



# *Life After Fire*

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The Eaton and Palisades fires in January took their toll on members of the Occidental family, including students, alumni, faculty, and administrators.

With a long rebuilding process ahead, they find strength and support among the Oxy community



**C**amilla Taylor had been driving for 16 hours on the night of January 7 and was getting close to their Altadena home when the fire on the mountain came into view. “The hillside was black besides the fire because all of the power was out,” recalls Taylor, an artist, printmaker, and sculptor who joined the Oxy faculty as a resident assistant professor in 2018. Once they got home, they ran inside to find their husband, Jason Troff, with an overnight bag packed and carriers at the ready for their four cats, waiting for an evacuation order. “We’ve got to go!” Taylor screamed. “We have to leave now!”

Within 15 minutes, Taylor says, “We got the cats in the carriers and in the car, we

drove away, and our house burned down that night. We never got an evacuation order. We weren’t even in the preparedness zone.”

Looking back on that night, Taylor says, “I didn’t think that our house was going to burn down. If I had been thinking, I would have taken 10 minutes to get our passports and birth certificates and get some things out of the house. I got nothing besides my cats and my husband—that was it.” After being away for a month at a residency called Sitka in Oregon, “I never really saw my house again because it was dark. There was no power.”

Taylor’s story is unique—no two wildfire stories are alike—but sadly, not an isolated one. The Eaton and Palisades fires ravaged Los Angeles at a scale never experienced in

the ever-growing history of California wildfires. And while the Occidental campus was spared from the fires’ trajectories, every segment of the College community experienced their devastation.

Thirteen current employees lost their homes, and many others have been displaced for months by fire-related damage. Emeriti professors Maryanne Horowitz and Lynn Mehl saw their longtime homes in Pacific Palisades and Altadena, respectively, decimated. Six current Oxy students and their families were left homeless, and an estimated two dozen or more alumni lost their homes or businesses to the fires.

Taylor lost not only their home but their studio space as well. “Everyone keeps telling

Caryn Rothschild and husband Mike survey their Altadena property. Among the items recovered from the debris is a bright blue ornament from 2009 of their wedding cake, *below*.



me that we're so resilient," Taylor says—speaking for the couple, but in a way for the Oxy community as well. "But resiliency is not how you feel—it's how you react. I feel awful all the time, but I don't know what to do besides just keep doing. It's not like you get to take a break. You just have to move forward."

**Growing up in Provo, Utah, Taylor originally** planned to be an entomologist ("I was already doing a summer internship studying non-social wasps"), but a high school trip to Los Angeles altered that trajectory. "While we were here, we went to LACMA, and I saw this installation called *Central Meridian* by Michael C. McMillan. And I thought, 'If this is what you can do in art, then I want to be a part of this.'" (Since moving to Los Angeles in 2008, "I've gotten to know Michael, and he gifted me a print that burned up in the fire," Taylor says. "But it was exciting to live with it for a while.")

A number of factors attracted Taylor and their husband to Altadena. "Jason works at a law firm downtown, so we circled downtown on the map, going farther out as we were priced farther out," Taylor says. In unincorporated Altadena, "You could buy a house relatively affordably and have space to make art in ways that you couldn't most other places." Taylor had a kiln and was doing foundry work in their backyard, "and as long as I was not being so dangerous that I was alarming my neighbors, no one cared. Our detached garage was my art studio, and we replaced the garage door with all frosted glass so there was natural light all the time. It was perfect for me."

In the aftermath of the fire, the couple stayed for a couple of weeks in a downtown

studio space that belonged to friends before renting a place in Mid-City that would accommodate their four cats, who range in age from 13 (Mulcifer) to 1 (Totzke), with Alberich and Geordi in the middle.

"They're roommates, not friends," Taylor explains. "Totzke has been fantastic through all of this, because his *joie de vivre* cannot be tamped down. Every new place we've gone and every new person he meets, he's so excited. It's fantastic to have one member of my family who is doing OK."

