

The Witching Hour: Run away!

Evacuation is our only choice when wildfire threatens, and we need to plan for it

By Tracy Salcedo

Much like the 2017 Nuns Fire when it blew into Glen Ellen, the 2021 Dixie Fire blew into Lassen Volcanic National Park wind-whipped and out of control. A family of endangered Sierra Nevada red foxes called Lassen home on that frightful August night, and the red fox mama had a choice: run away or stay. Drawing on her instincts, she made a decision.

She sheltered in place. The biologists who were tracking her believe she and her kits burrowed deep into a rock outcropping to wait out the inferno. She and the kits survived.

I had to make a similar choice in October 2017, but I had no instinct or experience to guide me. What would it mean to stay as the Nuns Fire barreled down on Glen Ellen? What would it mean to run away? The wind howled, the smoke created an unfathomable darkness, and I was overwhelmed. Then someone in a white SUV with flashing lights and a bullhorn made my decision for me. It wasn't so much a warning as a: *Get out now!*

I evacuated.

But could I have sheltered in place?

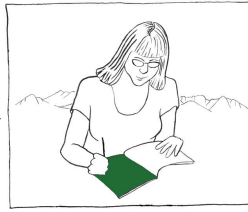
In the weeks that followed, I was grateful for those who did, because they were able to relay information from the evacuation zone, taking the edge off the anxiety and homesickness that accompany exile. Those who stayed not only protected their own properties, but also the homes of their neighbors. They had resources — pools, pumps, generators, chainsaws, walkie talkies, tractors — and the expertise, training, and mental fortitude to use them.

Shelter in place is what the red fox mama did in the Dixie Fire; stay and defend is what the folks who had pools and tractors and chainsaws did in the Nuns Fire. Now, as we approach the eighth anniversary of the Wine Country firestorms, the concepts of "shelter in place" and "stay and defend" have crept into the conversation about redevelopment of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC). The idea is that these strategies could help us avoid gridlock when the inevitable emergency evacuation comes to Sonoma Valley — gridlock that will only get worse when the thousand homes planned for the SDC are built out and the more than 2,000 people living there pile into their cars to flee.

Both are bad, and possibly deadly, strategies.

The National Institute of Standards and Technology says this about shelter in place: "Due to combustible construction materials, fuel accumulation and agglomeration, high structure density, and existing ignition vulnerabilities, many communities are not generally suitable for stay and defend, and nearly all are unsuitable for a more passive [shelter-in-place] approach."

Certainly, Glen Ellen and the SDC property, by virtue



of fire history, location, and planned density, would fit this definition of "unsuitable."

Shelter in place requires a confidence in a fireproof building or facility. Such a building doesn't exist (yet) — and I don't know about you, but I don't want to be one of people who field-tests that thing. I'm reminded of the looters who tried to steal a neighbor's "fireproof" gun safe after the Nuns Fire incinerated his home. The safe was so hot they couldn't lift it (and I am perversely satisfied when I imagine the looters' blistered hands after they tried). It

also got so hot the items inside were destroyed.

Stay and defend requires money and physical wherewithal. In Australia, where property owners are permitted to stay and defend, the Government of West Australia Department of Fire and Emergency Services says that to be

"completely prepared" for a bushfire, people need to have protective clothing, an "independent water supply of at least 20,000 litres," a generator with sufficient fuel to power a firefighting pump, the pump itself, at least two hoses with "metal hose fittings (so they won't melt)," ladders, metal rakes and shovels, a "garden backpack spray" to extinguish spot-fires, cotton mops to put out embers, and metal buckets. They also must have completed a whole host of modifications to their homes.

And they must be prepared to shelter in place, because stay and defend doesn't always work.

For financially challenged folks like me, stay and defend is a non-starter. I'd love a swimming pool and a pump and a generator and a place to store the fuel I'd need to run the generator to operate the pump. I'd love to seal my foundation and replace

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my wooden deck and siding. I'd love a personal trainer to help me build the muscle and stamina I'd need to defend my property from the flames. I'd love a great big rock outcropping I could retreat to when all else fails.

But the pocketbook's just not fat enough.

I'm not saying we shouldn't continue looking at ways to build more fire resistance into our homes, businesses, and communities, especially those in the wildland-urban interface (WUI), like the SDC. But from all I've learned in my reporting on wildfire over the past eight years, we aren't even close to that kind of security. Shelter in place and stay and defend are pipe dreams, just like the wildfire buffer that Eldridge Renewal, the SDC's prospective developer, has drawn around the thousand homes it hopes to pile on the land. The buffer is a comforting concept on paper, but absolutely meaningless to flaming

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downing, the late-day confusion and agitation that many families find challenging.

Green spaces are good for the mind, too. Studies have shown that just 20 minutes in a park, garden, or along a walking path can lower stress hormones, reduce blood pressure, and boost feelings of calm. Walking outdoors engages the senses — the sound of birds, the smell of flowers, the feel of a breeze — which stimulates the brain in a way that indoor environments simply can't match.

This idea — that connecting people with nature promotes well-being — is at the heart of biophilic design. Biophilic design intentionally brings elements of the natural world into our built environment through natural light, views of greenery, use of wood and stone, and easy access to outdoor spaces. Research shows this approach can lower stress, improve sleep, and create a sense of comfort — especially valuable for older adults and those living with cognitive changes.

The good news is that you don't have to be an architect or designer to benefit from biophilic principles. At home, you can open curtains in the morning to let in light, bring houseplants or fresh flowers indoors, or create a quiet chair near a window where you can enjoy the view. Taking advantage of local walking paths, vineyard trails, or neighborhood

embers lofted by gale-force winds into even the most well-prepared neighborhoods.

Evacuation remains the best choice, both instinctively and intellectually, for all humans living in the WUI, including those of us living in Glen Ellen and Kenwood. Planning and home hardening and buffering will save lives and property, but Trevor Smith, fire marshal with Sonoma Valley Fire District, was clear when I asked him about stay and defend: When the evacuation order comes, residents should get out.

"Leave the firefighting to the professionals," Smith said. "Stay and defend is not recommended."

As stakeholders — elected officials, county planners, state bureaucrats, hopeful developers, environmental nonprofits, community advocates — begin to negotiate mitigations for the significant environmental impacts SDC's redevelopment will impose, public safety needs to be foremost. We need to plan for the worst; not for the hopeful, not for the untested, not for the wealthy.

The red fox mama, saddled with her kits, knew evacuation was not an option. We humans, saddled with our hard-earned experience, must reconcile with evacuation as our only option. We must plan for it.

For more information on evacuation protocols, check CalFire's Go! Evacuation Guide: www.readyforwildfire.org/prepare-for-wildfire/go-evacuation-guide/#guidanceiftrapped.

parks just a few times a week can amplify these effects — supporting both mental clarity and emotional well-being.

As we age, our connection to the natural world becomes not just a pleasure, but a prescription for brain health. The sights, sounds, and rhythms of nature remind us to slow down, breathe deeply, and be present. In doing so, we give our minds and bodies a chance to reset, restore, and thrive.

Dr. Raj Kalra is a board-certified physician in Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation, Pain Medicine, Lifestyle Medicine, and Obesity Medicine. He is the founder of Aroha Memory Care by MD Senior Wellness, a wellness-focused memory care community in Santa Rosa set to open later this year. Aroha is designed to provide seniors with a warm, person-centered environment that blends evidence-based care with lifestyle medicine principles and meaningful connection. For more information or to join the waitlist, visit www.arohamemorycare.com.

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