

CAMARILLO Acorn

After the fire, she turns a new page

| November 29, 2019

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NEW CHAPTER—Noelle Nelson's Malibu home was destroyed in the Woolsey fire. Since then, she's bought a new place in Camarillo and told her story about moving on in a "Chicken Soup for the Soul" book that came out recently. BROOKE STANLEY/Acorn Newspapers

Last month's 60-mph Santa Ana winds felt all too familiar to Camarillo resident Noelle Nelson. In November 2018, similar winds were the driving force behind the Woolsey fire that destroyed Nelson's Malibu home of 18 years.

A year later, the trial consultant, psychologist and author has begun rebuilding her life in Camarillo. She's also published a short story about losing her home in Amy Newmark and Deborah Norville's "Chicken Soup for the Soul" book, "Think Positive, Live Happy: 101 Stories about Creating Your Best Life."

Nelson's piece, titled "Creating a New Story," is about finding a way to be appreciative and move forward after losing everything in the fire. She said she hopes it will inspire others who go through difficult circumstances to see the positives and not be afraid to lean on others for support.

On Nov. 8, 2018, the Woolsey fire that destroyed 1,643 structures and caused nearly \$6 billion in damage in Ventura and Los Angeles counties was still on the north side of the 101 Freeway. High winds hadn't yet sent the blaze across the freeway and through the hills between Agoura Hills and Malibu, and many Malibu residents still believed their homes would be safe.

Nelson, who lived in the hills inland from the Pacific Coast, said she hadn't received any evacuation orders because the fire was more than 20 miles from her home. Unworried, she went to her weekly ballroom dance class that evening.

When the class finished an hour and a half later, she had received three mandatory evacuation alerts on her phone. Nelson, who lived alone, said she grabbed her dogs, laptop and mother's jewelry and drove to the home of her friend Erica Jordan.

For the next couple of days, the two were glued to the news, looking for any sign of what had become of Nelson's home.

Jordan said she did whatever she could to support her best friend of over 40 years.

"My job was to be strong for her, and if she needed something to help her get it and to just sit with her while we watch the TV and hold her hand," Jordan said.

A couple days later, ranch hands who had been in the area after Nelson evacuated told her they'd watched her house burn to the ground in 45 minutes.

She spent the following days staying with friends and in hotels while searching for a place to live. She was one of hundreds of thousands of Southern Californians displaced by the fires, so space was limited—especially for someone with two large dogs. All the while, she was trying to process the strange feeling of losing her home and almost everything but the clothes on her back.

She thought about the things she had lost: her mother's portrait; the American flag the family had been given at the funeral of her father, a World War II veteran; baby pictures of her younger sister, Colette. To her, it felt like she had lost her story.

"It's the oddest thing in the world. I had just turned 71, which means I had 71 years of life . . . accumulated over the years," Nelson said.

That, she said, is when the miracles started.

"I literally had one miracle after another," she said.

Nelson's miracles came to her in the form of people—friends, acquaintances and complete strangers— extending kindness toward her. A woman at CVS offered to buy her whatever she needed. Her dentist replaced her retainers for free. A man at her church gave her a box of Christmas decorations. The list goes on, she said.

Soon after the fire, Nelson was in the parking lot outside her ballroom dance class when a woman approached her. She was local real estate agent Nancy Van Volkinburg, and she told Nelson about a home she had for rent in Agoura Hills that had a yard to accommodate her dogs.

It was more than Nelson could afford, but Van Volkinburg reduced the price for her. Nelson was able to stay there for four months while looking for a more permanent place to live.

Nelson said she had to learn to accept these kind gestures.

“I've always been fiercely independent and an introvert. . . . I lived on a mountain all by myself and I was perfectly happy,” she said. “And now, all of a sudden, I'm having to accept, to receive.”

It was unfamiliar but she learned to do it. She received support from friends, her church, her dance class and public resources offered to fire victims by Ventura County.

About four months after the fire, Nelson found a place to live in Camarillo and began writing her short story soon after. For her, it was another step on her path to closure.

After everything she's been through, Nelson has come to love her new story.

“In a really, really weird way, I wouldn't trade it for the world,” she said.