After resisting several friends' overtures to start a GoFundMe on their behalf, Taylor finally relented when their artist friend Nova Jiang, calling from London, woke them at 4 a.m. "You don't have a safety net," she told Taylor. "Don't pretend that you can just take care of everything yourself."

More than 650 donors contributed nearly \$68,200 to the fund ("which was very kind," Taylor says)—and Occidental stepped up with not only a sizable grant within a week of losing their home but also a studio space in the Weingart Center for Liberal Arts. "Occidental gave me this space to work in, which I find incredibly generous."

"We're absolutely planning on rebuilding, but genuinely I don't know if we will move back," Taylor says. "So much of the charm of Altadena was that it was historic and there was this great mix of income levels—there were really fancy houses close to very modest ones. But now the trees are gone, and everything is going to be new. We're not going to have this beautiful range of history in the buildings anymore."

Shortly before the fire, Taylor notes, "We applied to be part of this grant program to renovate old houses to have earthquake infrastructure. And the guy who came to look

at our house told us, 'This is the best-built house from this era in the area.' We were so proud of that: 'best-built house.' But, you know, fire takes everything."

**"This was our forever home,"** Caryn Rothschild says of her residence in historic Janes Village in northwest Altadena. In July 2017, she and her family—husband Mike and young sons Logan and Henry—moved into a 1,300-square-foot home that was constructed in 1925. "The house had enough charm for me and was move-in-ready enough for Mike," Rothschild says. "There was even a mature avocado tree in the back—we didn't know that when we bought the place."

"Mike and I saw 130-something houses, and we were outbid 12 times," she adds. "This was our lucky No. 13. There were places that we looked at in our epic house hunt that I said were too high up, too much of a fire risk. Our house was only half a mile north of the Pasadena line. This fire came so far south."

Rothschild joined Occidental as senior director of major gifts in March 2018. Her parents, John Garner '71 and Carolyn Layton '71, met as freshmen at Oxy. "At first, my mom thought he was a turkey—that was her word," she recalls, "but by the end of third quarter they were dating. They got married two weeks after they graduated." (Her father passed away in February 2018, just 2½ months after a "fluke" cancer diagnosis. "Before he died, Dad was over the moon that I was going to work at his alma mater," Rothschild says.)

When the family was awakened by an evacuation alert at 3:25 a.m. on January 8, "We were part of that group that never got a get-set warning," she says. "Our phones went absolutely bananas with the message, 'Go now.' We left in less than 10 minutes; we had



packed up the cars the night before.” One casualty of the rush to leave was Rothschild’s wedding band, which she left by her bedside. A day or two later, a firefighter whose sister works with Rothschild “spent hours at our property trying to find my wedding band,” she says. “The kindness of strangers has been overwhelming in the best possible way.”

Jumping ahead to the present, “We are living at my mom’s home in Pasadena for now,” Rothschild says. “The rental market was tight in L.A. before all this, and pretty much everyone we know who’s finding a place is finding it through some connection. And we adopted two big dogs in July [Dusty and Rosie, a pair of rescue doodles], which further complicates things.”

Mike, an independent journalist and author, has been documenting their recovery journey in a series of blog posts on his website. “The stereotype of L.A. is a bunch of neighborhoods with no center, where nobody talks to anyone else,” he wrote in March. “But that hasn’t been our experience losing our home—the city has come out for us.”

**Although they both majored in psychology** and had a few mutual friends, Natalie Koldinski ’10 and Adam Greenhouse ’10 largely traveled in separate social circles and only knew each other tangentially. After graduation, both took jobs in the Admission Office, and that’s when things started to develop.

“We really got to know each other working together in the office,” says Adam, now a business value adviser for Microsoft. “Natalie’s office was next to the water cooler. My office was down the hall, and as we started to get to know each other better, I found myself filling up my water bottle something like 15 times a day as an excuse to talk to her.”

