

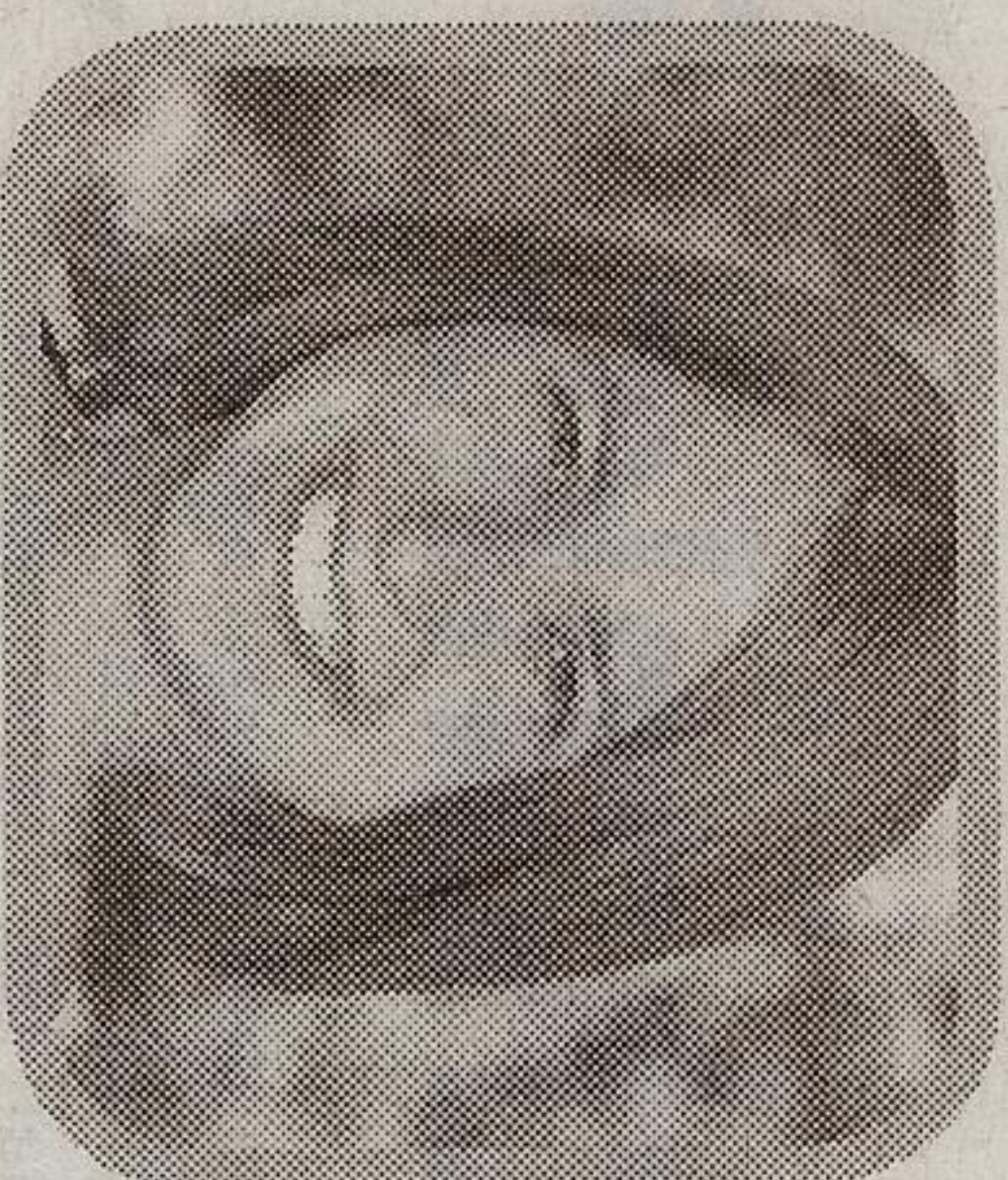
> OFF THE RECORD

# Meadows residents show true grace under pressure

The first time I drove toward the wildfires chewing through the mountains on either side of the stunningly beautiful Pemberton Meadows, my palms started to sweat and my hands shook. It was Thursday (July 30), and occasional lightning bolts darted through the skies while rain spattered my windshield.

The further I got from town, the more thickly the smoke clumped in the air, so that seeing down the road became difficult. But some parts of the fires on the Camel Back and Copper mountains could still be seen clearly, when I stopped some distance inside the zone covered by an evacuation alert since the early part of that

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morning.

I shouldn't have been going up there, adding to the traffic on the road. But I had to see and understand, had to smell and hear and know, what the residents in that end of the valley were facing.

To be perfectly honest, that

first experience quite unsettled me. I got my car out of the way off the road and talked to other people standing on the edge, watching occasional flares grow into golden spurts of flame and feeling sick at heart for the people whose homes and lands were standing in full view of these patches of fire.

On Monday night (Aug. 3), the blazes were an incredible – and incredibly strange – sight, with red-orange clouds billowing out from the Camel Back blaze from a distance against the darkening sky and the gold flames purring around the trees in the night when seen up close.

But I have no right to talk this way, when the residents under evacuation alerts and

orders have carried themselves with such grace and calm under duress. I've just seen it; they are living underneath it. And they are extremely impressive.

In each of the two community wildfire meetings I've attended, on Friday (July 31) and Monday, the large audience has applauded the fire service and Squamish-Lillooet Regional District officials who are fighting the blazes and leading them through this challenging time. Some people have asked how they can help out, how they can volunteer their time.

Some have managed to laugh about the valley's dial-up Internet access, asking officials to keep their website information just one click away,

and even at puns about burning questions.

It's quite something to watch people rise to the occasion, to observe others handling a very stressful situation with focus, cool and care for other people. It's hard to stand by and watch helplessly, when I want to clear the air and extinguish all these worries and fires; but times like this are also a powerful reminder that people can be pretty awesome.

I think one of the most interesting ways I heard of looking at the situation came from Jill Giese of Dreamcatcher Meadows, who remarked on how quickly the bizarre became normal. The helicopters frequently flying low over

head became normal, and were, indeed, missed when they were not around doing their work; the roadblocks became part of everyday life. It shows how adaptable people are.

But I'm not sure I would be so calm and adaptable myself under similar circumstances. Witness the shaking hands and sweaty palms. (Hey, I'm from Toronto, it's my first forest fire – and I'm a big wimp.)

So for what it's worth, I offer my commendations to the people who are living under the evacuation alert and the order, and all warm thoughts for a speedy return to a life that's actually normal, instead of this new normal with the clouds of smoke and packed-up houses and buzzing helicopters.