

Bancroft artist describes Fort McMurray ordeal



Tuesday afternoon: the fire approaches the city. Photo by Cheryl Ellenberger

By Tony Pearson

‘Now I have a better understanding of what it’s like to be a refugee!’

So says local artist Cheryl Ellenberger, who went out to Alberta about six months ago to help with her toddler grandson (her son and daughter-in-law both work in the oil patch). After having been evacuated from Fort McMurray, and after driving for days across Canada, she’s now back in Bancroft.

‘You’re forced to leave on very short notice. You have to make split-second decisions on what to take and what to leave. You don’t know when you’ll be back, or what will still be there if and when you do.’ She notes that many people had to go through a lot more, as they were caught at work or school and couldn’t go back, but had to leave straightaway. They were often left not knowing what was happening to the rest of their family.

Ellenberger actually left twice. On Sunday afternoon, a major fire was burning across the road from their house, so they were asked to leave until it was under control. This was quickly accomplished, and the family was back home that evening. But that was just the beginning of the crisis.

A fire that initially looked far away on the other side of the Athabasca River was seized by high winds and changed direction. It swiftly jumped the river and put the city in grave peril. By Tuesday noon, Ellenberger reported, ‘Out the window, I could see huge piles of smoke blocking the sun, with an orange glow at the base. At that point, I could tell it was an unmanageable monster.’

After her son and daughter-in-law returned from the oil fields on Tuesday afternoon, the family and the dog piled into one car and headed north. ‘You just grab what little you can and head out.’

Escape was via the only highway, which was jammed with cars. As Ellenberger described the whole experience, ‘In one sense, it was all a blur. In another sense, I felt like I was watching events in super-slow motion. Everyone felt helpless watching the fire rage, checking the changing winds, and praying for rain.

‘But technology served us well. Texting, calling, connecting and staying connected to family and friends, making plans, sharing photos and videos – it was a godsend!’

Eventually the family made it to an oil camp built to house workers taking multi-month shifts. What is ordinarily a one hour drive took six and a half hours. By the time the family was settled, it was past 1 AM.

The next morning, the family decided to head back south. What followed was, she reported, surreal: ‘As we drove along, trees already burned would suddenly burst back into flames. As we drove, I could look out to my left and see the city down the hill, completely deserted, with thousands of abandoned cars everywhere. My own truck was out in the suburbs. We didn’t know what was saved and what had gone up in flames.’

The bright note amid the smoky gloom was the volunteer effort. When we made it to camp, we were given a meal and they found water for my dog. I can't say enough about how helpful the many volunteers were. And the supposedly unfeeling oil companies were extremely helpful. Their employees worked untold hours to see that those fleeing the fire had their needs accommodated. For example, they had trucks running down the highway, checking that stopped vehicles had fuel and water. Then of course, there were all the people actually fighting the fire; they seemed to be tireless as they worked day and night to control the blaze.

Eventually she found a rental car that she could drive to Ontario. She and her dog drove 3,700 kilometres across the vast expanses of Canada until she was back in Bancroft. She left behind not only many of her paintings but her art supplies as well, and doesn't know when she will be able to retrieve it.

It put Ellenberger in mind of her own mother, who fled the former Yugoslavia after World War Two. She had to leave everything familiar, taking only what she could carry, family members having to find work wherever they could, until eventually the family had earned enough to book passage to Canada.

For now, Ellenberger just wants quiet time to re-charge before making new plans, the previous ones having gone up in smoke, so to speak. She reflects that one never knows when forces of nature can turn worlds upside down, and remains thankful that no one died in the fires.

She insists that what she experienced isn't her story, but the story of thousands of resilient people, who have endured a catastrophe, and must now re-group and start the re-building process. "I was fortunate," she says; "many people endured more, and many lost so much."

On that note, Bancroft McDonald's manager Jamie Campbell reports that the chain's program, "A Big Mac for Fort Mac" a program started right here collected over a million dollars across Canada last weekend. Of course, people can still contribute to the Canadian Red Cross. And donations will continue to be matched by the federal government.

In addition, MPP Todd Smith reported that his constituency office staff are working with Belleville and Picton Firefighters to collect priority items for families in need in Fort McMurray, such as hygiene products, batteries, clothes, bedding, and children's items like toys and colouring books. Once they have filled a tractor trailer, they will ship the supplies west.

More fundraising efforts are expected.