

# FIRESTORM NIGHTMARE:

## How we covered the early hours of California's most destructive fire

Raging wildfires driven by dry, violent winds roared into neighborhoods in Sonoma, Napa, Lake and Mendocino counties in the early hours of Oct. 9. Combined, the firestorm destroyed 6,190 homes and killed 40 people in the region. Thousands fled as the massive Tubbs fire raced into dense neighborhoods in Santa Rosa where many residents had little or no warning to evacuate. It was the most destructive fire ever in California. The Press Democrat used its website, live video feeds, social media channels and cellphone push alerts to dispatch real-time news on this disaster as it unfolded in the middle of the night.

**ABOUT 10 P.M., SUNDAY, OCT. 8 »** As the wind howls outside his Windsor home, photographer Kent Porter turns on his scanner and hears crews talking about a brush fire 13 miles away off Tubbs Lane on Highway 128 near Calistoga. He grabs his gear and takes off.

As he passes over Mark West Springs and Petrified Forest roads, he can see the glow of fire in the hills. “The wind was just going crazy,” he said later. “Grass was burning. Vineyards were burning. Power poles were going back and forth, and electrical lines were sparking. It was pandemonium.”



**10:42 P.M. »** One of Porter's first photos is a ghostly image of a firefighter racing through the yard of a home near the origin of the Tubbs fire. The flames would soon begin devouring rural homes in the valleys bordering Napa and Sonoma counties, racing west toward the region's largest city. “This thing is going all the way to Santa Rosa,” a fire official tells Porter.

**11:50 P.M. »** Porter sends a text message to Managing Editor Ted Appel: “Ted this is going to be in Santa Rosa in a few minutes. I strongly suggest you get a reporter out.” Appel begins waking up reporters and preparing the first story.

**12:35 A.M., MONDAY, OCT. 9** » First story is posted on [pressdemocrat.com](http://pressdemocrat.com), filed by Appel, still in his pajamas, from his home:

Wind-whipped fires broke out across Sonoma County late Sunday night and early Monday morning, forcing the evacuation of rural neighborhoods northeast of Santa Rosa as firefighters attacked the blazes.

Mandatory evacuations were ordered from a wildfire reported between Calistoga and Santa Rosa, to the east of Porter Creek Road and Petrified Forest Road, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office announced shortly after 11 p.m.

Evacuations were ordered along Porter Creek, Petrified Forest, Franz Valley and Mountain Home Ranch roads. Deputies were dispatched to help firefighters and CHP officers with evacuations.

"If you live in this area, please be alert for the danger," the Sheriff's Office said shortly after 11 p.m. "We are not on scene yet and haven't been able to determine the best evacuation route."

Many trees were down on Calistoga Road and 911 lines were inundated with callers reporting smoke. Dispatchers asked the public to refrain from calling, unless they were facing an immediate emergency.

Multiple fires broke out Sunday night as strong winds buffeted the area. In Sonoma County, fires were reported in Santa Rosa, at Mark West Springs and Riebli roads; in Windsor at Shiloh Road and Conde Lane; in Sebastopol at Highway 116 and Fredericks Road; in Kenwood, on Lawndale Road; and in Glen Ellen, on Dunbar Road.

In Napa County, firefighters were battling a 200 acre fire off Atlas Peak Road south of Lake Berryessa, Cal Fire reported.

