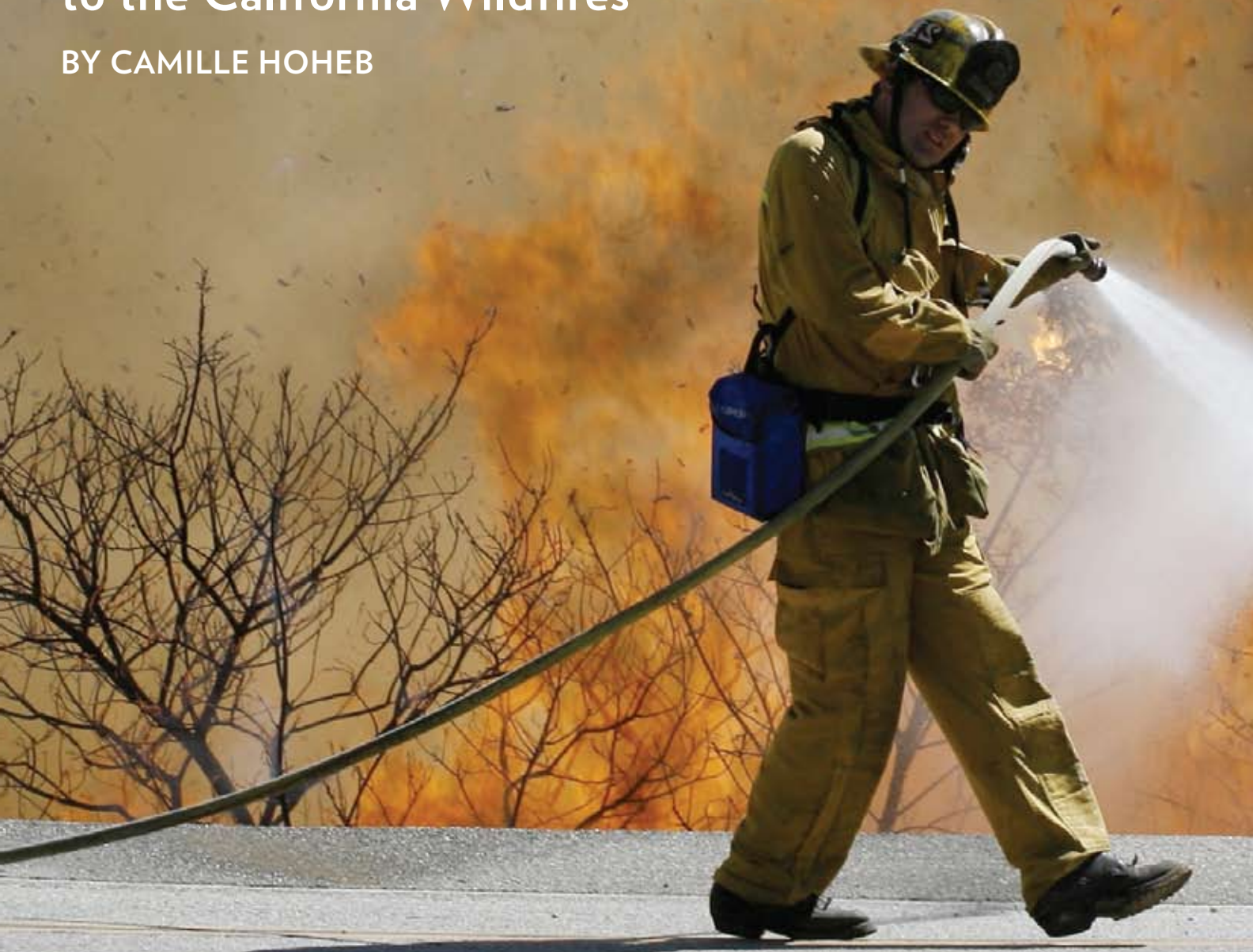


Devastation & Compassion

Massage Therapists React
to the California Wildfires

BY CAMILLE HOHEB





S

uddenly and swiftly, Southern California had the world's attention as flames and smoke devastated lives, homes, and property. This was much more than a local event. When satellite photos showed behemoth clouds of smoke covering a large geography, one could better comprehend the far-reaching destruction of 17 simultaneous fires. Seven counties were affected. The October 2007 California wildfires dramatically touched an estimated 1,200 massage therapists—their lives, businesses, and clients— including those who share their stories with us here.

Interested in Volunteering?

Ten years ago Doug Rasmusson formed the Carolina Emergency Response Team and it evolved into Emergency Response Massage International. ERMI is a nonprofit organization comprised of massage therapists who provide stress relief to emergency responders and caregivers following a disaster. There are 27 participating state chapters and one in the United Kingdom.

