

As Nuns Fire anniversary approaches, Sonoma wraps children in services

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When the Nuns Fire began north of Glen Ellen in 2017, Chimo, then a 13-year-old at Hanna Center High School, wondered if the world was ending.

“I could see the fire in the distance, through a window on the campus,” Chimo said. “We evacuated to the cafeteria and had to wear masks for the first time. Students’ families started arriving on campus. Families were running everywhere, and people were crying. It was the first time I witnessed so many people in a distraught and panicked state of mind. It was surreal.”

The experience confused Chimo.

“But my counselor at Hanna helped make sure that I was physically safe and mentally OK,” Chimo said. “I was blaming myself for not being more helpful to others during the whole experience. I was only focused on my family and myself. So, in the aftermath, I felt a lot of guilt. My counselor worked with me to straighten out my thoughts and give me peace of mind.”

This was also facilitated by Chimo putting in service hours and, along with other boys from Hanna Center, serving as volunteers as they worked in the kitchen or made sandwiches at homeless shelters.

“It all made us feel better,” said Chimo, now a senior at Hanna Center High School.

Hanna Center is one of several Sonoma Valley schools and organizations that found new ways to support children and youth in the aftermath of the fire and have since boosted their services to help them deal with traumatic situations.

“On the day of the fire [Oct. 8, 2017], immediately after word began to spread, Hanna Center alumni and their families began coming to the campus because they knew they could find help here and feel safe,” said Cameron Safarloo, CEO of Hanna Center. “When the campus was evacuated, families, staff and students left together.”

Stefanie Smith, vice president of clinical and trauma responsive programming at the center, says that it offers several types of mental health services to youth.

“We believe there should be many tools beyond talk therapy to help deal with trauma, mainly because trauma lives in the body and not all youth are ready to talk about trauma,” she said.

Hanna Center has offered equine therapy, canine therapy, art therapy, music therapy, sensorimotor interventions and mindful hiking to its youth.

“We plan to offer these and more — such as drama, dance, polyvagal ponies, trauma-informed yoga and neurofeedback — to the community, as well,” Smith said.

Since the fire, the Hanna Institute received a \$650,000 two-year grant from Tipping Point Community Foundation to provide targeted training for approaches that support mental health and emotional well-being after such an acute crisis. The training will be provided for nearly 1,000 people who work in nonprofit organizations, schools and government agencies within Sonoma Valley and broader Sonoma County.

Hanna Center also is home to the new Sonoma Valley Mental Health Collective, which was created to provide more accessible, affordable and culturally responsive mental health services for individuals and communities grappling with the effects of trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

It is composed of 17 community-based agencies that are committed to designing, implementing and sustaining a comprehensive system of mental health supports so that all residents — regardless of income, geography or background — have the mental health support they need.

Boys & Girls Clubs opens Mental Health Services unit

Boys & Girls Clubs of Sonoma Valley (BGCSV) has also provided children and families with support during and after the fire.

Oscar Fernandez Garcia was a 13-year-old member of the BGCSV and a freshman at Sonoma Valley High School when fire changed the Valley.

“I was evacuated out of my home due to the proximity of the fire,” he said. “We packed as much as we could into our cars and drove to relatives’ houses, spending what felt like countless nights.”

After the fire, he began to feel trapped and a sense of uncertainty about what was going to happen next.

“I would constantly panic when hearing notifications go off on my phone from Nixle [emergency alert system],” said Fernandez, now a freshman at Sonoma State University. “I think that’s because everyone around me was also feeling a sense of panic and uncertainty, it was comforting to be around my family and pray that things would get better. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Sonoma Valley helped me by providing a space for myself and others to feel comfortable and slowly transition back to a sense of normality after the fire.”

Fernanda Alvarez Cisneros, who was a 12-year-old eighth-grader at Altimira Middle School and a member of the BGCSV when the fire occurred, was evacuated from her home and stayed at the Sonoma Valley Veterans Memorial Building for a week.

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“Sometimes I think back on how much it affected people’s lives and how [the community] helped out at my local school by donating food, extra blankets and clothes to those who it hit the hardest,” she said. “It brought people together, but also destroyed homes, communities and safe places for many people.”

The BGCSV welcomed all families in the community — members and nonmembers — for a night of indoor recreation and fun nine days after the fire began. Dinner was served to more than 150 children and adults and the art and STEM rooms, as well as the climbing wall, were open to everyone. During the next three days, the clubhouse was opened to the community because schools were closed and parents needed support.

“On the 23rd, we opened at 8 a.m. to accommodate any student who was not able to attend their school for any reason, but specifically Dunbar [Elementary School], which had been damaged and was unable to open safely,” said Cary Leigh Snowden, president and CEO of BGCSV.

Most of the BGCSV staff members have been trained in trauma informed care and psychological first aid, which helped them to understand and respond to the impact of the trauma on children and their families. BGCSV also partnered with Social Advocates for Youth (SAY) to provide grief counseling for the clubs’ youth.

