home. I was looking out the little window, and I had seen smoke.

There had been somebody who was doing controlled-burns. But it was a really windy day, and it turned out that there was a fire between our property and theirs. Their controlled-burns had gone out of control. Jim Hallock (3131 Trinity), who was the neighbor at the time, he was clearing to build a house.

So I saw flames and smoke. It was very scary because we had just bought the house and actually some things were still in boxes. I called 911. And suddenly, it turned into this really huge thing with

helicopters and the firemen. One of the MVFD firemen, Michael Hudson, even had a heart attack. It was pretty horrible.

It was a hot March day. So basically, we were there for one month, and there was a fire. It did not burn down our house, obviously. It did damage the landscape from the very start. We have a lot of pine trees on the property, and it did burn the tops of a lot of them. So we realized that this was a high-fire danger area.

But as far as taking precautions, honestly -- even though I've been an active member of the fire department since we moved here; I was on the board; did the auctions; all that stuff -- I never really thought the house was going to catch on fire. It was a geodesic. It was a dome. It was very energy-efficient. We had massive non-flammable decking around the house. On three sides, it was cleared pretty well with a big driveway and all of that.

I guess, I always thought that if something was going to happen, it was going to be an earthquake. We did have an earthquake in Napa. It took out a lot of things in our house a couple of years ago. But I never really thought a fire would take the house out.

Interviewer: Wow. So the day or the evening of the fires, how did you first find out it was happening?

Lisa O'Connor: Well, it was a Sunday. Sean and I had been at the Harvest Festival in Santa Rosa at the Sonoma Fairgrounds. I probably stayed until

they closed about 5:00. We got into the car to drive home. When we were coming down Highway 12, it was really, weirdly, windy. We were very tired, but it was just this odd wind.

Now, we've been here so many years. You think you've seen it all. But it was really whipping around, almost in circles in front of our car.

So we got home and did the usual thing. We made our daughter's dinner. I actually sat down and had a quick little nap, which I didn't usually do, but we had a little bit to drink and eat at the Harvest Festival. We were going to have a cleaning girl come for the first time on the next day. I had cleaned the house. I remember sitting down in my chair and going, "Ahh, it's nice and clean."

So when it was time to go to bed, I wasn't particularly tired. I couldn't fall asleep, probably because I had a little bit of wine and too much cheese and all of that stuff. So I was really sort of tossing and turning. I just couldn't get to sleep.

Then I got up and down, and up and down again. Sean was asleep. Ella, our daughter who was 11, was asleep. And at some point, probably around midnight, my phone rang. It was a friend from Kenwood (above Geib Ranch), Gary Doty. It was very odd. I wouldn't even usually pick up the phone that late. But I could see that it was him. And he's a good friend so I knew something was probably wrong.

He sounded like he was amongst a lot of confusion. He said, "There's a fire up here in Kenwood. There's a fire on our hill. There's a fire. I think my house is going to catch on fire. And by the way, I'm standing on my deck, and your hill is on fire." So from Kenwood, he could see the Nuns Canyon area.

It didn't really compute that there would be a fire on a hill up here and in Kenwood also --

Interviewer: -- a few miles away.

Lisa O'Connor: -- at the bottom of Trinity Road. That didn't make sense. I didn't get it.

And then I hung up the phone from him, and I started to wake up Sean. I went outside. It really smelled smoky, and all the way up on Trinity, it was totally dark out. You couldn't see anything at that point, but you could smell it.

My phone rang again. It was a friend from our daughter Ella's school. The friend, Kushiell McClendon, was living on the Geib Ranch at the time, which is actually right behind where we're sitting -- right there -- where the maple --

Interviewer: So just at the other edge of Kenwood.

Lisa O'Connor: Yes, at the bottom of the hill that my friend Doty had lived on. She said, "Are you okay?" I said, "Well, yeah. Why?" She said, "My house just burned down." I said, "Your house burned down?" She said, "We just ran out in our night clothes, and our house just burned down. I don't know what to do." And I'm like, "Oh my God."

You don't hear of this kind of thing. You don't hear of people's houses burning down around here.

So I hung up with her, and then Sean and I were in discussions. "What do we do? What do we do?" He's like, "I don't know. Maybe we should leave." I said, "I don't want to leave. Should we leave?"

