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Tales of a city in flames

As the fires closed in on Fort McMurray, some people fled
and others waited in Edmonton to help

By Maria Silva



At the beginning of the week, no one in Fort McMurray expected the flames to threaten the existence of their city. (Michelle Corcoran)

IT WAS MONDAY, May. 1, 2016, in Fort McMurray, and nobody was expecting what was coming.

In the afternoon, news organizations like Global TV, CBC and the *Edmonton Journal* were running stories about a fire that had reached the city. Twitter was full of it. It made my heart race. My mother had been working at camp in the area for over four years. I was worried and scared. All I could think about was the worst-case scenario: death. I didn't look very deeply into the stories because all I cared about was whether she was safe.

I immediately called her and woke her up (she works the night shift). I was relieved that she answered. She had no idea what was going on. She told me that, the last she heard, the fire was under control. I told her that wasn't the case anymore, and to hang up, check the news and call me back.

An hour later, my mother was back on the line, explaining that the fire had gone out of control and her night shift has been cancelled.

Until then, my biggest fear of her working up north had been the potential for a car accident during the five-hour drive home on her days off.

The fires had continued to burn and had almost doubled in size by the evening of May 2. Fire crews continued their efforts to get the fire under control but it had burned almost 2,600 hectares at this point. Some parts of the city began to evacuate but others were still hopeful that it would stop.

My mother was one of many people stuck in Fort McMurray after the province ordered the highway closed on May 3. After telling me her side of the story, I couldn't help but wonder about what had happened to others who had dealt with this tragedy.

DON MacNEIL flew back to Fort McMurray on Sunday, April 30, from Calgary. He had been working the day shift at Syncrude for eight months, but coming back this time would be different.

Monday, his shift was cut short by the fires, but his bosses gave him no further instructions, so MacNeil stayed back. Realizing that many were being told to leave the city, he began talking to friends who planned to drive south out of town.

"A lot of us thought we would just be going back to work in a few days," he says. "We didn't know the severity of it. But, once we were all kicked out of the plant because the operators, the people that lived in Fort Mac, had to go home to get their things – evacuate and get their loved ones. We didn't realize it was that bad. And then we started to see people from Fort McMurray coming into the camps."

MacNeil says he knew he had to fend for himself. With no instructions from upper management, a lot of workers had to make the executive decision to evacuate on their own. He had left his pregnant wife a day ago, and she was worried for his safety. He knew he wasn't about to wait for this fire to calm down. He needed to get home.

"Social media helped a lot through Wood Buffalo emergency services, on twitter," MacNeil says. "That's where I got most of my information. Not really through management."

For the people in Fort McMurray itself, the story was different. Camps were safe, because most were about 35 kilometres from the town. Residents who were evacuating Fort McMurray had the options of the camps or temporary relief sites, or to stay with family members outside of town.



MICHELE CORCORAN was born and raised in Fort McMurray. She was in Grade 10 at Father Patrick Mercredi High School. She didn't expect Monday to be the last time she would wake up in her room. The day started off normally. She went to school, hung out with friends, walked the hallways to class. Then, in the afternoon, school officials decided to evacuate.

"So what ended up happening," she recalls, "is they called a volunteer evacuation on, like, most of the city. So what the school did was put the school on a lockdown and waited for all the parents to come and get the kids. So it was around the last block of school. So you weren't allowed to leave the classroom until your parents went to the

office and said, 'I am here to pick up my kids.' They didn't want anyone leaving and not being accounted for."

Leaving home for school that morning Corcoran didn't expect that she wouldn't be back to hang out in her room, eat dinner in the kitchen – or spend the summer in her backyard.

Similarly, her mother expected the evacuation to be short. She decided what was best for her kids was to stay away from disaster sites that were very close to home. She didn't want them worrying and had packed their clothes herself so they wouldn't have to drive past the home they were not to see for almost three months.

The city was evacuated on May. 3. Highway 63 was closed the same day, as the fire jumped the road south out of town. The temperature reached a very dry 32 degrees, which helped propel the fire. With people scrambling to find a safe place, evacuation sites set up all over the city were moving to camps far enough away to keep residents from harm. However, many of the sites filled up fast and left people with nowhere to go.

"I didn't think it was going to get that bad," Corcoran recalls. "The level it escalated to. I knew certain places were experiencing a lot of smoke and stuff, so they had to go to evacuation sites."

After the highway was shut down, Corcoran and her family stayed with a family friend in Timerblea, just north of the city. Police had been closing and opening the highway all day. At certain times, they would let a few vehicles through. Ordered to evacuate, on May. 3, the family left Timebrlea for Wandering River to stay with her uncle for the night. It wasn't until the next day that she and 10 other family members moved to Morinville to stay with her grandmother for what they thought would be just a few days.

