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Oakridge residents Mark and Dixie Pattison sent this cellphone photo of what remains of their 1834-square-foot home destroyed in the Sayre Fire in Sylmar.

Sylmar Firestorm Ravages Homes of Two Metro Employees

- East Valley Division Bus Operators shuttle residents to view homes destroyed in the fire.
- Monday: East Valley Division "Good Fellas" club and Operator Mia Perry are putting together a luncheon and clothing drive to benefit fire victims, including one of their own.

By GAYLE ANDERSON
— East Valley Division Stenographer Darlene Blake contributed to this report.

(Nov 20, 2008) Under skies swept clean by yet another round of Santa Ana winds, Friday, Nov. 14, bore the usual red flag of fire-warning anxiety. But for the residents of Oakridge Mobile Home Park, it was business as usual. With the Porter Ranch Fire nipping at their heels only a month before, it was the second time the residents were to be evacuated this year.

But this time, the residents returned to the smoldering rubble, after the Sayre Fire destroyed 477 of its 608 homes in twenty minutes in the early morning hours of Nov. 15.



Dixie Pattison, left, an assistant administrative analyst in Communications, and East Valley Division Bus Operator Robert Lutz, at right, lost homes in the Sayre Fire that destroyed the Oakridge Mobile Home Park, an iconic community of landscaped modular homes Pattison once called 'the best kept secret in the Valley.'



Two of those homes in Oakridge, an iconic community nestled in the slope of a hill at the end of Glenoaks Boulevard in Sylmar, belonged to Metro families.

East Valley Division Operator Bob Lutz, who joined Metro in 1990 and has operated out of Division 15 since 1992, was on vacation when the Sayre Fire took hold on Friday evening.

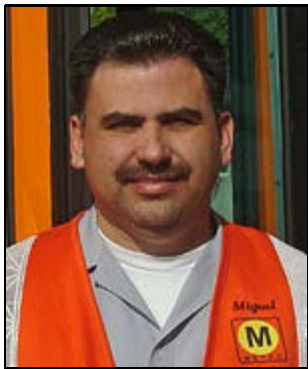
When the order came to evacuate, Lutz and his wife had only minutes to get out, piling their three dogs into the car and leaving practically everything else, even Bob's Metro Operator uniforms.

The couple took refuge in the Mission Hills home of Lutz' brother, reported Darlene Blake, Division 15 stenographer, who met with Lutz when he returned to the division to arrange for more uniforms.

Blake said Lutz told her he saw the "wall of flames," which he described as 50 feet high transformed by intense winds into a horizontal front 50 feet wide. So intense were the winds, he said, that firefighters couldn't get near the base. The only thing to do was evacuate.

Residents were allowed back in the area in their own vehicles beginning Tuesday. Lutz sifted through rubble and came back with nothing, he told Blake. "His fireproof safe wasn't so fireproof," said Blake. The safe contained important papers and savings bonds.

East Valley Division Operators relayed residents to the scene



Metro Bus Operator Miguel Contreras was one of four transporting Oakridge Park residents from the shelter to the scene of the fire. *Photo by Darlene Blake.*

Blake said the eeriest thing of all for Operator Lutz may have been the ride from the makeshift shelter at Sylmar High School to discover what was left of his Oakridge home. The ride was on a Metro Bus, one of four provided by Division 15 at the request of the Los Angeles Police Department, who had organized a shuttle to transport Oakridge residents into the fire-ravaged area to survey the damage and take photos of their property.

Operator Miguel Contreras' 40-foot Local was the first bus out. His passengers were Oakridge residents, a grief counselor, and a police escort.

"We weren't allowed to let anybody off of the bus," he said, "but we stopped for anybody who needed to take pictures. The bus was full. Some were anxious at first; some got depressed when they saw what was gone. But, they came back a little comforted – at least, they could know and picture what had happened," said Contreras. On board the bus was an Oakridge manager who helped people find their property. "The street signs were gone, nothing was recognizable, really," said Contreras.

Operators Luis Monje, Edgar Montes-Castro, and Rita Durkee also transported residents in the shuttle, said Blake. Durkee spoke of being apprehensive at first, expecting inconsolable passengers to be confronting a tragic loss and fearful she would not be able to comfort them. "But they were joyful," she said, "laughing even, comforting one another. People who had lost everything were supporting people who had lost everything. It's the human spirit. You can't put it down."