The couple moved to New York for graduate school, completed their master’s degrees, and got married in 2016. Their son, Aaron, was born two years later. “His first Oxy Ambassador activity was going to an admitted student reception in New York City,” says Natalie, who returned to Occidental in October 2023 as senior director of advancement services. “Aaron had a name tag and everything—Class of 2040.”

The Greenhouses moved back to Los Angeles in June 2020 during COVID, living in an intergenerational household with Natalie’s parents while they were figuring out next steps. “A big driver for us to come back to L.A. was being in a community with which we had shared values and experiences—something that was going to be important for us to expose our children to,” Natalie says.

Like the Rothschilds, they found a house in Janes Village, a historically Black community in West Altadena. Built in the early 1950s, it had gone through a couple of renovations “that made it easy for us to move into—just what we needed for a small but growing family,” Natalie says. The Greenhouses started escrow when Natalie was 38 weeks pregnant and moved in March 2021, when daughter Eliza was 3 weeks old.

This semester at Oxy, for the first time, Adam is teaching Organizational Psychology, which he describes as “the science of people, organizations, and the workplace. Students learn about leadership, motivation, and organizational culture. It’s been really fun so far.”





Following the loss of their home, the Psychology Department quickly identified a space where Adam could work full-time while he's teaching, "solving that problem in a very swift and supportive way," Natalie says. "There's a very strong culture of care at Oxy that circumstances like this pressure-test and activate. I've seen that at every level, including how the president texted me to let me know that he was available for anything."

"A week or two after the fire, I ran into an administrator [Marisa Mofford, associate director of international programs] who had helped me when I was a student on a project, and she gave me a hug and asked how I was doing," Adam says. "It meant a lot to have someone who I worked with over 15 years ago give me that sense of support. That has always been my experience at Oxy—that

those relationships shine through, especially in hard times like this."

What's their thinking about rebuilding? "It's hard to tell," Natalie says. "It's such a monstrous project—I don't feel like I have the bandwidth to take on a home rebuild at this moment. But the community has to be rebuilt. We're still trying to figure out what we can do to support that process."

For now, Adam says, "We're trying to stay connected to the community as best we can. Even though we're living in Eagle Rock, I'm going to be coaching on the Altadena tee-ball team for my third season this spring. Aaron and Eliza will both be playing on the team."

With Farnsworth Park out of commission, having been damaged during the fire, the league's organizers were able to find other fields in Pasadena. More than 200 kids

signed up for the Central Altadena Little League, for ages 4 to 14. "Trying to have a fun season, being part of that community, and connecting with other families who also lost their homes or have been displaced, it'll feel good to give back," Adam says.

**With a son who plays baseball** in the Central Altadena Little League, Bill Gould '86 likewise feels the loss of 91-year-old Farnsworth Park, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997. The community's history is important to Gould, who moved into a cul-de-sac in Altadena in 1988.

"At the time, there were nine African American families out of 12 homes on my block," Gould recalls. "I loved that dynamic. It felt like a sign of generational wealth, and maybe moving ahead in life as a community."



**After five weeks apart in the wake of the Eaton fire, Bill Gould '86 was reunited with his dogs (including 1-year-old Boston) in mid-February.**

As a sociology major at Oxy, Gould participated in the College's Justice Semester in Washington, D.C., interning with the Public Defender Service to support incarcerated youth. After graduation, he spent a summer working with Crossroads Africa in rural Zimbabwe and living without running water or electricity for most of the summer. "It was a fascinating time to be there," he recalls.

After earning his master's in social work at UCLA, Gould dedicated his career to uplifting marginalized youth in Los Angeles. At the child advocacy organization First 5 Los Angeles, he spent 17 years shaping policies and grants for early childhood development. In his current role as a policy analyst with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Gould studies the impact of state and federal laws on the substance abuse service landscape.

On the evening of January 7, "The winds were just howling and whipping. Trees were breaking. I have never seen the winds be that strong, and I've lived there for many years," he says. "We could see the fire on the mountainside out the back window of our house. But as we were watching the news, they had the fire heading toward Sierra Madre."