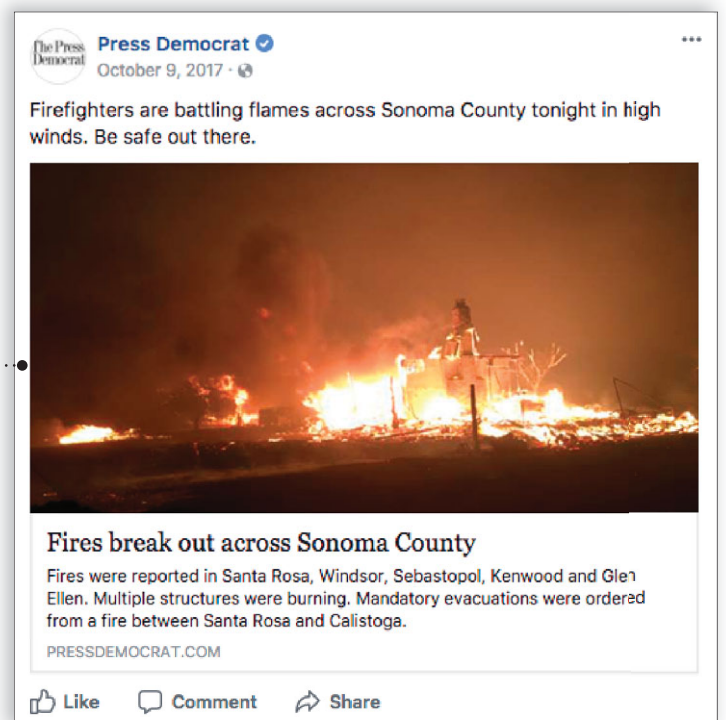
Check back later for more details.

**12:40 A.M.** » Porter reports that another fire is burning in the Sonoma Valley. He files images from the scene at 12:40 a.m. and posts an image on Twitter.

**12:58 A.M.** » The main story on The Press Democrat's home page is updated to include new fires in Sonoma and Napa counties. A link to the updated story and new photos is posted on Facebook:

Multiple structures were burning early Monday near downtown Kenwood, where the fire had crossed over Sonoma Creek. Fires were burning on both sides of Highway 12 in swirling winds, with gusts of 50 to 60 miles per hour. Multiple structures were also burning on Adobe Canyon Road, east of Kenwood across Highway 12.

In Napa County, firefighters were battling a 200 acre fire off Atlas Peak Road south of Lake Berryessa, Cal Fire reported.



**1:30 A.M. »** The impact story at [pressdemocrat.com](http://pressdemocrat.com) is now a rolling update including fresh photos and video from staff and readers. Reporters and photographers in the field feed information to reporter Julie Johnson in the newsroom, where she updates our online report through the early hours of the crisis.

It would be updated 18 times between the initial post and 6 a.m.

**2:16 A.M. »** Porter has returned to Santa Rosa and begins sending photos from the Fountaingrove neighborhood, where 1,519 homes would burn. The smoke is so thick he navigates by driving on the raised pavement markers in the middle of the road. He continues posting to Twitter.

## Fires burn across Sonoma and Napa counties as thousands flee devastating flames



(9 of 23) A home burns in the Fountaingrove area shortly after 2 a.m. on Monday, Oct. 9, 2017. (KENT PORTER/ The Press Democrat)

JULIE JOHNSON  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | October 9, 2017, 12:36AM



Two massive fires burned an estimated 50,000 acres across Sonoma and Napa counties, leveling neighborhoods and businesses from north Santa Rosa to the Sonoma Valley and Calistoga early Monday, forcing massive overnight

Tell friends you're safe by checking on Facebook's Tubbs fire crisis response page [here](#).

ong an estimated 10 blazes burning o counties.



Kent Porter @kentphotos · 9 Oct 2017

#TubbsFire burns homes in exclusive Fountaingrove neighborhood @NorthBayNews @SantaRosaFire @CAL\_FIRE



