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From the Field

We're a Library, It's What We Do

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Abstract

From December 2017 through January 2018 the greater Santa Barbara community was impacted by the dual disasters of the Thomas Fire and the Montecito debris flows. Through these months, and the following year, the Santa Barbara Public Library (SBPL) engaged in a variety of disaster response activities to support the community, from participating as Information Officers in the Joint Information Center and handing out N95 masks to providing additional storytimes and recovery writing workshops. While SBPL was expertly positioned to be involved in information provision and community gatherings, this was not always the view of other coordinating organizations. Part of the response and recovery process for SBPL was thus to secure our reputation and position among other official response organizations.

Keywords: disaster response, recovery, community support, information provision

On December 5, 2017, the staff of the Santa Barbara Public Library (SBPL) were getting ready for our Santa Barbara Reads community conversation with Emily St. John Mandel, the author of our featured title, *Station Eleven*. It was the culmination of a month of programming related to the post-apocalyptic novel, including practical events on disaster response and emergency preparedness, and fun events such as original play productions and Pub Trivia nights.

The day before, the Thomas Fire began about 40 miles to the east of Santa Barbara, and had already burned over 50,000 acres. The fire was moving rapidly, assisted by the Santa Ana winds. Smoke was clearly visible over the mountains and the smell permeated the city. The lights at the Marjorie Luke Theatre were flickering on and off as we began our event. Unbeknownst to us, we were about to go from an evening of discussing a fictional apocalypse

to confronting our own disaster response and recovery in real time.

The following day in the libraries, SBPL welcomed evacuees from Ojai and nearby areas as well as locals who were escaping the smoke-filled air and falling ash. While most of our libraries have activities during the day, the influx of patrons and the increasingly poor air quality prompted our staff to expand regular programming and explore ways to support the greater Santa Barbara community.

As a department within the City of Santa Barbara, all full-time staff at SBPL are also emergency service workers. When the call went out for staff that were skilled in monitoring social media, writing press releases, and answering phone calls from alarmed members of the public, the Library responded. Several staff volun-



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teered to support the effort at the Joint Information Center (JIC). Senior Librarian Jody Thomas remembers how surprised the JIC staff were at how efficient and skilled Library staff were at responding to inaccurate information on social media, answering questions and concerns from distressed callers, and identifying public interest stories that would engage the public between updates on the containment of the fire. These duties seemed routine work for Library staff, who answer all manner of questions and are tuned into the needs and interests of members of the community.

Library staff also quickly recognized that incident reports and updates were not being made available in Spanish, which meant that a large segment of our community didn't have access to timely updates. Our staff became vocal advocates for making sure that all official information was released bilingually. Advocacy was followed by action, and SBPL staff aided in translations for print and other media. SBPL Administrative Analyst Norma Cervantes even provided simultaneous Spanish translation for video updates alongside the Mayor. While many staff were aiding in information provision, adding programs, and adjusting schedules to accommodate, we also had staff reaching out to local disaster relief organizations and the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department regarding the Central Library being a distribution point of N95 masks for the community. Though the staff had the right contacts and made the case for the Central Library as a community hub - along transportation lines, easy parking access, and a central location in the city - no immediate response from the Health Department was forthcoming. For the Central Library to actually receive the masks it took the Library Director, Jessica Cadiante, working through administrative channels to secure them. When the Central Library did receive the N95 masks we needed a resupply within 24 hours because all had been distributed. Eventually, Carpinteria, Eastside, Goleta,

and Central Libraries all became official mask distribution sites as the County came to realize how efficient our internal distribution system was and, perhaps more importantly, how much patrons relied upon and trusted us. Overall the Santa Barbara Public Libraries distributed over 17,000 masks in two weeks.

Just as staff began to feel they had a handle on the additional programming and services that were needed, the local school districts cancelled classes for the upcoming week. Due to this, Eastside and Central Libraries increased programming again. With students out of school and unable to be outside for any length of time, the staff realized the importance of providing a safe and comfortable place to be. From sensory storytimes to coding and robotics classes, to "Recess in the Library" and family movies, Central Library alone provided a total of 70 programs and services in the 17-day span from December 6 through 22. The normally mellow month of December turned into nearly three weeks of a library full of people taking advantage of the clean air, available resources, and numerous activities. Needless to say, it was not exactly the stereotypical quiet library during that time.

With the extremely poor air quality and the warnings to stay inside, the health and safety of our community was front of mind for many of our staff. While the masks were one way to help protect individuals, our staff sought additional means of providing health resources. This resulted in a partnership with a local medical organization, SEE International, to provide free eye health checks for children and anyone affected by the Thomas Fire who didn't have access to care. They also distributed eye drops to help with irritation from the ash and particles in the air. Any individual that needed follow-up care was then connected to SEE's Santa Barbara Vision Care Program.



