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Statesman Journal

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Six neighbors, a wildfire and a street forever changed



George Atiyeh was an icon of the fight to preserve the Opal Creek area. PHOTO BY ANDY ADKINS

Atiyeh presumed dead in inferno

72-year-old missing for more than 2 weeks

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal USA TODAY NETWORK

It appears increasingly likely one of the most important voices in Oregon's environmental movement has died just miles from the iconic stream where he sparked a nationwide effort to protect the area's old-growth forest.

George Atiyeh, 72, the nephew of former Gov. Vic Atiyeh and an activist who used mining laws and legal tactics to protect ancient trees surrounding Opal Creek, has been missing for more than two weeks. Human remains were found in his burned home in the Elkhorn community following the Beachie Creek Fire, the Marion County Sheriff's Office announced Saturday.

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Stayton mom convicted in toddler's death

Virginia Barreda Salem Statesman Journal USA TODAY NETWORK

A Stayton woman was sentenced to five years in prison after her 2-year-old son was found dead in a house fire in February 2019.

Jessica Marie Pearce, 27, was convicted of criminally negligent homicide by Judge Tracy Prall Sept. 17 after entering a no-contest plea. Pearce will serve an additional three years of probation. Second-degree child neglect and two counts of first-degree criminal mistreatment were dismissed, court records show.

Pearce was away from home on Feb. 1, 2019, when Oregon State Police and firefighters responded to a three-alarm house fire and found the body of 2-year-old Christopher James Pearce.

See TODDLER, Page 3A



A neighboring home is seen burned to the ground as Jeff Keto serves himself chili on his back porch on Sept. 16 in Mehama. The Ketos returned home last Wednesday after a neighbor sent them a video of their home still intact. PHOTOS BY ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Connor Radnovich Salem Statesman Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

At about 9 a.m. on Sept. 8, alarms on Diana Morris' phone began going off. It was the smoke detectors — the security system on her house in Mehama was alerting her of the worst. • The Beachie Creek Fire had reached her front door. • She was miles away in Sublimity with her mother. She and her decades-long neighbors on Mehama Heights had evacuated in the early morning hours that Tuesday, spreading out across the county. • The fire would go on to destroy 470 homes, 818 other structures, torch more than 190,000 acres and kill at least four people. • Mehama Heights was not spared.

Drawn back by the need to help, to save something they left behind, or just morbid curiosity, each neighbor would return over the next week to see for themselves: the pockets of random destruction wildfires leave in their wake.

Six neighbors; four properties destroyed, two untouched. A street changed forever. Now, there are life-changing decisions to be made.

Try as he might to keep his mind off the growing wildfire, an

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Keto and his wife, Micah, stayed in their trailer after evacuating but returned Wednesday morning to a house surrounded by charred land.

"It's bittersweet. Seeing neighbors that you've known for a million years with their houses gone and knowing that yours is still standing. Doesn't seem right."

Joe Duhart Mehama Heights resident

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Wildfires

4 million acres of Oregon public land closed due to wildfires. 6A

Nation & World

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Weather

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Mehama

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evacuated Joe Duhart couldn't stay focused on his work.

Videos uploaded to Facebook showed flames crawling up a hill directly behind his home, a home he was certain was now gone.

It had been in his family for 70 years. He lived there with his mother, moving in with her 11 years ago after he got divorced and his father died.

He had to see it for himself.

Fire was everywhere as he drove up a pitted gravel road that Tuesday, past the old schoolhouse and the still-burning wreckage of his neighbors' homes. Only 12 hours ago he had fled this same spot.

For reasons that Duhart still doesn't understand, his house was spared.

The fire torched trees and stumps on his property. But it skipped over dry grass that should have ignited easily and a burn pile of branches and leaves. The charred land stops within feet of his back fence, and closer still to a backyard shed.

Still in shock from realizing his home was safe — albeit with a broken door after Duhart kicked it in looking for his keys — all he could do was grab his boat and leave again for his sister's house.

He returned in another 12 hours, and again 12 hours after that, dousing hotspots, cleaning ash out of his gutters and passing along damage reports to his neighbors.

"It's bittersweet," Duhart said. "Seeing neighbors that you've known for a million years with their houses gone and knowing that yours is still standing. Doesn't seem right."

'There's no better place'

When Micah and Jeff Keto moved to Mehama Heights 22 years ago, it was the first time since her childhood that Micah had a home on dry land.

She grew up on boats, and traveled the world on them.

So did Jeff, who couldn't wait to leave after graduating from North Salem High School in 1971.

But after a four-year sailing cruise that took them to New Zealand and back, they decided this small town in Oregon was where they wanted to stay. The mountains, the ocean, camping, hiking, fishing, quiet nights — it's all they needed.

"Looking around, there's no better place than the Pacific Northwest," Jeff said.

They returned Wednesday morning knowing they would see a still-standing house surrounded by charred land, thanks to Duhart sending them videos hours earlier.

Flames were still crackling near some blueberry bushes, so Micah tossed buckets of water from their above-ground pool on them as Jeff turned on the well.

They watered down hotspots all day, then did it again Thursday and Friday.

Jeff also called his neighbor to the north, Bruce Cuff, a six-time Republican candidate for state office, including three times running for governor.

Cuff's house was destroyed, but some items remained.



