

# WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS<sup>51</sup>

Fire represents a greater risk to life in Topanga than in most other communities because of seasonal winds; rugged terrain; heavy growth; many older, combustible homes, often very close together; and narrow roads in and out.

HERE ARE **FOUR** KEYS TO PREPARATION AND PLANNING THAT ARE CRUCIAL FOR SURVIVAL:

## Assemble Your Disaster Supply Kit

**WILDFIRE  
PREPAREDNESS  
KEY NUMBER ONE**

With respect to wildfires, your kit should contain, at a minimum, the following items for each person in the household:

- 1. Goggles**
- 2. Bottled water**
- 3. Respiratory protection (filter mask)**
- 4. Flashlight and batteries**
- 5. FRS radio**
- 6. Protective clothing including long-sleeved cotton T-shirts, jeans, cotton/wool blankets, scarves/bandannas, gloves, etc.**

## Educate Yourself and Your Family, and Create a Family Plan Before a Disaster Occurs

Remember, you may not be in the Canyon when your loved ones need this information.

- **Have a plan and discuss the plan with your family. Practice the plan.**
- **First and foremost, refer to the back of this guide and locate the map that corresponds to the Zone(s) in which you live and/or work.**
- **Learn the evacuation routes that will be used for your Zone, and study the locations of your nearest Community Safety Areas and Neighborhood Survival Areas. (These terms are further explained in the glossary and in section 7.)**

**WILDFIRE  
PREPAREDNESS  
KEY NUMBER TWO**

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## Be Prepared to Leave Immediately When an Evacuation is Ordered

The longer you wait, the greater the chance you will not reach safety. You may interfere with firefighters trying to do their job. In a fire, evacuation routes can quickly be blocked by traffic congestion, downed trees and poles, rocks, etc.

- **Make an inventory list of all your belongings (including serial numbers) and keep this list in a safe place outside of your home (with friends or relatives or in a safe-deposit box).**
- **Check your insurance policy to ensure that you have adequate coverage.**
- **Place all important documents and photo albums, along with any other valuables or keepsakes, in a box or bin, and keep it wherever it will be readily accessible to grab if you need to leave your home in a hurry.**

**WILDFIRE  
PREPAREDNESS  
KEY NUMBER THREE**

## Clear Your Brush for a Defensible Space

Although wildfires (brushfires) can begin at any time of the year, there are certain times when Topanga is more susceptible to fires burning more quickly and out of control. These “fire season” conditions generally exist between September and December, owing to the combination of:

- **dry brush**
- **prominent Santa Ana winds**
- **relatively low humidity**

**WILDFIRE  
PREPAREDNESS  
KEY NUMBER FOUR**

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[www.topangasurvival.or](http://www.topangasurvival.or)

# Brush Clearance Requirements for Topanga Canyon Property Owners

*Chuck and Laura Bateman use  
Black Belly Barbados Sheep to clear  
brush from this meadow  
on Paradise Lane.*

## **FOLLOW THESE STEPS TO ENSURE THAT YOUR PROPERTIES COMPLY WITH BRUSH CLEARANCE REQUIREMENTS:**

- 1. All flammable vegetation identified as a fire hazard shall be mowed or cut to a stubble height of 3 inches, for 50 feet around any structure.*
- 2. Create a firebreak for the next 150 feet, for a total of 200 feet, around any structure by clearing, trimming, thinning, cutting back, and removing flammable vegetation.*
- 3. Single specimens of trees, ornamental shrubbery, or ground covers are permissible, provided that they do not provide a means of transmitting fire to any structure. Such specimens shall be spaced a minimum of 15 feet or three times their diameter from other specimens, structures, or surrounding native brush.*

***All plants will burn under extreme fire weather conditions.***

*Fire-resistant plants burn at a relatively low intensity, with slow rates of spread and short flame lengths. To best protect your home from fire, it is recommended that fire-resistant plants be used when landscaping. A list of these plants can be obtained through the Los Angeles County Fire Department, Malibu Forestry Unit, at 818-222-1108.*

