

Citizens Cope With Northern Florida Wildfires

**By TERRY ELLIS
Contributing Editor**

Palm Coast, Fla.: Joshua Cummings, 7, was watching television around 6:00 p.m. on July 2 when the news was interrupted by a loud noise and a blank screen.

“They said nothing was wrong with the television,” Joshua reports. Nothing like this had ever happened in his history of TV watching, but Joshua wasn’t scared. Then a serious voice announced that his neighborhood was under a mandatory evacuation order.

The worst fires in Florida history have charred more than 450,000 in northeast and central Florida since Memorial Day, forcing the evacuation of some 120,000 people.

When the television went blank, Joshua’s grandmother, Carmen Nazario, was moving around the house already, packing essentials into the family van. For several weeks she had lived with an ominous, “depressing” cloud of smoke and falling ash. Other neighborhoods near her Palm Coast home already had been evacuated, and she wanted to be ready.

For her, the essentials included the Gohonzon, a few articles of clothing, memories captured in photographs, and pans to bake a wedding cake for a friend. Mrs. Nazario, a cake decorator at a local Publix grocery store, wasn’t about to stick it out as some of her neighbors were doing.

“Fires were already burning in other parts of the county, to the north, west and south of us. We were almost completely surrounded. It was very, very scary,” says Mrs. Nazario. “Some people stayed to sleep, until they were forcefully removed. That’s foolish. Material things you can replace, but life — your pets and the people in your life — that’s more important. That’s irreplaceable.”

An SGI-USA member for one-and-a-half years, Mrs. Nazario took time to call Luisa Moore, her group leader. There was no answer. Then the phone rang, and it was Luisa. She already had left home and was staying in a hotel in St. Augustine. She wanted to make sure Mrs. Nazario and her family also had somewhere to go.

They did. After a night stopover in Jacksonville, Mrs. Nazario, her family and other relatives took a caravan of four cars for the seven hour trip to Alabama to an aunt’s house. Along the way, Mrs. Nazario and her mother chanted.

“Until we got to Jacksonville there were other fires [along the road],” says Mrs. Nazario. “We were in awe looking at the glow of that fire.”

The next day, the remaining residents of Flagler County — some 40,000 people — were evacuated. As firefighters from around the country mobilized, local SGI-USA members supported with financial donations, as well as food, clothing and necessities such as towels, eye drops and food packing materials. Others cooked hot meals for the firefighters. Everyone offered prayers for the safety of all residents in the area. While 45–50 homes were burned in Flagler County, no deaths have been linked to the blazes.

When Mrs. Nazario and her family returned to their home on July 6, the only damage they found was to the air conditioning — caused by internal temperatures rising to 98 degrees. Luisa’s house, too, was unscathed.

With reporting by David Rubin