

## Evacuees Flee With Bird, Other Pets

**Fire evacuees with birds, dogs and other animals congregate at a Red Cross evacuation center in El Toro, Calif.**

*By Heidi Hatch*

Harry Davies sits at El Toro High School in Lake Forest, California after evacuating with his bird, dog and two cats.  
Courtesy Melissa Ash, California

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 describes.

That’s because Jimenez wasn’t alone. He brought his wife, six children, 2 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 says.

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 discusses that he has no idea whether his home has been spared or burned to the ground.

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

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

Another man at the shelter who fled Fallbrook, Harry Davies, shared Jimenez’s positive outlook.

“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, and the other thing is the animals. You want to save the animals.”

Davies evacuated his home with his wife, Mandy, and his pets, which included his dog (Dudley) two cats (Ditto and Cinder) and bird (Happy).

The elderly couple loaded up two cars as they began their journey to leave the fire zone on Monday. Harry Davies took the bird with him in his car, and Mandy Davies took the cats and dog with her. The two didn’t know where they were going to stay, but decided they would head towards safety in the city of San Juan Capistrano and maybe stay in a motel.

But those plans never came to fruition, as they became separated on the busy freeway next to carloads of others who were also trying to escape.

“We were trying to find a place to stop and we got separated,” he explains. “She stopped. She got desperate and 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 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 and 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 and see if they found my wife somewhere. The first person I saw was sitting right here [at the shelter], was my wife.”

After they reunited and settled their pets with kennels provided by Orange County Animal Control, the two 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 the high school and determine its need on a day-to-day basis. However, most were hopeful they’d be able to start packing 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 speculate the number of people and pets that have sought assistance at the shelter, as many have come and gone throughout 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 set up, and kennels were provided to serve the pets in need. Orange County Animal Control officers are working onsite to monitor the pets.

Jimenez says all of his animals were doing well, with the exception of his boa constrictor who was a little woozy from being in the car, but is now doing better.

Davies’ added that other than the fact that his cats don’t like being away from home, everyone is doing okay.

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