ERMI'S GOALS:

- To train massage therapists in the role of disaster/critical incident response.
- To educate local, state, federal support agencies, and the general public in emergency response stress management.
- To set standards for emergency response stress management in the massage therapy profession.
- To provide the opportunity for massage therapists to become a part of the emergency response stress management team without restrictions of professional association membership.

For more information, visit www.ermassage.org.



A FAMILY EVACUATION

Robyn Delagado, massage therapist describes how the fires impacted her directly: “We live in Rancho Bernardo about two miles either way from the major burn areas. We watched the fire on Sunday on the local news until about 2 a.m. At 5 a.m. our neighbor knocked on the door and told us it was time to evacuate. I gathered pictures and some other papers. I had received my paycheck on Saturday and put it on a shelf to deposit on Monday. As I was gathering my family—my husband, two kids, one poodle—I thought that I should bring my paycheck to deposit later, but I could not calm my mind enough to remember where it was. I made a few attempts, taking deep breaths, trying to focus. I couldn’t do it. The advice to post a list with items you would take in case of emergency is an important lesson. I decided to take my table and oils and some other things. My husband took our car and I took the truck. I was headed to Orange County to my sister’s house and my husband planned on staying in San Diego to work and stay with his mother. It took us six hours to make the normally 80-minute drive to Orange County. When I arrived, my massage table cover was black from the soot, but my table was clean.

“I work at Luminesse Medical Spa in Carmel Valley. During the summer we had set up a massage cabana on the second floor patio of our building. Although we had moved our services inside with the cooler fall weather, I still used the cabana to store several items, like pillow bolsters and table padding. When I returned to work, the patio was a black sooty mess. The foam padding was steeped in ash and the pillow was black. I asked when we would be setting up the cabana again, and that’s when I found out that the cabana had blown away. The last time it was seen, it was spotted on

top of a tree in the adjacent parking lot. The spa was closed for a week. I lost that week of massage business, along with the following week’s income. So many homes were lost. I haven’t noticed people thinking of indulging in massage, although it would be helpful in reducing stress. In times like these, the stress immediately following the event is overwhelming. In Rancho Bernardo and Poway, the loss is great. I believe we witnessed a miracle in the safe evacuation of so many people.

“At my kid’s school, 60 kids’ homes were burned down completely. I am in awe that no one was harmed. There were so many families who left with flames at their doorsteps. I am grateful for all of the prayers and well wishing that brought our community out of this wreckage with life intact for most.”

CLOSED DOORS

Mueller College of Holistic Studies in San Diego provides educational programs in massage therapy and integrated bodywork. Although not directly affected by the fires, Mueller College was closed for a week and graduation ceremonies are rescheduled for October 2008.

Jeff Walsh, PhD, president of Mueller College shares their story: “Many of our students, faculty, and staff were evacuated from their homes and some for several days,” he says. “The college was closed for the week that the fires were at their greatest intensity. (We closed) because of the poor air quality, the many freeway closures and resultant traffic hazards, and the unpredictability of the fires that were approaching the college, fueled by 70 mile per hour winds.”

Walsh says none of the students, staff, or faculty was injured and none suffered any permanent physical loss. “Aside from a great deal of toxic ash removal, no damage was done to the college facilities,” he said.

READY TO BE DEPLOYED



Helen Hodgson is the California representative for Emergency Response Massage International (ERMI-CA). She has more than 25 years' experience as a registered nurse, nutritionist, personal fitness trainer, and massage therapist.

"I jumped into the volunteer role with the California chapter of ERMI, eager to help first responders cope during disasters. With an established training program and a team of more than 60 strong, we were waiting and ready to assist with the wildfires," Hodgson says. "Although we contacted several agencies, including the Salvation Army, we were not deployed. We appreciate that their focus was on the wildfires—which were widespread and devastating—but ERMI-CA is always available to serve the community when disaster strikes."

In times of need, coordination takes place with agencies such as FEMA, Salvation Army, and the local emergency management teams. "This was such a big incident and spread over such a large area that this may have been the last on the list of priorities," Hodgson explains. First responders work around the clock until the incident has been contained or remedied before taking a moment for themselves.

Hodgson first learned about ERMI when its founder, Doug Rasmusson, asked for volunteers after Hurricane Katrina. "I couldn't make it to New Orleans, so I put on a fundraiser instead," she says. "Doug and I kept in touch. Later I persuaded him to come to California to do trainings. California was the 17th state to join ERMI." To raise awareness, Hodgson holds classes where massage therapists can earn eight CEUs toward their license renewal.

