

MVFD Fire History Project

Tiernan Colby, Cavedale Resident
Interviewed by Allison Ash

September 3, 2018



Transcription service provided by



Tigerfish
Transcribing-Editing

www.tigerfish.com

TiernanColby by AA 030918

[Start of recorded material]

Interviewer: It should be recording. Yep.

Okay. So Tiernan, I just told you this is a history project. We're going to record your story of the fire. What I'd like you to do is just say your name for the recording and your address and that you know you're being recorded.

Tiernan Colby: Hi, my name is Tiernan Colby and I am thirteen. Our address is 4435 Cavedale Road, and I am being recorded.

Interviewer: Great. You can just talk to me. You don't have to worry about the recorder at all. It's interesting. We've talked to a lot of adults about the fire. You're a young person and your perspectives are probably really different about the fire.

I'd kind of like to start out before the fire. You lived up on the mountain. As a kid you don't get to choose where you live. You just grew up where your parents' home was up here on the mountain. And so I'm just curious, did you have any thoughts about fire or worries about fire, or were you conscious of living in a fire-prone area or anything like that?

Tiernan Colby: I was aware of the fire risk, and my dad did a good job of being aware of it and clearing the area for it, and that helped us a lot. And just being informed about it and interacting with the Mayacamas

Board -- my dad worked there for many years -- and just being surrounded by all those resources.

Interviewer: And so you were aware of it sort of intellectually. Were you worried or afraid before the fires hit or anything? Did it get to that kind of emotional level?

Tiernan Colby: I wasn't really worried about it because I knew -- it was what it was. We couldn't control it. If it happened, which it would -- I think we all kind of knew that it would come eventually -- that we would just have to deal with it to the best of our ability.

Interviewer: Yeah. I can't actually remember. Were you born up here, born in a hospital, but I mean did you grow up here from day one or did you guys move here?

Tiernan Colby: I moved here about two months after I was born. I was born in San Francisco and we lived there for a month or two and then I moved here.

Interviewer: Okay, so all of your conscious memory is living on the mountain?

Tiernan Colby: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. How about your friends at school before the fire? Did anybody talk about it? Just was it a thing or not a thing?

Tiernan Colby: Talk about fires? Fire safety? No. Not at school

Interviewer: Yeah.

Tiernan Colby: I hadn't heard anything about that.

Interviewer: And so that Sunday night when the fires hit, tell me a little bit about that. What do you remember?

Tiernan Colby: It was super windy. It was extremely windy the night before. We were thinking the trees would fall and there's a good chance that power would go out.

Interviewer: Did you go outside in the wind?

Tiernan Colby: I did not, but we had to close all our doors and windows and we saw trees going back and forth and it was really windy.

Interviewer: Had you ever seen wind like that before?

Tiernan Colby: I'm not sure. I think I probably had, but it was one of the most up at the mountain that we had seen.

Interviewer: Yeah. And then what?

Tiernan Colby: I went to bed and --

Interviewer: Do you know what time that was?

Tiernan Colby: Probably around 10. I woke up at, I believe, about 4 AM. I went to the bathroom to get some water because I was thirsty, and I saw these glows out in the distance.

Interviewer: Which direction?

Tiernan Colby: Out in the Santa Rosa direction.

Interviewer: Okay, so sort of northwest?

Tiernan Colby: Yes, northwest. Yeah, a little more west, but yeah. I saw another one. I wasn't quite sure what it was at that time, but I didn't really think of it.

Interviewer: Were your parents up?

Tiernan Colby: I was not sure at that time. My mom was the only -- My dog, me and my mom were the only people there. My dad was in Europe.

Interviewer: [a cell phone rings] Okay. Sorry about that.

Tiernan Colby: That's fine.

Interviewer: Mute my phone.

Tiernan Colby: I don't remember. But I remember I thought through the glows and what they were, but I didn't think of it that much. I went back to sleep, and then a few hours later my mom woke me up and said there were fires and we got ready.

Interviewer: Do you know what time that was?

Tiernan Colby: I think we -- I think that was at 6.

Interviewer: A.M.?

Tiernan Colby: Yes, 6 in the morning, and we just got our stuff.

Interviewer: Do you remember what she said to you?

Tiernan Colby: "There are fires. You need to get up."

Interviewer: Did that scare you?

Tiernan Colby: No.

Interviewer: How did you feel when she said that?

Tiernan Colby: Just got to do what you got to do. Let's get out of here and then worry about it later.

Interviewer: Did your mom seem worried?

