

FEATURE STORY
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2015

City Administrator Jord Wilson, councilmember and volunteer firefighter Carlene Anders, Mayor George Brady, and clerk-treasurer Kerri Wilson stand near the wildfire-charred water towers in the hills above the city of Pateros.



RECOVERY ROOM

TWO CITIES DEFTLY RESPOND TO MONUMENTAL IMMEDIATE CRISES AND LEARN THAT LONG-TERM HEALING TAKES TIME.

BY TED KATAUSKAS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHRYN STEVENS

JUST BEFORE THE WALL OF FIRE crested the hillside above Pateros in the early evening on Thursday, July 17, 2014, the city's entire volunteer fire department was battling another backcountry blaze in remote French Creek, 16 miles north of town. Fed by maelstrom winds, blast-furnace temperatures, and tinderbox-dry terrain, four separate wildfires that had been triggered by lightning strikes three days earlier were about to merge into a single conflagration, a 400-square-mile ring of fire stretching north along State Route 153 from Pateros to Winthrop, east along State Route 20 to Malott, and south along US Route 97 to Brewster. It would soon be known as the Carlton Complex, the largest wildfire this state has ever seen. But that evening, everybody assumed Pateros was safe, protected by a 158-acre orchard that should have served as a firebreak. They were wrong.

With fires converging simultaneously on multiple communities—melting fiber-optic trunk lines, power lines, and cell towers—and the county 911 dispatch office overwhelmed with calls for help, communicating with the outside world was a challenge for the Pateros fire crew.

“We didn’t have a clue that the fire was in Pateros,” says Carlene Anders, a volunteer firefighter and longtime Pateros resident.

Pateros’s fire chief, who was vacationing in Alaska, received a frantic call from his son, a Skagit County sheriff’s deputy, who had gone to check on the family home in Pateros and saw the fire cresting the hill and threatening the town’s water supply, two tanks on the hillside just above the orchard. Somehow, the chief reached Anders, and the firefighters raced home to save

Pateros. They were shocked by what they found: At 5:40 p.m. the community was still in their homes, with a fire barreling down the mountain toward them. Within 20 minutes electricity would go out, and the town would be left in the dark. Fire crews circled town, giving evacuation orders by megaphone.

“It’s hard to explain,” says Anders, who started her wildland firefighting career as the state’s first female smoke jumper back in the 1980s. “In 30 years, I’ve never seen a fire act the way it acted here. This was really indicative of a southern California firestorm. At 7 p.m. it was still 100 degrees, the wind was gusting from 50 to 70 miles per hour, and it was pitch black and tough to breathe.”

After engulfing the orchard, the fire swept through town, and the Pateros firefighters—assisted by four other companies from the district—did what little they could but soon were overwhelmed. Around dusk, the city’s hydrants went dry as the fire melted the water towers’ electronics; anticipating that this would happen, the City of Brewster’s firefighters had driven 46 miles each way to Omak and borrowed that city’s portable pumps, enabling firefighters to continue battling the blaze with water from the Columbia River, a battle they ultimately lost.

“We were just watching one house burn after another after another after another. People we knew intimately were losing their homes,” says Anders, who fought the blaze for five consecutive days with only a catnap. “It was really, really tough.”

By dawn, the firefighters were gone, following the Carlton Complex fire, hoping to stop or at least slow the conflagration before it consumed another community.

CITY ADMINISTRATOR JORD WILSON (who was parks supervisor and planning director at the time) and his wife, Kerri (the city's clerk-treasurer), who live in nearby Brewster, returned to Pateros at 5:30 the next morning and drove around town, stunned. The firestorm had been as capricious as a tornado, leveling entire city blocks while leaving others—including the city's riverside business district and city hall—unscathed. In all, 33 homes within city limits and 55 more just outside of town were lost; the fire would destroy 152 homes within the school district and 312 overall before it was contained on August 24 after burning more than a month. Miraculously, there was only a single death (a Carlton resident, who died of a heart attack while trying to save his home), compared to 32 fatalities in the second-largest wildfire in state history, the Yacolt Burn of 1902. But the impact on a small town like Pateros, which before the fire had a 1 percent vacancy rate and lost 20 percent of its housing stock, was devastating.

"Driving through Pateros that morning was very distressing," recalls Kerri Wilson. "You'd drive down one street, and six houses in a row would be gone; then you'd turn the corner, and everything was fine. We were thankful for every house that was left standing, because for a city of our size to lose more than 30 homes, that's a huge chunk of our town."