Interviewer: And this was midnight, 1:00 a.m.?

Lisa O'Connor: Yeah -- somewhere around 1:00 a.m. at this point.

I said, "I don't want to leave. Where are we going to go?" He said, "Okay. Well, I'm going to go take a drive and see if I see anything." He took a drive a little bit down the hill. When he came back, he said, "It's really smoky. I think we should leave." I said, "I don't want to leave." He said, "Just get some things together."

So I'm walking around the house. I was just sort of stupid. I didn't want to go. But we did wake up our daughter and said, "We might have to leave so put some things in a bag." We got lucky in her case

because she was going on a camping trip with the Kenwood school so we had a sleeping bag and five outfits packed for this trip that she was about to take. So we had that for her.

When I found her – here's a moment of lightness -- she had packed her lunchbox with the leftovers from the fiesta-ware dish with the saran wrap on it. She had her lunch box packed. It was funny enough for me to take a picture of it. I'm like, "We have an emergency and here's what my daughter packs."

So I did pack. I grabbed my clothes from the night before. Not much. And then we went and sat on the bed. We've got the cat carriers and put the three cats in the carriers. We had a new kitten. It was actually much easier than we would have thought to corral all three cats into carriers. But they were on the bed.

So we're all sitting and "I don't know what to do." And Sean's like, "Well, we need to leave." I said, "Why don't you and Ella leave, and I'm going to stay." And then I started getting texts.

This is now closer to 3:00 in the morning according to when I looked at my text records. My friend, Theresa Hayle (3700 Trinity) from the mountain who was at her home in San Francisco, who could see the news, she called. She texted, "Are you leaving?" I had friends from Sonoma: "What are you guys doing? Are you going to come?" Somebody offered that we could come.

I was talking to my friend, Janice Apgar , on 4400 Cavedale. She said, "Well, there's no fire here. Why don't you come here?" So we were talking about going to her house.

And then it just seemed silly, "Why are we even going to leave?" You would think that there would be an emergency message or the police would call us or somebody would say, "Get out of the house."

"So why are we going to leave?" And then, boom, the electricity went out. And Sean was like, "That's it. We're leaving." And I really, really, really didn't want to but, "Fine." So we worked our way down the three-stories of the house to the garage, which was at the bottom of the house. We took two cars. He had to manually lift up the garage door because there was no power and got in the car.

I had the kitten in a brand-new cloth carrier. He had Ella and the other two cats. We backed down the driveway. I think he shut the garage door. I remember, I made the bed before we left because I was going to be humiliated if the firemen came in and saw that my room was a mess; just the silly things that go through your head.

But that's what I thought because I know all the firemen. I'm like, "Oh, they're going to make fun of me. Look at our laundry on the ground." The things that I thought to do and didn't do are pretty silly.

So anyway, Sean led and we went down Trinity towards Highway 12 because that would be the obvious and quickest way down. When we got around the Maple Glen/Margie Lane area, I called him. It was already scary driving down there. The wind was whip, whip, whip -- whipping the car.

The kitten had figured out and stuck his paw through the new thing and learned how to unzip it. So he's out, in the car walking around. As a new kitten, he thought it was awesome. So he was walking all over the car. It was just this horrible time.

But as we started driving down and got towards the Margie area, it looked like -- it was black below and black above, and then it was red. It was red like a sunset almost, only it wasn't a sunset. It was in the middle of the night. It looked like we were driving into what you would imagine as like Dante's Inferno or hell. It was this really weird thing, the smoke and the red and black. It looked like it was right there.

Because I had talked to Doty and then gotten a text from somebody else from San Francisco, what we had heard is the Gordenker Ranch was on fire. That's where we had the Mayacamas VFD fundraising dinner and auction--

Interviewer: That's right at the bottom of Trinity Road. So about two miles from you.

Lisa O'Connor: Right at the bottom of Trinity.

I'm like, "Why in the world would we even be able to pass in this direction? This is crazy." It's not like you see cars coming up. I'm like, "Are we stupid? There was nobody else on the road. Nobody." We were going down in these two cars. I called him, and I'm like, "I am not going a step further. This looks scary." He's like, "Yeah. I guess it does." So we turned around and I said, "I want to go back home." He said, "No, let's go up to the fire station," which is two-driveways up past our house at 3252 Trinity.