Tiernan Colby: No. She was very calm, which helped everybody.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Tiernan Colby: And Bocce our dog just stayed or stuck around us, with us. He was nervous because -- yeah.

Interviewer: What were you seeing when you got up at 6? What did you see?

Tiernan Colby: I went downstairs and I saw big glows across in multiple points coming. I can't really tell if they were coming toward us, but they were larger than when I woke up and ominous, they were ominous.

Interviewer: Were you hearing strange sounds or smelling smoke?

Tiernan Colby: I wasn't hearing anything or smelling anything. It was just the glow and that kind of was -- that kind of took my attention. We got ready and called our neighbors, Barb and Janet (4429 Cavedale) and we left.

Interviewer: You called Barb Phelan and Janet Niehoff?

Tiernan Colby: Yes. My mom told them to get ready because there are fires. We left together and went down towards Sonoma.

Interviewer: When your mom said get ready, what did you do? What did you and your mom do to get ready?

Tiernan Colby: I packed stuff. I packed things.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you packed?

Tiernan Colby: I packed things that were memorable to me. I packed my baseball cards. I packed this gold coin that my grandmother gave to me a long time ago. I didn't pack that much, just some clothes. Wasn't really that much. I think a picture but I'm not sure. It was in my duffel bag and we left. She was able to pack a lot of things.

Interviewer: Do you know some of the things your mom packed?

Tiernan Colby: I don't remember, exactly. She packed some cutlery that she got back in France when my father -- when they got married, and so that was memorable to them. Basically a whole trunk of cutlery and utensils and all these cool -- and it was memorable to her, so that's what she got.

Interviewer: Were you guys packing up in a hurry, like you were urgently needing to leave?

Tiernan Colby: We did not because my mom woke up earlier than that and was kind of surveying it and was already packing when she woke me up, and we were just -- It wasn't slow. We were quickly packing, but

not with any tension or panic. We were very fortunate that we had that time.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you remember doing anything to help your house keep from burning?

Tiernan Colby: Not anything at the moment. But just going back to what my father did, clearing defensible space around the house, and that I'm certain that's what helped save most of it in the end.

Interviewer: Yeah. When you were evacuating, when you were packing and getting in the car, what were you thinking? Were you conscious that your house might burn or did you not think about it? What was your mindset?

Tiernan Colby: My mindset was that there is a very -- there's a good chance that it will burn. I had at feeling at the back of my mind that it just wasn't going to burn. I don't know if it was a feeling or just some positive mentality. Just have to get through this and move on and do what we can do and not what we could've done.

Interviewer: Were you ever worried about your life or did you ever feel in danger?

Tiernan Colby: I did not feel in danger to myself. I felt in danger to our property and then other people's property as we went and met up with some other people. I felt very worried about them. For instance, some of

my closest friends, [Steven] and Alex, they lived on a street that all but their house and one other house did not burn on.

Interviewer: What street is that?

Tiernan Colby: Bonnie Way in Kenwood.

Interviewer: Oh goodness.

Tiernan Colby: And Sylvia was just -- Yeah, it was right next to Sylvia.

Interviewer: Yeah, Sylvia was very, very bad. You guys packed up and you left. Do you remember what time you left?

Tiernan Colby: I think it was around 6:30.

Interviewer: Real quick. Yeah.

Tiernan Colby: Something was at 6. I think we either left or at 6 or I woke up at 6. [Not sure if we left at 6.]

Interviewer: Yeah. And where did you go?

Tiernan Colby: We went down the hill, down the Cavedale side, and we went into Sonoma. Actually, our friends -- Dean and Alex's, my friends' parents, was the first warning. So at 12:00 or whatever, she called or texted my mom to warn her of it.

Interviewer: 12:00 on Sunday night?

Tiernan Colby: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Tiernan Colby: We met up at this other family's place in Sonoma and we played ping-pong there, just try to get our minds off of whatever it was. Took our dogs for a walk. They had a dog and we took our dogs for a walk. That was fun just to be with friends for a little bit.

Interviewer: Let's see, where was I? You came down mountain and you got together with your friends, but where were you going to spend the night? You had a dog with you.

Tiernan Colby: What we did was -- I believe it was that night or that midday to evening is that we drove into San Francisco. Yeah, so in the morning to midday we drove into San Francisco. My dad has an aunt who lives there and they have a property in Napa, so we were all kind of piling into that house. She has an apartment that we've stayed in before, and we just used that as a base for a few days until we were able to get another hotel and eventually go back into Sonoma for another night and then find a rental place.