Typically there is a delay in coordinating efforts among state and federal agencies. With disasters such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, it took three to six weeks after the initial event to coordinate relief. "Massage therapy is a great precursor to psychotherapy," Hodgson says. "It allows first responders to relax and start talking."

The greatest toll taken by the fire storms is in the area of emotional distress, Walsh points out. "It goes without saying that those who lived in fear of losing homes and property—or worse—were anxious and depressed." Many of the teachers, staff, and students came to mass evacuation areas to lend a hand to victims, overworked emergency personnel, and even anxious pets. "I am proud that they represented the college in such a positive light through their unselfish contributions," Walsh said.

A SAFE HAVEN

The Rancho Bernardo Inn is a luxury golf and spa resort in San Diego. Guests were immediately evacuated due to the encroaching wildfires. Initially the resort was transformed into a hub for firefighters, then a safe haven for displaced locals. General manager John Gates said the staff operated throughout the crisis, providing a place where first responders "could get a bite to eat, get cleaned up, and rest before heading out for another 12-hour shift."

Spa manager Bree Lewis-Pritchard was in for a surprise the morning of Monday, October 22. She turned on the television and discovered the extent of the out-of-control wildfires. Living near the coastline, Lewis-Pritchard was not in danger. She called the Inn and learned overnight guests had relocated and emergency procedures were in place. She immediately called her staff to ensure that they were not trying to make it to work. This was during the peak of wildfire activity that resulted in closed roads and freeways while thousands of residences were receiving reverse 911 calls to evacuate. Although the property remained operational, the spa was closed until Friday of that week.

Laura Firm, a staff massage therapist at the inn, had never experienced a disaster that touched both her personal and professional lives. Her parents and grandmother initially sought refuge at Firm's home during the wildfires, but within a day her family was forced to move again as blazes swept through nearby communities. "We evacuated around 7 a.m. on Tuesday, October 23rd. My parents originally brought their dog and cat to my house when they were evacuated. We took along my parents' pets plus my own dog and we all stayed at my boyfriend's house until Friday," Firm recalls. "I was unable to go to work that whole week due to the power outage at the spa. It was not a relaxing time. It is difficult when you can't go back to your own home, and I was worried my house would be gone. The air quality was very poor so we were unable to go outside and just about everyone went stir crazy."

When Firm returned to her home it wasn't damaged, but it was covered in black ash that continued to fall for a week. When asked what advice she would give to anyone facing a similar situation, she answers, "Be prepared. Try to remain calm. Have important items like medication, documents, foods, clothes, and photos packed and ready to go!"

A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Amy Grady, a student at Mueller College and a resident of Scripts Ranch was given minutes to evacuate and found shelter at Qualcomm Stadium for two days. Grady found herself helping others at Qualcomm Stadium. The scene is something she'll never forget. "I figure I was sleeping next to 20-plus horses for more than 24 hours with a tarp over my head and no running water and one potty. It looked like the Army was camping out with the

cats—and the odor wasn't that great," she jokes. "I started working the Petco Zone. I would help those bringing in any kind of pet or livestock. It became my passion for those two days."

After Grady was allowed to return home, she cleaned herself up, then returned to Qualcomm to help for the rest of the week. Certified in trauma hand massage, Grady taught evacuees how to calm themselves through self-massage. "I taught people who had actually lost their homes and others who didn't know if their homes were still standing."

The challenge was not without its lighter moments. At one point someone brought 200 ducks into Qualcomm. Grady was doing a television interview at the time. She took one look at the ducks, told the audience about their arrival and said, "We need kids' swimming pools to put them in." Within 10 minutes donations started pouring in.

COMPASSION AND GRATITUDE

As residents piece together their lives and try to return to a more familiar rhythm, what is clear is that the blazes inflicted an emotional toll on Southern Californians. What is so striking in these stories and the interviews they stem from are the repeated themes of gratitude, compassion for neighbors, and the desire to help others. **m&b**

6 *Camille Hoheb is a freelance writer and spa business consultant based in Los Angeles. Her 16-years of experience ranges from healthcare marketing to spa and wellness start-ups. She may be reached at camillehoheb@aol.com.*

California Wildfires Overview



- **Acreage affected: 516,356.**
- **Homes destroyed: 2,013.**
- **Deaths: seven due directly to fire; seven involving evacuees, including infirmity, age, and accident.**
- **Injuries: 71 firefighters, 27 civilians.**
- **Evacuees: at least 1,432 people in 13 shelters.**

SOURCE: ASSOCIATED PRESS, OCTOBER 29, 2007