So I agreed. We backed up, turned around, up to the fire station, and we pull in. There's actually one of our fire trucks there and then there's this figure at the door. I get out of the car and I'm looking. I'm like, "Oh, it's Uncle Ted." (Ted Meyer of 6200 Cavedale)

Interviewer: It's one of the firemen that we all know. He's on the volunteer fire force.

Lisa O'Connor: Yep. He's an older fireman. I swear, he looked like a zombie. I think he looked right at me. I was two feet away from him. I said, "Uncle Ted, it's Lisa." And I swear, it was almost like smoke was coming off of him. It was just like in the movies. He was so tired. I mean, this was somewhere around 3:00 in the morning.

Interviewer: And this is somebody who had years of experience.

Lisa O'Connor: Years of experience.

And he said, "I've been down the hill." I think he was either in Kenwood or in Glen Ellen fighting the fire. He had to come back to refuel or whatever.

So we're trying to talk to him. We're like, "What are we supposed to do?" He's like, "I don't know." And then Sean said, "Well, should we call Jeanette?" who is his wife. He's didn't answer. And then he's like, "Yeah, yeah. She's got to go. Call Jeanette."

So it's our two cars and Uncle Ted at the fire station on this whole mountain. There's nobody else here at the fire station. It was so freaking weird. And it was dark and wind, wind, whip, whip -- whipping us around. The cats are in the car. And it's so smoky.

Interviewer: And how's your daughter doing with all of this?

Lisa O'Connor: She's doing better than everybody --

Interviewer: At the time?

Lisa O'Connor: At the time, she was okay. It was almost an adventure I think. Although, she was in the car with Sean. But I don't think she was crying or anything. She was handling it pretty well. I think she got out of the car at that point with us -- so the three of us.

And then all of a sudden, someone comes walking up on the side of the fire house and it's Claude Ganaye --

Interviewer: -- who lives next door to the fire house at 3250 Trinity.

Lisa O'Connor: -- and Trevor.

Yeah. The fire department's Station One is on their property. I guess Betty, Claude's wife, had been in the South Bay.

But they wanted to see what was going on. They were just smiling like, "What's going on?" I'm like, "Oh you've got to get Claude out of here. You've got to get out of here."

Interviewer: And Claude is 90.

Lisa O'Connor: Yeah. So we talked for another moment. We all decided, "Okay, we need to leave now." Although, I still wasn't feeling like the fire was going to come all the way up the hill. I mean, the Gordenker Ranch is so far. Nobody walks up the hill. It's a long way.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's five miles easily.

Lisa O'Connor: Yeah. And at that point though, when we were at the fire station, a highway patrol or some sort of police vehicle came by with a megaphone and didn't stop, didn't say anything. He saw all of us

and just said, "Time to evacuate," or something. It was very strange because it didn't seem that serious.

And honestly, if we had been in the house, there was no way we would have heard that. There was no possible way. You barely heard it standing at the firehouse.

So anyway, Uncle Ted finished what he was doing to get the fire truck back. And Trevor and Claude went back and said that they were going to evacuate.

We then decided, "So where are we going to go? What are we going to do?" We did have friends in the Boyes Hot Springs area who had offered us to come over and stay. So we said, "Okay. We're going to try Cavedale." And at that point, our choice was to go to Napa over on that side. And then I think we had heard a rumor that there might be a fire in Napa. Well, it turned out there were fires everywhere, right?

We didn't know if we could get down Cavedale. It was a really, really, really long journey with wind blowing the way it was. And there were leaves and branches hitting the cars. The cat got out again because he's smart. It was this new carrier.

There were parts in the road on Cavedale where a fireman or a citizen had cut chunks between the trees that were just barely wide enough for a car to fit through to escape. It took us a really, really,

really long time. I think it was in the neighborhood of 45 minutes or something like that.

Interviewer: Which is normally a 20-minute drive.

Lisa O'Connor: Yes. By the time of leaving our house, going down Trinity and up, it was hours.