Interviewer: How many days were you evacuated?

Tiernan Colby: We were evacuated for multiple weeks, two to three weeks, I think, so it was definitely a long time.

Interviewer: And so you were in San Francisco for a few days and then you went to a hotel?

Tiernan Colby: We were in San Francisco for a few days, and then we went to a hotel in San Francisco, and then we went back to that place to my aunt's. And then eventually we went back to Sonoma, stayed the night in the Sonoma Inn, and then we found a rental place in Kenwood to stay. That was one of the --

Interviewer: [Crosstalk] long term. During the evacuation period, how were you getting news? Would you come to Sonoma sometimes?

Tiernan Colby: No, we were watching the TV on the news and just --

Interviewer: Were you guys using Nextdoor for information?

Tiernan Colby: We were using Nextdoor. The pictures that you posted, we were looking at that. One of them, a house had burned on it and we thought it was ours, but then we figured out that it was not. And then the craziest moment probably was we got a text message with an image attached from one of a friend -- a parent of one of my friends who used to go to my elementary school, and that was a picture of our property and fires burning on our property but our house unscathed so far.

Interviewer: How did they get that photo?

Tiernan Colby: From the news. We weren't watching it at that time, and that was pretty crazy.

Interviewer: Wow. What did you think when you saw that?

Tiernan Colby: It's not burned down yet.

Interviewer: What were you feeling?

Tiernan Colby: Feeling that it was just -- it was definitely scary because we knew that it was right there and we knew that there would definitely be damage no matter what happened further, but we knew there's still a chance for the house to make it through.

Interviewer: Yeah. How was your mom and how was -- It must've been hard for your dad being away at that time.

Tiernan Colby: My mom was very strong and she was being very calm. My dad eventually came back. He came back pretty soon and then we reunited and that was good, and everybody was just a little calmer after that. We met up in my aunt's house, as I said. There was a lot of us there and we were able to share stories and have dinner and just kind of relax and just kind of try to get life back to normal as you can if you're evacuated.

Interviewer: Yeah, hard. When you were evacuated you had taken a few things. When you reflected on it, did you take the things that you think you -- Would you do it differently?

Tiernan Colby: If I were able to do it differently I would just take more things because I had more time. There wasn't anything specific that I regretted not bringing. I'm sure my mom left things that she regretted and probably could've brought a few bottles of wine, but unfortunately that didn't work out. Nothing really stands out.

Interviewer: Yeah. Did you guys get up to your property during evacuation past the barricades at all or was the first time you got back when the evacuation was lifted?

Tiernan Colby: The first time we got back was pretty soon after evacuation was lifted. My parents went up for one day. We weren't able to get past before. Yeah. I was in San Francisco when they were up here, so that was -- I was a little nervous that I wasn't able to be there, but I understand why.

Interviewer: Why weren't you able to be there?

Tiernan Colby: Probably because it was just a little too crazy with everything there. I was there just keep with Bocce because he would be really wild. His tail was bleeding because we were moving around so much and

he got so excited and that was a big issue and we had to -- and I had to take care of that.

Interviewer: Yeah, it must've been hard because you would be so curious to see what your parents were seeing. What did they report?

Tiernan Colby: That the house is fine. I got a call that the house is fine but the out buildings were not and the property was heavily damaged, but I was relieved.

Interviewer: The out buildings on your property were heavily damaged?

Tiernan Colby: All four of them were destroyed.

Interviewer: Okay. When did you get to the property?

Tiernan Colby: I got to the property probably a few days after my parents first went and just looked around and worked on various things with my dad. He was doing projects and my mom was busy trying to get us a place to stay, which was hard, but we eventually found a couple.

Interviewer: Yeah, so you needed a place to stay because you couldn't inhabit your home. [Crosstalk]

Tiernan Colby: Correct, because it did not have electricity and it did not have water at that time.

Interviewer: Got it.

Tiernan Colby: We stayed in Kenwood for a few months and then moved twice more within Kenwood.

Interviewer: That day that you went to your property for the first time after the fire, I know it's been almost a year, but describe what you saw and describe how you felt.

Tiernan Colby: All the trees and everything was destroyed. It was very sickening because there were still lots of trees. The trees were still there by there were no leaves. They were black. It was just -- It was not good and it was very sad because I'd been there obviously a lot and interacted with nature there, and that was close to me and most of it was destroyed.

Interviewer: Yeah. Describe a little bit about -- you said there was damage. Can you kind of go through what actually happened?