***4. All trees and shrubs shall be maintained free of dead wood and litter. Trees and shrubs shall be trimmed up from the ground to 1/3 of their height.***

***5. Access roads shall be maintained with a minimum of 10 feet brush clearance on each side. Trees and shrubs overhanging roadways shall be trimmed to a minimum of 16 feet vertical clearance.***

***6. Provide a minimum 3 feet clearance around all fire hydrants.***

***Thousands of homes are in serious danger of destruction by fire because of their proximity to brush-covered areas. Homes with wood shake roofs, wood siding, decks, patio covers, or exposed eaves are particularly vulnerable to the spread of fire. Despite efforts by firefighters, wildland fires fanned by strong winds can destroy homes. It is your legal responsibility to take the necessary actions to clear vegetation around any existing structures. A fire-safe landscape creates a defensible space to help protect against approaching wildfires.***

# RED FLAG WEATHER

**Just what is “Red Flag Weather”,  
...and how should I react?**

*Red Flag Weather refers to certain weather conditions that lead to a greater possibility for a wildland fire to start and to spread rapidly.*

*These conditions generally exist when the winds exceed 25 mph and relative humidity is below 15%.*

***On days such as these, listen to the news on radio or TV to see if a Red Flag Warning or Alert has been issued.***

***If so, here are additional protective measures you can take:***

- 1. Park your car heading out (windows closed), and know where your car keys are.***
- 2. Disconnect automatic garage door openers and use the manual function (in case of power failure before you are able to exit).***
- 3. Place your box of important documents, photos, and keepsakes inside your car.***
- 4. Keep pet carriers readily accessible.***
- 5. When you leave your home,***
  - keep drapes or other combustible window coverings OPEN (or remove them completely).***
  - close all interior doors of the house (this slows the spread of fire).***
  - close all windows.***
  - lights on (as long as power remains, your home will be more visible to firefighters through the smoke or darkness).***

