

Chaplains Comfort Wildfire Victims

Depending on whether you see the glass as half empty or half full, the High Park wildfires near Fort Collins, Colo., as of Tuesday, are either 55 percent contained, or 45 percent non-contained.

For homeowners in this community north of Denver, it's more like half empty. Especially after the fires were 60 percent contained last week.

"The unknown is what's most difficult," said Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplain Jim Giannestras. "Most of them don't know if their houses are standing."

Thus far, more than 250 homes have been destroyed, with the High Park Fires burning an estimated 87,000 acres, making it the second-largest in Colorado history.

If the estimated \$27 million worth of damages ring true, it will be Colorado's most destructive ever. One person, a 62-year-old woman, has died from the wildfire.

For the Rapid Response Team, this deployment has been much different than a tornado, flood or hurricane. In many ways, the chaplains are watching the disaster unfold before the residents' eyes.

There have been more than 1,000 mandatory evacuations in Larimer County, just north of the Poudre River.

"Listening to their questions, seeing what's on their faces is hard," Jim Giannestras said. "This community is very close-knit, especially up in the hills.

"They know their family's history. They know their animals' names."

With the homeowners still blocked from their homes, the Rapid Response Team has had a majority of the interactions at daily community briefing meetings, where anywhere from 300 to 600 residents are clamoring for any morsel of information on their properties and animals.

"They have no idea when they're going to allow people back in," said Sandy Giannestras, who along with her husband, Jim, have deployed as Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplains alongside Samaritan's Purse to minister to the emotional and spiritual needs. "There's a great need for prayer that the fires won't pick up and undo all the progress that has been made so far."

The chaplains have been able to further minister to homeowners from their home base, Timberline Church in Fort Collins, sharing the love and hope of Christ.

"There's a 27-church coalition that's working in this community," Jim Giannestras said. "The body of Christ is alive and well here in Timberline. People want to share that personal hope and that personal need for Christ."

New Mexico Fires

They are calling it the Little Bear Fire, but for the 240-plus homes and businesses that went up in flames in Ruidoso, N.M., the effect is anything but small.

Phil and Pam Rhodes, Rapid Response Team chaplains who have been on the scene since Wednesday, have seen firsthand how homeowners are reeling from the wildfires.

"People have what I call the deer-in-the-headlights look," Phil Rhodes said. "We've been asking them how they're holding up and they're still in shock. Whether their homes are burned or not, there's just a sadness of what's going on."

The locals say the fire was started on Monday, June 4, from a lightning strike at nearby Angus Hill, but at that time they

were told it was just a small fire, under control. By the weekend, 40-mph winds had swept through and changed everything.

"Thursday was our first full day here and we had so many opportunities to minister to people and pray with people," Pam Rhodes said. "We didn't have to look for ministry. It was just there."

The first person Pam was able to talk with happened to be the church secretary, who welcomed some encouragement.

"I asked if I could give her a hug and she said sure and immediately tears started flowing from her eyes," Pam said. "So many people from her congregation had been impacted."

The fires are now 90 percent contained in Ruidoso, a south New Mexico town less than 150 miles from the Mexico border. But that doesn't mean the emotional turmoil has passed. In some ways, it's only begun.

"If it's a hurricane or tornado, they don't have an opportunity to think about it," Phil Rhodes said. "These people have a chance to think about it and mull it over in their minds."

And in this tight-knit community, it doesn't altogether matter whose home was destroyed and whose was spared. It's a community loss.

"Many people, their homes were spared, but their neighbors' were not. And their roots were so deep but it's a personal loss," Phil Rhodes said. "One volunteer, her personal home was spared, but her neighbors lost their homes and she expressed a lot of anger. She had sat and watched the fire and felt it was preventable."

But the chaplains were also struck by the strong Christian community, rallying to support each other. One couple the

Rhodes were able to encourage had been a cornerstone of their local church since 1939, married 72 years now.

Opal, the wife, refused to leave her home, even after the evacuation orders were sent out, and her children drove up to the couple's modest ranch home, trying to convince them to leave.

"She said 'I'm not going anywhere. We've been here since we've been married,'" Pam Rhodes said. "The kids said, 'OK, well we're going to stay here with you. We'll all die together.'"

Opal relented and finally evacuated, telling Pam "That's all I needed to hear."

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