Tiernan Colby: The fire caught -- Our garage, and then we have a woodshed close to the garage, and the woodpile near the woodshed caught on fire and then burned the woodshed and then burned the inside of the garage, not the outside frame but the inside of it somehow. And then we had an older house burn, but that was just used for storage. An old building that was used many years ago was burned as well, and then there were damage to the house itself. Would you like me to explain that?

Interviewer: Sure.

Tiernan Colby: It was water damage because the sparks had burned holes through the roof. And then when the rains came afterwards, the water fell through into the house and there was water damage.

Interviewer: Goodness. What were you feeling when you came back after the fire and you were seeing the burned buildings?

Tiernan Colby: It was very devastating because I'd been around that my whole life. It was just very sad, but I knew we would just have to do what we could do and work with what we have, and we did and we moved on.

Interviewer: Did you and your parents talk a lot about it, about how you were feeling and how you were going to get through?

Tiernan Colby: Not really. We just kind of focused on what we had to do now, that was pretty much my mindset, and what we could do and what we were able to control.

Interviewer: Yeah. You said the power and the water -- you didn't have power and water?

Tiernan Colby: Because the water tank burned, the roof of it did, and then the roof fell down and it clogged the drain, I believe, and the pipes were

burned. We got water pretty soon after, like a few weeks after, but electricity -- Actually we got electricity first and then a while after we got water back, and that was a big issue. But we were able to -- And then the repairs to the floors is what took the most time. That's what delayed us and that took many months.

Interviewer: Yeah, so you had said something that I want to go back to. When you came back seeing the silhouettes of trees and the ecology was just devastated and you had said that's important to you. I know that you've done a lot with Bouverie Preserve and etc. But tell me a little bit more about your relationship to the land and the ecology.

Tiernan Colby: When I was younger and I just would go out there for walks or whatever with friends trying to make new trails and making little secret areas and exploring that, and climbing trees and rocks, and that was really fun. That was really unfortunate when all of that got destroyed and we were not able to interact with it as well as I was once able to, and it will take a long time for it to grow back.

Interviewer: Do you remember specific plants or rocks and what was around them?

Tiernan Colby: We had rock piles that one particular friend and I used to go on top of and kind of carve rocks, and that was really fun. And just the area around it, all the underbrush and whatever, were destroyed. The oak trees were destroyed pretty much, all the other trees, and that was unfortunate.

Interviewer: And so what are you seeing now with the ecology? What are you noticing? Because I know you're a very observant person.

Tiernan Colby: So there are -- trees are sprouting back up.

Interviewer: They're what?

Tiernan Colby: Some of the sprouts are coming. Poison oak is coming back a lot, and we're just kind of letting it be for now. Some plants have come back and it's nice to see. But obviously no trees have really come back because they're just so damaged and not enough time yet. Unfortunately a lot of trees have been, our opinion, were not necessary were taken down by PG&E for clearing for the lines, including a lawn on our property recently. That was a little unfortunate because we think there was a chance that they could've survived.

Interviewer: Do you know what kind of trees they were?

Tiernan Colby: They were oaks. But they were not completely burned on the bark, there were still some areas that they weren't, and PG&E took them down.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about what your school life was. After evacuation, you're living in all these different homes and you still

go to school. But what was it like with your friends and teachers post fire?

Tiernan Colby: So many, about a hundred or so, which was a ninth of the school, was affected by the fire. A lot of people lost their homes. There was a lot of response to it. Everybody was aware of it. The teachers offered aid and they were relaxed with people getting back into it and knowing that they had struggles and it would be harder for them to do certain assignments or certain things. We took off slow and we shared our stories. There was a school response program, which gave out little gifts and stuff and gift cards and things like that to people who were affected.

Interviewer: When you shared your story, was there anything in particular, any anecdote that you shared that was either really good or really bad, or what did you share?

Tiernan Colby: I didn't really share that much because I know a lot of people were worse, were much worse off, who had lost their homes, than me, because I knew I was very lucky. So I didn't really share that much.

Interviewer: Did you feel lucky after the fire?

Tiernan Colby: Yes, because given what happened and what could've happened in that we still have our house and unfortunately what happened to a lot of people.

Interviewer: Yeah. What are your thoughts about fire and fire safety now? Have they changed since the fire?

Tiernan Colby: Up here, no, because we were prepared for a long time, or not really prepared, but we were knowing of it. But I think it's more important for lower communities in the valley to know because we were prepared and they were the ones who were harder hit quicker, and I don't think they were very -- They didn't really know that much about it. They [weren't] knowledgeable about it. I think just generally in any area that it is important to be aware of just certain natural risks that present itself.