"I grew up in this town—this is my home," adds Jord Wilson. "My folks lost their place of 40 years. A lot of people lost everything but the clothes on their backs. My brother-in-law showed up with just a pillow in his hand. It was heart-wrenching."

Yet the Wilsons headed for city hall, unlocked the front door, and got to work. They dusted off the city's emergency management plan, which involved calling the county for help, but quickly discovered that, as Kerri Wilson puts it, "The county was knee-deep in disaster."

As was the city. Pateros's first-term mayor, a newcomer to governing who had been elected only six months earlier, had been evacuated and was so consumed by personal tragedy (she had lost her own home, as had her mother and an uncle) that she ceded her duties to councilmember George Brady. Brady, a longtime veteran of state government (retired after 30 years as an agent with the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife), would help orchestrate the city's response as mayor pro tem. After driving around town all night, interviewing emergency responders, and keeping a running tally of the number of homes that had burned (Brady's home was spared, but his next-door neighbor's wasn't), he arrived at city hall shortly after the Wilsons and quickly came to the same conclusion.

"I keep hearing how you need to do more planning—I don't disagree with that—but our original emergency response plan was worthless," says Brady, a Pateros resident since 1971. "It put the county in charge. That could have worked, but not in a disaster like this. The county was completely overwhelmed. By four hours into the disaster, we quit relying on emergency services and started relying on ourselves."

With the Wilsons, Brady worked the phones, calling neighbor cities for emergency equipment like generators,

while a steady stream of residents seeking help or asking how they could offer some filed in and out of the door. Good Samaritans brought armloads or truckloads of canned food, clothing, toiletries, bottled water, blankets, and towels, so much that council chambers couldn't possibly contain it all. So Kerri Wilson called a friend, longtime resident Connie Miller, who found somebody to unlock the doors of the local school so it could serve as a disaster relief center. Volunteers accepted and distributed donations; Washington Trust Bank donated a half-dozen barbecue grills, and shifts of volunteers began serving meals of rib eye steak and salmon in the school cafeteria to whoever was hungry. By the time the American Red Cross rolled onto the scene with their mobile canteen truck, Brady laughs, they were somewhat put off to find that Pateros was so well-fed that folks had little appetite for PB&J.

Meanwhile, city hall remained open from dawn until well past dusk, seven days a week. Already overwhelmed by

**“A LOT OF PEOPLE
LOST EVERYTHING
BUT THE CLOTHES
ON THEIR BACKS.
MY BROTHER-IN-LAW
SHOWED UP WITH
JUST A PILLOW IN
HIS HAND.”**

—JORD WILSON, PATEROS CITY ADMINISTRATOR

the number of fire victims and volunteers on that first day, Brady—acting on the advice of his son-in-law, a former US Marine—called Team Rubicon, a nonprofit run by military veterans that specializes in helping cities manage short-term relief and long-term recovery in the wake of natural disasters. The organization (which had aided tornado recovery efforts in Moore, Oklahoma, in 2013 and mudslide recovery efforts at Oso in 2014) dispatched two representatives the next day, who toured the community and met with city leaders.

Brady and Jord Wilson then did something unprecedented: they gave Team Rubicon authority to make decisions on the city's behalf in managing the entire relief and recovery effort. It was a decision that neither Brady nor Anders, who took Brady's seat on the council when he assumed the role of mayor, came to easily.

"When you're hit, when you're down, you're not sure if somebody's trying to take advantage of you as a community," Anders says. "Both George and I were cynical about it, but they were just there to help."

And help they did. Within 36 hours, Team Rubicon had fielded an incident command team (consisting of 70 volunteers from 11 states) in Pateros, who established a command post in a 53-foot-long converted semi trailer fitted with computers running integrated disaster-recovery management software called Palantir. In short order, the organization collected and managed all of the data the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) would require when the city submitted its disaster recovery assistance grant, which in Pateros's case would total \$550,000. Over 17 days, in addition to collecting data, Team Rubicon managed an army of 793 volunteers—more than doubling the city's population—who removed 331,431 cubic yards of debris, all documented in the format mandated by FEMA. In all, Team Rubicon documented 14,533 volunteer hours valued at over \$191,000, well over the 25 percent match FEMA would require of the city.

"I really give credit to the City of Pateros: within 24 hours, they recognized that they couldn't manage the disaster relief, and they came to us," says Bob Obernier, a retired Tallahassee battalion chief who served as Team Rubicon's incident commander in Pateros. "When it comes to disasters, there's a fine line between response and relief and long-term recovery. Cities do a good job preparing for the response. But 48 hours after the response portion of a disaster is over, the relief portion begins, when you need to coordinate the efforts of volunteers and nongovernmental organizations and tracking all of the data needed for FEMA public assistance grants.