But we did get down. When we got to the bottom of Highway 12, again, there's nobody. It's like we were the only people in the whole world, which didn't make any sense at all. I would have really liked to go right because I was also managing this house that we're doing this interview in. The people were on vacation, and there were house sitters in the house. There were two Airbnb guests in the two different units.

Interviewer: And this property is at the edge of Kenwood where you knew several properties had gone?

Lisa O'Connor: I already knew the property right behind it had gone up.

And I love the people who I watch this house for, their animals -- cats and dog -- and all of this.

Anyway, we went to Agua Caliente to our friends house. We loaded in there, and I made calls to the house sitter at this house. She didn't know what to do. She packed the dog and went to the Kenwood

Fire Station and left the cats. The Airbnb guests were texting me and I said, "Get out. Go." I had lots of people from all over the place texting at that point. So we were wide awake for hours and hours.

So I guess that's that part of the story, anyhow.

Interviewer: So you were in Boyes Hot Springs? How long did you stay there?

Lisa O'Connor: We stayed in Boyes the first night. It wasn't really a night. We might have gotten up and realized, "Okay. We have nothing. We can't go back to the house." I remembered that our fish was still there, Bob; our computers; Ella's college fund; passports. We didn't take anything. We took some clothes, some of which were dirty clothes, in fact, because it was dark by the time we decided to actually evacuate.

We tried to go back and we could go back to the house because we knew -- I have friends on the fire department, and I was on nextdoor.com. I was texting all night and all day; texting back and forth between various firefighters, retired firefighters who went into the hill and weren't maybe supposed to be there but were giving me information.

Interviewer: Or helping?

Lisa O'Connor: Yes. And I knew that our house was there. So I'm like, "That's it. We're going to go get Bob. We're going to go get the hard drives, and we're going to go get the cash from the safe just in case. I'm sure it's going to be fine." But they wouldn't let us through.

I happened to also have a job at that time at the Valley of the Moon Winery. So we went there and took a lot of pictures. We could see the fire on the mountain. We could see lots of helicopters. We could see that there was nothing being dropped on the area where we lived. But also, there was lots of smoke. And we could see that the fire was almost like on Cavedale on one side and coming up Nuns Canyon on the other side.

There is this raised area where they unload the grapes at the winery. So we were on this high thing. We watched for a long time. We also parked on Highway 12 and watched for a long time where the roadblock was at Hwy 12 and Madrone Road, and actually wound up seeing lots of people we knew because they also came to the roadblock to look up and see what was happening.

At this point, we've now heard that there were fires in Calistoga, Safari West, and in Santa Rosa at Fountain Grove, Coffee Park. Catherine's mom, who Catherine is the owner of this house -- I sort of manage the house -- is 90 years old. She was in Coffee Park. They got her out in her nightgown without her walker, just barely able to get her squished into a car to drive her to Oakland because

the houses were catching on fire one by one. She was in a retirement community there.

Anyhow, we were able to go into Sonoma. I had no underpants, for instance -- you know, these simple things. McCaulou's store in Sonoma wasn't open. I had to go to Rite Aid. I got a package of underpants that didn't fit; it was very irritating. I spent somewhere around \$350 or \$400 -- makeup, toothpaste, and stuff that we could use -- at Rite Aid. And then, of course, they wanted to charge me for a bag. I remember feeling just shocked. [Laughter] Yeah, "I guess I don't have any bags."

Interviewer: They're all at home.

Lisa O'Connor: Yeah, they're all at home.

So I think we stayed two or three nights there -- probably three, maybe two. I'd have to look at my calendar.

But at some point, we had to evacuate there because then suddenly, the fire was coming to Sonoma. You could see flames from Agua Caliente. I had friends in Boyes, on the other side of the street, who were unloading their horses because coming down Park Avenue, they thought the fires were coming. So we had to find another place to stay.

Interviewer: What news did you have of your house at this point?

Lisa O'Connor: Well, that news, it must have been that Tuesday morning when the fire chief, Will Horne and the fire chief's son, Anthony, called me. I was in bed, upstairs. All three of us were squished into the one bed with three cats in the room. That's kind of how we live now.

But we were up all night. I wish I could remember right now if it was two or three nights. It must have been two. The second night, in the morning, he called and said, "It's gone." Will called on my phone. He's like, "I'm sorry. We couldn't protect it."