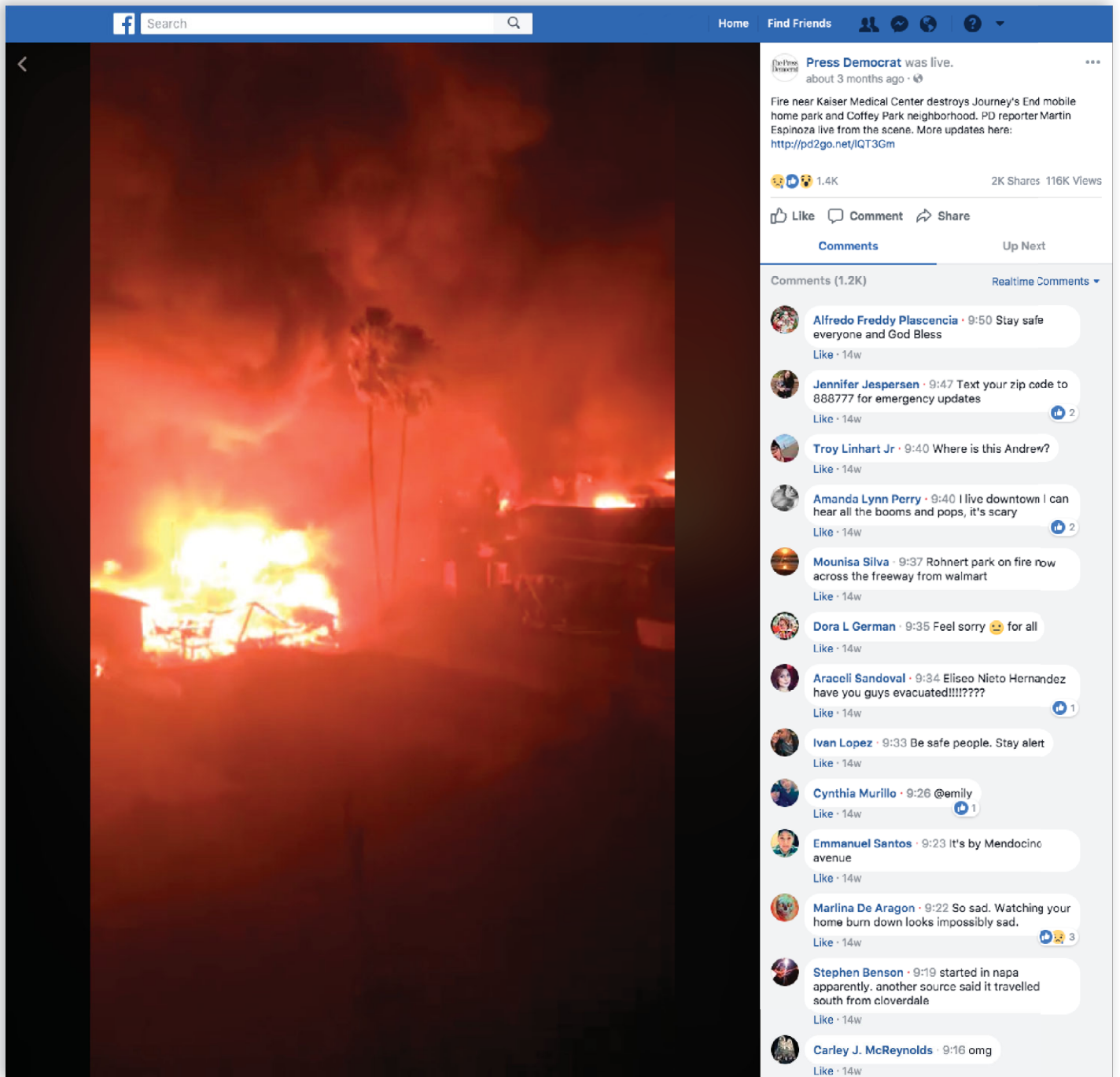
1 8 3

**3:12 A.M. »** While enroute to the newsroom, Executive Editor Catherine Barnett is forced to detour by closed roads. She encounters bumper-to-bumper traffic heading to an evacuation center that had already been declared full. "There was a man in a vest out front refusing to let more people into Finley," she said later. She stops at the center and files a brief item for the rolling update:

Cars thronged the parking lot at Finley Center on West College Avenue in Santa Rosa shortly before 3 a.m. Monday and traffic was stopped trying to turn into the center, which was designated as an evacuation center.



**3:46 A.M. TO 3:53 A.M. »** Porter sends six photos showing flames devouring the Round Barn, Willi's Wine Bar, a building near Hopper Lane, and Skyfarm in the Fountaingrove neighborhood.



**4:22 A.M. »** Reporter Martin Espinoza shows viewers destruction of Journey's End mobile home park, where two people died, and Coffey Park, where four died, in a 31-minute Facebook Live video.