"That's where there's typically a shortfall, and that's the niche that our organization has found. . . . Our slogan is that we bridge that gap. We get there quick, we manage disaster relief, and we get the city ready for long-term recovery."

THE SAME MIGHT BE SAID about man-made disasters, although there's no FEMA grant that can help a city recover from the impact of a school shooting.

At 10:39 on the morning of Friday, October 24, 2014, Marysville Mayor Jon Nehring had just returned to his office from a city hall meeting with Washington State Department of Transportation officials when just outside his window, two police cruisers rocketed down State Avenue. Seconds later, his chief administrative officer burst into the room, saying that there had been a shooting at Marysville Pilchuck High School.

"Did we prepare for something like this? Yes we did," says Nehring, whose children attend Marysville public schools. "Our police had been running drills, mock scenarios, and tabletop exercises around this type of incident for years. But you never expect it to happen."

His mind raced as he rushed to the city's incident command center on the second floor of police headquarters, two blocks away. "It was a little bit of shock that this had happened in our community," Nehring recalls. "My first thought was, 'I hope they get the shooter before there are any victims.'"

But as Nehring entered the room and was briefed by the incident commander, it became clear that this was not the

HACK SCRATCHER

Q&A WITH KRISTIN JUDGE

Municipal cybersecurity guru Kristin Judge, founder of Michigan-based Opcio Solutions, talks about the ways city computer systems are vulnerable to hackers and the steps every chief information security officer should take to thwart them. Your city doesn't have a chief information security officer? That new hire is step one.



How does a former county commissioner become a municipal cybersecurity expert?

While attending the National Association of Counties conference in 2008, I happened to sit next to someone from the Department of Homeland Security who was looking for a local government representative who would be a champion to get city and county officials to pay attention to cybersecurity. I started working with DHS creating a community coalition, a model that brings together partners from education, law enforcement, small business, and local government to talk about this new threat.

How vulnerable are cities to cybersecurity attacks?

Cities are on the front line and are not yet paying attention. Cities protect infrastructure, municipal courts, tax information, and more. All of these systems are being attacked on a daily basis.

Do you have an example?

While I was briefing a city mayor on the West Coast, he received a call that the chief of police had been hacked. All of his credentials were stolen: his passwords, user names, and log-ins. The City of Detroit and Dickinson, Tennessee, were both victims of ransomware attacks last year. In a South Carolina data breach, 3.8 million Social Security numbers were stolen; it cost the state \$25 million to recover. The typical Social Security number is worth \$2 on the black market; with an associated birthday and address, it can be worth \$6. All of the data that cities hold—maybe it's a deed to a house—is worth something on the black market.

Yet you don't hear much about municipal attacks in the news.

If it happens in your city, you will most likely hear about it on the local news, but it is not making the national news so often. Now

continued on page 19 →

Marysville Fire Chief Greg Corn, Mayor Jon Nehring, and Police Chief Rick Smith



case. As the city's IT crew networked phones and computers and a wireless Internet connection, the incident commander scrawled the known facts on whiteboards.

It had happened during the first lunch in the high school cafeteria, where a single shooter, a freshman armed with a .40-caliber Beretta handgun, had opened fire on five students seated around a lunch table, then had turned the gun on himself. The shooter and one of the victims were dead; four others were alive, but in critical condition (ultimately, only one would survive). Meanwhile, the school was on lockdown as a tactical team searched the building and confirmed that there were no other shooters or victims; once the campus was secured, students were evacuated by bus to a local church, where they were reunited with their families.

As details emerged—the shooter had been a popular athlete who had been crowned homecoming king of his freshman class, had been close friends with the victims, and was a member of the Tulalip tribe—the mayor's phone was overloaded with a flood of inquiries. The schools superintendent, Becky Berg, had been at a meeting in Olympia (coincidentally, the Marysville School District had been one of three state-wide selected to share a \$10 million federal grant to improve mental health services for students), and the police chief, on his day off, was in Seattle getting his car serviced. Nehring kept Superintendent Berg abreast of the situation as she raced back to Marysville, reached out to Tulalip tribal elders and invited them to the command center, and, as the story became international news, stayed in contact with elected officials and their

staff at all levels of government. As the media spotlight shone on Marysville that day and for days after, it was Nehring's job to present a unified message from the city.

