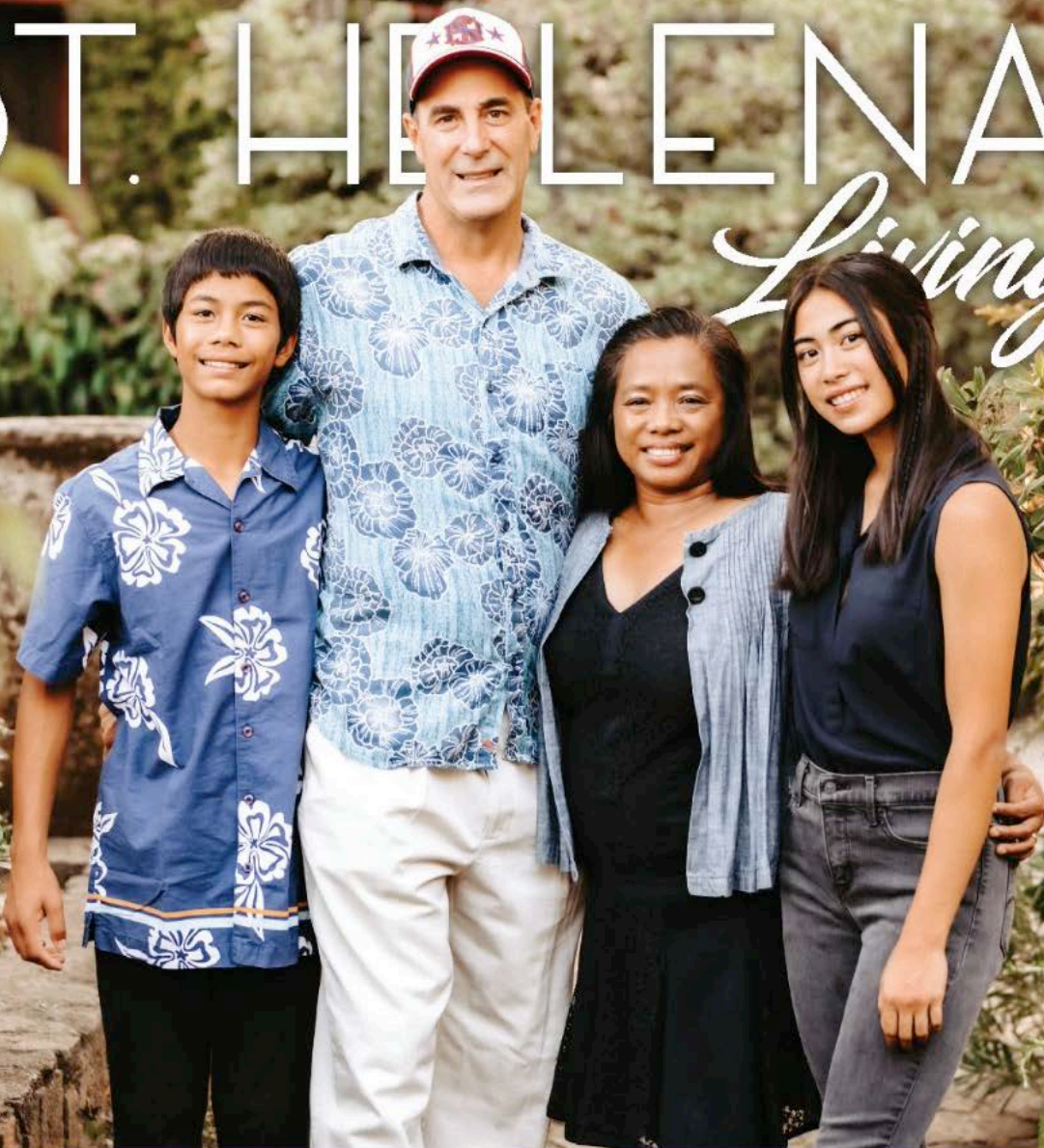


ST. HELENA

Living



The Aloha in St. Helena

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A Strategic Approach

TO WILDFIRE PREVENTION



BY EDEN UMBLE

“Wildfires know no boundaries.” Everyone who lives Upvalley has had a brush with wildfires. For some, it’s been the uncertainty of evacuating, followed by a grateful homecoming. For others, it means battling a merciless adversary which threatens or scorches homes, properties and livelihoods, or far worse: losing everything. The undeniable effects of climate change – years of drought and hotter temperatures creating tinder-dry conditions – are all around, and the best defense in addition to fighting the fires directly, is to create a wildfire resilient community that helps stop wildfires before they start or spread. By becoming actively involved in wildfire preparedness and defense, sharing the responsibility with our firefighting community and emergency responders, St. Helenans can create a better outcome for themselves and their neighbors.

Fortunately, the Napa Communities Firewise Foundation (Napa Firewise) and its highly proactive Fire Safe Councils (FSCs) throughout Napa Valley, including in and around St. Helena, are here to help. Formed in 2004 by concerned fire professionals and community leaders to address the volatile wildfire fuel buildup throughout Napa County, Napa Firewise and the local FSCs it supports have grown. They are now the premier volunteer organizations working with our community leaders to change the way Napa County residents and communities think about, prepare for, defend against and stop the spread of wildfires.

A big part of this success comes from the all-volunteer, proactive FSCs currently at 20 and counting, centered in the highest fire risk regions throughout Napa Valley. Each FSC is comprised of neighbors working together to make their homes and neighborhoods better prepared for wildfires. In and around St. Helena, this includes St. Helena, Spring Mountain, Diamond Mountain, Deer Park, Calistoga, Lake Hennessey and Mount Veeder FSCs.

