

October's wildfires make some local residents question their complicated relationship with possessions



PHOTOS BY ALVIN JORNADA / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Visual artist Helena Donzelli at her home and studio, which was burned during the Nuns fire in Glen Ellen in October. The burned piece of metalwork she holds is one of the salvaged items she has been commissioned to incorporate into art by clients who also lost their homes and belongings in the massive wildfires.

Is it just stuff?

By MEG MCCONAHEY
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

For almost two months after October's firestorm wiped out her home and all physical trace of her life before that night, Helena Donzelli was unable to sift through the ash to see if anything might remain.

"I would drive by and just put my hand on the window of the car, tear up and say prayers. I couldn't handle it. I just wanted to feel normal, and go through my normal routines," said the artist, who for the past seven years had lived in a century-old home off Warm Springs Road in Glen Ellen, a charming place with an old claw foot tub and original wavy glass panes in the windows.

But then in early December she had occasion to visit the site with an inspector and her vision cleared. Suddenly, it was no longer just a mound of detritus. Certain objects started catching her eye from amid the ruins. There was the front plate of her Cuisinart, a pile of wrenches from her workshop, the top of her iron, the head of her hammer. Fragments of things that used to be part of her everyday life.

Miraculously she spotted a metal sculpture that she thought of as her personal logo — a heart with two angel wings extending out on either side. It had occupied a special place above her bed. It was perfectly intact



A burned metal sculpture that Donzelli salvaged from her home and studio. She will turn it into artwork.

in the ash.

Donzelli said she was overcome with a sense of wonder.

"I saw art," she said. "Some things were twisted or mangled. But I just have so much respect for the things that survived the wickedness of that heat."

She was inspired to gather up the fragments and create a piece of collage art embedding the random totems of her pre-fire life.

"These were things I loved and treasured and were a part of my life. I wanted to honor that. I wanted a reminder. When you walk away from everything in your pajamas you have nothing to look at but your memories," she said.

She posted a picture of it on Facebook, and within 24 hours had heard from 15 fire victims asking her to make a piece of art for them,

using the few scattered objects of their own that had been salvaged from the fire.

Time to rethink 'stuff'

The flames of October have left thousands of people like Donzelli, re-evaluating their relationship with possessions, whether they were

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burned out of their home or not. They are pondering questions like, "What is most important to me?" and "What do I really need to live and be happy?" Even those who didn't lose homes but warily watched the flames threaten their neighborhood during that crucial month, or who drove around with their valuables in their car after evacuating, are casting a critical eye on their stuff, knowing that in a matter of a few moments, it could be gone.

People are reacting in different ways, from trying desperately to recreate what was lost, to taking the opportunity to start over with a clean slate, or furiously purging all the extraneous stuff cramming their closets and cupboards, and creaming off only what they need or truly love.

Donzelli said the fire made her value things in a different way. Before the fire, she was a perfectionist when it came to her Christmas tree. Her ornaments were chosen for their appearance. But this year, every object hanging from the branches of her tree was given to her and it has changed how she views holiday decorating.

"Now that a little time has passed, I wouldn't have it any other way. I would rather have the one ornament that means something to me than the others that don't mean anything. Before, I was more in to how it looked than what it meant. The fire has changed a lot for me. I'm grateful for that. If you can grow out of anything tragic, that's a good thing."

Vicky Royer lost her home in Larkfield. She found after the fire, that something interesting shifted in her consciousness.

"Once I realized everything was gone, the little things that I was fond of didn't seem to matter. I didn't want to hang onto the tiny things that were found."

Friends sifted and sifted through the ash to find her wedding ring. Amazingly, they did. It was melted, but a jeweler in Sonoma managed to repair it almost good as new. But that was about all that she wanted to keep.

For Royer, the remnants of objects that once meant something to her, are now a reminder of something very painful, an "anchor" as she put it, holding her to a tragedy she knows she

must put behind her. She doesn't want them, even her father's watch, something that once was precious to her. It was found, but severely damaged beyond repair.

"I don't want to look at that the rest of my life," she said.

"It feels better to just let go of all of it and start new," said the 54-year-old mother of two grown children.

She thinks back to the night of the fire, when there was no time to save anything but grab her dogs and two cats. She and her husband used the remainder of their precious few minutes, not gathering up objects but waking their neighbor, whose son is disabled, and knocking on other doors. The fire at that time was already on their lawn.

Lost family photos

For others, post-fire, small things become more precious. Royer, 54, said she lost thousands of family photographs. But a few friends have found some photos of her kids when they were young.

"Whereas you thought you couldn't live without those 5,000 photographs on your hard drive. Now I live with five photographs and it's okay because it has to be, and I choose for it to be okay."