See the video: [bit.ly/2mPxK5p](http://bit.ly/2mPxK5p)

**4:49 A.M. »** Barnett contributes this from state Sen. Mike McGuire:

Ten major fires broke out after 10 p.m. Sunday in Sonoma, Napa, Lake and Mendocino counties, said state Sen. Mike McGuire.

“These blazes have taken place at an individual’s most vulnerable time, when they are home and in bed,” he said.

The hills surrounding Santa Rosa glowed red early Monday and evacuees fleeing the fire clogged West College Avenue at 3 a.m., as officials opened additional shelters. Multiple fires burning in densely populated areas at night propelled by winds gusting up to 50 miles per hour severely strained firefighters, McGuire said.

“Of great concern is Kenwood, Glen Ellen and greater Santa Rosa,” he added. Darkness made it difficult to determine how many acres had burned and impossible to fight the fires from the air. McGuire said that hundreds of firefighters were en route from throughout the state and that aerial attacks would begin at first light, with winds expected to ease by 9 a.m.



**EARLY MORNING, OCT. 9 »**

A 9-minute YouTube video, created by photographer Kent Porter, aggregates video shot during the early hours of the Oct. 9 wildfires.

See the video:  
[bit.ly/2DcqUR5](http://bit.ly/2DcqUR5)

**4:52 A.M. »** Reporter Paul Payne contributes this dispatch from a large evacuation center in Santa Rosa:

The Finley Center was crowded with hundreds of evacuees as of 4 a.m. The city of Santa Rosa directed residents to go there in the fire’s aftermath. Many seniors from nursing homes from the hillside region were being brought to the center.

Ted Regan, who lives near Calistoga Road, said he saw the glow from the foothills behind his house about 2 a.m. “It got brighter and brighter and then we saw flames. That’s when we said, ‘It’s time to go,’” Regan said.

He, his wife, two adult sons, two dogs, four cats and two birds all got in his car and left immediately.

Rachel McKenzie, who lives on Tuliptree Road, started to evacuate at 2 a.m. with her 12-year-old, Bryce Ward, and her husband, Kevin Ward. They left with their reptiles and dog as they fled their house. Pulling out, their neighbor’s house was fully engulfed.

“It was totally chaotic,” McKenzie.

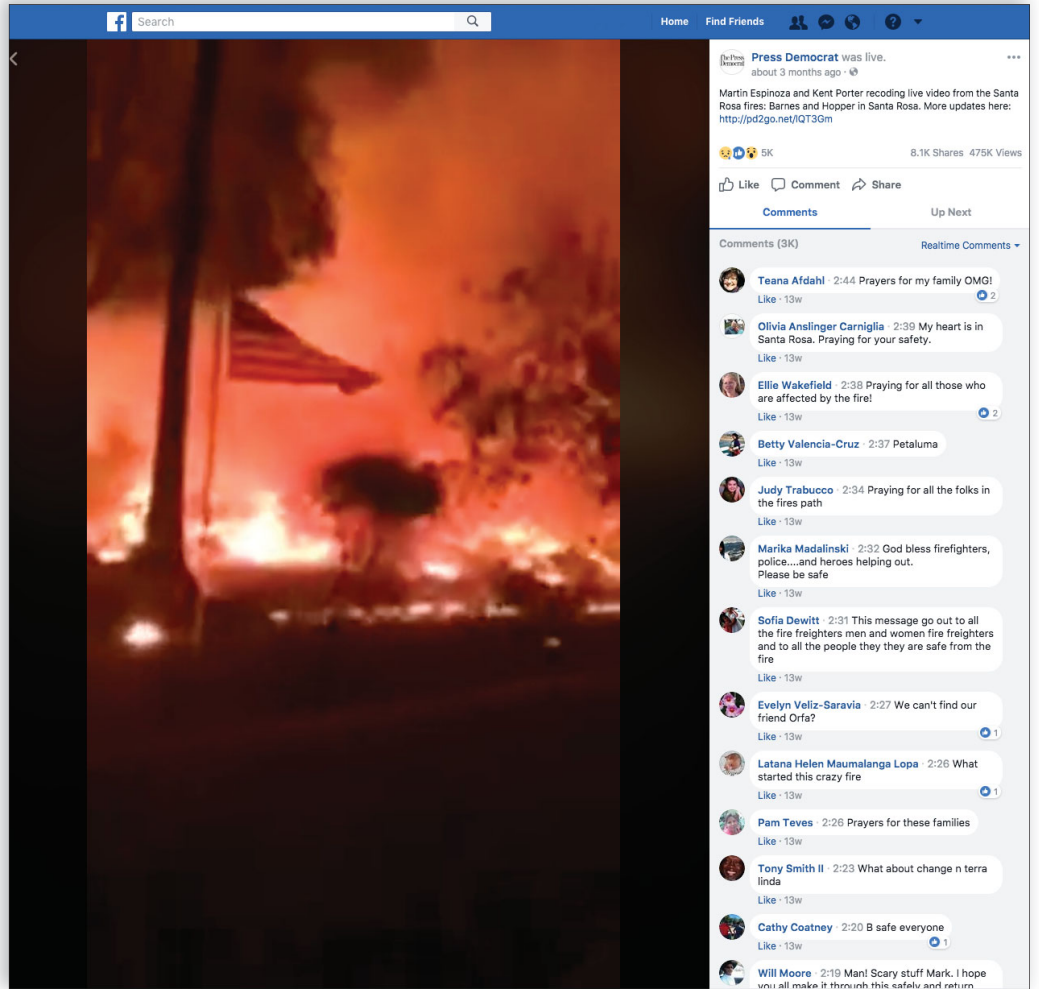
Her neighbor later called her and said her house burned down.

