

Rotary Leads Sonoma Valley Fire Relief Efforts



By Greg Brennan
Photos by Will Murray and others

Besides unusually high winds blowing branches off trees in his neighborhood, it would have seemed a Sunday evening like any other for Tony Moll, a Rotarian in Sonoma, California, and Meagan, his wife. When he looked out their bedroom window as they prepared for sleep, he realized this Sunday evening was different than anything he'd ever seen. "There was this massive glow on the hillside," Moll said.



He was staring at the beginning of the Partrick Fire on October 8, 2017, one of four wildfires that ultimately burned more than 245,000 acres in Northern California's wine country the following two weeks. Moll learned quickly that he wasn't looking at the only wildfire in the wine country. "We got a text from our friends in Glen Ellen saying, 'We've been evacuated. We're losing everything. The fire is raging toward our house.' "



Moll did the only thing he could think of to help. He loaded his car with bottled water to deliver to CalFire units—part of California's firefighting division that was already responding to the Nuns Fire in the neighboring town of Glen Ellen where Moll's friends lived. "I got onto Dunbar Road," Moll said, "and all of a sudden a wall of fire comes over the hill. It was ten feet high as far as I could see right and left. I just

remember chucking the water out at the CalFire trucks and ripping back towards the sanity of Sonoma.”



Moll spent the next few hours checking on friends and family, and tracking the fires via social media. About 3:00 a.m., he ran into Gary Edwards, a fellow Rotarian and a Sonoma City Councilmember. “We’ve got to do something,” Moll said to Edwards. “They evacuated Glen Ellen and there’s no place for those people to go.”

“Sonoma’s city manager and police chief were establishing an emergency operations center,” said Edwards. “We knew that the high school would become the evacuation center.” The center needed 200 blankets and almost as many pillows. Edwards and Rotarian Eliot Carter found bedding and arranged its delivery to the high school about thirty minutes after Edwards received the request.



Monday morning as the smoke-filled skies blocked the new day's sun, Moll fired up the pizza ovens at The Red Grape, a restaurant owned by Sam Morphy, his father-in-law and past president of Rotary Club of Sonoma. "We wanted to help feed first responders," said Moll. "Sam was in Hong Kong with my mother-in-law, Carol, but I knew he'd do the same thing."

Delivering water to firefighters, finding bedding for and delivering it to the evacuation center, and feeding first-responders were the Rotarians' initial responses to the emergency, all of which occurred just hours after Moll looked out his bedroom window. Edwards smiled as he explained the Rotarians' strategy behind their nearly immediate response to the emergency, "We didn't have a playbook. We made it up as we went along. Tony led the charge."



The hurricane-force winds that whipped the wine country fires into furies died down on that Monday. But the devastation the fires brought was significant and occurred faster than the Rotarians' response to help. In just a few hours, for example, the Tubbs Fire started in Calistoga and raced across nine miles of hilly oak woodlands to Santa

Rosa. Not much later it jumped the freeway, reducing hundreds of homes and commercial buildings in north Santa Rosa to ashes.



Even as fires continued ravaging the counties, Sonoma's two Rotary clubs set more significant relief efforts into motion. On Wednesday the clubs began using Rotarian Ron Lawson's buildings on his farm as a collection and distribution center for dry goods that victims would need. Pleas for contributions were publicized across social media. Victims would also need cash, so the clubs established a fundraising website, www.SonomaStrong.org, and promoted it extensively on social media, too.

The response was astounding. Contributions poured in, seemingly from everyone everywhere.



“A couple drove from Phoenix, Arizona, with their two kids to make a donation,” said Lawson. “The president of Williams Sonoma came from world headquarters in San Francisco with her entire executive team. It wasn’t like they went to their stores to get stuff. They went out and personally purchased what they thought we needed. Twelve guys from an engineering union south of San Francisco arrived with a forty-foot truck full of diapers. And they had \$3,000 worth of Safeway gift cards.”

Goods kept flowing in. A woman from the East Bay pulled in with a van full of basic necessities, the first of three such loads that she collected and delivered. More eighteen-wheelers arrived with more supplies. People drove up in U-Haul trucks filled with dry goods. FedEx shipments arrived from out of state, some with no note or explanation. More than a ton of dog and cat food sat on a pallet waiting to go to pet owners in need. Individuals and businesses ultimately contributed about fifty tons of goods for fire victims. More impressive, many people who arrived with contributions stayed to help organize and distribute everything.

“We got to the point where we were worried about what to do with all of the stuff,” said Lawson. “So we reached out to social services groups in the community—Friends in Sonoma Helping, La Luz, Church Mouse, Sonoma Overnight Support, Boys & Girls Club, Redwood Empire Foodbank, Pets Lifeline, and a few other nonprofits. We started distributing as fast as we could. But as fast as we could put it out, it was still coming in.”

During the fires, stores in town operated with very limited hours, so getting food to victims became another club priority. Rotarians Diane Mercer, Patricia Shults, and

Gayle Arrowood coordinated purchasing, assembling, and distributing fresh food for 300 families of four.



Using some of the cash contributions, Rotarians also bought food for local chefs to prepare and serve in a Rotary-sponsored community center just north of Sonoma. Dubbed The No Pay Café, fire victims dropped in to enjoy free hot and cold meals that wine country tourists normally paid for in more luxurious settings.



Mercer and Rotarian Rich Lee set up a pantry program in a vacant storefront north of town. In the course of two weeks, Rotarians restocked the store more than fifteen times. “Every day we had fresh produce, canned goods, dry goods, diapers and toiletries to give out,” said Mercer. “We were like a minimart.”

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& Rotary Club of Sonoma Sunrise
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The clubs' success presented a significant challenge. "We got to the point where we needed to decide to continue accepting goods or not," said Lawson. "At some point everyone would have more than they could use. We knew that the Rotary groups in nearby Lake County, where they'd had horrific fires a couple of years before, still had a warehouse full of stuff."

The Sonoma clubs opted to stop collecting dry goods two weeks after the fires began, and focus on distributing more than \$400,000 that the website raised for victims and first-responders. "We wanted to increase the velocity of money in the valley," said Lawson. When people spend the aid that they very much need here, that gives merchants a chance to get their workers back, get paychecks in their pockets faster. So we started distributing gift cards to use at local retailers and at chain stores with a local presence."

"Hundreds of people have now received \$500 in the form of gift cards," said Gayle Arrowood, chair of the grant committee for Rotary Club of Sonoma Valley. "And we know that the money we've given so far is just a portion of what we've collected. Our next step in the recovery process is extending our reach with the money we've received to help people who've sustained financial losses in the fires. We'll continue collecting money via our Sonoma Strong website through the end of this year. And our goal is to distribute all of the money we collect by mid-June of next year."

"Before the fires, we had a very strong reputation in the valley as a benevolent organization that works hard to improve the lives of people who live and work here," said Marck Zuehlsdorff, president of Rotary Club of Sonoma Valley. "Our rapid response leading the recovery efforts was met and supported enthusiastically by neighbors as well as people outside our community."



The recovery started quickly, even before the fires were contained. “As soon as merchants and wineries got back to daily operations,” added Moll who is also president of the Rotary Club of Sonoma Sunrise, “they began contributing a percentage of their sales to Sonoma Strong. And people got behind them, too, which helped the companies and meant we could help people even more.”

“It will be a while before we return completely to normal—whatever that is,” said Zuehlsdorff. “But I’m proud to say that our two Rotary clubs moved about as fast as humanly possible to get the community rolling towards recovery even as the wildfires roared through the hills around us.”