After the power went out, Gould and his wife, Dorena Rodriguez, made the decision to evacuate to a friend's house with their two children and three dogs. Later that night, he says, "I wanted to go back through my house and retrieve some things. I had an autograph from Alex Haley when he came to speak at Occidental. I had a basketball signed by Kobe Bryant. I had a bottle of champagne the Red Sox had for their 2004 World Series championship." He also had many family keepsakes, including a diary that his great-great-grandfather William Gould's oldest daughter had written. "I kept thinking I was going to come back. But it didn't end up happening."

The following morning, a basketball pal of Gould's was helping someone in his neighborhood evacuate and shared a video in their group chat showing the street right above where Gould lived, with the two houses closest to his home fully engulfed in flames. Later in the day, a neighbor who had stayed behind to fight the fire sent Gould a photo confirming his fears. "Sorry, man," he wrote, "your house went down."

"There's many parts of Altadena that are completely wiped out," Gould says. "Of the 12 houses on my street, half of them burned

down. My brother lived a mile west of me, and his whole neighborhood burned down.

"It is surreal sometimes to take a look at what has gone on," he says. "My wife looked at our insurance policy and it had a zero percent risk rating of wind fire where we lived. We've experienced fires before and I've always been nervous about smoke damage, but I never experienced something like this.

"There's a great mix who are living in Altadena—Latino, Asian, white—but there's a lot of important African American contributions to the area," he adds. "I really liked joining that community in the 1980s. And 37 years later, I fully intend to move back there when we can rebuild."

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***"It's going to be a long dig-out process,"  
Bill Gould '86 says.  
"But I'm hoping we can come back strong and figure out ways to build back better."***

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**Somewhat circuitously, Dave Andres '83** and his siblings all found their way to Oxy. Older sister Jamie '79 initially intended to enroll at UC Irvine out of high school. But at the urging of Tigers baseball legend Don Hagen '63, an assistant principal at her school, she took a tour of Occidental, Dave recalls. Jamie ended up graduating with a degree in geology.

One by one, the Andres siblings followed: Older brother Paul '81 transferred from Harvey Mudd after a year. Dave himself started at Cal State Dominguez Hills but transferred to Oxy, majoring in American studies and playing baseball for the Tigers. Phil '84, the youngest, turned down offers from top schools like Pomona to join the family fold.

For Dave's daughter Grace Andres '26, a history major, her Oxy experience has been "pretty good so far. I've met a lot of kind people and have a lot of really good friends." Photographing the baseball team all season long—an activity her father began doing in 2016—"has been really nice and given me something fun to do," she adds.

Not long before Dave and his wife, Susan, got married in 1995, they began looking for houses. A decade earlier, brother Paul and his wife had bought a house in Bungalow Heaven—a 16-block area stretching from Pasadena into Altadena—and his Realtor mother-in-law told Dave and Susan about a listing on Poppyfields Drive. "We ended up buying it," Dave says. "It was nice to have my brother a couple of blocks away." (Paul, too, lost his home in the Eaton fire.)

When the newlyweds moved in, the house had 1,070 square feet with two bedrooms and one bath. "We expanded it significantly in 2003 and nearly doubled the square footage, making it three bedrooms and two baths," Dave says. "All of our kids have lived their whole life in that house." Grace is the youngest of their three children: Older daughter Emma graduated from UC Irvine, and son Adam, who just turned 24, has Coffin-Siris Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder. ("He's a fairly severely handicapped young man but a very nice little guy," Dave says.)

January 7, he recalls, "was a very windy day. We had already lost power a couple of times and actually had a cord running from my neighbor's house to the fridge. On her way home, Susan had picked up a generator from Harbor Freight in anticipation of losing power again. As the sun was going down and we were getting ready to eat, she got a heads-up text from her teaching partner who lived near Eaton Canyon."

Like so many others, they got the news about their home by text the next morning. "When we left we really thought we were coming back," Dave says. "Even though we've seen this in California now multiple times, there wasn't a sense that every single house would just be wiped out. But that's pretty much what happened in our area."

