

Heroic story of evacuation at Santa Rosa senior home during early hours of Glass Fire

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The traffic jam eased the closer Jamie Gralund got to the Oakmont Gardens senior residence. Police at three roadblocks had already urged her to turn off Highway 12 and follow the cars fleeing the fast-moving Glass Fire menacing eastern Santa Rosa. But Gralund flashed her name nametag — she runs a memory-care facility in Petaluma — and said she had to help Oakmont evacuate. You won't get that far, the police warned.

To the left, Gralund saw the fire's orange glow illuminating the night sky. It was still Sunday. At the fourth and final roadblock, with 3 miles left to go and aiming toward the wildfire, she sensed this officer would insist that she turn around. So, heart pounding, Gralund pressed her foot to the gas and blew through the checkpoint.

Nelson and Joan Andrews had just gone to bed in their second-floor apartment at Oakmont Gardens, a residence situated between two state parks. It has apartments for seniors able to live independently and for those who need more care. Nelson, 98, and Joan, 99, are somewhere in between.



Oakmont
Gardens
MBK SENIOR LIVING

On Sunday night, Nelson woke suddenly at the sound of someone entering the apartment. He glanced at the clock. 11 p.m. "Hello! Anyone here? We're evacuating!"

He thought: "Oh, no. Not again."

In more than 30 years living in nearby Oakmont, the retired dentist and former nurse never fled a wildfire — until 2017, one year before they moved into Oakmont Gardens. Yet this evacuation would be their third.

The couple grabbed the single walker they shared and dropped two packed bags on its seat. Together they walked, pushed and rolled to the elevator before joining about 80 fellow residents down in the lobby. More than 60 others had already driven off or gotten a ride from friends and family.

Outside, city buses lined up to evacuate the remaining residents to a shelter in the Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Building, a 20-minute drive downtown to the safer, west side of Trione-Annadel State Park. The Andrews didn't know it, but it would be 22 hours before they would sleep again.

She was sent upstairs to make sure no one remained in their

apartment. On the second floor, as Gralund went from one door to the other calling, "Hello! Hello!" Nelson and Joan Andrews passed her on their way downstairs.

Working with seniors wasn't just a job, and the residents felt like family to her.

As Gralund cleared each apartment, she placed a resident's pillow outside the door, in accordance with safety procedures. "Hello!" she called into the next apartment for another couple. She heard: "Who is it?" The couple inside awoke slowly, groggily. As they dressed, Gralund grabbed coats for them in case the night grew cold.

For all the excitement, the Andrews had a lot of nothing to do. They sat in the lobby for about an hour before a staff member indicated it was their turn to board the bus. Outside, the harsh smell of smoke penetrated everyone's mask. Someone took a photo, another safety procedure.

An unbidden thought came to Joan. In the last evacuation, she remembered, a larger,

luxury bus had come for them. This was a city bus. Well, they wouldn't have to pay the fare.

Gralund, 56, is the executive director for MuirWoods Memory Care in Petaluma, one of many facilities for older adults run by MBK Senior Living, a company based in Irvine and owned by Mitsui in Tokyo. On Sunday night, as the Glass Fire that would force more than 80,000 people from their

homes in Napa and Sonoma counties loomed larger and closer, Gralund and other administrators heeded the call to help evacuate their sister property, Oakmont Gardens.

If anything, the trip toward the fire proved what Gralund had long known about the career she had chosen. Working with seniors wasn't just a job, and the residents felt like family to her. Her children grown, Gralund lives alone.

On the road to Oakmont Gardens, the retired fire captain she calls her significant other spoke encouraging, comforting words through the speakerphone Gralund kept on her lap as she drove.

Now, having given the slip to the officer at the fourth checkpoint, she glided into a parking spot up the street

from Oakmont Gardens. City buses and police crowded its entrance. As Gralund approached, thoughts of the encroaching wildfire receded. Work mode took over.



Despite their ages, neither Joan nor Nelson needed help getting on the bus, as many others did. The couple made their way toward the rear, taking aisle seats across from each other.

The bus eased onto Highway 12, and Nelson watched the lights of the police escort gleaming up ahead. Joan gazed at the vineyards burning not 25 feet from where she sat, and considered the gnarled oaks lining Highway 12. Would they be there when she returned?