I had known that they were holding the fire line right before my house from some of the firemen. The night before, they were holding it at 3000 Trinity. It was on nextdoor.com. "They're holding the fire at 3000." And then they abandoned that tactic and went to try to knock on doors about that to get people out.

So when they abandoned that line, my house was at 3001. And he said, "I'm sorry. It's gone." But I respect him and Anthony for being able to make that call.

Part of their call was because I had actually called them. My friend, Mary Loban (5800 Cavedale), was in distress the night before because Grant, her husband and a former MVFD firefighter, had disappeared. He was no longer a fireman. I know he used his bull dozer thing to make paths around his house and everything. But it turned out that he and Aaron Jean had gone to Uncle Ted's --

Interviewer: -- who are two people who used to be on the fire department.

Lisa O'Connor: Mm-hmm -- to the Ted-Lou Ranch. They actually were fired-in on the ranch. They were stuck in there. But they were protecting the ranch. That's where they were, and Mary Loban didn't know it. She thought something had happened to Grant. So it took them hours, and they did finally find them. So that was also part of the phone call reason, "Did you find Grant yet?"

Anyway, they said, "It's gone." I said, "Well, what about the yard studio? What about --?" We had three barns. We had a trailer. They said, "It's all gone." And I said, "Well, did you go up onto the driveway and look?" They said, "No. I'm telling you, it's gone." So that's how I knew.

Then the fire was coming into Sonoma. So a few hours later, we had to go to Oakland to more friends' houses. That drive to Oakland -- Oh my God -- just to get from Agua Caliente to 37, it had to be two and a half hours.

Interviewer: -- which is normally a 30-minute drive.

Lisa O'Connor: If that. From there, it could have been 20 or 15 minutes. There were so many people coming out on every street, like from Grove where the Bonneau's 76 gas station is.

We were stopped, and I was furious. We were in our two cars and, again, with the cats. Wasn't life already hard enough? I had underwear that didn't fit me. [Laughs] I'm tired. I mean, I'm being silly, but it was like --

Interviewer: It's the little things that just get you.

Lisa O'Connor: I mean, the few things we had, all this crap in the cars, and we're sitting there. I'm so tired, and I'm so upset because now I know my house has burned down. It's hot.

We have to take this long drive to Oakland. It would have been a long drive without being stopped for a couple of hours on Arnold Drive. I didn't want to go to Oakland. I didn't want to leave Agua Caliente. I didn't want to leave the Valley. I didn't want to leave my whatever I had left on the mountain. But that's what we had to do.

So I let Sean take the lead on that. We once again evacuated. It was pretty miserable, and it was a pretty miserable drive to Oakland.

Interviewer: I'm sure. So then you were there until you got to come back?

Lisa O'Connor: Yes. We were there for about a week with some friends who Sean had gone to college with on the east coast. We stayed in their basement. We started going to Ross; got some underwear that fit; got Ella one toy.

I think if we hadn't had that kitten, that's probably what saved her. She's only lived in one house. She was 11 at the time. She's only lived in one house. She's probably spoiled. She had 12 American Girl dolls and all kinds of electronics and all kinds of stuff. We had just redone her room. She had a new closet and all of this stuff.

But this kitten, on the way to Oakland, sat on her lap. She would pet him. When we evacuated to Oakland, she had him. He was very loving. She had him so she was okay.

I never ever would have agreed to get another cat, because that would make three, if we thought we were going to be living in one room. I think it saved her and us in a lot of ways.

Interviewer: That's like our dog with our son.

So then you came back the first time you could?

Lisa O'Connor: The first time we came back, we came back to this house; the one we're doing the interview now in Kenwood (1 Mound Ave). It was burned up to this fence here and part of this fence was burned down, a total devastation.

Interviewer: So just 30, 50 feet from the house itself.

Lisa O'Connor: Yep. So when we came back, we came in -- and I, obviously, knew the property very well because I managed it. We moved into one of

the units. And two other fire victims who are friends of my friend and boss were in the other unit at that time. We were tired and hot. We went down to Palooza in Kenwood to just get a quick bite.

Interviewer: -- which is a local pub.

