

From the Ashes of Her Home, a Tea Fire Survivor Finds Strength in Art

On the Tea Fire's three-month anniversary, many survivors are still sifting through grief, endless paperwork and the remnants of their past. For Melissa Marsted, a new future is rising, too.

By [Melissa Marsted](#), [Noozhawk Contributor](#) | Published on 02.13.2009

*Should at that moment the full moon
Step forth upon the hill,
And memories hard to bear at noon,
By moonlight harder still,
Form in the shadows of the trees,
Things that you could not spare
And live, or so you thought, yet these
All gone, and you still there,
A man no longer what he was,
Not yet the thing he planned ...*

— [Edna St. Vincent Millay \(1892-1950\)](#)

Today, Feb. 13, seems particularly significant — it comes four days after the lunar eclipse, three months after the Tea Fire and the day before Valentine's Day. It's a day to stop and reflect.

The Tea Fire consumed my house, the only home that I have owned in Santa Barbara, and the only house my two sons knew. More than 220 homes were destroyed on Nov. 13, 2008, and many of them also housed renters, some with insurance and others without.

Fortunately, I was home that early evening as the moon was rising right above the Tea Gardens. Periodically I would check on the fire above the hills, which was burning about a mile from my house as a crow might fly. As the fire neared our home, my 13-year-old son and I raced to pack the car. We saved as much as we could during nearly an hour of packing. I pulled belongings while he loaded. We saved art, photographs, soccer trophies, some jewelry and clothes, musical instruments and computer equipment.

I am thankful for what I have, and have been shocked to uncover additional memories in the remains of our home. These treasures include a heart-shaped

cookie cutter and two fully intact piggy banks. Inside a storage container I had filled during the past year, partly in fear of fire but also as a way to clean out my garage to treat myself to a new washing machine and dryer, I found a letter that my grandfather wrote to my father on the day I was born.

Meanwhile, a daughter of a friend whose family evacuated the night of the fire and took us into their home for nearly two weeks after the fire crafted some unusually beautiful and meaningful sculptures from the burned, melted and mangled remnants that were part of my love before the fire. I love them, and they have inspired in me an idea to help other artists who lost so much more than I did that November night.

A few weeks ago, I reached a point where I could no longer focus on the daily insurance e-mails and claims, the calls from the contractor on decisions to be made, and the shopping sprees to replenish basic living items. It felt like the process would never end. The healing needed to begin. Heart-shaped stones gathered from Summerland Beach provided more inspiration for the creative process.

My boys and I seemed to have enough -- and maybe even more than enough -- in such a short time. I finally had a chance to register with [FEMA](#) (for which I didn't qualify) and then with the [American Red Cross-Santa Barbara County Chapter](#), and then realized that most people evacuated with nothing only to find that their insurance didn't cover their needs or the insurance delayed their payments. What could I do?

As a board member of [Art from Scrap](#), whose mission is to support art, education and the environment, and with the vision of the new art pieces that were coming into my life, I offered to host an art show with Art from Scrap called Phoenix Rising.

It remains in the planning stages, with the ultimate goal to have a show during the Tea Fire's six-month anniversary in May. We are seeking donations of art made by artists affected by the Tea Fire. Art from Scrap will host a silent auction to benefit artists and musicians who lost materials, supplies and instruments in the wildfire. For more information, please e-mail Art From Scrap at afs@afsfromscrap.org, or melissa@marsted.me.

From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for supporting the hundreds of people affected by the Tea Fire, three months ago today.

[Melissa Marsted](#) is a [Noozhawk](#) contributor, author and freelance writer. Her home was among the first to burn in the Montecito foothills.