

Evacuees Flee With Dogs, Other Pets

Fire evacuees with dogs, cats, and other pets congregate at a Red Cross evacuation center in El Toro, Calif.

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DeeJay Jimenez with his two pit bulls. Photo by Melissa Ash

When DeeJay Jimenez fled his home to escape one of the California wildfires burning throughout the region and showed up at a pet-friendly Red Cross shelter at El Toro High School in Orange County, Calif., shelter workers could only manage to utter one word.

“Whoa,’ that’s all they said, ‘whoa,’” Jimenez described.

That’s because Jimenez wasn’t alone. He brought his wife, six children, two pit bulls, a Chihuahua, one cat and two snakes — one of which was a boa constrictor.

“But they welcomed us. They fed us. They fed the animals, sheltered the animals. They’re great. They’re fantastic,” he said.

Jimenez and his family were forced to flee their home due to mandatory evacuations after the wildfire closed in on their neighborhood in Fallbrook, Calif. Though many may say his circumstances are grim, Jimenez keeps smiling — even as he admits that he has no idea whether his home has been spared or burned to the ground.

“I’m not stressing,” he said. “I just take one day at a time.”

He added that if his home burns down, he and his family and his pets will simply “move on to bigger and better things.”

Harry Davies with his dog, two cats and bird. Photo by Melissa Ash

Fallbrook, Harry Davies shared Jimenez’s positive outlook.

Another man at the shelter who fled

“The insurance company, it’s really their problem if it burns down. You have no control of what the situation is along that line,” Davies said. “The first thing you do is worry about you and that you’re away from it. The other thing is the animals. You want to save the animals.”

Davies evacuated his home with his wife, Mandy, and their pets, including a dog, Dudley; two cats, Ditto and Cinder; and a bird, Happy.

The elderly couple loaded their belongings into two cars and began their journey out of the fire zone on Monday. Harry took the bird in his car, and Mandy took the cats and dog with her. The two didn’t know where they would stay, but decided they would head towards safety in nearby San Juan Capistrano and maybe stay in a motel.

But those plans never came to fruition. They became separated on the busy freeway among carloads of others who were also trying to escape.

“We were trying to find a place to stop, and we got separated,” Harry explained. “She stopped. She got desperate because she doesn’t like to drive after dark. So she went into a Honda dealership, and they were very kind to her. They found out that this [El Toro High School] rescue center was available, and the gentleman who owned the company brought her over here to the high school.”

“When I realized she was gone, I found out how to get to the sheriff’s department in San Juan [Capistrano]. I met a gentleman there, and he told me there was a center up here at the high school, and that he would also do a search to see if they found my wife somewhere. The first person that I saw sitting right here [at the shelter] was my wife.”

After they reunited and settled their pets into kennels provided by Orange County Animal Control, the couple thought of a way to check on the status of their home.

“There’s a test one runs,” he said. “You call the answering machine and if the answering machine answers and goes through its spiel, chances are the house is still standing because two things happen. You have to have a pair of wires for the telephone, and you have to have power for the answering machine to work.”

So far, the Davies’ answering machine has picked up.

The Red Cross will continue to operate the pet-friendly shelter at El Toro High School and determine its need on a day-to-day basis. However, most evacuees were hopeful they’d be able to pack up within the next day or two and journey back home where they’ll discover whether or not their homes have been spared from the blaze, according to a Red Cross volunteer.

Volunteers and organizers were unable to estimate the number of people and pets that have sought assistance at the shelter because many have come and gone during its operation. Cots have been set up in the high school’s gym; however, that area was designated a pet-free zone. Outside, a makeshift tent was erected, and kennels were provided to serve the pets in need. Orange County Animal Control officers were working onsite to monitor the pets.

Jimenez said all of his animals were doing well, with the exception of his boa constrictor, who was a little woozy from the car ride, but now has recovered.

Harry Davies added that besides the fact that his cats don’t like being away from home, everyone is doing OK.

Jimenez agreed. “Everything is going all right,” he said. “The corroboration between the people and the love that everybody is showing is a lot of help.”

-Heidi Hatch, Associate News Editor for DogChannel.com

For more updates on how the California wildfires are affecting dogs and their owners, [click here](#).