Lisa O'Connor: -- a local pub just two minutes from here. And we got some milk at the Kenwood market next door. We weren't gone for more than 45 minutes and then came back. But on Warm Springs Road, the National Guard set up a blockade and wouldn't let us back through to here.

The cats were here. It was Sean and I and Doty, our friend who also lives in Kenwood who had stayed the whole time, by the way, when he wasn't supposed to and protected houses up in the Kenilworth area. He was a fireman from Mayacamas as well.

So they wouldn't let us through. I had had just about enough. And I'm a pretty nice girl. I always follow the rules. But I got out of the car with my gallon of milk in one hand and my daughter in the other hand who was now crying. It was getting dark I guess. I walked past them. I said, "I'm going. You're going to have to stop me."

So I left Sean in the car. I walked past of these guards with my milk and my kid and walked all the way -- not that far -- walked up

Warm Springs Road to this house, went upstairs, put the milk in and that was it. Sean was on his own. I'd had it.

They did block people in and out of this area every day for at least a week after that. And, of course, we didn't have an ID with this address on it. Actually, most people in Kenwood did not have an ID with their address because Kenwood uses P.O. boxes. So those people's driver licenses have a P.O. box. So a lot of people couldn't get in and out of their homes here.

I have a friend on the police department. And I came to find out that there were at least seven looters a day in Kenwood looting these houses. So they were there for good reason. But it was quite a shock to have these people with these guns and stuff and these Hummers.

Interviewer: And you were already dealing with so much.

Lisa O'Connor: Yeah. It was hard. "Do I look like I'm going to loot?" I don't know what a looters looks like, but I'm pretty sure I didn't look like that at the time. When I escaped the house, I threw on a pair of cowboy boots and yesterday's dress. I was not looking like a looter at that point. I was looking pretty disheveled.

Interviewer: So you eventually got to go back up to your property?

Lisa O'Connor: Yes, we did. I don't even know when. It was certainly at least a week until we could go back. It was the same time everybody else could, and the National Guard was there as well.

When we went up there, I certainly wasn't prepared for what I was going to see. There was nothing. It was lots and lots of half-black trees. Those pine trees that were not native that they planted after the last fire, most of those burned about halfway. So we had acres of sticks in the dirt. The house looked like it was three inches high; like three stories went to three inches.

I later heard that the houses where I lived burned from embers from the top down. A fireman, Uncle Ted (Ted Meyer), saw the pink house on the ridge (2615 Trinity). That would have been next to us. They saw it; it was there. And then minutes later, it was gone.

And the embers -- because the winds were whipping, the circles were throwing the embers on the tops of houses. So no matter how much fire retardant stuff you had around your house, it burned from the top-down.

One of our neighbors had a completely, supposedly, fireproof house; a wealthy neighbor with a really expensive new house on that property that Jim Hallock had burned 20 years ago. But the new house was finally built. It burned, and it shouldn't have.

So apparently, there was nothing we could have done. We couldn't leave the water on anyway because there was no power for the water to keep things wet. But I guess, if the embers hit you from the top, there's nothing you can do.

Sean had brewing equipment in there with propane tanks. Things burned really, really hot. Our fireproof safe burned. I mean, there was still a skeleton of it, but it like cooked the money and the jewels. There were some boxes that you could actually almost open. But then there was charcoal inside.

I didn't want to wear the masks. It was really hard. It was so dirty. There were pieces of metal. We had a lot of modern furniture. So everything we had was sort of melted together. There were streams of silver and aluminum and crystal. Our wine cellar burned. There were bottles fused together.

There were some bottles with wine still in it. I even picked one up. There were champagne bottles that still had the corks and the wire wrapper on them but no Champagne in them. The champagne had steamed out of the cork. It was bizarre, like some of the most bizarre things I've ever seen.

So, yeah, it was hard.

Interviewer: So now that you look back, are you going to rebuild and move back?

Lisa O'Connor: Yeah. Honestly, when we first saw the mess and the view and the landscape and everything that's so ugly now, I didn't want to move back. And the only reason we are rebuilding is because of the way our insurance is structured. If it wasn't structured the way it was, we would have just taken the money, sold the property, and bought something somewhere else.

But our insurance was structured in that we had a rider on our insurance. So if you rebuilt, you would be eligible for a 50 percent rider. That means we would have been giving up quite a bit of money. So it made economic sense. Even if we decided, "Okay. We'll rebuild and sell it," it still made more sense to do that.

