

Out of the Ashes

MCKENZIE RIVER HOMEOWNERS
REBUILDING 10 MONTHS AFTER
HOLIDAY FARM FIRE

By Jeslyn Lemke

On a June morning at Everyone's Market in Vida, people stop during their drive up Highway 126 for gas, cigarettes and to use the outdoor restrooms. The door alarm pings constantly and the tiny ceiling radio is blaring an AC/DC song that seems at odds with the surrounding devastation.

As one of the few retail stores open within the Holiday Farm Fire zone, Everyone's Market has become a central point for the devastated community. A cash jar on the counter reads "Locals Helping Locals" in shaky black Sharpie. A feathering of dollar bills and coins line the bottom.

The phrase "rising from the ashes" is apparent everywhere in Vida and up into Blue River. Four hundred homes burned down the night of Sept. 8 in the Holiday Farm Fire. Scores of homeowners who lost homes have popped up an RV or two along the river. The black skeletons of trees hang grotesquely over the river. On a drive from Eugene to Vida, 21 logging trucks pass by, hauling trees from the fire zone back to Eugene. A long trail of a thousand contracting businesses buzz up the highway — their little white vans and fix-it trucks festoon every other driveway.

One thing is clear: Recovery for Vida and Blue River is going to take a long time and a lot of dollars.

LOCALS HELPING LOCALS

Near the door of Everyone's Market, a stand of hats and sweaters also reads, "Locals Helping Locals."

"That's just our own money maker," Mary Ellen Wheeler says of the slogan and sales. "All the proceeds go to the fund for the community." Wheeler is president of McKenzie River Locals Helping Locals and a fourth-generation Vida resident.

For the past 10 months, the organization has taken in donations and given out funds for a host of local rebuild-

ing projects, including buying Christmas presents for 60 families who lost their homes in the fire, and helping businesses reopen, like Vida Cafe.

"We gave Christmas to 137 kids," Wheeler says.

The buildings of Blue River were wiped off the map by the Holiday Farm Fire. Now, Locals Helping Locals is hosting meetings with Blue River land and business owners to reimagine what the new town's layout could be. The determined group of locals meets at Living Waters Church on the river. Six businesses — including the iconic Christmas Treasures store on Highway 126 — burned.

"The first two meetings were just visions and dreams. It's been very supportive about having a business district back," Wheeler says. A big community concern is outside real estate developers buying up tracts of riverfront property for Airbnb and vacation homes.

"I think the biggest fear of people up here is big investor groups. We aren't going to have a community, we're going to have a lot of vacation by owners [VRBO]. Being born and raised up here, we were always a tight-knit community," Wheeler says. "I'm afraid we're going to lose it."

McKenzie River Trust, a Eugene-based nonprofit protecting the water of the McKenzie River and nearby land, has purchased three riverfront properties from owners whose homes and land burned. Homes with land in the floodplains of the river present opportunities to regrow the riparian habitat, says Brandi Crawford-Ferguson, MRT associate director. One homeowner's 2-acre property was right along a critical salmon spawning channel, so the property owner called MRT to ask if they were interested.

"She really recognized the importance of her property and her land and what that could mean for the salmon," Crawford-Ferguson says.

Around 100 homeowners who lost their homes along the McKenzie have opted to plant tiny native plants in the riparian zones of the river, courtesy of the Pure Water Partners Program. The program is a joint effort between EWEB, MRT, McKenzie Watershed Council and several other local organizations. A staggering 25 percent of the McKenzie River Watershed burned in the fire, meaning much of the wooded areas along the river were lost. The Pure Water Partners program has helped replant hardy native species such as ninebark tree, red twig dogwood, Douglas fir, snowberry and more, free of charge.

Wayfarer Resort owner Andy McWilliams spots a tiny Douglas fir poking up next to Martin Creek on his land along the McKenzie. The new trees are growing between massive burned stumps, left over from the fire. He reaches down and lovingly plucks away the weeds, giving the little tree a small pat before spotting a tiny cedar tree. The resort lost nine cabins in the fire. McWilliams says

his insurance coverage for the 10-acre resort was \$1.5 million, but because not all his buildings were lost, he is now underinsured by about half million.