Residents are returning to their homes to see fire damage in Mehama. Some homes were leveled while others are still standing at Mehama Heights and Emma Street. ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Fire had burned all around and underneath his 1999 Honda Accord and utility trailer, but it still appeared in decent shape. The lace-leaf maple his wife, Vonna, had been protecting from deer by covering it with a pool ladder and chicken wire was toasted, but standing.

And the red sign nailed to the utility pole outside his house reading "uphold the Constitution, vote Republican" was still there.

Part of the fence separating the Cuff's property from the Keto's was destroyed, but on either side of the missing section, fence stood undisturbed.

As with the Duhart's home, the fire came within feet of the Ketos' house, and within feet of the wood shed. The Ketos had recently laid out fresh wood chips in their flower beds — highly flammable and, somehow, largely untouched.

Jeff is convinced firefighters discovered Mehama Heights and saw two homes still standing and decided to save what they could. Unnaturally straight fire lines on the ground seem to tell that possible story.

Micah said many in Mehama who were fortunate, like them, are dealing with "survivor's guilt." But she's trying to move past it.

"You can't hang onto that because then you're not going to do any good for anybody," she said. "But you kind of have it in the back of your mind, like, why? All of our neighbors are gone except for the Duharts, and we're not."

Dinner among the ashes

One week after the Ketos returned to their home, they invited Joe over for dinner on their porch — the common spot for them to entertain company. These meet-ups would be happening a lot more often now, Jeff vowed.

Micah made chili, her great-grandmother's recipe. The gas wasn't yet turned on in the house, so she prepared it in their trailer parked in the driveway. There were sliced cucumbers from their garden, picked before the fire, and water from their well.

They talked about the damage to their town as they ladled chili into their bowls. Two of the bowls came from a local potter, who also lost his home.

Around them, smoke still hung heavy in the air and ash covered the ground. There was a lot of cleaning left to do.

"It's all set for Halloween, the cobwebs and the ashes," Micah joked.

Jeff said he planned to clean the next day, hopefully when the smoke had thinned out.

"I saw a rumor that it's raining hard in Coos Bay right now," Joe said. "Send it this way."

"It's taking its sweet time," Micah said.

From there, the conversation moved to family dramas, neighbors who were back in town, politics, and the Keto's small dog Dixie, who was running around the deck and yard.

But, inevitably, the conversations return to the fire: the damage, which buildings survived, stories about first responders or who stayed behind, and what comes next.

They don't know why they were the lucky ones. They may never know.

Was it because both their homes had metal roofs? Did firefighters arrive in time to save only the two? Did the winds die down at just the right moment? Was it a combination of these factors, or other ones all together unknown?

Plans to rebuild

Cuff didn't come back until Friday, already knowing his house was gone.

His family has lived on that property for 30 years, and he said the fire was not going to change that. They are already in the process of rebuilding.

"We just love the neighbors. The neighbors are like family for us," Cuff said. "I'm just glad that some of those houses were saved up there."

Cuff believes that everything he lost is ultimately unimportant. He has his family; his neighbors are alive. He believes this experience is God is giving him another adventure.

About a month ago, he said he and his wife were discussing how to downsize. But Bruce doesn't like garage sales.

"To us, it was like, sweet we don't have to worry about that stuff. We get to do what we like to do, which is shop for more stuff," he said.

He was surprised to see his Honda Accord sitting mostly unburnt.

When he jumped into the driver's seat and turned the key, it started right up. He drove the car and its trailer out of there that day, along with vegetables picked from the garden that his family ate for days afterward.

Late last week, Cuff secured a 350-square-foot rental apartment in Stayton, where he and his wife will stay for the immediate future.

"We've got 17 new neighbors in Stayton that we get to meet over the next six to eight months," Cuff said. "We're real excited about that."

Saying goodbye

Diana Morris had lived at the corner of Mehama Heights and Jennie Road since 1980, the year she married her husband, Larry.

Larry had purchased the property in 1976 and renovated the shell of a house that came with it. Diana and Larry loved the outdoors and worked for the forest service for years. They weren't anti-social, but they preferred each other's company.

"It was our place. We were safe there," she said.

On September 7, 2017, exactly three years before the Beachie Creek Fire would roar to life, Larry died of a heart attack in their home.

A year and a half later, Diana tore down their old home and replaced it with a manufactured home. She was still working on the final touches.

When she returned, a week after evacuating, there was little left. She had seen pictures before she arrived, so it wasn't a surprise. But it was still a shock.

"I just broke down. I have lost everything. I mean everything," Morris said.

Micah, her next-door-neighbor, joined her soon after she arrived. Mostly they just walked around, crying and hugging, because there wasn't much to recover. The two have been best friends for more than 20 years.

"We all knew each other, we all watched out for each other. When my husband died, they all rallied around me," Morris said. "I planned on living in that neighborhood the rest of my life."

Now, her intention is to sell. She's had too much heartache there.

"But I also had a lot of joy," she said.

She would go on walks with her neighbors or go out for coffee. Things will be different after she moves closer to town, but she is certain they will stay in touch.

"I don't know how we'll do it. Maybe it will just be a text and a phone call occasionally," she said. "We just will."

Contact reporter Connor Radnovich at cradnovich@statesmanjournal.com or 503-399-6864, or follow him on Twitter at @CDRadnovich.

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