

‘Oakley Family Shares What Happened the Day They Lost Their House to Fire’

Story #4 in 'Protecting Oakley Families—Residents Thank the First Responders of the East Contra Costa County Fire Protection District'

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Maybe you were running errands on that Sunday afternoon and saw smoke billowing into the sky. Perhaps you pulled over to let a firetruck race past you to the scene of that fire on Sellers Avenue. Some of you were close enough to smell the bitter scent of burning wood and treasured personal possessions. But unless you knew the family, more than likely you thanked your lucky stars it wasn't your house and went on about your business. You didn't think to pick up a fire extinguisher at Home Depot that afternoon and no lessons were learned. But Kay Partain has so much to share about that day.

Five months ago on the rural outskirts of Oakley, the Partain's home went up in flames. There was no warning. In fact, it had started out as a perfect day. Kay and her husband Dave had just returned from a Harley ride and they were full of positive energy. Kay recalls, "We talked at lunch about plans for our business and our future." Kay left Dave in front of the garage to put away his motorcycle. She headed for the master bedroom to change her clothes and get ready for dinner with their neighbors.

When Kay heard muffled noises from the garage and then what sounded like exploding ammo, she opened the bedroom door to go scold Dave for messing around when he should be getting ready. Instead she saw a wall of flames separating her from her husband of 23 years.

"It all happened so fast. Dave had tripped on something which caused him to lay the bike over. It spilled a bit of gasoline which hit the hot engine...and the bike blew up." The flames took over their son's Honda 50 and two other trail bikes that were also in the garage. "Dave was frantically looking for the fire extinguisher. It had been in its usual place on the wall for 12 years. But he forgot that the water softener had sprung a leak the week before. We moved the fire extinguisher out of the way and forgot to put it back." Dave needed to get out of the garage in time to save his life.

Within seconds, all hell broke loose. The fire had spread to engulf the water heater...and their Cadillac SUV in the driveway. Kay was frantic when she realized a propane tank nearby could go next. Then a fallen power line hit their son's basketball hoop and sparked dangerously, daring anyone to get close.

Luckily their neighbor, Lisa Pinguelo, saw what was happening and had called 911. The Oakley fire station was responding to another call, something that happens with regular frequency since the ECCFPD is dangerously under-equipped with just three stations in operation for the 249 square miles it must serve. It was Battalion Chief Jeff Burris and the Brentwood fire station crew who arrived first on the scene in about five minutes. A tanker fire truck had to bring water from the Discovery Bay station. "The fire department immediately started to secure the propane tank that was on the outside of the garage which was already pretty much gone." But the house was already fully engulfed in flames and the fallen power line could have meant electrocution for anyone in the way.

While Kay and Dave were stranded at opposite sides of their burning house, someone called their 21-year old daughter Emily who was having lunch in Pittsburg with her 13-year old brother Robbie. "Emily's friend said 'Hey, your house is burning and you better get home quick.' The fire was even posted on Snapchat!"

Kay admits she was in shock and doesn't remember all that happened that afternoon. She did make sure Johnny, the family's standard poodle, was safe. At some point she recalls sitting down so Lisa could pull a few nasty 'goathead' burrs out of her feet. Then she was amazed to see the 4-H Swine Leader come with his trailer to move Dixie, her son's pig, although the trauma of the fire would keep the animal from gaining the weight needed to be entered at the county fair.

But one thing she clearly remembers. "The firefighters were so professional and they worked so hard. They risked their own safety to help us."

Kay also recalls how considerate the firefighters were. "They had pulled pictures off the walls and put them on beds. Then they covered them with plastic to try and save them. I still lost most of them. I didn't know there is a trick to releasing them from the glass!" (She's since learned you have to wet the backing of the photos.) Burris also noticed Kay's very first personalized license plate she had proudly displayed on the wall and managed to save it for her.

Even with the fire finally out, the Partains would not be allowed to enter the house. Not only was it structurally dangerous, it was an older home and asbestos could have been released. There wasn't much left of the structure anyway, particularly the roof. They found out the blown-in 'shredded paper' type of insulation was a major factor in the spread of the fire throughout the attic. "We had a weatherization program come out to assess our house years ago and they used this stuff. I want people to know that they should check their homes... it is hazardous!"

As the firefighters prepared to leave, there was a moment of humor for Kay and Dave. "Chief Burris asked if we needed anything he might be able to find in the house before they left. I told him both Dave and I had medications in the kitchen we would need to take that night." He went right into what was left of the Partain's kitchen and came out with a bulging bag full of medicine bottles. "I remember saying

'Heck, we don't take that much medicine.' Chief Burriss just said with a big smile, 'Hey, I'm not judging you, Lady.'" Then he told them the kitchen was the worst place to keep medicine!



*The Partain Family from Left to Right:
Emily, Kay, Dave, and Robbie*

The Partain family is still dealing with the consequences of the fire. From filing insurance claims and seeking permits to rebuild their home to the recurring realization of how much was lost that afternoon. The sad truth is that there have been vandals and looters looking for valuables in the burned rubble that was once their home. But there has also been an outpouring of support and help from their friends and neighbors. "Our wonderful neighbors, Lisa and Rick Pinguelo, had us move in with them for 15 days. Karen Rarey (who is a personal friend since our children were small) set up a GoFundMe account for our family. Then another friend offered their rental house for us to move into while we rebuild." Yes, the Partains are still making a mortgage payment every month even though the house isn't even there anymore...but they expect the new house will be finished within two years.

The dynamics of getting back to normal have been a lesson in resiliency for Kay. "I realize people deal with grief in different ways. Sometimes I think of the hand-crocheted dollies I wanted to give Emily for a wedding gift one day. Robbie never knew any other home. He used to go off and play video games but there are times now when he wants to be BY us, not just near us. And Dave said he wanted me to know that he may be focusing on the building of a new house, but he appreciates all that I am doing right now to make a home for us again." In the end, they have each other and the comfort no one was hurt or killed in the fire...not even Johnny the dog or Dixie the pig.

Kay's late father was a minister. The walls of her house may have fallen down, but one of the things that wasn't consumed in the fire was his Bible. "When he worked on sermons, he highlighted passages." So, several weeks after the fire, Kay opened the book to where a bookmark had been slipped between the pages. It was Ezekiel 13:14: "*So I will tear down the wall which you plastered over the whitewash and bring it down to the ground, so that the foundation is laid bare; and when it falls, you will be consumed in its midst and you will know that I am the LORD.*" Kay says each Thanksgiving their family chooses a passage and makes it the scripture for the coming year. This year the perfect passage was miraculously chosen for her.