After spending 10 nights with his wife's sister and her husband in Hancock Park, they moved into a home in Temple City (not far from Gould, his Oxy baseball teammate) that would accommodate Adam's needs as well: "We're still taking care of him," Dave says.

Grace, meanwhile, returned to campus early after winter break and found a reprieve from the fires in resuming her photography duties with the baseball team, who surprised her with "a nice present and card," she says.

Looking to the future, Dave says, "We'll rebuild on the property," to which Grace adds, "Yeah—get back on Poppyfields."



"We actually paid off the darn house two years ago, so we own it outright—which is nice, because a lot of folks are having to deal simultaneously with insurance companies and lenders," says Dave, who coincidentally works as a property underwriter in the heavy manufacturing sector of the insurance business. "But we're going to build pretty much the same house with better fire resistance."

"We had a beautiful California native plant garden," he adds. "I started as a bio major at Oxy. I'm a nature guy and a birder. Seeing how full of life our yard is compared to our neighbors who just have lawns, we're going to rebuild that. Some of our native plants are already resprouting green growth, and any rain is going to further help them."

**Even before making an offer on the place** they have called home since 2013, Grace (Wang) Flowers '00 found herself driving up to Topanga and tending the 3½-acre property. "The home was unoccupied, so I would just drive up to visit. I remember pruning the lavender bushes and simply enjoying the serenity and the quiet," she says. "That's how we found this little slice of heaven, and we've been there close to 12 years."

Flowers and her husband, Jason, were living in Venice when they decided to go house hunting one weekend. "We drove through the Palisades, but it just wasn't our vibe," she says, "so we headed to Topanga and came upon this house. I actually didn't think we were going to move there. I thought the roads were too windy and I am prone to getting carsick. But I believe in being called to a place much like how certain people are called to visit vortexes. There is a resonance to a place that you feel in your bones. That's how we felt about Topanga."

At the time they moved in, Flowers had left the corporate world and started to teach yoga full-time. "The land stayed barren up until I had my first child about three years into living in Topanga," she recalls. "That's when I started to work on land restoration, restoring the native habitat and ecosystem. When you start to pay attention to a piece of property that has soil on it, it comes to life. With a little bit of love, nurturing, and water, nature comes in and does the rest."

"As I shifted my own identity to motherhood, I started to nurture not only my family but steward the land around me," Flowers continues. "Just before my second child was

born, I was very intent on having a flock of fowl, so we built a very large enclosed garden at the bottom of the property. Eventually, my vision for the land grew to include everything from a small orchard to medicinal and healing rose gardens and bees. It was a thriving ecosystem of beauty with the ocean as the backdrop. I had visions of community members coming to La Salvia Sagrada—what our home was called—to escape from the jungles of city life. I wanted this to be a place where all could rest in quietude, where children could pick fruit off trees and run free—a sanctuary for all of our hearts."

Flowers' most recent project involved the construction of a ceremonial dome to host not only tea ceremonies but other gatherings "for people to commune, learn, or just retreat in silence. This beautiful temple was almost finished. We were opening to receive our tea guests the following week before the fires came and our first community farm day was scheduled for the end of January."

She and her family had only returned to their home last fall after 2½ years of being displaced for renovations. "We were a week and a half away from being able to move back into our master bedroom when everything lit up," she says. "Now, everything's gone."

Six days after the fire, staying with a friend down in Oceanside, Flowers and her husband went to look at a house in nearby Cardiff-by-the-Sea, which has become their home for the time being. With her children's school across the street and the beach mere blocks away, she says, "Cardiff felt like a really soft landing for my family."

**Amy Lyford met her husband during her first semester at Pomona College.** David Clegg was two years ahead of her and graduated with a B.A. in mathematics in 1984. Lyford graduated with a B.A. in art history in 1986, and the couple got married three years later.