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As librarians, we're also all about providing information, which meant at the same time we increased our programming, we also gathered and shared needed information, made it available to patrons, and pushed it out to the community. The Central Library's large display case was used for Thomas Fire updates, we included the daily incident updates from the fire command, news releases from the City and County, air quality reports, public health advisories, and maps of the fire perimeter and evacuation zones. This effort was instigated internally by staff and everything was printed from the County incident page, City emails, and other websites. While the Central Library had been undertaking these efforts, the responding agencies put up two official information kiosks in other locations. It took repeated efforts from Library Director Jessica Cadiente to designate the Library as an official kiosk with poster-sized maps. We had not been on their radar as a location or organization to share information, but for the next few weeks an individual from the Office of Emergency Management was in the Library almost every day to provide us with new maps and additional information.

On the evening of December 15, the Thomas Fire had been burning for eleven days and had scorched 249,500 acres and was threatening areas of Carpinteria, but had not yet reached Montecito and Santa Barbara. It was on this evening, as firefighters battled 40 mile an hour winds causing flare ups, that Acting Library Services Manager Molly Wetta was one of the individuals manning the JIC overnight. The fire encroached on local containment lines and flames, while miles away, could be seen out the window of the Office of Emergency Management and seemed far closer than they were. As Wetta worked with the JIC team to write different versions of press releases that included evacuation order scenarios for the downtown corridor extending all the way to the ocean, she thought how much her idea of "other duties as assigned"

had expanded, and that while nothing like this had been covered in MLIS courses, it was the same basic principle at work: information access.

The morning of December 16 brought with it new evacuation orders, mandatory zones for almost all of the communities to the south of the City of Santa Barbara, as well as portions of the City's Eastside and mountain neighborhoods. Almost the entirety of downtown was under an evacuation warning. In the midst of this, the Central and Eastside Libraries not only continued their expanded programming and information sharing, but also helped set up the evacuation point in the Eastside neighborhood where evacuees that did not have transportation were connected to transport services. And again, bilingual staff communicated with residents of this predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhood.

As the community tensely waited for the next evacuation order, for the next alert from the County, or for the winds to change, fire personnel worked to hold the lines of the fire and increase containment. With great relief, on December 21 all evacuation orders for Santa Barbara County were lifted. The Thomas Fire had grown to over 272,000 acres (about 1.5 times the size of New York City), many people had been evacuated from their homes for two weeks, the Montecito Library had been closed since December 12, and though there was relief, there was also fatigue. By the time the Thomas Fire was over more than 1,000 structures were destroyed. At the time, this was the largest wildfire California had ever known. As we moved into the holidays there was a sense of relief.

With all Libraries open again in the new year, staff began working on what we could do to support the community. We all knew that certain weather conditions would have a great impact on our mountainsides and could trigger



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flooding and mudslides, but no one was truly prepared for the early morning of January 9.

As the first storm came through with intensity, mandatory evacuations were ordered for higher elevation areas in and directly below the Thomas Fire burn zones. Hours before dawn, an estimated half inch of rain fell with such ferocity that mud and boulders from the mountains above Montecito were forced down creeks and valleys into populated areas. The debris flows were reported to be up to 15 feet in height, containing mud, boulders and trees, and moved as swiftly as 20 miles per hour. Twenty-one lives were lost, 150 people were hospitalized, 300 homes were damaged, and 100 homes were destroyed. Author and Montecito resident T.C. Boyle captured the feeling of loss and emptiness felt by the community in a [New Yorker article](#) shortly after.

All of Montecito and much of Carpinteria remained under mandatory evacuation for several days to allow for search and recovery, then planning and clean-up. Our Montecito and Carpinteria Libraries were immediately closed, and the Montecito Library was completely inaccessible to even check on the condition of the building. While this was another disaster, it was of a different kind. Carpinteria Library would reopen three days later, but Montecito Library would not be open until January 30, a full three weeks after the disaster. Immediately after the debris flow, there was little we could do to mitigate the effects of the devastation. After such a tragedy we looked to our partners and asked what we could do.

One need we could meet was to provide outreach and access to our collections. The Montecito Union elementary school had been displaced and had set-up temporary space at the local community college but since they didn't have access to their classroom, they didn't have any materials, including text books. SBPL was able to help fill this gap by providing access to

hundreds of books which were taken to their temporary campus. SBPL also participated in a fun, hands-on learning day for the students in partnership with local organizations and museums such as the Santa Barbara Zoo and the Wolf Museum of Exploration and Innovation.