"To see these people with their houses burned down," said Operator Luis Monje, "sharing whatever they have left with each other ... I'll never forget it." When a police officer boarded to announce that no bodies were

discovered and not even any injuries were reported, the passengers cheered wildly, said Monje. "That was everyone's concern," he said, "a great relief for everyone."

The last run of the day, in the late afternoon, was for residents who had not lost their homes. With embers still dying out, the residents were allowed ten minutes to enter their homes and grab some necessities, such as prescriptions or a change of clothing.

Pattisons moved their world in ten short hours

From the first sound of alarm, delivered by neighbors, to a short and frantic 10 hours later, Mark and Dixie Pattison managed to grab what they could from their home, organize the swift retreat of Mark's 81- and 83-year-old parents and their puppy from their nearby home, help pack up Mark's son Danny and fiancée Adela, and move their extended family and all that remained of their belongings into a beautiful four-bedroom home owned by a friend in Santa Clarita, who just happened to be looking for ideal renters.



Mark Pattison with his prized motorcycle.

Both Pattisons are members of the Metro family. Dixie, an assistant administrative analyst in Communications, returned to employment at Metro in February, after working in previous assignments from 1994 to 2002. Her husband, Mark, joined Metro's Public Affairs Department in 1994 and retired from his position as assistant communications manager on the last day of 2004.



Neighbors pounding on the door woke the sleeping couple about 10:30 that Friday evening, relatively long before the helicopters roared overhead blaring evacuation orders in the middle of the night.

"I had a feeling this was big," said Dixie. "It looked a lot closer than last time; the winds were worse." (A month previous, the park had been evacuated in response to the October fire in Porter Ranch. That had felt more like a drill – that time the quaint homes with rustic gardens welcomed the residents back home.)

In a "fight or flight" response mode, the Pattisons grabbed jewelry, important papers, computers, some clothing and shoes, photos, and five of Mark's guitars from his collection of many.

"Our street was the first to go"

"We thought we were coming back," said Dixie. Firefighters beating back the flames had told the couple that the fire would likely pass through the brush and back over the hill away from the homes. The scenario proved true until about 5 a.m. That was when the wind shifted and brought the

fire back.

"Our street was the first to go," she said.

The 1834-square-foot, two-bedroom home was burned to the ground. The couple, avid collectors and artisans both, lost generations of photos, record collections, a library-sized study full of books, and antique furniture.

The biggest loss, or perhaps, the most symbolic, was Mark's prized motorcycle, said Dixie. "I broke down and just lost it when I saw the burnt-out, blackened shape." The motorcycle was parked at the end of the park alongside Dixie's new Volkswagon convertible bug. The VW, with its cloth top that could have burst into flames at the sight of an ember, remained untouched by the fire.

The Oakridge Mobile Home Park is far from what its name implies. Tucked under the 210 freeway at the end of Glenoaks Boulevard at Foothill, the park of manufactured pre-fabricated homes, not trailers, some historic, all landscaped, is populated by young and old alike.

"It was the best kept secret of the Valley," said Dixie. "I am mourning a community. We were all together – Thanksgiving dinners, bingo, lots of children, an Olympic-sized swimming pool. It's a 'paradise lost'."

But not forever, it would seem.

The residential community of Oakridge Park evolved on the grounds owned by the Stetsons, the makers of the famous hats. Although burned to the ground, or nearly so, "It still has the magic," said Dixie. "You still don't want to leave."

The Pattisons are convinced the park will return to its nestled serenity one day. "Already a property manager came by the evacuation center and was talking about 'great leads' on manufactured homes," she said.

Between sorting out a former life and starting a new one, the Pattisons are busy filling out FEMA papers and furnishing their new rental home. Somehow, Dixie is finding time to print t-shirts with a slogan to boost the family's already positive morale:

"Keep on keeping on."



Entrance to the rental home in Santa Clarita, above, where the Pattisons relocated within ten hours of the evacuation, contrasts with the entrance to their home in Oakridge Park, below, destroyed by fire. Note the patio furniture intact in the background.

