Building groups creating tiny houses, temporary housing for fire survivors

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By the second full day of the October fire, Senses Wine co-founder Chris Strieter was asking, "How can we help — what can we do?"

"We thought maybe we could do an event, we could fundraise, donate some money, donate some time, see where people needed help," he said.

Soon Strieter realized that the wine industry was eager to get behind a major relief effort, so he and his co-workers at the Occidental-based winery created Rebuild Wine Country (rebuildwinecountry.org).

Using social media and other digital assets, the new nonprofit found a way to channel that outpouring of support into financing for new home construction.

To date, the group has raised more than $1 million for Habitat for Humanity, he said, with a goal of raising $5 million to build homes for fire survivors that can be reused as affordable housing.

The first five to eight homes are slated to be built in February and March, with people flying in from across the country to help with the construction.

"Not only do they fly in at their own expense, they also chip in up to $5,000 and their time," said Strieter. "It's not just professionals. Anyone who wants to help, there's going to be something that could be done."

Fundraising is continuing with events such as the 5K Run to Rebuild Wine Country (runtorebuildwinecountry.org) on March 11 at Napa Valley College in St. Helena.

The nonprofit came together when Strieter reached out to his childhood friend, Algeo Ché Casul, the volunteer and community development manager for Habitat for Humanity of Sonoma County.

Though the Habitat office on Piner Road in Santa Rosa was "basically shut down" during the first days of the fires, Strieter worked with Casul to set up a tax-deductible fund.

Part of Habitat for Humanity's mission is to respond to disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, so when Strieter asked what was most needed to help the North Bay rebuilding efforts, Casul had one word, money.

"He said, 'Chris, why don't you guys raise money and help us rebuild homes, and we can help throughout all of Wine Country through our local affiliates,'" Casul said.

That became the organization's No. 1 focus.

Chelsea Boss, general manager of Senses Wine, said they began to see bigger needs than those being addressed by some of the well-funded and well-executed community fundraising efforts.

"We wanted to have a long-term impact," Boss said, "so when Chris made the connection with Ché, he thought, 'Oh my gosh, this solves all of our problems.' They are going to be rebuilding homes. That's long-term impact, and they can give money to multiple chapters affecting the entire Wine Country."

John Kennedy, board chairman for Habitat for Humanity of Sonoma County, said Rebuild Wine Country has been instrumental in getting the word out about Habitat's effort to help the North Bay regenerate its housing stock.

All the funds coming from Rebuild Wine Country are allocated for housing "fire survivors" in "Sonoma cottages" similar to the "Katrina cottages" built for refugees of the 2005 hurricane that inundated New Orleans.

That year, Habitat built temporary homes of 500 to 800 square feet on "skids" or large sleds that could be relocated to wherever they were needed. Some were placed on public lands while their occupants rebuilt their homes.

In the North Bay, fire survivors will be able to live in these one- to three-bedroom homes for up to two years, then the houses will be moved to permanent locations to provide affordable housing for low-income families or single people such as veterans.

The cost of the homes will likely range from $30,000 to $100,000, he said, depending on the size and number of rooms. With volunteer labor, those numbers decrease by 10 to 20 percent.

The cost to occupants hasn't yet been set but will be based on what a family can afford, Kennedy said, "as with our other Habitat programs." Casul said he expected that monthly rent to be about $1 a square foot, far below the market rate.

“Once those homes are no longer needed — they will be on temporary foundations wherever they are — we will offer them to Habitat first, then we can put them on somebody’s land as granny units,” Casul said.

“This can become a long-term rental for a low-income family and provide desperately needed housing in our community,” Casul said.

Ultimately, these homes will give Sonoma and neighboring counties a more affordable housing base.

“We see it as a great program to cost-effectively help fire survivors as well as helping to alleviate the affordable housing problem in Sonoma County,” said Kennedy.

Casul noted that typically Habitat’s efforts are reserved for lower-income residents, for example, those earning 80 percent or less of the county’s median income.

But this effort isn’t as limited. Anyone earning up to 120 percent of the area’s median income is eligible for assistance.

In addition, Habitat is helping people rebuild for “pennies on the dollar,” Casul said. Case in point: A recent $15,000 job in Bennett Valley for two 90-year-olds that cost the homeowners $234. Materials were donated through Builders Exchange, and vocational youth were trained to do the construction work.

“The couple had two adult children: the son had a broken back and the daughter is fighting leukemia,” Casul said. “That is the return we bring to the table for these families.”

Before the October fires, Habitat of Sonoma County sought to build ?600 homes in the next 10 years. Kennedy said that goal has been accelerated, cutting the time frame to five to eight years.

But the most important time period will be the first half of this year, Casul said. Traditionally in disasters, about half the people who lose their homes leave the region because homes aren’t built quickly enough.

“Our No. 1 goal right now is to keep these families that are at risk from leaving in our community,” he said. “We cannot afford to lose them … because we already were pressed for workers. And we need to keep this economy moving forward.”