Clegg, a software engineer and mobile security specialist for Sybase and SAP, was among a select group of experts across North America and Europe who met regularly to discuss the challenges of blockchain and artificial intelligence. "Dave was the real deal," Lyford says. "But he was also an artist, musician, and furniture maker."

In November 2017, Clegg died in a motorcycle accident following a heart attack. "He had no idea he had a heart problem," Lyford says. "Our house in Altadena was in-

credibly meaningful to us both. Maybe six months before he died, my husband said to me, 'I never want to leave here.'"

Following a small memorial service, she scattered his ashes in the yard, honoring the spirit of his wishes. In the aftermath of January's wildfire that claimed their home, "I went back to the house, but I couldn't find his urn," she says. "And I thought to myself, 'I guess he stayed here like he wanted to.'"

As a Ph.D. student at UC Berkeley, Lyford wrote her dissertation about surrealism and masculinity, which ended up being her first book (*Surrealist Masculinities*, published in 2007). "When I interviewed at Oxy and other schools in 1999," she says, "I gave a campus talk about sculptor Isamu Noguchi and Japanese American internment based on work that I did as a master's student at Boston University," which became the topic of her second book (*Isamu Noguchi's Modernism*, 2013). Of the three campuses she visited, "The reception of my work at Occidental felt the most robust and positive. People asked really good questions about my research."

Oxy also introduced her to her eventual home. After she accepted the job, Cecilia Fox, executive assistant to then-Dean of the College David Axen, picked up Lyford and Clegg and drove them up to Altadena. "We thought, 'Oh my God, this place is really cool,'" Lyford recalls. "We had dogs, we liked to go hiking, and it felt a little like Berkeley or some of the nicer parts of the East Bay."

They purchased a place on Skyview Drive—"I just call it the Skyview House," Lyford says. "The architect's name was Boyd Georgi, and he had built the house for himself and his family in 1954. Then he retired to a home he built for his parents in Laguna Beach, which actually still stands to this day."

After a bit of research, she found Georgi's architect's license and called his home. "I actually talked to him and invited him to come meet with me and Dave once we got settled," Lyford recalls. "Two months later I called, and he had just passed away." Nearly 25 years later, Lyford met Georgi's son, Karl, who showed up at her doorstep in December. A month later, the Skyview House was gone.

On the morning of January 8, Lyford and a friend who was staying in her guest house drove back to Altadena to survey the damage. "It was like a war zone," she says. "There were fires still going on everywhere and officials hadn't blocked everything off yet. We got up



**“Being distracted right now might not be a bad thing,” says Grace Flowers ’00, preparing a tea ceremony at her new residence in Cardiff-by-the-Sea as husband Jason watches.**

to my place and the only thing standing was the chimney and this steel trellis in front of the house. My husband and I replaced that trellis in 2011 after a tree crushed the old one.”

When she finally sifted through the remains some days later, she found several random items, including silverware, as well as two undamaged coffee mugs cradled next to each other in the dishwasher. One of them was a handmade mug that had belonged to her mother, who died in 2014: “I kept that mug and thought about her every time I used it.” The other mug was from a whale watch foundation—blue with a whale tail on it—that her husband had picked out when the couple vacationed in Hawai‘i. “Every time I used that mug, I said, ‘Hi, Dave,’” Lyford explains. “I know it sounds weird, but I felt like these mugs were sending some kind of message, like ‘We’re with you.’”

In conversations with architect Renee Dake Wilson and contractor Carl Bronson,

who renovated her home five years ago, Lyford has expressed an interest in rebuilding, but she’s not making any decisions just yet. “If I do rebuild,” she says, “it would be different and obviously hardened for wildfire. If you look on a map, it shows that my house is in the Angeles National Forest, even though it’s on Skyview Drive, which is above East Loma Alta.”

Lyford, who is currently on leave, is midway through a three-year phased retirement. “My final semester as a tenured professor will be next spring,” she says. “I’ve had people say, ‘You’re too young to retire.’ But my financial situation changed after my husband died. I think Dave would want me to travel and do research. My plan is to spend about a month living in Paris and doing research every fall.”

