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CHELAN AFTER BURN

Rebuilding, reflecting, and renewing after the wildfire

BY RHYS HEYDEN



When Brett La Mar left his store, Lake Chelan Building Supply, for a short family trip to Canada in August, he made sure everything was in working order. While north of the border, he got word that a fire had started near his store, nothing out of the ordinary for the season.

What happened next, though, was like a nightmare relayed via cell phone. First came the worried texts, then the frantic calls, then the terrible pictures.

La Mar grieved on his drive back to Chelan. Upon his return, he found an unrecognizable ruin of twisted metal and scorched earth where his store once stood.

"It sucked," La Mar said. "I'm not going to gloss over the suck. There was

nothing pretty or wonderful about the fire."

When it's all said and done, La Mar estimates he'll lose more than \$2 million due to the fire that destroyed his store and everything inside it.

While he readily admits that the fire was a gut punch for both his business and the larger community, La Mar refuses to be defined or deterred by the tragedy, much like Chelan itself.

"The fire renews our resolve, it makes us stronger, and it ensures we'll be prepared for the next time," La Mar said. "There's some pretty cool stuff that can happen out of rebuilding."

THE INFERNAL INFERNO

At around 5 a.m. on Aug. 14, lightning struck the top of the 3,835-foot Chelan Butte overlooking the town that was

already perilously dry after a hot summer, and ongoing drought.

Soon enough, flames were racing down the butte towards Chelan, a surreal and terrifying sight for the locals and tourists enjoying a relaxing summer weekend by the lake.

Clint Campbell, the sales and marketing director at Campbell's Resort — a Chelan institution since 1901 — was in town that day. Campbell said he knew the fire was serious when a giant DC-10 tanker jet lumbered over town, making drop after drop of red-dyed fire retardant over vulnerable areas.

"There were monstrous sky crane helicopters flying directly over the resort, making swimming-pool-size water drops nearby," Campbell recalled. "The hills around us were ablaze and sirens wailed constantly. It felt like a war zone." >>

Destroyed in the fire, Lake Chelan Building Supply still plans to rebuild and reopen in 2016.



Campbell's Resort was forced to close that day for the first time in its 114 years of operation. With no phone service, Internet, or power — not to mention road closures and mandatory evacuations for much of the area — Campbell said the resort had to scramble, but was ultimately able to protect, house, and feed its employees and guests.

"The fire was traumatic, in the truest sense of the word," Campbell said. "More than 50 homes burned, including our catering manager's home. For several weeks, there were hundreds of local folks whose homes were still under a Level 3 evacuation order. All this kept Chelan in the media spotlight and helped to put an emphatic end to what was left of our summer business."

Campbell's summation is a perfect example of the devastatingly pervasive nature of a wildfire.

Unlike an earthquake or a hurricane, wildfires often last for weeks and months, and their true impact can be measured in multiple ways: deaths, injuries, and property damages, but also in environmental impacts, lost business, and lingering reputational damage.

Campbell explained that the resort makes nearly a quarter of its annual revenue in August, and half of that disappeared due to the fire. September, he said, was also slower due to a "fire hangover."

Mike Steele, the executive director of the Lake Chelan Chamber of Commerce, confirmed Campbell's assessment of the fire's devastating impact on tourism — the Lake Chelan Valley's second-largest industry behind agriculture.

"Chamber businesses ended up down in August, one of our biggest months of the year, by more than 50 percent of our normal numbers," Steele said. "When the fire struck, it was like someone turned the faucet off."

Steele said the Chamber's board immediately recognized the gravity of the situation, and met every single day from Aug. 15 to Sept. 8 to make some sense out of the chaos and uncertainty the fire had wrought.

"We had to put a drastic plan into place and brainstorm how to recover — both physically and economically," Steele said. "After August, we put forth a very focused and committed effort to welcome people back to the Chelan community — once the smoke had cleared and that was appropriate."