“Wildfires know no boundaries,” Chris Warner, co-leader of the St. Helena FSC says. “And our volunteers and neighbors throughout the Valley work across borders too,” he adds. Warner is busier than most

people, but he hides it gracefully. As co-leader in St. Helena along with his neighbor Jeff Farmer, Warner credits his fellow FSCs and members in St. Helena and Calistoga for the grassroots, collaborative progress Upvalley communities are making to prevent and prepare for wildfires. Working with guidance from local leaders on wildfire safety including the entire St. Helena City Council, St. Helena Fire Chief John Sorensen, CAL FIRE Napa County Fire, leaders such as Diane Dillon and Sen. Bill Dodd, and especially the strategic guidance of Napa Firewise President and Board Chair Christopher Thompson, Warner and his fellow FSCs support a constant stream of strategic wildfire fuel reduction projects while building community partnerships and educating St. Helena and Upvalley residents on how they can make their homes and properties more wildfire resilient.

Warner also is on the Napa Firewise Board of Directors where his 40+ years putting coalitions together in the areas of emergency planning, public & government policy and environmental programs, are considerable assets. He made time to talk about this work - moments before heading out to support an evacuation drill for senior residents on the east side of town, helping St. Helena police & fire departments and Napa Valley COAD (Community Organizations Active in Disaster) ensure these residents, especially those with mobility issues, are well prepared for the next wildfire event.

Warner credits his fellow Napa Firewise Board members, including Thompson and Elaine Honig, for bringing him into Napa Firewise a year ago. “Elaine was really helpful to me,” Warner says warmly. “She was instrumental in supporting the St. Helena FSC and also focusing on what’s different about this particular FSC compared to some of the others. Because of my background in emergency planning, I volunteered and Elaine got me involved with the St. Helena FSC, and then Christopher Thompson solicited me as a board member, so I wear two hats now. I’m so grateful to learn from these Napa and St. Helena leaders.”

