

Long-range sustenance

Bay Area volunteers deliver food, support to Camp Fire survivors

By [Evan Tuchinsky](#)

This article was published on [06.13.19](#).

When the Camp Fire enveloped Butte County communities last November, Judith Parker took in the disaster from afar. She and her husband, Charles, live in Walnut Creek. Both volunteer with White Pony Express—a nonprofit that distributes surplus food and donated goods around Contra Costa County—but had no direct connection to events here.

Since then, she's become so enmeshed in the lives of survivors that—to her embarrassment—she's picked up the nickname Saint Judith.

Parker coordinates White Pony Express' program, in collaboration with the North State Food Bank, to serve fire survivors displaced from their homes. From the Bay Area, teams (which sometimes include one or both of the Parkers) drive refrigerated delivery vans full of fresh food, clothing and other necessities to about 300 people living in trailer parks and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) housing located far from full-service grocery stores; plus, to over 200 people in Concow.

They've done this every week since December—following daily runs in the immediate aftermath—and recently received a \$5,000 grant from the North Valley Community Foundation to continue through October.

"Their help has been greatly appreciated," said Tom Dearnore, who manages the food bank operation in his capacity as community services manager for the Community Action Agency of Butte County. "The fire victims ... are so spread out that logistically it would just be [impossible] for us to do without more staff and a vehicle."

Parker knows the challenge—now. When she stepped up, after White Pony Express founder Carol Weyland Conner proposed the Camp Fire outreach, "I thought I was just going to make a few phone calls. Now I spend between 15 and 20 hours a week, and I'm usually up there in person every two weeks."

She's developed close relationships. More than just sustenance, Parker said, White Pony Express provides support: a hug, a shoulder to cry on, a referral to someone local for assistance.

"Some of the stuff is very basic," she continued, such as making a doctor's appointment or refilling prescriptions, "but some of those things, if they don't have help, it turns into a crisis."

As an example, Parker spoke about an older man staying in Corning, in the RV Park at Rolling Hills Casino. (For confidentiality, the CN&R will refer to him as James.) After several deliveries to the trailer park, Parker learned about James, who was recovering from a stroke.



Judith Parker hands out treats, homemade by a volunteer, at the Old Orchard RV Park in Orland. She says White Pony Express delivers there to at least 100 Camp Fire survivors staying in 50 trailers. PHOTO COURTESY OF WHITE PONY EXPRESS

"He had not had any good food for over a week—he'd just been eating whatever he could scrounge around," she recalled, "and he ran out of his medications and had no way to get to the pharmacy."

Parker recruited volunteers to pick up his medicine. James then wrote a note asking for a visit from a pastor. Parker put out a call for clergy, via Facebook, and got an affirmative response.

White Pony Express also brings clothing and items from its general store. On the sheet indicating his needs, James wrote that he had no blankets and only one set of clothes. Parker, on her own, bought him a blanket, unpacked it and washed it, "so it would be nice and soft."

She met James the following week.

"He just couldn't speak; he just started crying—and he just kind of walked off," Parker said. "He's on my mind a lot."

White Pony Express launched in September 2013 to realize an opportunity Weyland Conner saw: to give hungry people the food discarded by eateries and retailers strictly for commercial reasons, such as appearance or artificial sell-by dates. In five years, the organization has delivered over 8.7 million pounds of food, plus 500,000 other items, to over 70,000 residents of Contra Costa County.

Disaster response—anywhere—wasn't part of the plan, until the Camp Fire.

"Believe me, we're as surprised as anyone," Parker told the CN&R by phone. "We hadn't anticipated this. But because our mission is to reach out to all those in the community who are in need—our slogan is 'All of us taking care of all of us'—when we heard of this disaster, it really touched the core of who we are."

"Our hearts felt called."

The North State Food Bank, meanwhile, started receiving additional donations. An organic food manufacturer shipped products from Wisconsin. A CSA (community-supported agriculture) in the Davis area offered boxes of fresh produce. But stocking 52 pantries throughout six counties, covering 12,000 square miles, already had Dearnmore's four-person team stretched thin.

"We're a little busy moving food to begin with, and then after the fire, the flow of food probably increased tenfold," he said. The partnership with White Pony Express proved fortuitous.

"They've added another, human dimension to this delivery," Dearnmore added. "We're dropping off food; they're giving food and [somebody] to lean on. It's more than just food for them."

As rewarding and important White Pony Express considers the effort, Parker's group knows it can't serve as a long-term solution. Each run takes eight hours: three to get here, two for deliveries, three to return. Most times, volunteers don't have time for a break. White Pony Express and the North State Food Bank are working with other local groups to develop what Dearnmore calls a Disaster Feeding Plan, for this and any future crisis.

"Personally, I have felt very connected to this community," Parker said, "even though I'm three hours away. Through social media and contact with people, I feel I'm an integral part of the recovery program."

As evidenced by her saintly nickname.

"I politely tried to decline [the moniker]," she said with a chuckle, "because I'm just one person. There's all the people in the organization behind us doing this."

"All of our volunteers who sign up for these food runs, it's what they want to do."