According to Steele, the six-week, \$250,000 marketing campaign was a success for the Chamber: September was 10 percent ahead of any other September on record for Chamber businesses. Speaking in early December, Steele was in a celebratory mood, as just-released projections indicated that Chelan's businesses as a whole would finish the

year on a flat line — or maybe even a tiny bit of growth — compared to 2014.

"A natural disaster like this is never a good thing, but the way a community addresses the disaster is the factor that makes or breaks the situation," Steele said. "Our community really rallied to pull itself out of what could have been a tragic situation and turn it into as much of a positive as possible."

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COURTESY OF LAKE CHELAN BUILDING SUPPLY

"That said, we recognize that we're still in recovery here in Chelan," he concluded. "We're still going to be dealing with rebuilding and recovery issues, especially those who didn't have insurance, and we're not going to be starting 2016 like nothing ever happened."

All told, the "Chelan Complex Fire," as it was dubbed, burned around 90,000 acres, up to 75 homes, several businesses in the industrial part of Chelan (including La Mar's store), cost about \$20 million to battle, and wasn't officially extinguished until new snow hit the ground in early December.

Steele said that there are no solid figures on total economic losses yet — as they're still being totaled — but most estimate losses will fall between \$20 million and \$100 million.

AFTER THE FIRE

For Lacey Lybecker, co-owner of Chelan's Cairdeas Winery, which was unharmed by the blaze, the blackened Chelan Butte has become a powerful symbol for the area in the months since the fire.

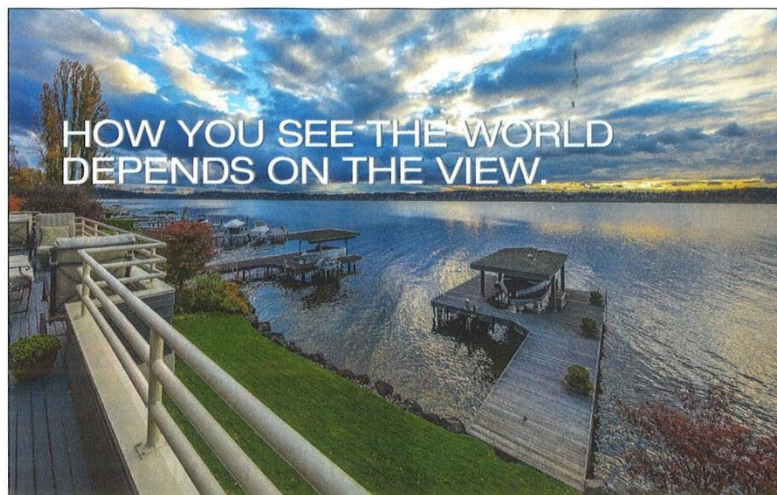
"You can see the charred hillside, but if you look at the lake, the town, and the sky, it's still one of the most beautiful places in the state," Lybecker said. "Besides, the grass on the butte will grow back in the spring and be greener than it was before."

La Mar agrees. Though what was once his store is currently an empty dirt lot, he's already drawn up blueprints for a new and improved facility that he can't wait to build.

"We're at the final stages with the county of getting a permit, and I think it could go up and reopen all in 2016," La Mar said. "Something is definitely going to come back, and we'll get to see trucks coming in with new material instead of trucks hauling old, burned stuff away."

At Campbell's Resort, 2016 reservations have been flowing in, and Campbell said that the coming year is shaping up well following a challenging 2015.

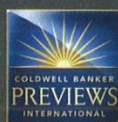
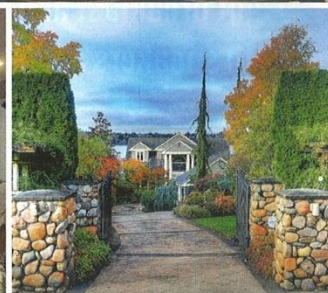
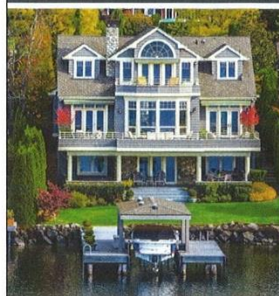
"The Chelan community is resilient, and we are 100 percent back in business," Campbell said. ☀️



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