‘Rebuild Wine Country’ Is Helping Wineries and Residents Look to the Future

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Since the devastating fires in the North broke out, the Bay Area has witnessed a heartwarming scene as local communities came together to help those affected in their time of need. Evacuation centers have been overflowing with donations — for both humans and pets — and there’s a never-ending list of ways to help, or places to donate money for relief.

But now that the smoke has cleared, what happens in the weeks, months, and even years to come, when the media and the rest of the world moves on?

To address the longterm recovery process, a group of wine industry professionals quickly launched **Rebuild Wine Country**, an organization that will provide assistance directly to victims for the long term. They’ve partnered with Habitat for Humanity of Sonoma County to rebuild homes (for both owners and renters) in Napa, Sonoma, Lake and Mendocino counties, and as of today, Rebuild Wine Country is closing in on $54,000.

The rapid construction of a non-profit

Rebuild Wine Country is the brainchild of Chris Strieter, a founder of Sonoma County’s Senses Wines, and Senses General Manager Chelsea Boss, who lives in Napa. They spent Monday, the first day of the fires, checking on and helping friends, desperately seeking accurate news and looking for ways to help. By Tuesday, they had set Rebuild Wine Country in motion.

“Everyone wants to help, but no one knew how to help. There’s an excess of volunteers, an excess of materials, a ton of people on the ground,” said Strieter. “I realized the best place for us to focus our energy is to figure out how to help those that need it the most and to focus on the long term rebuilding of those homes that were lost.”

But the task was easier said than done. It was important to them for donations to be 100 percent tax deductible and have zero fees attached, as many crowdfunding platforms take as much as eight percent. To do so, they had to partner with a 501(c)3 that could help them distribute the funds.

Now, **100 percent of the donations go directly to the charity**, without siphoning off a percentage (GoFundMe takes five percent or more off the top).

Another key consideration was the ability to spread the funds across all of wine country — Sonoma and Napa, but also Mendocino and Lake county. Yet Streiter found that this widespread distribution would often operate outside of the bylaws of many potential sponsors.

"It was easy to raise money for one fund, but we wanted to cover everyone that was impacted," said Streiter, who eventually reached out to his childhood friend Ché Casul, the Volunteer & Community Development Manager at Habitat for Humanity Sonoma County, which is a local affiliate. Now, as the fiscal sponsor for Rebuild Wine Country, they have the ability to distribute funds to other local affiliates across the other counties.

"They already have boots on the ground, they're out there saving animals, cutting down trees," said Strieter. "It was a natural fit to work with him and Habitat Humanity of Sonoma County, and he were able to make it happen within a few hours."

With a fundraising goal of five million (which has been upped from the original goal of $500,000 to attract larger donors), they hope to be able to rebuild 50 homes at $100,000 a piece. That may sound unrealistic, especially by Bay Area standards, but Habitat for Humanity has access to donated and discounted materials, plus volunteer labor.

"As an example, the last job they did was a $17,000 job, and they did it for $750. They're able to stretch these dollars really far," said Strieter.

Once they'd secured their sponsor, Boss set out to create the Rebuild Wine Country Website, and then they each sent the link to their personal contacts. Within a few hours, they had already raised $5,000.

Next, Boss started to aggressively push it out on social media, and within two days, they'd raised $20,000. By the end of the first week, they'd doubled that, and grown to over 2,000 Instagram followers.

Putting a team in place for the long-haul

With such rapid growth, it quickly became clear that this undertaking required more than two people. Luckily, both Boss and Streiter have a large network of wine industry friends to call upon.

"The great thing about the wine industry, is we knew we had the connections, and would be able to get people to donate time and skills to help run something on this scale," said Boss. "We knew that our wine industry friends would be behind us within five seconds of telling them what we're

up to, and it's been very, very true."

Rebuild Wine Country is now a team of 15 people, volunteering their time and skills to help with everything from logo design and photography to media outreach and administrative tasks, which enables Habitat for Humanity to spend no money on operation costs. This means that every dollar raised goes directly into building or repairing homes.

Streiter said he's currently working on partnering with local businesses and organizations to put on a number of fundraising efforts, and that Rockridge restaurant Duchess, which he's a partner in, will donate a portion of proceeds through the end of the month.

Looking to the future

The team is also hosting a free Resource Day for fire victims on October 30 from 6-9 p.m. at the Culinary Institute of America's CIA at Copia campus in downtown Napa (next to the Oxbow Marketplace). Featuring professional guest speakers, attendees can learn how to apply for aid through Habitat for Humanity, how to handle insurance claims and FEMA applications, and how to recover uninsured losses from the California Fire Lawyers.

"We were at lunch with this California fire attorney, and he's like, 'Nobody is really holding any informational meetings. People don't know what to do in these situations. I highly suggest you rally your community,'" said Boss. "We want to be industry leaders and help lead people to the resources they need during this time."