Marisol Richardson was living in her mother's home in the Mark West Springs area when the fire roared through that first fateful night. Her family had moved there earlier in the year as her mother was dying. So she lost not only all of the memorabilia of her life with her husband, Stephen, and her sons Ryan, 20, and Brandon, 10. She also lost everything of her mother's and father's — essentially her family ties.

Losing those reminders of her parents hurt the most, she said. It felt like losing them all over again.

So in the weeks after the fire, her family went on determined treasure hunting, scouring antique stores to try to find some of the vintage items closely associated with her mother.

At one store they were thrilled to spot two pieces of black lacquer wall art inset with mother of pearl that were identical to a set Richardson's mother had owned. A few days later they came back and the dealer had brought out two more pieces and they scooped those up as well.

"I spent hours in those stores.

We went to one antique mall with 100 dealers. It took us all day to go through it. We didn't find anything."



ALVIN JORNADA / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Helena Donzelli sifts through the remainders of her home for more burned objects, which she might use to create art pieces.

"It's my parents' history. The fire took that away," she lamented. They were married almost 56 years. They worked so hard for everything, and I don't have anything of their own to show for it."

She is now living in a small rental in Sebastopol, that is something of a shrine.

"I have a hard time bringing in something brand new. I don't want to just start over. I want little bits of remembrances of who we were."

During the midst of the fires Doralice Handal of Healdsburg started reaching out on social media, trying to connect fire victims with people in her vast network of acquaintances and friends, who might have something they need or want. She found herself in many ways, becoming an empathetic ear for people who wanted and somehow needed to talk about their loss, almost like a memorial service helps the grieving before a loved one is buried forever.

"We attach emotions to possessions. We're possessed by our possessions. It's a human trait," Handal said. "Like this was given to me by my father. I can never get rid of it because it's the only thing I have left of him. People are mourning the item but they're also mourning their dad."

For some people, the fires have sparked a new sense of detachment and a desire to shed clothing and household items they don't need.

Area thrift shops report a big uptick in donations since the fires.

"Overwhelmed is more like it," said one volunteer with the Assistance League Thrift Shop in Santa Rosa. "We would get calls

offering truckloads of donations, which we couldn't accept.

Brian Benn, manager of the Pick of the Litter Thrift Shop on Piner Road, not far from the devastation of Coffey Park, estimates that donations have soared 20 to 30 percent since the fire.

"A lot of people said even though they were not personally affected by the fire, it caused them to re-evaluate how they look at stuff. The last months have been the best months ever for us in terms of sales," he said. Many of the donations are unused — clothing with tags still attached and objects unopened in their original boxes. "They figure, I don't need this and other people might."

Went on a purge

The fire skirted the Glen Ellen property of Anne and Dennis Zieminski, both artists, coming within a few feet of Dennis' studio. The couple was evacuated and for days they were convinced their house was gone. But once they returned and it was still standing, Anne went on a purge. Dennis went up into the attic, built a shoot and then started sending 20 years worth of storage sliding down. Old art. Magazines with articles about their old art shows. Old love letters, toys. Grateful Dead memorabilia.

Anne found herself going through old letters, back from her days as a belly dancer living in Egypt. She tossed the gossipy ones, but kept those that offered insight into her world back then. She saved the brilliant and funny letters her mother wrote to her. But cupboards yielded extraneous stuff, like a multitude of covered casserole dishes

"I think it was about trying

to get some control back into my life," Zieminski mused. "At Christmastime we didn't want to buy stuff. We bought a new bed for both of us. I just don't need anything."

Anya Concoff, who lives in Forestville, said even though the fires didn't come close, the town for a time was under evacuation, and she was on edge until they were under control.

The night they were evacuated she looked around her house before she fled and she was struck with the realization that "everything could disappear and I would feel better."

A clutterer by nature, she found that the fire triggered a need to shed. When she returned to her house, she dumped bags and bags of toys and clothing, old makeup, and books on topics she could now research on the Internet.

"Now I'm not just piling stuff around me like a fortress," she said.

The 36-year-old single mother said Christmas this year was profoundly different. She picked for her two daughters, ages 3 and 9, only a handful of gifts she knew they needed or would really use.

"In previous Christmases, it was about how laden can the tree be, and how many big piles of toys can I get my kids so they feel loved, and yet as soon as they are opened they become part of the clutter," she said.

Many people in the wake of the fire talk about a new minimalism that has overtaken them. Kira and Brian Wright are among them. They didn't lose anything themselves but watched family and friends deal with loss and it made them want to detach from the "emotional side of objects" and to value people, time and experiences rather than the ephemeral," they said.

They began a monthslong effort to give away extraneous stuff.

"We will scan important documents and photos to remove the fear of these precious items disappearing forever," Kira Wright said. But they're inspired to live a "well-curated, simpler life."

We can value the important objects rather than have junk piled in boxes we never look at. As the minimalists always intone, "Love people and use things, because the opposite never works."

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