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RUGER RANCH -- As we headed down Highway 89 from Prescott early Sunday afternoon, it looked as if an entire hillside near our house was on fire. My husband made some calls and heard that Peeples Valley, just south of Ruger Ranch where we live, was being evacuated.

We didn't worry about our friends in Yarnell. That community seemed to be in the clear. We were more worried about Peeples Valley and whether the fire was headed in our direction.

We talked about getting ready to evacuate. What should we take?

"Things we can't replace," my husband said. A portrait a friend had painted of our dog, who had died. Family photos. Birth certificates, passports and other documents. Our computers and wireless hotspot.

We made a plan. I would start lining up boxes at the entrance to the garage while my husband took down our most important artwork.

The first thing I thought to do was contact members of my church and ask for prayers. I didn't want to take the time to write an e-mail once we got home. I called someone from my small church group and asked him to contact everyone in our group to ask for prayers. For us, for the community and for the firefighters.

Meanwhile, my husband made more calls. A longtime rancher in Peeples Valley told us the fire would never get to us. He didn't sound concerned, even for himself. We decided to wait and see what happened.

But I made a list of things I didn't want to forget if we had to leave quickly. I wrote them down in this order: medications, docs, photos, our small safe, cellphones, water and some food, boots and books to read. I thought about what I was wearing. Would I be comfortable in it all night if we had to leave?

Perhaps those decisions seem trivial after the week we've had here and in the surrounding communities. Nineteen brave men dead. Several hundred people, many we know well, evacuated from their homes. Only now are they beginning to return to survey the damage. We've seen so much destruction

... yet we've also seen so much goodness, so many friends and strangers willing to help.

But Sunday night, our friends and neighbors were weighing many of the same options as we were, not knowing that the Yarnell Hill Fire was about to make global headlines.

A scary lightning strike

We were at a neighbor's house last Friday night when we first heard about the Yarnell fire. Our neighbors called 911 because of a lightning strike behind their house that set a small spot on the hill smoldering. The two volunteer firefighters who responded told us they were stretched thin because of the Yarnell fire. The smoke by our friends' house was coming from high on the hill, in rugged terrain. It would be a tough hike. The firefighters would have to deal with it by hand.

Two other neighbors arrived, having just come from the Valley. They told us there was an active fire in the direction our home faced. They saw a fire truck turn off on the road to our house.

My husband and I live 4_ miles off Highway 89 on a dirt road. We like to tell people that our closest neighbor lives 2 miles away and our next closest, 6 miles away. Yet it's a close community. When you live like we do, these relationships become important. In a development of about 5,400 acres, ours was the third house built. Only one other house has been completed since we sold our home in Mesa and moved to Ruger Ranch a year and a half ago. That's where we were. Six miles from home, at our next-closest neighbor's.

We felt the tension, with our neighbors nervously watching the hillside behind their house and us wondering if we should head home. The hostess looked at us. Should she delay dinner?

We all stared out the window, straining to see the firefighters. Before long, the firefighters drove back to the house. They had been pulled back, they told our neighbors, because the smoldering area was on state trust land and could very well burn itself out. They told our friends to keep an eye on it and call if it got worse. Otherwise, they would be back in the morning.

Back home, we didn't see any evidence of fire. A Google search for "Yarnell Fire" turned up the Yarnell Fire Department website and old

clippings of a fire that happened long ago. Yarnell's fire hadn't even registered a blip on the media's radar.

Then, Saturday night, we sat down to dinner and saw through the window that a ridge in the distance was on fire. My husband called 911. It didn't occur to us that it was the fire our neighbors had seen when driving up from the Valley. The dispatcher said it was the Yarnell fire and they had it. We couldn't tell how far away it was. We sat for a long time on the porch watching it burn.

Went to church as usual

Sunday morning, we didn't see flames or smoke. We learned that the fire was burning only about 15 acres. We left, as usual, about 9:30 a.m. to attend church and do our weekly grocery shopping. Driving home just a few hours later, we could hardly believe how big the fire had grown. We began to wonder what we should we do.

My husband and I sat on the porch. We couldn't see flames, just enormous plumes of smoke. By then, planes were in the air. Small planes and big water tankers. We watched the tankers fly past, then circle around and dip below our sight. We called the Peoples Valley Fire Department to see if we could help. They told us not to come down because the roads might be closed.

So we each did what we do in times of stress. He got on the phone and I got on the computer. I've had a Facebook profile for years, but hardly ever log on except to retrieve a message sent to my account. I had no idea if anyone would read something I posted. But I sat down and began to type: Dear friends, we ask for your prayers ...

By then, Yarnell residents had been told to prepare to evacuate. They expected a four-hour notice. But some of them living in an area of homes called Glen Ilah had almost no time to prepare to leave. We heard a friend had to flee as her house was engulfed in flames. I thought it must be rumor or exaggeration. I called her cellphone and she answered.

"We lost everything," she said. I told her how sorry I was.

"Do you know what I spent my day doing?" she asked. "Planting flowers." Then she broke down and cried.