Laura Mills, who lives Wedgewood Way in Fountaingrove, was forced to evacuate with her husband at 2 a.m.

“It was very spooky. It was like an apocalypse,” Mills said of the bumper-to-bumper traffic as she left her house.

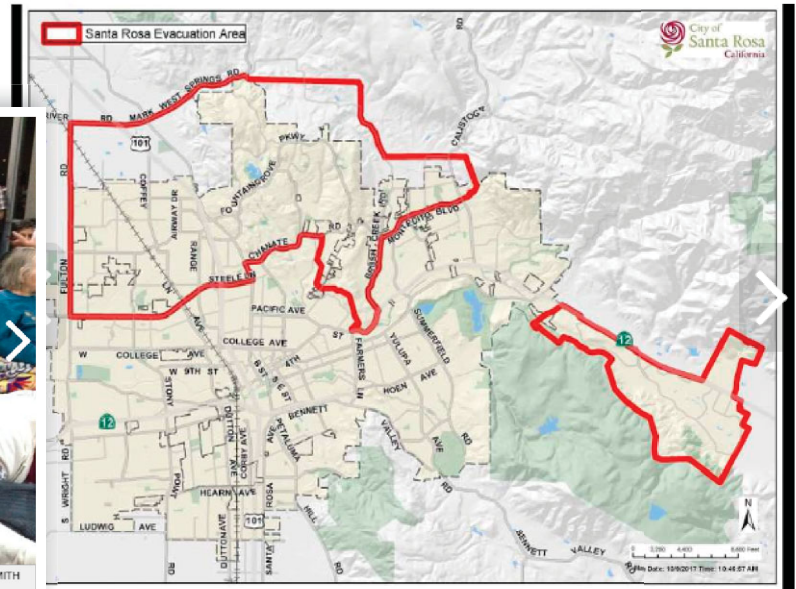
**4:54 A.M. »** Espinoza joins Porter in Santa Rosa's Coffey Park area. Amid explosions and hissing of natural gas, Espinoza begins a stunning 9-minute Facebook Live video from the heart of the burning and evacuated neighborhood.

See the video:  
[bit.ly/2Dd74Ff](http://bit.ly/2Dd74Ff)



**5 A.M. »** Reporter Robert Digitale updates a list of evacuation zones and provides details of evacuation centers in four counties impacted by the fires. [bit.ly/2rp6pLZ](http://bit.ly/2rp6pLZ)

**Large swath of Santa Rosa evacuated, emergency shelters centers open across Sonoma County**



of 18) The latest evacuation map from the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, Tuesday, Oct. 10, 2017.



