



## Reflections and images from hell



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*Last summer's fires in Lake County produced plenty of horror and tragedy for local residents. But one woman found a way to produce something worthwhile from the terrible experience, and even use it to help educate people on how to manage themselves during a calamity.*

*Katherine Griffin, a 20-year resident of American Canyon, was living in her new home of Hidden Valley Lake when fire after fire erupted in or near her neck of the woods from July to October.*

*She found herself evacuating back to American Canyon on two different occasions, but still found moments to photograph the flames and their aftermath before getting out of harm's way.*

*Many of her images will be on display next week at Umpqua Bank in American Canyon for a special, one evening show on Jan. 22 that will also include lessons on being ready when disaster strikes.*

*"One of the reasons for doing the exhibit," said Griffin, "is that I will be giving a presentation on fire preparation and evacuation that also ties into earthquake preparation and possible evacuation."*

*Griffin got some firsthand experience on how to get ready and safely leave an area enduring a natural disaster, which she will share with people attending the exhibit.*

*She says she "learned a lot" from the first fire, dubbed the "Rocky Fire," which began on July 29.*

*"As the fire grew in size, I followed wind directions and wind speed," said Griffin. "I connected with other neighbors and for several days and nights we would take turns reporting to each other the fire conditions."*

*Being a "night owl," Griffin said she took the "night shift" while her neighbors slept until 6 a.m., when "someone else would take over and I got some sleep."*

*With "boxes of important papers, pictures, etc. by my front door ready for evacuation," she said she woke up one day to "raining ashes" and the smell of smoke that was so strong she decided not to wait for a mandatory order to get out.*

*She got into her car and went back to her house in American Canyon, which she was preparing to sell.*

*"I was lucky to have a place to go," she said, unlike the hundreds of others from Lake County who were forced into shelters after fleeing the flames.*

*She returned to Hidden Valley Lake five days later, her house intact. But "within days of returning a second fire broke out just a few miles east" of the town, she said, referring to the Jerusalem Fire.*

*"Once again wind velocity and direction was closely watched and neighbors kept each other informed," said Griffin.*

*"We also made sure that some of our elderly neighbors were okay."*

*Having survived these first two fires, Griffin said she and others thought they "could give a sigh of relief" that the worst was over.*

*Then came Sept. 12.*

*That was the day the Valley Fire broke out. Over the course of a month the conflagration consumed more than 76,000 acres and destroyed nearly 2,000 structures, according to Cal Fire.*

*Griffin and a friend were attending a wine release party just outside of town on Sept. 12 when they "noticed a plume of smoke rising somewhere southwest of us." It was Cobb Mountain, the origin of the Valley Fire, about a dozen miles away from Hidden Valley Lake, she said.*

*Given the distance between the two towns, Griffin wasn't concerned at first.*

*But they decided to head home anyway, and by the time they got back, Hidden Valley Lake was already under a mandatory evacuation order.*

*"I ran inside and knew that I had to pull myself together," said Griffin. "Rule number 1: Don't panic. I took a deep breathe and told myself that I would give myself a total of five minutes to get what I needed and leave."*

*She collected her two yellow Labradors, Bentley and Bailey, along with a computer, some papers, and a few clothes. The fire had reached the outskirts of Hidden Valley Lake just as she left.*

*She took some photos on her way down the mountain, before joining the logjam of cars on Highway 29 from so many people trying to get away from the fast moving blaze.*

*Again, she went back to American Canyon. This time for eight days.*

*When she returned, she was relieved to see her house still standing.*

*"Due to the winds the fire jumped from street to street, burning some houses and skipping others," Griffin said. "Several of my friends lost their houses in [Hidden Valley Lake]. I also knew the girl in Anderson Springs who lost her life in the Valley Fire."*

*Her show on Jan. 22 will include a viewing of a DVD she's been working on that documents "the rebuilding and regrowth" in Lake County, which may not be out of danger yet depending on winter, she says.*

*"Lake County is also facing more devastation during El Nino," said Griffin, alluding to the risk of landslides if heavy rains arrive in areas that lost so many trees and ground vegetation.*

*If more disasters strikes, Griffin intends to document them as well and add those images to her exhibit and DVD, which she hopes to show at other locations in the coming year.*

*Her show on Jan. 22 will run from 5-9 p.m. at Umpqua Bank, 3417 Broadway St. in the Canyon Plaza shopping center in American Canyon.*