Helping local residents understand how they need to share responsibility for wildfire prevention and preparedness can be a challenge. Warner says, "It's an uphill effort with any FSC. Whether it's St. Helena, or up in the hills or down in the valley, it's vital to help get people informed, show them how to help themselves and also understand that this is not something you do *ad hoc* or without close coordination with our local leaders, emergency responders and wildfire experts, like St. Helena Fire Chief John Sorensen and CAL FIRE. We need volunteers at the neighborhood level, street by street, following the expert guidance of our wildfire experts and emergency responders."

Warner states that "Jeff Farmer and I work closely with Fire Chief Sorensen, the Mayor and all the City Council members, and they are grateful that we provide additional support that aligns with their emergency plans and programs to mitigate wildfire hazards. The St. Helena City Council and City staff, along with Calistoga, Yountville, the County, CAL FIRE, Napa County Fire and Napa Firewise are tightly coordinated to change the paradigm of wildfire protection to not just suppression when the wildfires come, but hazard mitigation and prevention before fires start."

To show how to put wildfire prevention front and center, the St. Helena FSC, in coordination with Spring Mountain, Diamond Mountain, Calistoga and other FSCs, has initiated several strategic wildfire fuel reduction projects this year, funded by Senator Bill Dodd's 2021 holiday fundraising event which netted \$1.4 million for Napa Firewise. The Spring Street roadside project completed on the west side of St. Helena in July removed fuels such as dead trees, overhanging limbs and overgrown vegetation on both sides of Spring Street adjacent to the Sylvaner subdivision to create a fuel break and provide safer evacuation for residents in and adjacent to the western hills, including on White Sulphur Springs Road, while giving firefighters better access to prevent a fire from marching down the hills and engulfing homes and threatening properties along the west side of St. Helena.

Warner adds that still to come are "more fuel reduction and hazard mitigation projects that St. Helena's recent FEMA grant will fund over the next years. St. Helena's City Council and staff, including Chief Sorensen, deserve huge kudos for pursuing these strategic projects to protect all St. Helenans." Napa Firewise also has obtained public funds to provide cost sharing to needy individual

property owners to finance their own defensive space projects in St. Helena and Calistoga. "Protecting your own property from wildfires also protects your neighbors and the whole valley," notes Warner.

Warner believes that the experiences of Upvalley residents and businesses with wildfires over the last several years has spurred united community support for wildfire prevention and self-help. "I think five years ago before the 2017 fires, people just were reacting to the fires and relying on emergency responders and fire suppression efforts by others. More recently, the double whammy of the LNU Fires, with rare heat lightning sparking fires throughout the valley virtually at the same time, followed just months later by the raging Glass Fire, that prompted evacuations and millions in property damage on both sides of St. Helena as the winds blew embers across the valley from east to west, has inspired community-wide efforts. The community reaction has been massive. Our Upvalley neighbors have been laser-focused on helping protect themselves and their neighbors, doing their own defensible space projects, knowing what they need to do to be ready to evacuate, and supporting major fire break and fuel reduction projects. Out of the disasters has come a great opportunity for people to get involved, and they have."

Warner credits Napa's local leaders for the new paradigm of wildfire prevention. "Sen. Bill Dodd and our other Napa leaders have been steadfast and indefatigable in helping us find the resources and get the approvals needed to do these major strategic fuel reduction and wildfire prevention projects up and down the Valley. It's an example of how Napa Firewise and all our FSCs band together in our communities and with our neighbors and leaders on a common goal - we aren't just in our own little sandbox. We're working together to preserve the natural beauty and economic prosperity of this Valley we all cherish."

With that, Warner is on his way. He's got things to do -- along with his co-leader Jeff Farmer, his fellow FSCs up and down the Valley, Christopher Thompson and Napa Firewise, local leaders, and of course all the residents and businesses of the Napa Valley who are united in working together to prevent and defend against wildfires.

Visit napafirewise.org to learn more.

JOIN NAPA VALLEY'S WILDFIRE FORUM ZOOM EVENT OCTOBER 12, 6-7PM



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