Interviewer: I know you do a lot of community work with your Boy Scouts or outside Boy Scouts. Can you talk a little bit about what sorts of things you did after the fire?

Tiernan Colby: We did the clean up up here on Cavedale, the Cavedale clean up where we -- for Boy Scouts -- for two to three hours just on this stretch of road. Just picked up bottles because all this garbage was very visible after all this brush had burned up. So, we took it out and put it in trash bags and disposed of that, and it was nice and it felt good.

Interviewer: Yeah. Cool. Anything else in that regard? Were you doing anything with Bouverie?

Tiernan Colby: I went to a Bouverie hike and then we kind of outlined what the fire affected in Bouverie. Bouverie had a controlled burn a few years ago so that area didn't burn, which was very good for them, but unfortunately they lost a few structures.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Tiernan Colby: I didn't really go to any relief programs for them.

Interviewer: Yeah. I have a list of questions that I think we covered most of this, but I'm just going to review them and see where we're at. When you look back over this time of the fire and the evacuation, were there any particular frustrations, like things that drove you nuts or you were frustrated by because you couldn't control them?

Tiernan Colby: I think that maybe the response time for getting -- for clearing the areas and allowing us to get back and by PG&E or whoever did that, that was a bit frustrating that it took three weeks to get back. But for pretty much else, for everything else, it was a little -- it was okay because I knew that I couldn't control it. It was just everybody was struggling and just had to be grateful as a community and help each other get through it kind of response.

Interviewer: How about on the other side of that? Were there moments of joy or levity through this whole process that kind of stand out either with your friends or your family?

Tiernan Colby: I think the community responding and being so gracious to each other, especially here, that really stood out. Just people being respectful of others who have lost their homes and lost things and finding -- that was very good by the whole community and my friends.

Interviewer: Looking back, is there anything you would do differently?

Tiernan Colby: It's hard because a lot of things were not in our control. Probably if it was possible to have my dad home, because then we would have another car so we could take more things and maybe take some wine, because my mom missed that when all the wine was destroyed.

Interviewer: Your mom's a winemaker, so that she lost her stuff she made?

Tiernan Colby: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Tiernan Colby: In her wine cellar, and that was unfortunate. With my dad's car, so it was left alone for three weeks. When we got back there was a huge rat's nest in the engine, which was really crazy but dangerous because that could've exploded and that would've been a problem. Just to find a rat nest in the car, that's crazy.

Interviewer: Yeah. Those wood rats all their homes got burned and we've had them move into our cars and our barbecue and all sorts of places, too. They're just trying to find a home. Anything else about evacuation and what you took that you would do differently?

Tiernan Colby: Just probably bring some of my other baseball things, like some baseballs to remind me of little league and what I did and those memories because those were good memories. Maybe some more pictures. That's pretty much it.

Interviewer: How about your day-to-day life now that you're back home? Are there changes?

Tiernan Colby: Other than the landscape there are not a lot of changes. We're still kind of -- There's still some stuff that need to be moved back in. My room isn't as good as I want it to be yet. But there's not a huge difference now just other than the views.

Interviewer: Your perspective as a young person, none of us were in control of things during the fire. We come back and we have to deal with what we have. But as a young person you're even more not in control because you have to do what your parents are doing or what your parents say. Do you think your experience of the fire is different than adults for that reason or for any reason?

Tiernan Colby: I think I had a lot less stress than my mother because she had to organize everything without my dad and figure out what to do and

make judgment calls at the moment and where to go, and she did a very good job of that. But I think I just trusted her and kind of followed and tried to be as helpful as possible because I knew she needed the help.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you remember about the fire or you wanted to add to this interview that I haven't asked about?

Tiernan Colby: My aunt's boyfriend has a condo in Napa on Silverado, and she was there at that time and he rents out that. Some people were there at that time, so he was alerted of that and he told the people to move because the fires. And he had a very close encounter as he was trying to get out of that area with the fires. He basically drove into a wall of flame and then he turned around and got out of there and drove down to San Francisco. They have two places over there. Both of them were okay in the end, but it was very close. He had to go get the renter's stuff afterwards.

Interviewer: That's a close encounter. Anything else?

Tiernan Colby: Not that I can think of.

Interviewer: Okay. Tiernan, thank you very much.

Tiernan Colby: Yeah.

Interviewer: Let's turn this off.

[End of recorded material]