

Colorado wildfire survivors look beyond fire and ash

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LOUISVILLE, Colo. (BP)—Linda Hinkle didn't get "one more time" into her house.

On Dec. 30, winds in excess of 100 mph drove the fire that would soon devour Hinkle's home alongside others in several communities west of Denver.

At the absolute most, she recollects, her family had 30 minutes to get what they could as the smoke thickened and ash began to fall.

Her 95-year-old father. Bags with clothes jammed in them. Shoes. Medications. Computers, phones and chargers. Two parakeets in the travel birdcage used on trips to the vet and two dogs—a rescued Yorkshire terrier who had been in their home for a week and a Czechoslovakian Wolfdog—joined them in two cars.

Earlier, Hinkle's son, Jordan, finished his shift from the bakery of a nearby grocery store and looked west toward the city of Superior. The dry conditions made the smoke he saw more concerning than usual, as fires typically don't happen at this time of year.

Meanwhile, two miles toward the direction he stared, parents were snatching up their kids at a pizza parlor, pushing through doors pinned by the wind, and running to their cars to escape the flames.

Fifteen minutes after Jordan arrived at his parents' house nearby, he told her they should leave. A moment later, Hinkle received an evacuation alert on her phone. She went to her backyard and looked. At that point, she said,

it felt like being inside a dark cloud that was choking views at 50 feet.

“I was in panic mode and thought we were going to come back,” she said. “We just grabbed some necessities for a couple of nights.”

Even so, the worsening conditions made her want to go back in the house one more time. Jordan had none of it, telling his mom they needed to leave now. His warnings were echoed by escaping cars honking their horns to alert neighbors and firemen announcing an immediate evacuation over loudspeakers.

Hinkle was in the process of cleaning when Jordan arrived and had removed her wedding ring. The ring remained on the counter when they left. Other lost personal items include the jewelry given to her after her mother’s death and pre-digital era pictures and videos she had always meant to put online.

“It felt like you were in the middle of an erupting volcano,” she said. “You couldn’t see. Ash was blowing around and getting in your mouth and eyes.”

Eventually, they and others crawled their way onto the road and away from the smoke. After about 15 minutes, the darkness began to give way to the light.

Loss of material things changes perspective

Things like your house burning down only happen to other people, she said, until it happens to you. There’s no doubt that losing possessions hurts, especially those with sentimental value. But that loss also has a way of clearing your eyes, letting you see what is of more, even eternal, value.

In the past she and her husband, Dale, had served with Colorado Baptist

Disaster Relief. As Colorado Baptists responded to needs from the fire, so now the Hinkles are being cared for by friends and their church family at Reclamation Church in Boulder.

“All of these possessions that we cling to ... you can’t take them with you anyway. You realize how many people care about you [from the] love of our church, our friends and our family,” she said.

Currently, the family is staying with her best friend, who also is a member of Reclamation Church (a daughter lives further north in Loveland, Colo.). With word getting out, clothes have been provided and even a more suitable birdcage for the parakeets. A woman at Walmart overheard Hinkle’s story and gave a \$100 bill to help her get restarted.

“People have helped me,” she told her. “And now I’m going to help you.”

Sleep has often been tough to come by since last Thursday. All kind acts big and small have helped.

“I pray: ‘God, it’s a new day. Give me the strength I need to continue,’” she said.

“Gratitude doesn’t accompany only what you can hold and see,” she said. It’s bigger than that, she explained. It helps you step through the darkness and into the light, one more time.