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I lived in Pacific Village for 13 years. I loved and knew all my neighbors - a community of 82 manufactured homes located on South Pacific Highway at the border between Medford and Phoenix. A beautiful, quiet, all age park with big trees. We had a very loving community. On Tuesday September 8th, the sky was blue, we were out enjoying the day. Then a fire bomber flying low caught our attention. We looked up. Very quickly everything changed. The wind roared. Black smoke blotted out the sun and it was hard to breathe. We could see flames two stories high. We heard huge explosions. We all stood stunned. Should we stay or should we go? Surely the fire fighters had this covered. Surely, we were in an urban area that was safe. Another neighbor came out and yelled – EVACUATE NOW! Everything is on fire and it's coming our way! We had five minutes to evacuate. My brain turned off as adrenaline kicked in.

We are all logical, intelligent, and practical people. But the response to imminent danger is flight, fight, or freeze. I had a hard time focusing. I froze. Then I heard my daughter's voice in my head screaming at me, "GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT." I kicked into gear. I ran to gather what I could: my cat, dog, meds, and some important papers. I picked up the landline to call my sister three doors down. The landline was dead. I thought I was overreacting when I drove out of the park. I thought I'd be back the next day. Then the sheriff came into the Park with a bullhorn shouting: "Get Out, Get Out. The fire is here." My 86 year old neighbor with her walker, and her daughter, who was on oxygen, had no car. Another neighbor jumped out of her own car and gathered them both up. She saved their lives. A young mom hobbled down the road while balancing her toddler and diaper bag. She waved at the sheriff for help. He drove past her, focused on his work. Another family saw her struggling, threw their own family photos and baskets of laundry out of their car and loaded mom and toddler in. Their lives were saved. Another neighbor, frozen in panic, held tightly to her porch rail and could not be budged. It took two neighbors to pry her loose and get her into a car. Her life was saved. Some neighbors were on their roofs with hoses. The wind was so strong it blew the water right into their faces. They could hear the explosions and the percussion in the air as houses blew up from gas lines in the neighborhood next door.

The fire was coming so fast - right behind us as we fled north on South Pacific Highway - huge black ashes burning red dropped on our windshields. People ran down the highway - others opened their car doors and said "jump in". This is the importance of Community – THIS IS WHY EVERYONE SURVIVED. You are not overreacting when you hear a fire or something is coming, get in your car and go. Don't think "I'm overreacting - we live in an urban setting - we will be okay". If it turns out that you actually have a home to return to - bless you. But, as in my park, there was nothing to return to. Finally, if you only remember one thing, I want you to remember this: Don't spend time grabbing things. Everything can be replaced, but YOU cannot be replaced. Don't freeze. Just go...

Two Weeks Later: I have been back to my neighborhood three times now. It is truly a miracle, a gift, that all of my neighbors made it out of the park alive. The monster that was coming was relentless, unstoppable, and horrific. We had no notice. We had one exit. Many of my neighbors were home without cars. It was only because of the love and thoughtfulness of

many that everyone made it out. Community, love, caring. That was Pacific Village. We were family. We knew the vulnerable among us and took care of them. We took care of one another. And not just on September 8, but year round. I am so amazingly proud of my community. I am also deeply saddened that we are now all dispersed. Love is what matters. Community is what matters. Caring is what matters. All the rest of life's noise is just distraction. Cherish those around you and your community. Kindness. Thoughtfulness. Cheer. A pat on the back. A kind ear. An encouraging word. This builds community.

Five Months Later: We are bereft at the loss of our community. We lost our neighbors. Our friends. Our support system. We miss the laughter of the children. The faces. The routine. We lost much more than our homes and possessions. We lost our way of life. Our safe community. Our loved ones. We will never be the same.

Humbly submitted by Shawna Huggins
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