"As mayor, you're not just the elected leader of the community; you're the face of the community, and people want to hear from their mayor," he explains. "You leave the emergency response to your fire chief, your police chief, your paramedics: they know what to do. But there's an urgent need for community response. So I tried to make myself available to the media, as mayor, and our message was that the Marysville and Tulalip communities were standing together, that the tragedy of this criminal act would not define Marysville. What would define us would be our response."

It was a message he reiterated again and again all that Friday and the next day, in more than a dozen interviews in person, via e-mail, and by phone, to reporters from CNN, NBC, NPR, local TV news stations, the *Daily Herald*, the *North County Outlook*, and the *Marysville Globe*, among others. "From early morning until midnight, the phone is ringing and buzzing with e-mails and calls," Nehring explains. "You just try to manage everything and keep your head above water. You learn on the fly."

And when it comes to a crisis like a school shooting, you learn that you don't have to manage some things, like the grassroots community response that followed in the hours and days after the shooting. By 1 p.m. on Friday, with dozens of first responders and tactical teams swarming around the high school—still a crime scene—community members, by word of mouth and social media, had announced a vigil that evening

at a local church. When Nehring showed up, he was amazed to find hundreds packed shoulder-to-shoulder, everyone from the governor to friends and relatives of the victims to members of the football team from Oak Harbor High School, which had been scheduled to play Marysville Pilchuck that night in a game to determine the conference championship.

In coming days, residents would plaster downtown in red and white, the high school colors, tying ribbons on trees and leaving messages with plastic cups on cyclone fences. The fence along the high school athletic field became an unofficial memorial wall, bedecked with thousands of flowers, photos, stuffed animals, and posters with hand-scrawled messages.

“I’ve lived here for over 20 years, and I’ve never seen Marysville come together to the degree that it has,” Nehring says. “To this day, everybody’s still hugging and taking care of one another. Our community will get through this.”

As for the mayor himself, he says one of his most important decisions was to clear his calendar for the following week to be out in the community. He visited multiple schools in the city, meeting with students in their classrooms, walking the halls, sharing his story, listening to theirs.

“People need to see their city standing with them,” Nehring asserts. “I might not have said anything profound, but I sat and I talked with and cried with and hugged a lot of people. . . . In

“ IN THAT TYPE OF EVENT, AS MAYOR, YOU NEED TO DROP EVERYTHING AND JUST BE OUT IN THE COMMUNITY. ”

—JON NEHRING, MARYSVILLE MAYOR

that type of event, as mayor, you need to drop everything and just be out in the community. You don’t get a second chance. Once the moment’s gone, it’s gone.”

MORE THAN TWO MONTHS LATER, Nehring still has a box of all of the cards and letters that were sent to his attention in his office at city hall. (One, from Shoreline Mayor Shari Winstead, reads, “I can only imagine the challenges that you will face as a community. . . . If there is an opportunity for Shoreline to assist, please do not hesitate to let us know.”) On his computer, he has hundreds of e-mails archived in a folder labeled “MPHS.” (These include a message from the first selectman of Newtown, Connecticut, which

the big breach stories are about large retailers. But if you Google “ransomware” and “city,” you can read about a number of attacks.

What is ransomware?

That’s where hackers will go into the computer system of a city, usually a smaller city that doesn’t have backups, and they will encrypt all of a city’s files. Let’s say your city runs a municipal court; they will encrypt all of those case files and evidence files and then say, “We will give you access to your account for \$1,000.” If a city has good backup files, it will not need to pay in order to get its system back up and running.

What’s another common municipal hack?

It’s called a “key logger.” The bad guys will send a city employee a phishing e-mail and say, “This is your boss. I need you to click on this document right away.” The employee clicks it, and that click puts a virus on the computer that allows the bad guy to watch and record every keystroke the employee makes. They watch as you go into the city’s bank account and enter your user name and password. With one city, the bad guys wiped out the fire department’s entire budget.

That’s awful! How can cities protect themselves?

First, you need to have a chief information security officer trained in cybersecurity and the protection of networks. If you can’t afford to hire someone, work with your vendor partners on bolstering security. But

there needs to be someone on your staff who is in charge of cybersecurity, regardless of your size, and that person needs to be in regular communication with the administrator and elected officials to help everyone understand the threats.

What’s another thing every city needs to do?

At a minimum, train your entire staff, anyone who touches a computer, about cybersecurity awareness. There are fantastic educational programs out there, online courses and printed materials that already have been created and are available for free or a small cost. Training staff is like buying insurance against a breach, because most breaches are caused by someone clicking on something they shouldn’t and infecting the network.

Anything else?