It ended up being for the whole summer.



The fires were the costliest natural disaster in Canadian history. (Michelle Corcoran)

Meanwhile nothing had been arranged for the workers at the camps. The air quality had already begun to decrease, heavy with smoke and fog. As the camps continued to fill with families from town, many people living and working there moved out to make room. With no busing or flights organized, many had to rely on co-workers with vehicles to drive them to safety. However, the roads had been blocked, making it impossible to leave, and many left their vehicles behind. MacNeil had no vehicle, so he had no choice but to catch a ride out. Yet the police were still turning vehicles back.

When word came by phone that WestJet and planes chartered by Suncor were offering free flights out, MacNeil and his colleagues – including my mother – drove to the airport and

waited for the call to board. Word had spread, though. The airport was mobbed, and many who had not been called to evacuate were there with faked credentials. MacNeil says madness was the only word to describe it. There were no security checks. People were bringing animals on the planes.

By then, the number of evacuees had reached 70,000, with people taking refuge in such cities as Edmonton and Lac La Biche, and in surrounding areas. With Red Cross donations reaching \$102 million, some people felt more was needed than just money and they set out to collect clothing, toiletries, blankets and food.

People across the province and the country had been shocked and saddened by the scope and impact of the tragedy and they opened their hearts. Donation centres were set up all over Edmonton, making it easy for people to give.

And there were those who felt they needed to do even more. They opened their homes to misplaced families.

TANYA SAUMURE lives in a duplex in Sherwood Park and, when she heard about the fires, she took action. Following what was happening on social media, Saumure went to her daughter's school and asked how she could offer to take in Fort McMurray refugees. She was sent a family of four.

The Gado family had left a low-income home in Wood Buffalo, in one of the first neighbourhood evacuations, bringing only enough clothing to last a few days.

They hopped on a WestJet flight to Edmonton. When they landed, they headed straight to the Edmonton Expo Centre, where shelter, food and beds were – along with several thousand other refugees. Just as they were getting settled, they were told they would be moving on to Sherwood Park.



Donation centres were set up across the city so people could drop off emergency supplies. (Tanya Saumure)

Saumure had posted a call for donations on Facebook, and that brought in pillows, toiletries and clothing for the couple and their two daughters. Even though she was working two jobs, Saumure found time to drive them around until they could rent a car. Her days filled up with collecting items, shuttling the family members to work, school and various appointments. She raised \$600 to buy basic necessities for the family. A

Grade 1 teacher at Saumure daughter's school organized a read-a-thon to raise money. In three days, they brought in \$800, which also went to the family.

"We were able to ... get them everything," Saumure says. "Like microwaves, toaster ovens, dishes, cups to drink out of, new cutlery, couches – everything to furnish a townhouse for a family of four. Within a week."

The experience taught her children a lesson about doing good that will impact their lives forever, she adds.

On May 5, the Alberta government implemented a province-wide fire ban, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that the federal government would match donations to the Red Cross for Fort McMurray relief efforts. Officials and relief workers dedicated the next few days to moving evacuees from the camps to the south of Alberta. In Fort McMurray, thousands of structures had been destroyed, but most of the town was still standing.

May 10, the fires reached the Saskatchewan border, and started to slow down.

By then, MacNeil had made it back to Calgary, where his pregnant wife was waiting for him. They spent the summer waiting for the arrival of their first child. The couple had recently moved to Calgary, so MacNeil devoted all his time to settling in. He says he felt he could deal with work later.

He did return to work on Sept. 21, but not to Syncrude. He works for Safeway in Kearl Lake.

The Corcoran family spent the summer in Morinville, but Michelle's father, an oil-field veteran of 25 years, returned to Fort McMurray to repair water and smoke damage to the family home. Two houses next to their house had burned down – burning branches or embers may have been blown onto them.

Michelle Corcoran is back at Father Patrick Mercredi High School, in Grade 11. She says she had been worried that her friends might not come back, but it looks like she'll be attending her last couple years with people she has known since elementary school.

Saumure helped the Gado family in Sherwood Park, until they moved back to Ontario. They had lived in the Fort McMurray area for seven years, and were six months between leaving Wood Buffalo and arriving in the East.

Disasters always brings communities together. This disaster did more than that; it brought a together a province, a country – and beyond. By the time the fundraising drive was over, the Red Cross had collected more than \$299 million worldwide.

As Saumure says, "It was nice to see just humanity come full-blown."