Neither felt especially afraid. Maybe it was a centenarian thing. Or maybe the couple knew that, despite the approach of a deadly fire, they were surrounded by police, a good driver, and caring staff. “We felt confident they knew what they were doing,” Nelson said.

But by the time their bus completed the half-hour drive, every socially distanced cot in the Veterans building was taken.

With the pandemic as well as the fire to blame, the 98- and 99-year-old turned around and got back onto the bus in the predawn hours of Monday.

“You need to leave. Get out now,” the officer told Gralund, who had just watched the last bus of Oakmont Gardens residents drive off for downtown. “There are structures on fire in Oakmont,” the community surrounding the facility.

As she exited Oakmont through the smoke well after midnight, Gralund turned west on Highway 12 and saw flames — a street corner on fire. She passed a fence in flames. And she couldn’t help but notice the towering tree that resembled a giant cigarette, its top gleaming orange.

The buses and their police escorts had long gone. Locals had fled. Now, Gralund’s was the only car on the road, and in the dark, she raced the fire as it licked both sides of the road. Her heart pounded.

Then, ahead, there was — nothing. Billows of blinding white smoke obscured the road, roadside and even the flames.

“Help me God! I can’t see where I’m going!” she cried out loud.

God may have been listening. But on the other end of the phone in Gralund’s lap, so was the former fire captain, who told her to drive very, very slowly. As Gralund crept forward, she realized she couldn’t tell if she was heading off the road.

“What do I do? What do I do?” she called out, taking comfort from the sound of her own voice and, sometimes, her own screams.

Burning embers to her right indicated she was veering off the road. She corrected. Soon, she saw an empty fire truck parked in the middle of Highway 12. As she passed, the smoke cleared just a little. She saw another empty fire truck.

Gralund can’t even guess how long that 7-mile drive to the Veterans building took because it felt like eternity. But she arrived, parked and walked inside to check that the Oakmont Gardens residents who would stay there or be bused to the Petaluma Fairgrounds had everything they needed.

The city bus carrying the Andrews headed southwest on its 17-mile journey to the Petaluma Fairgrounds, the

staging area for MBK Senior Living.

With no local relatives to pick them up, the couple and about 40 other Oakmont Gardens residents needed a plan. MBK had one: They would wait out their evacuation in vacant apartments in five other sites the company owned throughout Northern and Central California.

By early Monday morning the waiting began in earnest in the covered arena.

And Nelson and Joan had no idea where they would spend the night.

On her way to the Petaluma Fairgrounds, Gralund stopped at a Starbucks, thinking she could pick up enough coffee for her hardworking colleagues helping with the evacuation. The door was locked, but she could see someone inside and knocked.

“Fifteen minutes!” the guy called out. “Can you wait?”

“I don’t have 15 minutes!” Gralund called back.

Once she got to the fairgrounds, Gralund would need to call residents’ families. She’d need to make sure that everyone — especially those in wheelchairs

and using walkers — were comfortable. She’d have to help set up the cots.

The time was 4:20 a.m. Starbucks wouldn’t open until 4:35. She looked at the guy. He shrugged. She left.

It would be another 12 hours before Gralund would return to her home in Santa Rosa, thankful for the Petaluma residents who donated water, pastry and tangerines to the evacuees. And thankful to the firefighters who protected Oakmont Gardens from the flames.

Gralund’s own role in the rescue is one she’ll never forget.

“I actually have goose pimples even talking about it,” she said.

Nelson and Joan waited in the fairgrounds until about dinner time on Monday before boarding the bus yet again, with five or six remaining evacuees.

This time, they said, the ride lasted four hours. The bus rumbled south, then due east.

“We’re in Manteca,” Nelson told a reporter who called a few days later.“

The couple hadn’t slept for nearly 24 hours by the time they

arrived at the Central Valley town at 9:30 p.m. Monday. They were at the Commons at Union Ranch, another MBK senior residence.

Asked how they felt after such an ordeal, Nelson turned philosophical.

“In each life there are certain things over which we have no control, and you try to be flexible,” the former dentist said.



Nelson confessed that he felt slightly less magnanimous as he and Joan fled for their lives in what turned out to be very slow motion.

“But right now,” he said. “I’m just feeling grateful.”

Article by Nanette Asimov.
Photos by Noah Berger, Paul Chinn,
Michael Short and Justin Sullivan.