“This wasn’t just about loss of life: This was about loss of homes and loss of jobs, among other things, and we knew SAY was well versed in grief counseling,” Snowden said. “So, we were grateful they were able to come in right after the fires and lend that support.”

Snowden says that most of the BGCSV staff are still uneasy during certain times of the year — and specifically this time of year due to the fire — and feels that children understand that and share the anxiety.

“We started Mental Health Services [in collaboration with Petaluma Peoples Services Center] in house, here at the club, last year for this very reason,” she said.

Mental Health Services has a clinical intern who provides one-to-one counseling for any members who need it and group counseling three days per week to middle school youth and teens.

New SVHS Wellness Center offers student therapy services

At Sonoma Valley High School, teachers and counselors encouraged students struggling in the aftermath of the fire to focus on the positive and move forward, rather than look back.

“However, if students were struggling or had anxious feelings about the event afterward, we have multiple resources and encouraged them to utilize them,” said Dennis Housman, vice president of clinical and trauma responsive programming.

In his classes, Housman helped students by talking to them about their feelings and what they could do to address them.

“Since I teach P.E., I stressed that physical activity always helps you feel mentally strong,” he said. “I encouraged them to keep busy, play sports and do things that focus on the positive. I was also able to help a few students who had individual problems because of their personal situations.”

Teachers and counselors provide help to students dealing with trauma, SVHS has enhanced its support by opening its Wellness Center on Aug. 15 with a soft launch, with plans to make it fully operational by January.

The center, which also serves Creekside High School students, has three therapists who are available to students five days per week, providing brief intervention in both individual and group modalities. In addition to mental health services, the Wellness Center offers students opportunities to talk to a trusted adult; have a safe space to practice coping, regulation and self-care skills and/or learn a new prosocial self-care activity; access medically accurate health and wellness information; and connect to services and resources on and off campus.

“The wellness center is intended to help anyone who is going through or has gone through tragedy or suffering with particular personal issues,” Housman said.

High school students, as well as elementary and middle school students and their families, also have sought help with fire trauma from Sonoma Valley psychologists and therapists.

Private mental health professionals urge parents to engage children

Janet Cain, who has been a clinical child psychologist for 42 years and lived and practiced in Sonoma for the past 28 years, said that five families contacted her in the immediate aftermath of the fire.

“Three of the children, all 6 to 9 years old, would not sleep alone and returned to their parents’ bed,” she said. “Remember that the fire raged overnight. When children thought of the fire, they pictured flames out of control against the dark night. Children of these ages were prone to nightmares. And with such a trauma, we see behavioral regressions.”

The other two children were teens who were worried about the effect of global warming on their lives.

“Two of these five are sensitive children who still have fear of fire,” Cain said. “This fire was compounded by two more smoky fire events in the last five years.”

She says that to overcome traumatic incidents, children and youth of different ages need to be guided differently in many respects.

“With elementary children, the emphasis is on activities that help our environment,” Cain said. “Engage them in drought-resistant gardening, keeping yards weeded, conserving water and preparing a to-go bag just in case. They will understand how much quicker we respond to small fires. Don’t let them get out of control. Finally, emphasize their resilience. They have lived through difficult times, and they are stronger for it.”

Cain says that with teens, adults need to be honest about big issues such as global warming, violence, pandemics and social change.

“But again, we must remain positive,” she said. “If we adults have fears, we need to discuss these fears with other adults, not teens. Becoming active in events that combat climate issues, violence and virus spread will help with some of their fear. But some teens may need an outside professional to help them sort things out. Parents should not be offended if teens ask for outside help. Parents at this age are often not listened to by teens.”

Victoria Rohrer, a licensed marriage and family therapist and co-owner and Sonoma Valley Family Therapy, served as a county disaster services worker during the time of the fire. She worked in several emergency shelters, providing counseling and support to parents, youth and children.

“I worked with parents and youth who lost their homes in the fire,” she said. “There is a significant grief process that occurs then. Not only do you lose all of your things: You also lose your sense of safety and security.”

She says that children need to be able to feel and express all of their emotions triggered by this type of trauma.

“Parents can normalize a child’s reactions and emotions to these incidents, informing them it is OK to feel sad, scared, anxious, overwhelmed, numb or angry,” she said. “It is also important to be a source of emotional safety, love, support and reassurance for children — to remind children that even if all of their things are gone, you are there for them and they will be taken care of. Create a routine that involves having all of their basic needs met and help them stick to it.”

Rohrer was touched by the empathy shown by Sonoma Valley residents in the aftermath of the fire.

“I remember feeling amazed and hopeful at the generosity and kindness of our community,” she said. “I was at one shelter where neighbors would show up at all hours and ask what supplies were needed, and then immediately go out and get them.”

She also feels that public acknowledging the fifth anniversary of the fire can help to heal the community.

“Coming together during these types of anniversaries helps all of us, as it provides a place for shared connection, an opportunity to not feel so isolated in our experience,” she said.

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