Information dissemination was a key role that we once again provided after this disaster. People appreciated that timely library materials were featured including resources about how to help children after trauma and reading recommendations for those dealing with grief and stress. And we continued to communicate status updates and recovery information. Thanks to some of our contacts and regular partnerships we were able to provide a few immediate informational programs to the community:

- January 18 (and repeated again on February 8 due to popularity) local trail expert and author Ray Ford discussed the conditions of the Santa Barbara area's beloved trails. This update at the Central Library included current trail conditions and closures in the mountains above Montecito and Carpinteria as well as images of popular trails that Ray had been able to take in the closed areas using his reporter credentials.
- January 25 the Central Library with Santa Barbara Urban Creeks Council and Citizens Planning Association presented an informational panel discussion with University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) professors on the geological impact of the January storm and debris flows.
- February 10 presented the opportunity for residents to meet with a professional conservator at the event Saving Memories from Mud. SBPL in partnership with UCSB Library invited those impacted by the debris flow event to have their family photos, documents, and books damaged by water or



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mud assessed, while also receiving recommendations and resources for preserving family memories.

- The weekend of February 10 and 11 at the Eastside Library the American Red Cross of the Pacific Coast provided individualized recovery support for Spanish speaking residents impacted by the Montecito debris flows or Thomas Fire. Since the organization was a non-governmental agency, support was provided regardless of citizenship status.

Recovery and support weren't just in the immediate aftermath of the debris flow and Thomas Fire. We understood that this was a process that community members would approach at their own speed and we wanted to be there when people were ready. This led to programming months after the events to help our community structurally, mentally, and financially.

Subsequent programs in the months following the events included:

- Fire Safe Landscaping with the UC Master Gardeners in May
- Restoring Our Trails with the Los Padres Forest Association, SB Mountain Bike Trail Volunteers, Montecito Trails Foundation, and Santa Barbara County Trails Council in May
- Working with StoryCenter and the Carpinteria and Montecito communities to record their stories as part of the California Wildfires Story Project in June
- Partnering with Hope 805 on Phases of Disaster in August to provide understanding of reactions to disasters and links to emotional support

- Coordinating with our longtime partner Women's Economic Ventures (WEV) to provide informational sessions for small businesses on WEV's grant program for those impacted by the Thomas Fire and debris flow as well as self-employed individuals such as groundskeepers, cooks, childcare providers, housekeepers no longer supported by the residences and businesses that had previously employed them

Disasters are not just events that we respond to in the moment. We are part of the grieving process, and the work to rebuild and recover. Even a year later we are still looking for ways to provide support.

As the one-year anniversary of the debris flow came around, the Montecito Library participated in a remembrance event. The Central Library provided a poetry writing workshop for grief and healing, and we continue to engage with organizations to give updates on the status of our trails and how to get involved in the cleanup and rebuilding process.

As a library system, responding to disasters is about supporting the community, but also working with the community. The contacts and partnerships we had already forged through our regular programming allowed us to be successful in hearing additional needs and being able to use our skills to work together to provide support for our community. In total, SBPL worked with over two dozen community organizations and government agencies over the course of 14 months on Thomas Fire and debris flow response.

While many of our partners immediately reached out to us during these times, we also needed to insert SBPL into conversations and communicate our strengths in order to have organizations and departments realize the benefit of including the libraries in disaster response work. This is still an ongoing process to make



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sure that we are an integrated partner in coordinated responses, but the continuous resources and outreach that we provide are opening minds about what it is a library does. We are working to ensure other disaster responders understand that disaster response is what we do every day - in small and big ways - by preparing our communities and giving them the tools and resources they need to succeed.

Before the disaster, we had selected a quote from *Station Eleven* for the front cover of our Santa Barbara Reads program: "Survival is insufficient." We could never have predicted how true and prescient it would be. As our community continues to heal, mend, and rebuild, the Santa Barbara Public Library will continue to support our community in every way we can so that we not only survive, but thrive. In a strange way, Mandel's visit marked the end of our before: before the fire, before the flood. However, it also set the tone for our after – a community drawn together in shared experience and better prepared for whatever comes next.



Figure 1. During the Thomas Fire, SBPL used our internal digital media to help share informational updates and health information, including encouraging the community to pick-up N95 masks to wear at all times while outside.



Figure 2. One delivery of N95 masks from the Santa Barbara County Department of Public Health during the Thomas Fire.



Figure 3. The display case in the lobby of the Central Library was turned into a bilingual information board during the Thomas Fire.