(2 of 18) The Veterans Memorial Building in Santa Rosa is filled with evacuees on Monday, Oct. 9, 2017. (CHRIS SMITH / The Press Democrat)

**5:02 A.M. »** The paywall is lifted at [pressdemocrat.com](http://pressdemocrat.com).

**6:41 A.M. »** First of the day's nine push alerts is sent.

**6:43 A.M. »** Sports columnist Kerry Benefield reports on damage to local schools and closures across the region. [bit.ly/2xsJF0k](http://bit.ly/2xsJF0k)

**ROBERT DIGITALE**  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | October 9, 2017

Emergency shelters have been opened across Sonoma counties.

Large swath of Santa Rosa under evacuation orders

Evacuation Centers

Here is Sonoma County's [list of evacuation centers](#).

For the list of shelter sites in Sonoma County, visit [here](#).

The American Red Cross is helping with shelters in locations in Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties.

"The main thing we are focusing on is providing safe space for people who evacuated in the middle of the night," Red Cross spokeswoman Cynthia Shaw said.



**Santa Rosa hospitals, care facilities evacuated in fire's path**

**7:01 A.M. »** Espinoza and reporter Guy Kovner cover the evacuation of patients and personnel from Kaiser Permanente and Sutter hospitals. Photographer Beth Schlanker files images of evacuated patients at a nearby shelter. [bit.ly/2DjyOos](http://bit.ly/2DjyOos)



**(3 of 3)** Kaiser Hospital patients arrive at the Veterans Memorial Building being used as an evacuation site on Monday, October 9, 2017 in Santa Rosa, California. (BETH SCHLANKER/The Press Democrat)

MARTIN ESPINOZA AND GUY KOVNER  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | October 9, 2017, 7:01AM



In the face of onrushing flames, medical personnel evacuated patients from two Santa Rosa hospitals early Monday, while other health care facilities moved residents out of harm's way.

Patients were evacuated from the Kaiser Permanente hospital on Bicentennial Avenue as the adjacent Journey's End Mobile Home Park became a raging inferno.

"It was getting smoky inside the hospital," said Renina Ndegwa, a Kaiser patient care technician.

Officials said the evacuation of about 130 patients was completed by 6 a.m.

Patients in need of medical support were relocated by ambulance, while those who were not critically ill were transported in private buses, said Joe Fragola, a San Francisco-based Kaiser spokesman said in a statement.

The majority of patients was taken to Kaiser Permanente in San Rafael, while others were sent to Kaiser facilities in San Francisco and Oakland and local community hospitals, he said.

Kaiser's Santa Rosa hospital was not damaged in the blaze that devastated business and residential areas in northern Santa Rosa, but the hospital was closed and scheduled surgeries and appointments were canceled.

**Fire destroys Paradise Ridge Winery, Fountaingrove Inn, Willi's Wine Bar, other local landmarks**



**(1 of 26)** The Historic Round Barn burns in Santa Rosa, Monday Oct. 9, 2017. (Kent Porter / Press Democrat) 2017

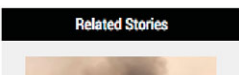
PRESS DEMOCRAT STAFF  
PRESS DEMOCRAT STAFF | October 9, 2017, 7:37AM



The firestorm that raged from Napa County into Sonoma County early Monday burned well-known businesses, schools and local landmarks, including the luxury 124-room Fountaingrove Inn and the nearby historic Fountaingrove Round Barn.

The Hilton Sonoma Wine Country, a 250-room hotel, also was destroyed, as were the buildings at Paradise Ridge Winery.

Hidden Valley Satellite, a campus serving about 80 primary-grade students, was leveled by flames, as was the K-12 Christian school Redwood Adventist Academy. The former, located on the west side of Paradise Ridge, south of Gh...



