



Above: The Gridley Camp Fire community, located at the Gridley Industrial Park west of Highway 99 on Independence Place, is the largest temporary housing site set up by the Federal Emergency Management Agency post-disaster. PHOTO COURTESY OF FEMA

Left: City Administrator Paul Eckert says the town of Gridley acted quickly to meet the emergency and permanent housing needs of survivors post-Camp Fire.

Spencer restocks the center each week. The building's owners, Dan and Mary Boeger, have opened up the space rent-free. They're also volunteers. Right now, the hope is to raise enough money to get an air-conditioning unit installed—the heat has shortened their hours, Spencer said.

She typically helps people check in at the front (they have to provide proof that they are survivors). Spencer also assembles special boxes with items such as towels, toilet paper, and pots and pans for folks moving into their new homes. One of her favorite things to do is to help families find a special treat for their children. Just before Easter, she met a family of five and gave a miniature electronic backhoe and a Barbie bus to the parents.

"I brought it out to the dad and there were tears [in his eyes]. To see that, it just really touched my heart," she said. "Those are the things that make it really worthwhile for me."

Several volunteers at the center also are survivors, like Lucy Love. She lived in Paradise for more than 40 years and now calls herself a "Gridley gal." She bought a home in town this past January and started volunteering at the center three months ago because she loves meeting people, she told the CN&R. She does a little bit of everything there,

greeting survivors at the door, helping them find and carry items, and making them feel welcome.

It helps that she knows what they are going through, Love added. "You just give 'em hugs. That's all you can do."

Since the center started operating in November (it's moved a few times, and been at its current location since February), Spencer has heard countless stories from survivors and "shed a lot of tears with a lot of these people."

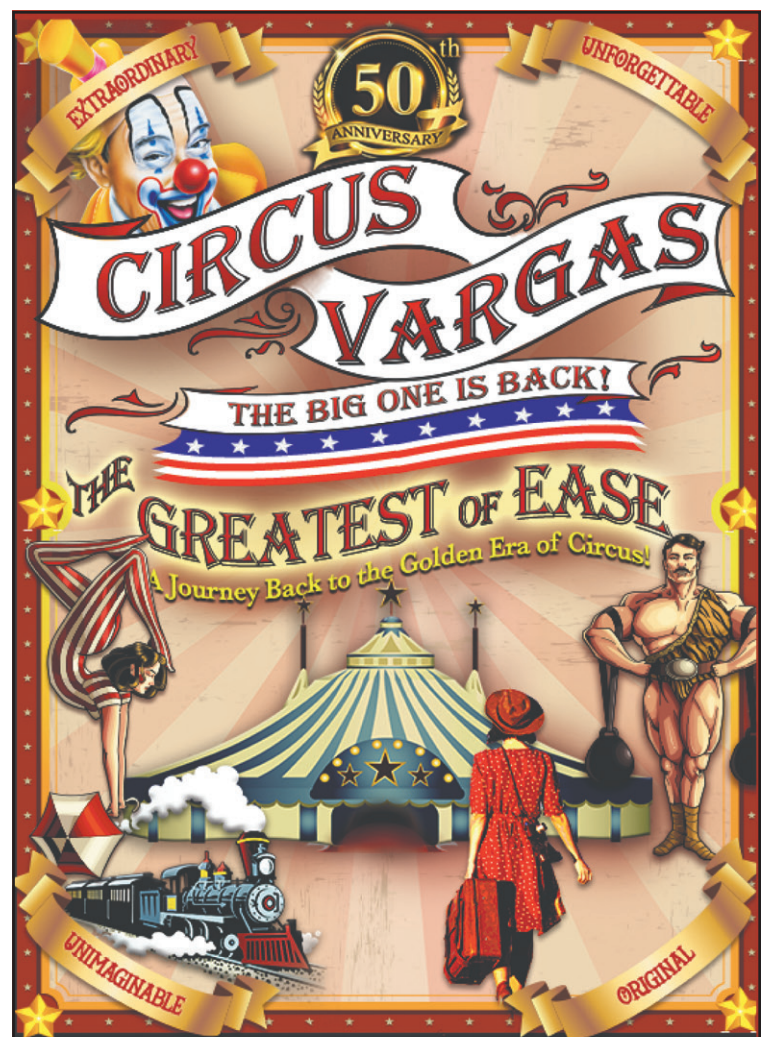
"There's a lot of them that are physically [and] emotionally compromised from this. It's going to affect them for a long time," she said. "We've got to be there for them."

Last week at the center, Powell and Jenkins were able to take home a few shirts and some snacks. Other folks left with bags full of toiletries and food, and each household was offered a case of bottled water. All expressed gratitude for Spencer and her volunteer crew's efforts.

Among those gathered was 3-year-old Audri Oppenheim, who sat in her stroller clutching a bright pink bear with a sunhat. Her mother, Laura Huth, said Audri and her sister are adjusting well to their new life in Gridley.

After the fire, her family stayed in a hotel in Sacramento for a while, and started renting a place in Gridley in March. They're considering settling down there and purchasing a house, Huth said. Some days they feel a bit discombobulated, and others they feel settled in. But they have felt welcomed and embraced.

"I really like that it's a small town," she said. "It makes it feel like home."



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Get involved:

To volunteer or donate to the Gridley Camp Fire Distribution Center, find the organization on Facebook, or call the Gridley Area Chamber of Commerce at 846-3142. The chamber also can provide information on how to participate in the Gridley Camp Fire Relief Group.