**Survival Tip**

**On average,  
Southern California  
experiences 15  
Red Flag Weather  
days per year.**

**SURVIVOR'S STORY**

**THE 1993 OLD CANYON  
WILDFIRE**

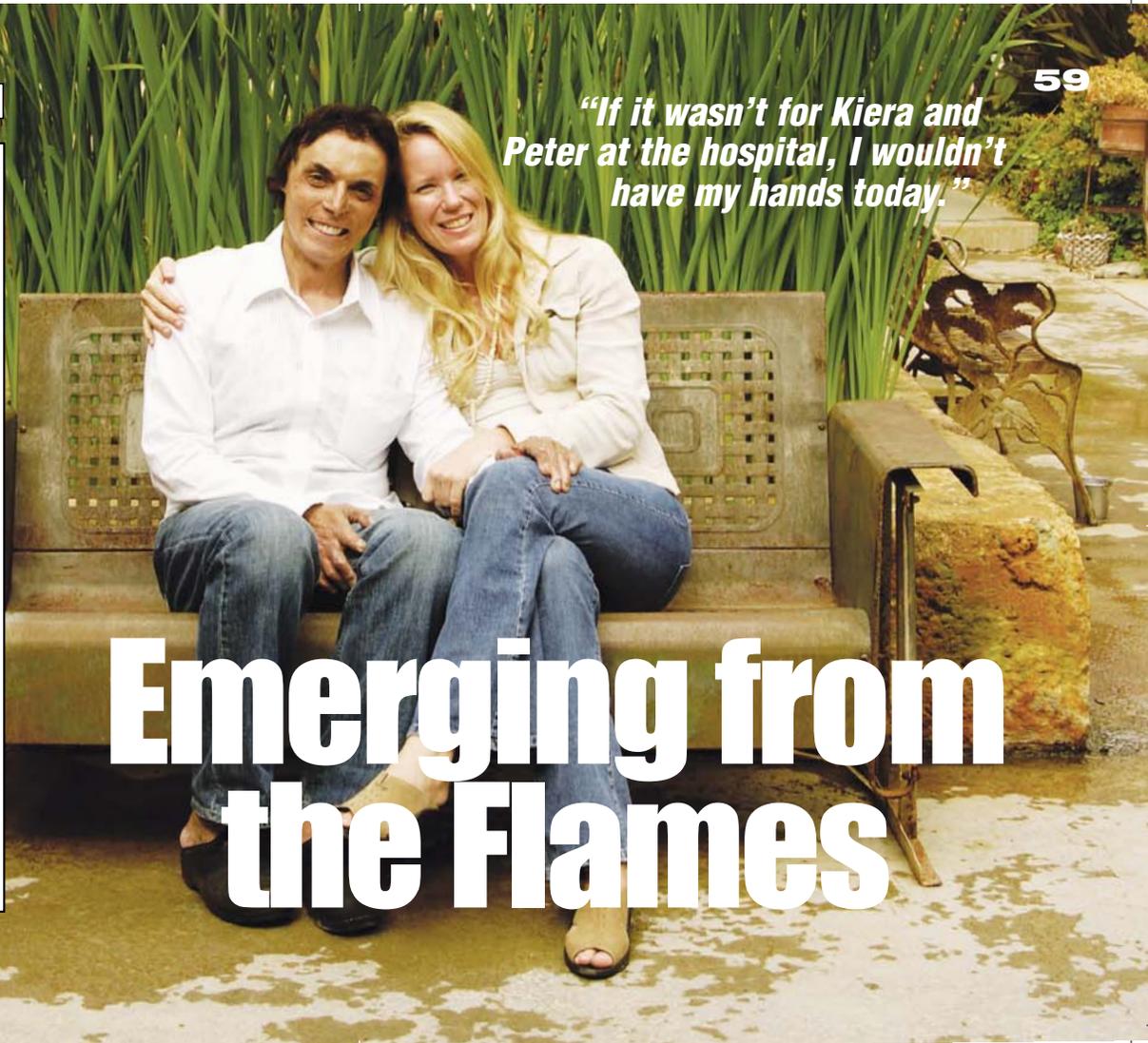


**RON MASS**

*Ron Mass today, right, with his good friend Kiera Schlihs (formerly Alexander). Ron was living on Kiera's ranch, known as Deer Creek, at the time of the 1993 Old Canyon Fire, above.*

*"If it wasn't for Kiera and Peter at the hospital, I wouldn't have my hands today."*

**Emerging from  
the Flames**



***The inferno Ron Mass ran through on that fateful day twelve years ago this November was just the beginning. What followed was an unimaginable firestorm of physical pain and mental anguish.***

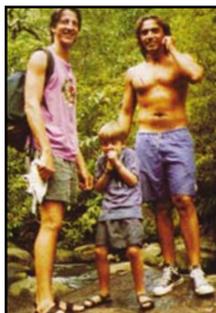
BY BILL BUERGE AND GAIL McDONALD-TUNE

**A**round midday on November 2, 1993, as the Santa Ana winds were raging, Ron Mass got into his Jeep at The Inn of the Seventh Ray to drive back home to get a forgotten saw. He lived at Deer Creek Ranch, a 15-acre spread owned by art dealer Peter Alexander and his wife, Kiera, located ten minutes north in Old Canyon. Ron was thirty-eight years old, had lived mostly in Topanga for the past twenty years, and had just started a new job at the restaurant six weeks earlier. Working with his hands as a carpenter was his passion and part of his new job description. Never sick a day in his life, he says that he had no reason to have health insurance, except that it was a perk that came with his new job. The insurance would become a gift beyond telling in the harrowing decade ahead.

Topanga's and the greater Santa Monica Mountains' extraordinary fire hazard is due in large part to the unique alignment of its canyons and hills to the hot areas inland,

and a "brush load" measured in tons per acre that is many times the state average. The notorious "Santa Anas" blow primarily between Labor Day and Thanksgiving and are created from high-pressure areas over the Great Basin. They become hot and dry as they are whipped to high velocity by the San Fernando Valley, which functions as a giant bellows. The winds roar seaward through the narrow canyons that act like chimney flues. Add a spark to the thick vegetation and a major wild-fire can erupt.