**7:37 A.M. »** Update details the destruction of Santa Rosa landmarks including schools, hotels, restaurants and a historic site. [bit.ly/2mSK8kf](http://bit.ly/2mSK8kf)

**9 A.M.** » The first gallery of reader-submitted photos is posted to [pressdemocrat.com](http://pressdemocrat.com).

**9 A.M.** » Reporter Randi Rossmann files a story about a Larkfield family that alerted neighbors and narrowly escaped the flames. [bit.ly/2mUMOK2](http://bit.ly/2mUMOK2)

Reader-submitted photos of Sonoma, Napa fires



(7 of 48) A house in Bennett Valley, Oct. 9, 2017. (Alejandro Sanchez Rubalcava)

Santa Rosa residents return to neighborhood devastated by fire



(1 of 51) A man takes a photo of the devastation in the Coffey Park neighborhood of Santa Rosa on Monday, Oct. 9, 2017. (KENT PORTER/The Press Democrat)

ROBERT DIGITALE  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | October 9, 2017



A smattering of northwest Santa Rosa residents returned Monday morning to see if their homes were still standing amid the burning ruins off Hopper Avenue.

In a single neighborhood east of Coffey Lane that includes Skyview and Crestview drives, only a dozen of the more than 200 single-family houses remained intact. Among them was the home of Grace Muga, who lives on Skyview with her parents and two siblings.

She returned with friend Farai Jumbo about 8 a.m. Monday to find the home largely untouched. When told how few of the neighbors' homes survived, the two women dropped to their knees in disbelief.

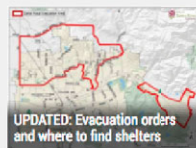
Next door, a neighbor's fence still burned, threatening Muga's house. But a Santa Rosa firetruck pulled up and quickly doused the flames. A firefighter advised Muga that a garden hose was nearby should she need it. As the crew got back in their truck, Muga called out, "God, watch over them, please."

Muga looked across the street where a dozen chimneys stood.

"These are my neighbors," she said.

In the midst of the destruction, she thanked God that her family's home and her father's truck had been untouched.

Related Stories



**10 A.M.** » Digitale files a story about residents returning to their devastated neighborhoods. Reporter Nick Rahaim posts a video of Yvette Lopez outside her destroyed home in the Coffey Park neighborhood.

Story: [bit.ly/2DSK6Rq](http://bit.ly/2DSK6Rq)

Video: [youtu.be/T97tl-v0ecl](http://youtu.be/T97tl-v0ecl)



Santa Rosa fire: Coffey Park fire victim tells her story

34,874 views



Blazes torch Napa, Sonoma wineries and vineyards

Fires close roads, Sonoma County airport; SMART resumes service

2 fatalities in Mendocino County, more expected



Over the next 10 hours, as reporters and photographers continue filing from the field and our news team begins planning for print coverage the next day, Press Democrat staff post 11 new stories and a photo gallery with 68 images documenting the firestorms' toll. Stories are updated throughout the day and into the evening with new information, photos and videos.



**11 A.M. »** Staff reports road closures and impacts to the region's transportation network. [bit.ly/2Bgugx5](http://bit.ly/2Bgugx5)

**11 A.M. »** Reporter Bill Swindell reports on the impact to Napa and Sonoma wineries. [bit.ly/2DRFX0i](http://bit.ly/2DRFX0i)

**NOON »** Our online producers create a photo gallery to share images of the day. [bit.ly/2Dh8nj5](http://bit.ly/2Dh8nj5)

**1 P.M. »** Rossmann reports on the deadly fires 65 miles to the north in Mendocino County, and officials' fears the death toll will climb. She then teams with reporter Meg McConahey, working from the Sonoma Valley, for a story on the fight to save Kenwood and Glen Ellen. [bit.ly/2mSmXGZ](http://bit.ly/2mSmXGZ)

**3 P.M. »** Death toll rises to 11 across Sonoma, Napa and Mendocino counties. Johnson and reporter J.D. Morris warn it will continue to increase. [bit.ly/2DxIYWO](http://bit.ly/2DxIYWO)

**3 P.M. »** Fire evacuees shared their worries and fears in a story by reporters Christi Warren, Eloisa Ruano Gonzalez, Rossmann and Rahaim. [bit.ly/2mUwZrd](http://bit.ly/2mUwZrd)

