

“Evacuated”  
by Irene Ashkenas

October 2007 Witch Creek fire near San Diego



*neighbor's house*



*neighbor's house minutes later*

On Sunday, the first wildfire broke out shortly after noon. My neighbors and I (I live in the Rancho Bernardo area of San Diego), smelling the smoke, gathered in the street and exchanged information. The fire was in Ramona about 12-15 miles east. Since that is an area that burns frequently, we were not concerned. Our street is several blocks from open brush. I kept tabs on the fire on TV and when I went to bed about 10p.m., the town of Ramona was being evacuated and were being sent to Mira Mesa High School, about 8 miles South. I wasn't able to fall asleep, so I got up, packed a duffel bag with 3 days food for my Sheltie (Bailey), 3 days food for my Macaw (Midori), water bowls, leashes, treats, and medications, then I put that bag by the door from the house to the garage. I then added the box with my important papers (passport, birth certificate, etc.) and my laptop computer. I felt very silly, since I had never had to



evacuate, but once I had done that, I was able to fall asleep. At 4:30 a.m., my phone rang and it was my next-door neighbor who said "Irene, it's Linda. We are evacuating." I thanked her, got up and tossed on clothes (white pants and thong sandals should NOT have been the choice...), tossed my medications into a small bag along with my cell phone charger and a change of underwear. I opened the garage door and was met with smoke so thick it was hard to see across the street! I threw my packed bags into the trunk of the car along with a case of bottled water. Then I grabbed Midori and put her in a small carrying cage, placed her in the back seat and covered the cage with a sheet so she would see any flames. I grabbed Bailey and as I was carrying her down the hall, I remembered the doggy door. I went back and placed the metal slide in it so that no one could crawl in. Thank God I remembered as the firemen later told me that's what saved my house! I put the dog on the front seat and off we went. I had the radio on and called a friend that had just moved to Tennessee, since it was 5 a.m. here and 7 there. It is 5 blocks to the main street and I made it 4 blocks before the traffic came to a stop. We crept along and when I was 4 cars from the corner, the flames came over the hill across the street and started burning the back of the church on the corner. I am told that I told my friend "I'm scared...I'm really, really scared. This is how it's going to end. They'll find me in my car with my animals." I made it around the corner and decided to head for my office. It is a "secure haven" and has food, water, and shelter for 1500 people. It was only a mile away, but it took me until 6 a.m. to get there. The three of us were taken to the basement and given fresh water. 8 minutes later, Security came back and said, "We are being evacuated." So, back into the car we went. I

was told to go to Qualcomm Stadium, but I remembered that in 2003, the evacuees with animals had to sleep in their cars in the parking lot, so I headed to Mira Mesa High School, hoping there was still room.



*Mira Mesa gym*



*Puppy Hill*

Luckily, I got there and they were all ready set up. There were about 1200 people that had been there all night, so the gym was already a solid sea of cots and air mattresses. There was a grassy knoll area with pine trees on it that had been set up by the Humane Society for the animals. About 250 of us opted to sleep outside, on the ground with our "kids". Of course, birds have a weak respiratory system, so Midori was whisked away and placed in the humane society's 60 foot mobile hospital where she spent 4 days keeping all around her amused. Bailey and I got settled on what became known as "Puppy Hill" and the Humane Society gave us a kennel for her to sleep in. The Red Cross, the Humane Society, and the other evacuees were wonderful! A double-amputee lent me a sleeping bag (said he had an extra) and on the second day, after many areas were reopened for residents to go home, I got an air mattress. I was there for 4 days. On the 5th day, some of the streets were reopened and I gathered my brood and went to a friend's house in a nearby town. Midori went to her vet's office to be kenneled until the air was clear enough for her, but Bailey and I spent the next 9 days with my friends, Martha and John, in San Marcos. On that Friday, we were allowed to go into the neighborhood, with proper ID, and check on our houses. Mine was OK. I had a lot of smoke and ash inside and lost landscape plants and trees in the back yard, as well as all the cushions and the umbrella from my patio furniture. There were burned embers against the house and tucked up next to that doggy door! Over 360 homes were lost in my neighborhood; the nearest one was 3 houses away. The street that I used to get out on was over half gone. Luckily, my insurance was great. They sent in a 10-man cleaning crew to clean from ceiling to carpet. They also paid for Midori's boarding, Bailey's bath and grooming, additional expenses incurred by Martha and John by having us there, and new patio cushions and umbrella.

All in all, I am one of the lucky ones. Aside from being more scared than I have ever been, once evacuated, everyone was wonderful. I have to admit, the last time we had a Santa Ana wind start blowing, I started pacing and thinking about loading up the car. When it comes right down to it, you grab what is most important and the rest is just "stuff"!