You also need to have someone monitoring your network, watching traffic in and out of your servers. If you see that at 3 a.m. someone in China is pulling data out of your city’s servers, that’s a problem.

Has anything changed for the better since you became involved in municipal cybersecurity?

When I started talking to elected officials back in 2008, there was not much interest. We had to push information to them, and now it’s more of a pull: elected officials and city managers request information because the threat is very real—they know it requires attention.

Recovery Director Mary Schoenfeldt and Marysville Schools Superintendent Becky Berg



sent a delegation to Marysville to talk about that city's experience with the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.) The e-mails and artifacts, along with artifacts from the school memorial fence, are being catalogued and saved and likely will become part of the local historical society's permanent collection. Although still raw, the school shooting has become woven into the fabric of Marysville.

"Ten years from now, I hope people will remember and learn from this," Nehring says. "What happened, and how the city rallied."

As for recovery, the city is lobbying for assistance grants to offset medical bills and other expenses of families that were directly affected by the tragedy. A recovery committee that met twice a week in the early days after the event now meets every other week; one of the discussion topics is a permanent memorial. The firefighters and paramedics who responded to the shooting continue to receive counseling from chaplains and their peers from around the state.

"The age of the patients, the innocence of the patients ... all of them had pretty significant head injuries. It's a particularly gruesome thing to see," explains Marysville Fire Chief Greg Corn, whose grandson was in the cafeteria when the shooting occurred. "Our peer support groups continue to meet, and the goal is to avoid post-traumatic stress disorder down the road. ... As a community, I believe we are healing, but I don't know that we are quite there yet."

At the high school, the cafeteria remains closed indefinitely, as the school district decides whether to remodel or raze the space. Not long after the shooting, the district used its share of the federal mental health grant to hire Mary Schoenfeldt as the district's full-time recovery director. Until recently the outreach director for the City of Everett's emergency management department, Schoenfeldt has made a second career advising school districts nationwide on how to deal with the lingering trauma of student shootings, suicides, and natural disasters; now she's tasked with helping the students and teachers at Marysville Pilchuck move on from the tragedy.

"Within about 36 hours, 48 hours at most, the urgency from everybody else's perspective is gone," says Schoenfeldt, who was at work in Everett on October 24 when her Black-

berry began buzzing, rushed to Marysville Pilchuck, and never left. "The crime scene has been secured, the victims have been transported, and the media has gone somewhere else. When their job is done, it's done. But in a system like a school district, or a private business like a movie theater or a mall, that system is left with the carnage and the cleanup and the path to recovery.

"A month, two months, three months down the road, who fills that gap? It's a relatively new concept that's being talked about in the world of emergency management. You need somebody who can stay and help with things like volunteer management and donation management, who knows the community and can get the resources it needs."

FOR THE CITY OF PATEROS, Team Rubicon filled that gap. A half-year after the wildfire, the community still bears scars—a charred landscape surrounds the town for square miles, and lots are scraped bare where there used to be homes. But just like shoots of saplings that one day will rise out of the ashes of the burn in the surrounding forestland, the signs of rebirth are evident in downtown Pateros.

With the help of friends and family, the local church, and an SBA loan, Jord Wilson's parents have nearly finished rebuilding their home; at press time, the city administrator was preparing to paint the place. The city's water tanks also needed a new paint job, but at least the water is flowing again (thanks to a new \$20,000 well water telemetry system, paid for by insurance). And although Wilson is still spending too much of his day on FEMA paperwork, the city recently received its first relief check from the federal agency—made out for \$40,000—and a local bank has pledged \$2 million in loans to help homeowners who lost everything (and were either uninsured or underinsured) begin to rebuild, with help from Habitat for Humanity. While much work remains to be done, Pateros appears well on its way to recovery.

"The fire gutted Pateros, but instead of people hiding away, they ended up moving together," says Carlene Anders, who in addition to fighting fires and serving on the Pateros city council also now serves as executive director of the Carlton Complex Long Term Recovery Group. "I have seen more people interested in government, more people stepping up and helping each other, than I've ever seen. There was a documentary video done about the fire, and near the end one of the victims says, 'I've had way more tears about the generosity of the community and our family of friends than I've had about any of our loss.'"

Experts say it may take 10 years for Pateros to fully recover. But Jord Wilson, who also serves on the Carlton Complex Long Term Recovery Group, thinks Pateros has the gumption to do it in half that time, with one caveat: "You don't recover to the way things were," he notes. "There's a new normal."

The same could be said for Marysville. But in both cases, behind the surface scars, that "new normal" is defined by a community that's stronger, closer, and better than it ever was before. **C**