Lyford’s companions through it all have been her dogs Angus, a rescue Doberman, and Kaya, a Rhodesian Ridgeback. “Angus is interested in new things, whereas Kaya needs

her stable, regimented schedule. After we had to evacuate, Kaya was so upset that she was barely peeing and not pooping at all for days. Normally, she would at least go twice a day—you just know these things.”

A few days after the fires, President Stritikus contacted Lyford to offer the Annenberg President’s House, with its fenced-in space, as a temporary shelter. “When Kaya got to the President’s House, she began galloping around and finally started to go to the bathroom.” The home was a comfort to Lyford as well: “There’s this fountain outside by the table that is very zen. My friend and I were also able to do what little laundry we had and feel safe at night.”

The hospitality extended beyond a warm bed and a nice yard when nature calls. After Stritikus returned home from his travels, he prepared dinner for his houseguests. “Tom’s a really good cook,” Lyford says. “He made us feel so welcome.”



In addition to those members of the Oxy community who lost their homes, many others went without power for several days, and still others had to evacuate their homes. In the face of all that, a hot meal of comfort food—brisket, chicken, mashed potatoes, vegetables, and desserts—offered a respite to a gathering of about 50 in Gresham Dining Hall on Thursday, January 9. People brought their children and their dogs in many cases, and “just found solace in each other’s company,” says Mel Gamba, who came to Oxy as associate vice president and chief human resources officer in September. “For the folks that showed up, it was nice.”

“For many of us, myself included, it was the first normal meal we had in over 48 hours,” says Erik Russell, assistant vice president of hospitality and auxiliary services at the College. “That evening we were able to dampen the chaos and restore a sense of normalcy, even if only for a few hours.”

The following day, the Business Office, working closely with Institutional Advancement, sprung into action to provide much-needed financial support to nearly three dozen employees hit hardest by the wildfires. Building on their experience implementing an Employee Relief Fund at the height of COVID five years ago, they spent much of the weekend putting together the framework for an Emergency Relief Fund to provide immediate cash infusion to those who were suffering the most.

Compared to COVID, “We knew that this natural disaster would impact people in a far greater capacity,” says College Controller Lupe Salmerón. “We had to do something and we had to act fast.”

Before the first dollar had been raised, President Stritikus and Chief Financial Officer Amos Himmelstein made the decision to front-load the necessary capital “because we needed to get money into the hands of the people who really need it as quickly as possible,” Salmerón says. “If we had waited until we had received donations to dispense funds, it could have been weeks.” The initial round of applicants received their funds by direct deposit just a week after the fires.

“Here we have something that was really devastating, that happened very quickly, and there wasn’t even a hesitation by the administration to support them,” Gamba says. “It really speaks to the strength of our commitment to one another as a community.”



**“I just got a tattoo of a part of my house on my arm,” Professor Amy Lyford says. She’s sitting on York Boulevard outside Cafe de Leche, whose Altadena location burned in the Eaton fire. “That house was incredibly meaningful to me.”**

All totaled, the College raised \$278,529 from over 350 donors, with gifts ranging in size from \$5 to \$25,000—“not only people who are close to the College, such as volunteers and supporters whom we work with all the time, but also people without a long history of giving who felt compelled to step up in this moment,” says Suzy LaCroix, who shepherded the fundraising efforts as vice president of institutional advancement. “It’s been a very touching outpouring.”

In addition to the money that has been distributed so far, the College has set aside funds for financial aid to award scholarships

to those students who were impacted by the fires, according to Salmerón.

Their efforts have not gone unnoticed. “The College making the commitment to support people who are probably at one of the lowest points of their lives felt really good,” Lyford says. “It’s putting into practice the kind of ethics that Occidental is meant to follow.

“There’s a lot of conflict on college campuses right now,” she adds. “But when push comes to shove, Oxy has done a pretty good job of living up to its mission. It feels very meaningful to be seen and supported.” 