**3:29 P.M. »** Rossmann reports on another fire burning 25 miles to the north of Santa Rosa. [bit.ly/2EXku5B](http://bit.ly/2EXku5B)

### A night of disaster in Santa Rosa's Fountaingrove neighborhood



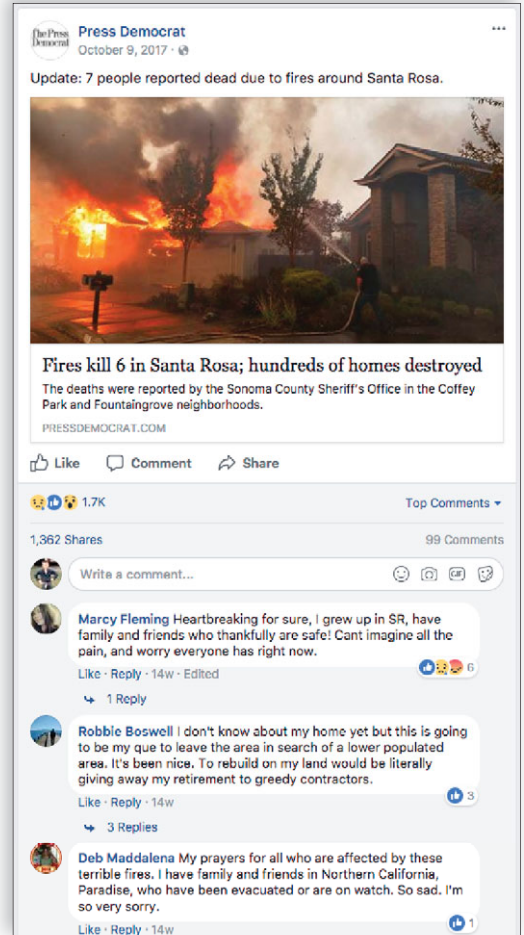
(2 of 14) Jim Stites watches his neighborhood burn in Fountaingrove, Monday Oct. 9, 2017 in Santa Rosa. (Kent Porter / Press Democrat) 2017

**7 P.M. »** Reporter Kevin McCallum teams with Espinoza to chronicle the devastation in the city's upscale Fountaingrove neighborhood. [bit.ly/2DrCClv](http://bit.ly/2DrCClv)

**7:25 P.M. »** Digitale captures the unfathomable destruction of Coffey Park, using satellite images of the neighborhood before the fires to count the number of homes in the perimeter. He determines more than 1,000 homes had been leveled — far more than official estimates at the time. [bit.ly/2rjErS8](http://bit.ly/2rjErS8)

**8 P.M. »** Morris reports on emergency restrictions to public water consumption in Larkfield. [bit.ly/2DjPNa4](http://bit.ly/2DjPNa4)

## Social Media



We used Facebook and Twitter to reach people who were forced from their homes and were following the fires closely on their phones. Some examples:

**11:16 A.M. »** Gov. Jerry Brown declares state of emergency, shared on Twitter. [bit.ly/2Dkq41a](http://bit.ly/2Dkq41a)

**11:30 A.M. »** Facebook post on the scene that awaited residents returning to Coffey Park. [bit.ly/2FVfXBZ](http://bit.ly/2FVfXBZ)

**12:16 P.M. »** Smoke fills the skies over the Bay Area, triggering health warnings, shared on Twitter. [bit.ly/2DhW5XH](http://bit.ly/2DhW5XH)

**1:54 P.M. »** Update on damage to Coffey Park shared on Facebook. [bit.ly/2Dj2HoF](http://bit.ly/2Dj2HoF)

**2:33 P.M. »** Updated map of evacuation zones and link to list of shelters shared on Facebook. [bit.ly/2Dk2sdh](http://bit.ly/2Dk2sdh)

**4:38 P.M. »** Update on the rising death toll in Santa Rosa shared on Facebook. [bit.ly/2BdwVYJ](http://bit.ly/2BdwVYJ)