She and other friends had assembled in the Family Dollar parking lot in Congress. We offered our home, but Highway 89 had been closed and the hill was in flames.

There was room at the Congress Community Center. She said they might stay there.

We felt helpless. My husband continued trying to reach people. I got back on Facebook and began reading the links people were posting.

We got a call from a couple who had been evacuated. We knew her from the community garden. He was in our book club. Did we have room at our house? They had a cat. Was that OK?

We were still preparing the room when they arrived. They spent some time alone in their room with the door shut, talking on the phone and watching the news online. We were sitting down to dinner with them when they got a call from another friend. He hadn't evacuated and was now being asked to leave. The request was so polite, he didn't feel right to refuse.

"Tell him to come here," we said.

He had a dog. Was that OK?

The news gets worse

Later Sunday night, I walked out onto the porch to find my husband staring blankly, tears in his eyes.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"Glen Ilah's gone," he said, choking.

It was nearly 11:30 by the time we got everyone fed and settled in. The news that dribbled in was all bad. Twenty firefighters who hadn't been accounted for were located, surrounded by fire. Not long afterward, I heard my husband on the phone. Nineteen had been killed. I went to Facebook with every update.

Someone said it was on the news that the Yarnell Market was gone. Someone on Facebook said the community center and library, too. Taking care of our guests, I hadn't posted for hours. I went to my computer and passed on what we heard.

About midnight, my husband's phone started to ring. It was a member of the community garden who also served on the Chamber of Commerce with my husband.

"The market isn't gone," she said. Someone she knew was still in town and saw it for himself. The buildings on Highway 89, Yarnell's main street, were still standing.

We heard so many reports from so many sources, it was hard to know what was true. I posted that, too, and went to bed.

A false alarm

About 1:45 a.m. Monday, my husband's phone rang. It was a recorded message telling us to evacuate. I woke him up. Outside, I could hear the wind howling. It had blown so hard it knocked over a plant on a stand.

"We've got to go," I said.

"Go where," he said, struggling to understand.

"We've got to evacuate," I said, handing him the phone. I went to post that we were being evacuated and pack up my computer. I noticed that my phone didn't get an evacuation message. I looked outside but couldn't see fire.

I called the fire information number I had programmed in to my phone. It was a Phoenix number. Someone named Mike answered on the second ring. I asked him about the evacuation order. He put me on hold, then came back on the line. It was a mistake, he said. We didn't need to leave at that time.

It was hard to sleep, not knowing if at any moment we'd get a real evacuation call. That morning, we were all up early, searching for information. People were calling, texting, sending messages on Facebook. My phone buzzed every time someone posted to my Facebook page, which was almost constantly.

We got confirmation that Yarnell's business core was still there. Offers of lodging, supplies and help starting pouring in.

We heard from people we hadn't heard from in years. They called from all over the country and outside of it. That's when we understood that we had become international news. We used to say Yarnell was Arizona's best-kept

secret. Even natives looked at us blankly when we said where we lived. Now our community had become infamous.

Everyone asked what they could do. I posted their offers on Facebook. Over the course of the day many of our friends confirmed that they had, indeed, lost their homes. They were staying in Congress, Prescott, Chino Valley. But everyone seemed to have gotten out unharmed.

Monday afternoon, we got a call from a friend who was crying and nearly hysterical because she lived on Yarnell's main street and heard the whole street burned down. We knew a friend who had stayed in town and asked him to call and reassure her. I called back later to be sure she was OK and talked to her husband. What did they need? For someone to water and feed their cats, he said. We called back our friend in Yarnell and relayed the message.

Lessons that we've learned

As I write this, the story is still unfolding and we are still in our home, but we are already learning from our experiences. We're learning some things about people we know. Who left. Who stayed. What they took. One of our friends said when it came time to go he looked around his home. He had many nice things. In the moment, they didn't seem important. He took his dog, three guitars and some coffee. He couldn't explain his choices. That's just what seemed right at the time.

We are also learning not to repeat everything we hear. An earnest desire to help by relaying information just fueled rumors that later turned out not to be true.

On Monday morning, we drove up a ridge overlooking Peoples Valley. From there, the fire seemed far away. We felt reassured that we were not in harm's way and glad we had not packed our belongings and left in the middle of the night.

Since then, we have cried at times but we have also counted our blessings. By Monday night, though the losses seemed great, there was also good news. Some of the homes we thought lost were still standing. Glen Ilah wasn't gone. The fire had hopscotched, inexplicably destroying some houses and leaving others untouched. The businesses on our main street stood intact. And there is a feeling that we are all in this together.

One of our guests has been through an emergency like this before. He told us what to expect. There will be phases, he said. For the moment, the fire had left us adrenaline fueled, and on a kind of high. But the hangover will follow.

As a community, we will be mourning losses and can expect to experience all the stages of that grief: anger, denial and bargaining before, God willing, we find acceptance. We will all want to talk about it. Then we won't want to talk about it at all. There will be hassles with insurance and temporary buildings that become permanent. Healing will take a very long time. All we can do is stick together, and take it one step at a time.

Freelance writer Kathy Montgomery is a former Arizona Republic editor.