As Ron neared his home at the summit of Old Canyon Road, he could see and smell smoke. He intuited that there was a fire, but the exact proximity and magnitude could not be determined as it was out of sight over the crest of the hill. Three homes at Deer Creek were scattered two or three minutes apart by vehicle. Ron raced down the long driveway and on to the Alexanders' home to warn them. Peter, who was alone, began gathering up his dogs. Then Ron drove back out to the street and hooked up one of the new hoses; he asked two men who happened to be standing there to water down the trees and watch for the fire. In a state of



*Ron (right) with Peter Alexander and Peter's stepson before the fire, in 1992.*

resourceful panic, he raced back again, this time to warn the other resident, to get his things and get out as soon as possible. A red pickup from the fire station drove up out at the street, and a chopper was now circling overhead ordering everyone to evacuate. When Ron came back to warn his neighbor a second time, he was still writing on his computer. Ron hurried back to his place and gathered up some important papers, cash, and a few clothes and came back yet a third time, urging him to get the hell out of there. The neighbor, delayed by a fruitless search for his cat, finally got into his car.

Ron drove toward the driveway with the neighbor following. But it was too late. Flames had engulfed the entire drive ahead as well as the gullies on each side. The fire had outflanked them and was moving southward, as if by some ancient thermal instinct, on its relentless march to the sea. They were surrounded by the blaze. Ron thought of jumping into the pool but was concerned about the power lines that stretched overhead. In the hunch of a lifetime, he decided to blast through the wall of flames in his vehicle. "Cars can't drive through fire like they do in the movies," he says in hindsight. "The flames were just too intense. There were three walls of fire: we made it through the first, but I couldn't see him in my rearview mirror after the second. My ignition wires melted and my tires exploded in the middle of the third. When the ignition wires went, it came to a complete halt." The neighbor had already abandoned his car, ran back, and jumped into the pool.

Blazing oleander bushes bordered both sides of the driveway, creating a fiery tunnel. Within the vortex of the firestorm, Ron struggled out of his vehicle into the full ferocity of the fire and ran four hundred to five hundred feet down the driveway through the

inferno. Memory was the first casualty of the catastrophe. He can't recall if he held his breath or not, but neither he nor his doctors can understand why his lungs weren't destroyed—like his neighbor, who inhaled a lot of fire and was burned over 95 percent of his body. Firemen later pushed Ron's smoldering Jeep down the hillside to get

***Ron struggled out of vehicle into  
the full ferocity of the fire  
and ran four hundred to five hundred feet  
down the driveway.***

to the neighbor, where they found him barely conscious in the swimming pool, his eyelids burned off. He repeatedly uttered that he didn't want to die...he didn't want to die, but his voice was hauntingly weak because his lungs were fatally scorched by the firestorm that had engulfed him and Ron. He made it to the hospital, where more than forty soccer teammates were at his bedside when he died of his wounds. Members of the team visited the scene of the fire; there they found his cat alive, hiding under a toolshed, and pledged to take care of it.

When Ron reached to the street he thought he had made it out with merely superficial burns, so did the firemen who helped water him down with the same hose he had hooked up a little earlier. Ron sat down on the tailgate of the pickup and fell into an



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unconscious state that lasted six weeks.

With Peter Alexander at his side, Ron was flown by helicopter to the Sherman Oaks Burn Center. More than 75 percent of his body's surface had been literally cooked by the intense heat. The lighter-weight cotton T-shirt and shorts he was wearing stayed intact and offered enough protection to stave off more serious burning. Had his clothing been of a synthetic material, like nylon, it would have melted and his injuries could have been fatal.

