

Finding hope and strength in comfort of others

The events of the past two weeks have brought to life the words of an Irish proverb: "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live."

As wildfires continue to devastate swaths of Grant County, what comforts us is the embrace of others. Our family. Our friends. Neighbors. Strangers. From all walks of life they have come to our aid in this moment of crisis.

The first to help were the individuals stationed atop U.S. Forest Service lookouts in Malheur National Forest. After three days of lightning storms, they alerted the men and women at the John Day Interagency Dispatch Center. Twelve fires had been spotted.

Firefighters, smokejumpers and rappellers were quickly dispatched. Air tankers, helicopters and water tenders followed. It was Wednesday, Aug. 12. Two days later, the two fires would merge and the Canyon Creek Complex battle was engaged.

As the fires spread into the weekend, local churches became evacuation centers, gathering food, clothing and household goods for those displaced. Inns and motels became emergency shelters. Ranches and veterinary clinics offered boarding and food for pets and livestock. The fairgrounds was transformed into a relief center.

As additional firefighters arrived and set up camps, more Grant County individuals stepped forward. Kevin Moles helped victims with their water systems. Dianna Church offered laundry services. Oster Professional Group provided telephone, Internet and email

services for those trying desperately to reach relatives. Kristin Currin and Jim Hamsher spearheaded Hay for John Day to provide hay for livestock.

The number of Grant County citizens and businesses that stepped up are too numerous to list, though the staff of the Eagle is attempting to do just that.

Beyond the fire crews, there are also hundreds of men and women from other parts of Oregon and the nation who are giving aid and comfort to this community. They may have once visited Grant County. Or know friends who live here. Or they first learned of John Day and Seneca and Prairie City as words and pictures of the devastation spread across the web and social media outlets such as Facebook.

Recovering from disasters such as this requires money. Large organizations like the Red Cross are gathering donations for victims of the hundreds of wildfires burning in western states. Old West Federal Credit Union moved quickly to establish a relief fund for this community. Local stores, meanwhile, have set out donation jars. Grant County confronts many more weeks of fire and smoke.

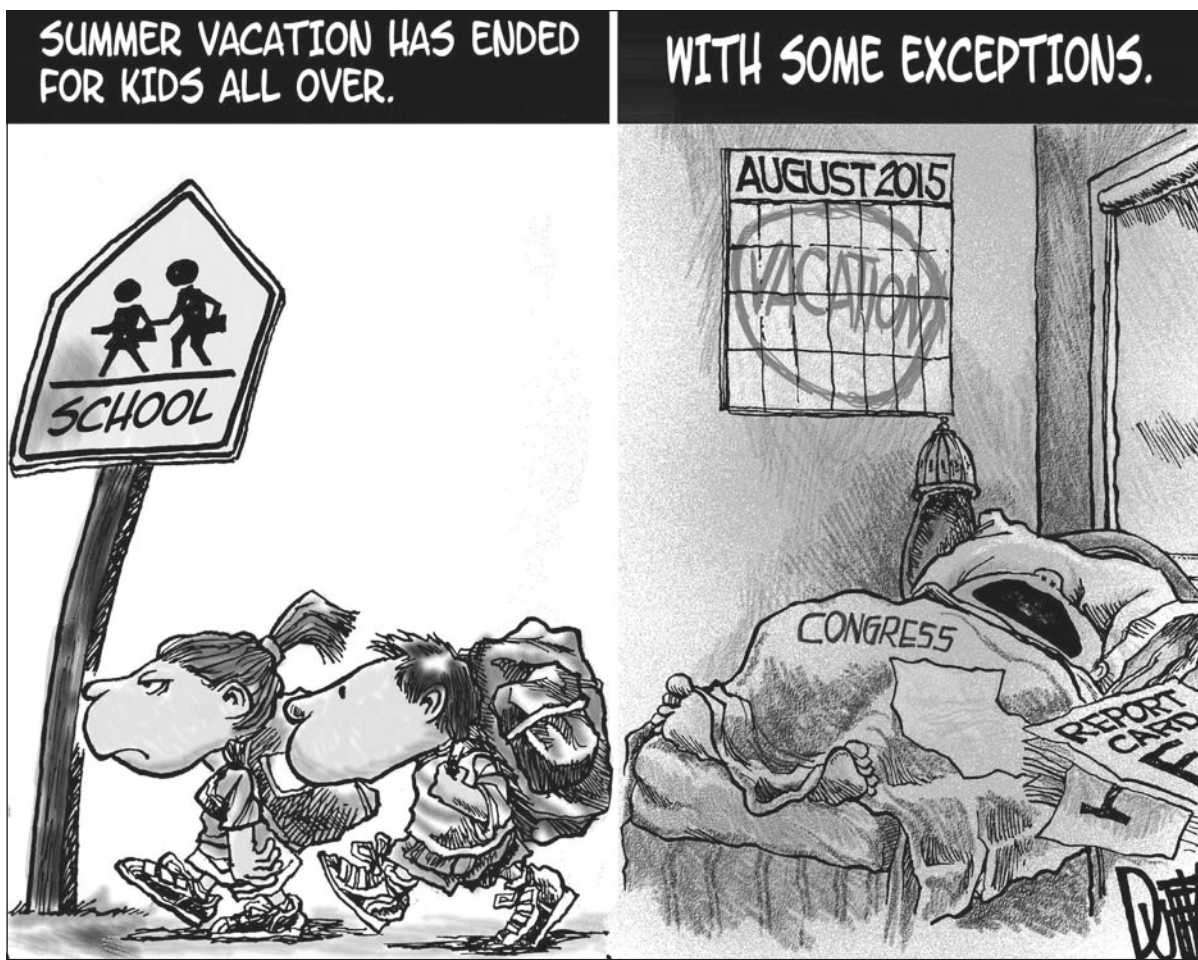
Those who lost their homes face a desperate future of temporary quarters, donations and paperwork as they seek to rebuild their lives. The stretch ahead will challenge our spirit.

