

Emotional Journey

Discovering the Human Side of Disaster Appraising

by Mark Reddy

When I hired on with the Assessor's Office as an appraiser, I never pictured myself dressed in a yellow fire suit driving past National Guard checkpoints into wildfire areas to document fire damage and estimate the impact on real property values. Nor could I have imagined the wide range of emotions we would experience in the course of our work in the field, in the office, and with property owners.

Normally, we go into the field to pick up new construction for the county records: driving to the address on the building permit, knocking on the door to introduce ourselves to the owners, measuring and sketching the new house or addition, taking inventory and photos, and returning to the office to enter the data and determine a value for the property. This was the familiar routine.

Now we find ourselves driving cautiously into a familiar subdivision through the thick haze of lingering smoke and approaching the perimeter where only a few days before the fire raged out of control. Aside from the smoke, the neighborhood looks normal enough with houses nestled in pine trees and the ground covered in dry grasses and brush. Turning a corner, we see the ground black, trunks of trees charred, and a house intact. Getting out of the Jeep to take a closer look, we are amazed to find that the fire has burned everything on the ground within feet of the house, leaving the house untouched, the welcome mat still in place. Walking about, we photograph several other homes in a similar condition. No need to knock on the doors, the area is still under evacuation. Oh, how elated the owners will be when they return to see how the firemen saved their home from the fire that came so very close!

Up the road a bit, the scenery changes dramatically. The landscape is stark and barren, a few black smoking skeletons of trees remain from a forest once thick

on the hilltop, the ground is almost completely grey with occasional strips of white ash, the remnants of fallen trees that were consumed where they lay. Just off the road, we see the remnants of a home. This family was not so lucky. What was once a two-story house is now a pile of rubble with twisted metal railings on a fractured foundation, the stone fireplace once part of a living room now looms silently over the smoldering remains. Our hearts go out to the family.

In another area, we find a home completely destroyed with the surrounding forest relatively unharmed, or a hillside with all vegetation and trees completely burned and a house standing with only minor scorching and smoke damage. The fire seemed to burn with a mind of its own, devastating this area, sparing that area, jumping the river to take out this house, yet mercifully passing another by unnoticed. How would the returning residents make sense of it all? How do we?

We appreciate the safety policy of conducting these field inspections in teams of at least two appraisers: an extra set of eyes and ears to avoid a falling tree, another shovel to extinguish a persistent isolated flame, a quick hand to pull us out when our foot breaks through the ground where a root is still burning. It's helpful having others to confirm what we witness in disbelief, or to call attention to details we might have missed. It is comforting to discuss what we see and feel, or just exchange knowing glances without words. It gives us strength and deepens our relationship.

We dutifully take pictures from every angle, carefully documenting each scene and the surrounding area. We discuss the damage among ourselves, pointing out signs of the fire's fury: windows that became globs of melted glass, steel brackets with bolts that once secured mighty wooden beams burned clean, a lockset from the front door now laying in

ash, small silver streams of once molten aluminum streaking the ground. But how striking the little things we come across, ordinary things that somehow survived the fire, those "silent witnesses" of what happened. These we also photograph as a way of recording the whole story. And so, in the midst of our photo documentation, as in the midst of the fire, are pictures of a child's partially melted plastic toy in the yard where it was abandoned, a singed wood bench still strong enough to sit for a moment of reflection, a small statue looking on with unchanged expression, a charred plant in the rubble with green shoots sprouting through, a tarnished figurine of a young girl holding, comforting, and shielding her little brother from the storm.

While in the field, we sometimes take a break for lunch at a local restaurant. We are immediately greeted, seated, and graciously served. After the meal, we go to the register to pay the ticket and the owner says it's "on the house" and "we really appreciate all that you firefighters are doing." We realize we are still wearing our yellow fire suits. We explain our role and pay for our meals. Wherever we go we see signs thanking the firefighters—the women and men from all over the country putting their lives at risk day after day for our community. We drive by the fairgrounds and see hundreds of tents pitched as temporary quarters for these guests come to serve. As we meet and greet them in the field, they are always friendly, always helpful, always humble.

Back at the office, we enter the data, quantify the damage, attach the photos, and record our findings. Naturally, our co-workers who didn't go into the field ask how it went, what we found, or what it was like. We describe what we saw in an objective and rather technical way, pulling up photos on the computer for illustration. But as we try to explain

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what it was like, the detached objectivity we tried to maintain in the course of our work is pierced by the human tragedy we are documenting. All those feelings we held at bay to carry out our work suddenly well up as we share the significance of what we were experiencing.

As an office, we are drawn together by a common sense of community in a time of crisis. Although no one in the Assessor's Office lost a home, others working for the county did. Some of us were evacuated or on notice for evacuation, or had evacuated family, friends, and neighbors staying with us—all anxiously awaiting news. We go about our work with sensitivity and compassion, doing what we can to serve our community, to serve those who come to us, or those we meet in the field.

Now residents are returning to their homes, or what is left of them, and we begin to see the human face of the disaster more closely. We feel the anguish of a retired fire marshal as he tells how he watched his home burn on the hillside as he stood helplessly by the checkpoint. We visit with a man covered in soot who has been cutting down burned trees in an effort to do something, anything, to reclaim his property. We meet a man who has pitched his tent on the ash-covered ground next to where his home once stood. He is digging footers to begin again. He offers us a cold soda from his ice chest. We walk the property with a couple who show us where the fire came onto their land, the outbuildings it destroyed, and the damage to their home, now being repaired. We listen attentively as a woman shares her dilemma of whether to rebuild where there is now the threat of flooding or to purchase a home in town for the time being. We explain to a family the steps we are taking to estimate and adjust property values based on the fire damage sustained. We do a follow-up site visit for a property owner who feels his valuation is still too high. We log in the protest of a taxpayer who questions the classification of his burned land.

Each year since the fire, we have revisited those familiar subdivisions. We see blackened earth gradually hidden beneath layers of lush ground cover; areas once stark and barren, now growing thick with underbrush and aspen; devastated home sites cleared to make way for a new house. We still have clear reminders of the fire's fury, and its mercy, but we witness the forest and the land healing, and the lives of those who live there.

We are driving the same roads with building permits in hand, knocking on doors of new homes, measuring and sketching, taking inventory and photos, entering the data and determining values. We still work in teams and discuss what we see and feel, or just exchange knowing glances without words. ■