A special room was set up to handle all the press that besieged the hospital. All the mirrors were removed from his room, and visitors were instructed not to comment on or speak to him about his appearance. Between excruciating dressing changes, he was bandaged like a mummy in the intensive care burn unit for the next eight months, suspended on a special bed made of hundreds of computerized pillows needing constant adjustments by factory technicians and costing three thousand dollars a day to rent. Ron made history at the burn unit for the longest hospital stay of any patient on record.

Upon leaving the burn unit, Ron spent another three and a half months in transitional rehabilitation where his stiff, grafted legs were brought back to life and he was taught all over again how to walk, feed himself, and use his hands. Finally, nearly twelve months after the fire, he was able to move

*Left: Topanga Messenger captures Ron at the Sherman Oaks Burn Center*

back into the house he had built at Deer Creek, where he lived for the next three years. Astonishingly, his simple plywood dwelling had survived while the other, more substantial structures burned.

For the greater part of the next decade, Ron's entire existence would revolve around an endless succession of surgeries. He estimates he had some fifty operations while at the burn unit, and

***Ron attributes his miraculous recovery to the outpouring of support he received from his hometown, which he calls his "extended Topanga family."***

another twenty-five after he got out. The tab from the burn unit alone came to \$2.1 million. Another half a million or so has been spent since, with a series of hospital stays lasting two days to three weeks.

In 1993, even given the advanced state of burn medicine, Ron had a dismal prognosis. His doctor admitted to him years later that given the extent of his wounds, he should not have lived. Fortunately, the insurance was there. But even more important, Ron says, Topanga was there. His hometown rallied with a vengeance—Topangans did not want Ron Mass to die! Ron unequivocally attributes his miraculous recovery to the outpouring of support he received from his hometown, which he calls his "extended Topanga family." "They have always been there for me. Topanga people came and sat vigil by my bedside. They prayed for me. At times, complete

strangers. The phone never stopped ringing. My walls were covered with get-well cards and drawings from the elementary school. There was a benefit concert at the Community House. When the word went out that I needed fifty to a hundred pints of blood, Topangans donated eighteen hundred."

What makes his story so compelling (and unsettling) to Topangans is that it brings the fact of our vulnerability to natural disasters home to us, breaks the door down and slaps us in the face. For a moment anyway, hearing his story shakes us out of our complacency and denial and we get that people just like us can, and do, lose their lives here from catastrophic events. Ron Mass was actually one of the lucky ones. In addition to Ron's Neighbor, two others died in the 1993 blaze when their car became a funeral pyre in a Malibu canyon. We are rudely reminded that just under the surface of all this rural splendor lives a volcano of deadly potential.

Ron has since grown weary of the operations. His last surgery was a relatively small ordeal involving a tiny leg graft. Still, it required the usual costly consultations with specialists and an anesthesiologist and several days in the hospital. Even though it was covered by insurance, his copayments came to \$8,000. The graft didn't take, but he still had to pay. He has decided to stop the operations for the time being and see if he can live with his present state of restoration and get on with his life.

The inferno Ron Mass ran through on that fateful day, twelve years ago this November, was just the beginning. What followed was an unimaginable firestorm of physical pain and mental anguish. It took the combined effort of his huge willpower and the power of collective community to ultimately extinguish the flames.

# Reducing Your Stress during a Disaster

**1. Instead of moving too fast, running, or yelling...**

*Slow down, take a deep breath, and think!*

*You will get things done more efficiently.*

**2. Instead of getting angry, becoming aggressive, and blaming others...**

*Stop before you hurt yourself or someone else.*

*Only try to control what is possible for you to control.*

**3. Instead of denying yourself basic needs...**

*Make sure you and your family eat and drink (especially water)*

*as often as possible. Do not take stimulants, such as coffee, without eating food first. Limit alcohol use.*

**4. Instead of feeling anxious about not knowing what is happening...**

*Call the T-CEP hot line at 310-455-3000 for information*

*about what is happening in Topanga Canyon that might affect you.*

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**See section 11 for information on reducing stress following a disaster.**

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