But I still go up there. It's a year later, and it is still just as ugly. Now, they've scraped up all the remains of my life; my art studio and my portfolios from college; every piece of art that I've ever done that didn't sell; all of Sean's brewing equipment; our barns full of -- we're big into Halloween costumes and Christmas ornaments; so three barns, a trailer, the pump house; everything.

So it's still ugly though. It's still there with all those black trees. We have zero landscaping dollars available to us. We're city people so I don't know how we're going to ever change the land.

But we had a couple of architects come up and give us bids. It was all very shocking, the costs. We wound up settling on a company

that does manufactured walls. They weren't any cheaper than an architect design house. It was the idea that they were supposed to be a little bit faster. But here we are, a year later, and we haven't broken ground yet. So nothing is fast.

Interviewer: So if you move back there, eventually, do you think the way you live or the way you organize, thinking about a potential future fire, will change?

Lisa O'Connor: Oh yeah. We are going to move back. I don't know if we'll stay there forever now. Before, I would have said we were going to stay there forever. We might. I mean, now, we're going to have a big beautiful house with a lot more cement.

I mean, in looking at this house, every choice that I am making has to do with cement. I want cement and metal. I just talked to a landscaper here, "Do you ever do hardscapes? Have you ever been to Cornerstone?" It's a garden gallery, the Sunset place. There are hardscapes where people use metal windmills and rocks and all kinds of things.

I don't want anything that burns. Before, I was the big tree-hugger. I didn't want any trees cut down. Now, I told Sean, "Cut any tree you want. Cut every tree. I don't care. I'm not going to get plants. I'm not going to get anything that burns. I want cement siding. I want metal. I want cement. I want a cement truck for my Birthday."

That's what I said. [Laughter] I'm not kidding. I mean, I want cement everywhere. Because I won't feel --

Interviewer: -- safe.

Lisa O'Connor: Yeah. I won't, especially now after hearing all of these stories. There were people here in the '60s during the fire that I didn't really know a whole lot about. It burned the same path.

Interviewer: Yeah. So we should begin to wrap up. Is there anything else that you think is useful to share or that you want to share?

Lisa O'Connor: I think it has probably been shared. But if somebody is reading this or seeing it or hearing it in the future, then I would say, "If somebody loses everything, they would never wish that on you." There are so many people around here who seem to feel so guilty that it didn't happen to them. I wouldn't wish this on anybody.

We have learned that there are really a lot of very generous strangers out there. Within the week of us coming back here, a stranger bought Ella a Chromebook.

Interviewer: Wow.

Lisa O'Connor: It just arrived in the mail for her. Then there were some teachers who put our names on a couple of lists. So people were sending us

things from Amazon. The Rotary gave us some money. People were giving us gift cards. People we just didn't know, they'd reach out.

When we were in Oakland, one of the Elementary School teachers from Dunbar School -- her name is Renee Magnani, and she's a friend of mind -- she had somebody come and drop off two or three suitcases with cat food and clothes in Oakland because we had nothing. They dropped it on the porch. They didn't want to bother us. So you'll find that there are a lot of generous people out there.

But I want to go back. So what did we learn? If somebody loses everything, don't offer to loan them anything because loaning them, it's too hard to keep track of. When you've lost everything, your mind is crazy, and you don't want to owe people anything. We found, for a lot of people, that seems to be difficult.

And be smart. Take your passport. The amount of money, let alone the time (!), to replace birth certificates and wedding certificates and passports, it's crazy. Several hundred dollars to replace things that burned up. I guess it should be obvious. You take all of that. You take your hard drives with all of the baby pictures. You take your money.

But again, I didn't know we weren't coming back. I didn't believe we weren't coming back. I never believed that. I believed that things would burn, but we had the fire department within two blocks of

our house. I didn't think it would ever, ever burn. But the house burned down.

Like I said, "I thought of maybe having an earthquake. And if an earthquake happened, you'll be able to retrieve your stuff. It'll be smooshed or whatever." But fire takes everything and it makes it very ugly and greasy and toxic.

Interviewer: Yep. Okay. Well, I'll stop it there.

[End of recorded material]