

# Life in transition

**Camp Fire survivors at Silver Dollar RV lots struggle to find a place to land**

**S**teven Thomas has tried to stay busy these past four months.

Most days, Thomas, a Camp Fire survivor, leaves his trailer behind at the Silver Dollar Fairgrounds' south RV parking lot and continues his search for a new home for his family: his wife, 14-year-old son and their dog. It has been a fruitless, frustrating effort.

Tuesday morning (March 12), Thomas was installing a towing package on one of the family cars. They are preparing to move come April 30. The fairgrounds has asked those staying in the approximately 60 RVs in its north and south lots to leave by May, in preparation for the Silver Dollar Fair, according to Melissa Fornof, a fair exhibit representative.

The Thomases most likely will move to Washington, closer to relatives, because "it's impossible to find a place" locally, he said. The couple grew up on the Ridge and raised their son there, and they hate the idea of uprooting him. Life after the fire is like "getting kicked out of one place and going on to the next," he added. "I'm pulling my hair out nightly, stressed out."

The Thomases aren't alone. Though several people told the CN&R that life at the RV park is quiet and drama-free, many residents are struggling quietly behind closed doors, trying to figure out what comes next with limited resources available.

For Thomas, his family is what has kept him going. They had no insurance for their rental in old Magalia that is now rubble, and used the \$3,000 they received from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to buy the trailer they're living in now.

"Really it was like a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound," he said. "It got us out of sleeping in our car, but now we're sleeping in a big car, pretty much."

Since the Camp Fire, the fairgrounds has served as a sort of limbo for survivors. At peak count, more than 700 people were living there at a Red Cross-run shelter. That shelter was permanently closed on Feb. 15, despite the organization having extended its lease at the fairgrounds through March 15. Workers began ushering people out in January, and half a dozen Camp Fire survivors told the CN&R they were headed onto the streets of Chico (see "Nowhere to go," Newsline, Jan. 31).



Others, like the Thomases, were able to move their trailers to the north or south lot. Those who stayed after Feb. 15 started being charged the fairgrounds' standard rate of \$40 per night. A \$1 million donation from Wells Fargo has covered the cost for some of the families (those not paying privately, receiving FEMA assistance or insurance coverage), according to Casey Hatcher, a spokeswoman for Butte County, the fiscal agent for those funds.

As for the folks who don't have a plan come May 1, Hatcher said the county is encouraging them to contact FEMA for further assistance or access Immediate Disaster Case Management services (see Downstrokes, page 8). She noted that the county relaxed zoning laws for RV dwellers through 2020. Those waiting to move back to their properties in the burn area should contact the county to be placed on a priority clean-up list (more info at [buttecountyrecovery.org](http://buttecountyrecovery.org)).

Fornof said fairgrounds staff will determine if the RV lots will reopen for the general public in June, after the fair ends.

**At the north RV lot on Monday (March 11),** a little girl numbered hopscotch boxes with rainbow chalk on the asphalt as Jesse Domondon visited with a neighbor farther down the row of tightly packed trailers and vehicles. His dog, Medusa, a muscular American bully, excitedly trotted up to passersby for attention.

Domondon told the CN&R he's lucky she made it out of the fire alive—he was working in Chico when his Paradise rental burned. Since then, Domondon has moved from place to place. He settled at the fairgrounds in January.

As financial support and other resources have dwindled for survivors, Domondon has found it increasingly difficult to cope, he told

Jesse Domondon, pictured with his dog, Medusa, says he's uncertain of his future come May 1, when the RV lots at the Silver Dollar Fairgrounds will close. About 60 RVs are parked there, most owned by Camp Fire survivors.

PHOTO BY ASHIAH SCHARAGA

the CN&R. While others from the Ridge could afford to purchase homes and resettle elsewhere in Butte County, he said he is part of a remaining group of survivors who are stuck, unsure of where to turn.

"I'm very bitter ... I know I didn't ask for the fire," he said. "I'm blessed to have my life and Dusa's life ... but I'm very frustrated."

One of Domondon's new neighbors, Amanda McMurray, told the CN&R the fire displaced four generations of her family, now scattered across the North State.

"For what it is, it's OK," she said of life at the fairgrounds. The neighborhood is quiet and people keep to themselves, she added, and employees at the fairgrounds have been non-intrusive and helpful. A recent electricity connection issue with her trailer was fixed quickly, she said.

"My main challenge is getting used to not having a fenced yard," she said. Her dog, Bella Boo, used to run around in hers in Paradise, where she also tended tomato plants.

For now, McMurray plans to relocate in Paradise after the debris-removal process is finished. Some days, she feels rather hopeless about her future and about the future of her hometown, she said. Other days, she tells herself, "it's not the end."

"I know for the outcome to be bright ... I have to do the footwork, I have to make it bright," she said. "It will get better with time, it will."

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