"The cabins were so close to the creek, we are trying to work with the county to make it as easy as possible to move the cabins about 10 feet away from Martin Creek so we can get some more riparian vegetation planted between the cabins and the creek," McWilliams says.

PERMITS FOR FIRE VICTIMS

Multiple sources told *EW* the process to get a permit to rebuild from Lane County is still terribly delayed at the moment.

"All sorts of people along the river are having problems getting their permit. I believe it's just because there are so many people trying to rebuild, they just don't have the staff capacity to keep up," says Laura Sireci, a long-time resident of Blue River who lost her home in the fire. Sireci added she is looking at between \$2,000 to \$5,000 total to pay for every permit to rebuild her home.

After residents of Blue River, including Locals Helping Locals, met with Lane County commissioners to advocate for an easier rebuilding process, the county waived some permit fees, including land use fees, for fire victims. Every Thursday, county building officials meet with homeowners at the McKenzie Fire and Rescue station by appointment. The county has so far issued 85 land use permits, and 39 more applications are pending review, according to Devon Ashbridge, public information officer with Lane County. Around 400 homes burned in the Holiday Farm Fire.

"One of the challenges folks are facing is the land use system. It's complex," Ashbridge says. The county hired a new permit navigator to focus primarily on helping issue permits for Holiday Farm Fire victims.

Wheeler says many homeowners became so frustrated with the complications involved in rebuilding with the county, they've sold their land.

"We had a lot of people walk away. They aren't going to rebuild. They aren't going to deal with it. I had great friends 87 or 88 years old. How do you start over at that age?"

Fire Chief Christiana Plews (known as Chief Rainbow) of the McKenzie Rural Fire District gained fame for her rugged commitment to fighting the fire in last year's news coverage of the Holiday Farm Fire. She lost her own home and her son's home as well. Ten months later, Rainbow says most of her 19 original volunteers have returned to work for the station, even after losing their own homes.

Of the massive rebuilding efforts underway on the McKenzie, she notes, "Being grateful for everything that is happening really changes your perspective. It's important to be thankful for everything we do have." ■

Donations to the McKenzie River Locals Helping Locals can be made at any SELCO branch, under Account #661678.



HAPPENING PEOPLE

by Paul Neevel

Ruth Duemler (REVISITED)

November 2001: Los Angeles native Ruth Duemler began a career of political activism in the 1960s, battling cancer-causing smog in her hometown. "I learned to lobby and put on press conferences," she says. "We got a lot of legislation passed." After a 1976 divorce, Duemler moved to San Diego, where she aided a successful campaign to end city-wide election of councilors. "With city-wide elections, big money took over," she notes. "After we won, the first Black, the first Hispanic and the first gay person were elected. It completely changed the City Council." In search of clean air and water, Duemler relocated to Eugene in 1992. "On my second day, I went to an environmental conference at the UO," she recalls. "I was enthralled." A year later, Duemler and others she had met at the conference launched "The Other Paper," a forum for progressive groups that lasted eight years. Her current major campaign is Health Care for All Oregon, a universal health care initiative. "And the mayor is pushing an

initiative for city-wide elections," she warns. "It doesn't give neighborhoods a voice at City Hall."

2021 update: Each Eugene city councilor is still elected by a single ward, and, at age 88, Duemler remains focused on health care as a human right. "I go to at least two Health Care for All meetings per week on Zoom," she elaborates. "We have a group in Eugene, a state-level group, and a national group. With single-payer, when you're sick, you know you'll get medical care. The insurance industry is not needed!" She maintains her interest in air quality as it relates to health, and is critical of Seneca Sawmill and its wood-fired electrical power plant in west Eugene, citing the prevalence of asthma among children in the neighborhood. "I am responsible for the little San Diego law of the late '80s that was adopted as Title V of the Clean Air Act," she notes. "It's the most important thing I've done. It makes industry pay according to how much they pollute."