We can never fully repay the men and women who in our time of trial came forward — with their time, their labor and their treasure. But we can take comfort and find strength in their humanity.

CORRECTION

In a story appearing in the Aug. 19 Blue Mountain Eagle, it was incorrectly stated that James Dunn lost his house to the Canyon Creek Com-

plex fire. Dunn actually lost a workshop that was on his property. The house remained standing. The Eagle regrets the error.



Community opens their hearts and their homes to fire victims

The stories will remain long after the fires

By Nancy McCarthy
Blue Mountain Eagle

(Nancy McCarthy has been working as interim editor of the Blue Mountain Eagle for the past four weeks)

As fire roared through Canyon Creek and over the hills just south of John Day, those who were ordered to evacuate recall details they probably never will forget.

Dean Elliott, who lost his home of 53 years, remembers the sound of the wind. It was like a locomotive, he said.

His wife, Betty, recalls how the oxygen was sucked out of the air and she could hardly breathe.

Mike Mannell, who was woken by a friend, tells how he ran through the smoke to put a sprinkler on his Harley Davidson and another sprinkler on his neighbor's house.

If his friend hadn't woken him that morning, says Mannell, whose cabin that he had been building for six years burned to the ground, "I probably would have perished in that fire."

And with tears in his eyes, the neighbor, Bryan Nelson, whose home Mannell saved, calls Mannell a "hero."

These stories abound in the canyon. They are told and retold to friends, relatives, restaurant waitresses, store clerks. They are told because people in this community know each other, and most importantly, they care about one another.

For two weeks, *Blue Mountain*

Eagle staffers Cheryl Hoefler and Angel Carpenter have been keeping a running list of all the donations, services, offers of homes and other resources available to those who were affected by the fire. Response has been pouring into the Eagle's Facebook page from those both in the area and throughout the region, asking how they can help.

That's what you do in a crisis.

Where I live — on the North Oregon Coast — we are a small community, too. Most all of us have ties to each other — through family, work, volunteer activities, civic duties or friendship.

We also have emergencies. Usually, it's flooding or windstorms in the winter because it rains so much along the coast, where we live on a narrow strip of land between forest and ocean.

Our largest, overriding concern, however, is the potential Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake that is expected to occur 50 to 75 miles offshore and trigger a tsunami that would wipe our communities off the map.

It seems that, no matter where you live, some sort of disaster looms, threatening to destroy all we hold dear.

The difference between the North Coast and Eastern Oregon, however, is that the Cascadia earthquake happens every 300 years, and fires are a real possibility here every 300 days.

We are constantly in the emergency planning mode on the coast. We worry about where we would evacuate to escape the wall of water heading toward us 15 minutes after the earthquake drops the ground out from under us. We gather "go bags" — backpacks filled with emergency supplies; we test out evacuation routes leading toward ground higher

than 80 feet; and we organize Community Emergency Response Teams to help us deal with the immediate crises that will occur when people finally reach pre-established gathering spots.

After observing and reporting on how John Day and Canyon City area residents and emergency crews are responding to this crisis, I have hope that we will do just as well when disaster hits us on the coast.

The local fire departments, U.S. Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry, Grant County Sheriff's Office and Red Cross all began working together to fend off the fire and keep us informed. In only a day or two, when it was obvious the fire couldn't be controlled locally, nearly 1,000 firefighters from throughout the region responded, and two incident commanders trained to supervise massive wildfires took charge.

Meanwhile, local volunteers opened their hearts, wallets and homes to those who needed immediate help.

Where I live, they say not to count on outside help being able to reach us for several weeks — or even months. We will be on our own to cope.

This experience, in this small community, shows me that it can be done.

The details of our potential crisis will be different. We will have different stories to tell. Instead of a wall of fire, we may be fleeing a wall of water. Instead of fire consuming our homes, it will be an enormous ocean wave.

But I hope — and expect — the community response will be the same. We will take care of each other.

Because that's what communities do in a crisis.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Government responsible for fire

To the Editor:

According to the fire timeline, on Aug. 12, there were 10 acres burning. On Aug. 20, there were 50,000 acres burning out of control that may not be contained without the help of winter.

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Oregon Legislature — State Capitol, Salem, 97310. Phone: (503) 986-1180. Website: www.leg.state.or.us (includes Oregon Constitution and Oregon Revised Statutes).

State Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario (District: 60),

fire suppression, due to the past years of management failure in all areas.

I have developed this factual opinion after living 57 years in Grant County, fighting minor and major fires during the days when the government agencies were efficient organizations.

John Aasness
John Day

WHERE TO WRITE

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