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# Helping neighbors during historic wildfires

By Maddie Loverich '22

**T**hat week was crazy," Miguel Olide Gomez '24 remembered. "I had never seen dark, ashy skies like that before."

In September 2020, high winds and severe drought fueled the most destructive wildfire season in Oregon history. More than 4,000 homes were destroyed, and more than one million acres of land burned. By comparison, two homes in Oregon were lost to forest fires in 2019.

The sun hid behind a smoky veil as ash rained down in some areas for weeks, covering the world in a gray blanket as a solemn reminder of the compounding losses.

The only comparable Oregon fire disaster had been in 1936. A wildfire devastated the town of Bandon that year, leaving only a handful of structures standing. While large wildfires remain common in Oregon, they've historically occurred in more remote parts of the state.

This time, as whole towns were impacted, a number of Linfield community members stepped up to help their affected neighbors.

Olide Gomez, a member of the Army National Guard and a first-year student in 2020, missed a week of classes to train at the Portland Air National Guard Base. He eventually was deployed to evacuate patients at Willamette Falls Medical Center in Oregon City as the wildfires raged nearby.

Olide Gomez recalled the looks of immense gratitude and relief on the faces of patients as the team helped move them to a safer location.

"It was something I knew I was not going to forget," he said.

Back on campus, Linfield's cross country coach, Mike Blackmore, heard of the mass devastation in the southern Oregon town of Phoenix. Nearly one out of every three students in the school district had lost homes to the Almeda Fire.

Blackmore turned to a Facebook running group, asking for donations of new or slightly-used shoes to give to high school runners who had lost everything. The response to Blackmore's Facebook post was strong and immediate. Donations came pouring in from group members, and piles of shoes grew rapidly in Blackmore's garage.

Eventually, word spread to stores and shoe companies such

as Brooks and New Balance, who sent new shoes directly to the area.

Blackmore drove eight hours roundtrip to deliver more than 500 pairs of shoes. He says now that the effort is far from over.

"This isn't a one-time need because shoes wear out," he said.

In April, Seattle-based Brooks sent another 100 pairs of shoes to Blackmore's home to be donated.

Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue Lieutenant Rich Stamps '12 was on the Oregon coast hunting with co-workers when smoke began to fill their forest camp.

"We heard that they were closing forests down, and my phone starts blowing up," Stamps said.

They started packing, and before long, Stamps was summoned to the Chehalem Mountain-Bald Peak Fire back in Washington County. He and his crew hopped in a truck and drove two hours to the site of the blaze.

They ended up working throughout that first night. The fire ultimately scorched about 875 acres, but no homes were lost. The next morning, the firefighters rested and were quickly dispatched to another fire.

"At one point, we were cleaning up from one fire and could see another burning in the distance," Stamps said. This pattern continued for weeks.

In October, Stamps was honored as one of Tigard's 2020 Community Heroes.

"I represent the department," he said simply. "The crew and the department are all heroes; I'm no more special than any of my co-workers."

It's a theme that others in the Linfield community would echo of their experiences. Olide Gomez said he was just doing his job in the National Guard, and Blackmore said he simply did what anyone would do in a similar situation who heard about kids in need.

"Linfield is a special place with special people," Blackmore said. "But we also live within this larger community of human beings all around us. At moments like last fall's wildfires, we all do what we can, whatever that happens to be."



Linfield student Miguel Olide Gomez '24 was among the Linfield community members that helped others during the catastrophic Oregon wildfires in 2020.