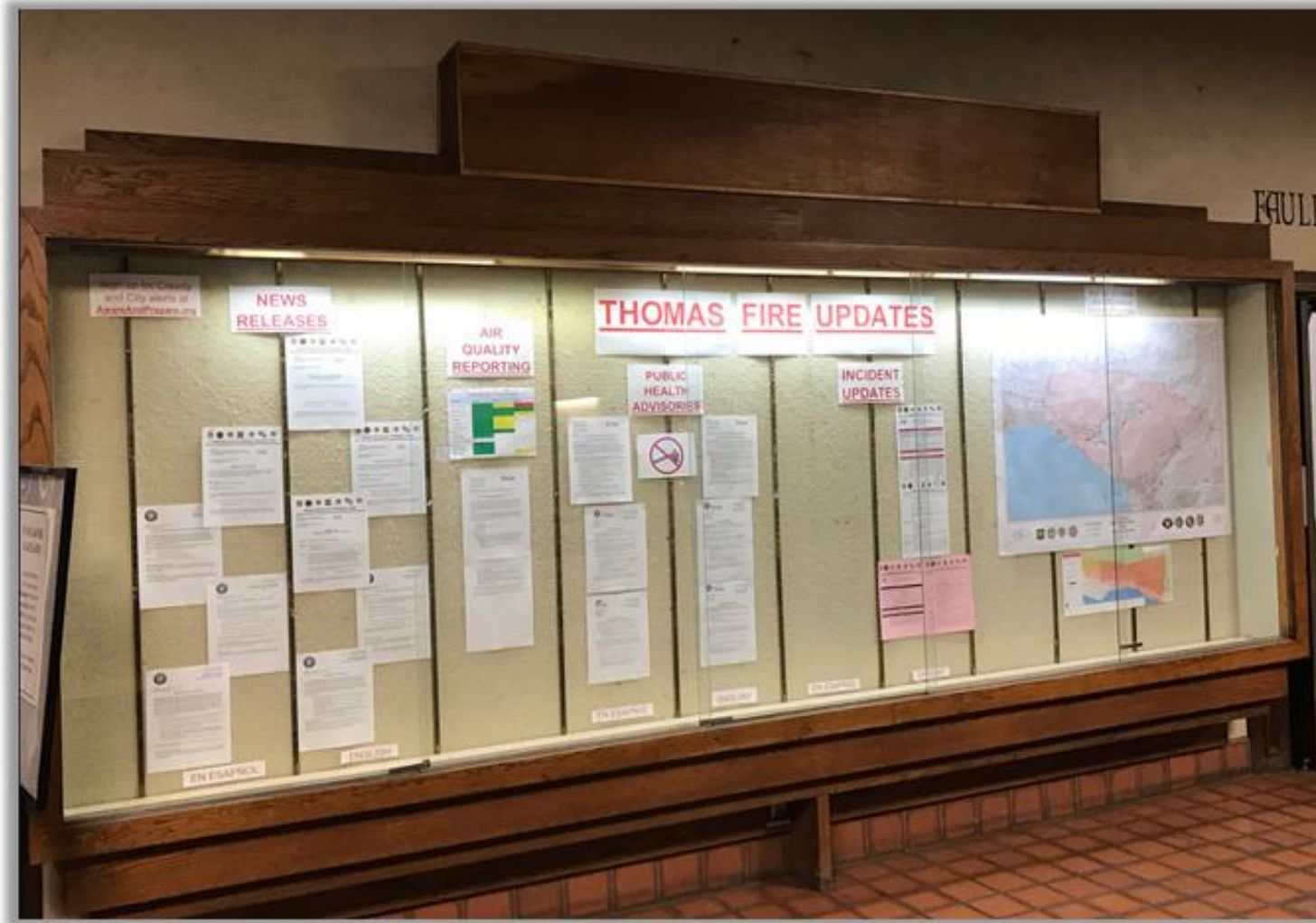


Figure 4. View from the Joint Information Center late in the night on December 15 looking east towards the Thomas Fire.



Figure 5. The morning of December 16 the winds moved the Thomas Fire closer to the populated areas of Montecito and Santa Barbara, changing many neighborhoods to mandatory evacuation warnings.



Figure 6. The weekend of December 16 and 17 the sun was completely occluded by smoke from the Thomas Fire.



Figure 7. Sensory play was one of the many additional activities provided during the weeks of the Thomas Fire when it was unsafe for young children to even be outside.



Figure 8. Staff from Montecito Union School show their receipts for the hundreds of books they checked out for their temporary campus.



Figure 9. Social media post for the community update on the status of the areas front country trails affected by the Thomas Fire and debris flow.

