

Mia Bassett

Mr. Greco

English III

19 May 2021

### The Loss and Recovery of Skylark Ranch

Magic is always in the air at Camp Skylark Ranch. As the camp ranger drove up the winding Whitehouse Canyon Road that previously transported young girls to a whimsical world of summertime adventures, not even the fires could stop the sign of a phoenix rising from the ashes. Amidst the overwhelming sight of black charred plants and white ash covering the forest floor, Eliz Adem, the camp director of Skylark Ranch, spotted a singular deer prance through the blackened brush. She breathed a sigh of relief knowing not all life was lost in the Santa Cruz Mountains of Skylark Ranch as she prepared herself to see the remains of the camp that had been her summer home for the past fifteen years.

Camp Skylark Ranch in the Santa Cruz Mountains accounted for 280 of the 86,509 acres burned from the CZU Lightning Complex Fire in August 2020. Firefighters and foresters described the fire as coming through the campgrounds hot and quickly, doing its damage in a matter of hours. Within one day, tents, cabins, BIFFYs (Bathroom In The Forest For You), high ropes course obstacles, and many other areas of camp that had served generations were lost. With increasing deadly fire seasons like that of 2020 becoming more common, staff and alumni have been left with one question: what happens next?

Residents of White House Canyon Road, Girl Scouts included, must decide whether it is worth it to rebuild their properties in an area that is very high risk for more wildfires like the CZU Lightning Complex. Residents of Sonoma who lost their homes in the Tubbs fire of 2017 made a similar decision to rebuild in the same location as the fire, despite acknowledging that a fire would be likely to come again. “Hundreds of Sonoma residents have opted to stay put, both financially and emotionally tied to their land,” wrote NPR climate change journalist Lauren Sommer. This emotional attachment to the land and the memories it holds had provided hope for many Skylark Ranch alumni.

Eleanor Vickery, a member of the counselor-in-training program at Skylark, along with other campers, spent the months following the fires looking back on her favorite memories of her time at Skylark Ranch. One moment stands out in particular for Vickery, the time when she and her friends performed a song on the guitar for the closing campfire, an event that takes place the night before all the campers return home. “I just saw a picture perfect moment where we were all in a little arc around the campfire. Everybody was glowing from the fire and we were all singing our song and it was beautiful. I got emotional honestly,” described Vickery. Alternatively, camp alumni found comfort by reaching out to each other and rekindling their connections. An alumni facebook group titled “Skylark Ranch is in My Heart” saw a large increase in posts following the news of the fires, as people began flooding the group with memories from their time at camp. “People were sharing stories, they were sharing memories, they were sharing camp songs, they were sharing their camper t-shirt, their staff t-shirt, their staff tie, their staff tie pins. And it was really fun,” recounted Adem. This reconnection

demonstrated the beauty of Skylark Ranch: it has impacted the life of every single camper and staff member that has attended camp, from the 1950s to today.

Camp Skylark Ranch opened in 1956, originally as a Girl Scouts of Santa Clara County Camp. Since then, the camp has served Northern California girls from 3rd-12th grade, offering summer programs including horseback riding, surfing, high ropes courses, hiking, and many other adventures. 2019 was the last year that Skylark operated under normal conditions because all Girl Scouts NorCal camps were forced to move into an online format for the summer of 2020. While this was disappointing to many campers who were unable to spend their last summer before the fire physically at camp, Adem described the situation as lucky because there were no campers or horses living at the camp when the fire arrived. “If we had been running camp, it would have been a day at camp. So I also kept thinking, ‘Wow, I’m very grateful that I did not have to evacuate 250 people,’” she shared.

Girl Scouts staff were first able to visit the damage about a month after the fires reached Skylark. The landscape was almost unrecognizable, even to someone who had been attending camp nearly her whole life. “It did not feel like the place I remembered it to be. When I actually physically got to the site, it felt like something from a horror movie,” Adem described. The ground was coated in white ash, and the tall trees that made up the thick forest were now merely burnt trunks. Adem, along with Girl Scouts NorCal CEO Marina Park, assessed the forest’s health following the fires with a forester. “He really talked to us a lot about waiting and giving the forest time to recover before we start coming in and using this as a camp again, because it’s not safe,” explained Park. Although the end goal of Girl Scouts is to bring campers back to Skylark Ranch, Park

and Adem described how that process will take many years and patience from the Girl Scout community while they ensure the forest can recover safely.

In the meantime, Adem sees this period of time as an opportunity to teach young Girl Scouts about forest recovery. “We very much so want the rebuild of Skylark, whatever that means, to be part of the experience of our campers,” described Adem. As the Skylark Ranch community grieves their loss, rebuilding the camp may provide an opportunity for alumni to reunite and connect in person. Adem continued, “A dream would be to have some sort of Girl Scout Conservation Corps where we can go rebuild and be part of the recovery process.” As for Skylark Ranch campers, they will have the opportunity to attend camp at one of the other Girl Scouts NorCal camp sites this summer: Camp Sugar Pine, Camp Bothin, or Camp Hidden Falls. As Vickery described, “No matter what, I’m going to go to camp for as long as I possibly can. So whatever that holds surrounding COVID or fires, I’ll be there.” Adem will direct Girl Scouts NorCal’s virtual camp program this summer, and is optimistic for the future of Camp Skylark Ranch. “I’m just looking forward to seeing what comes next, even though I know there will be many things that come, come, come before we are finally in the clear.”

Works Cited

- Sommer, Lauren. "Getting Back What You Lost — Rebuilding In A Wildfire Zone." *NPR*, 16 October 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/16/656532029/getting-back-what-you-lost-rebuilding-in-a-wildfire-zone>. Accessed 21 May 2021.
- Adem, Eliz. Personal interview. 23 April 2021.
- Vickery, Eleanor. Personal interview. 28 April 2021.
- Park, Marina. Personal interview. 13 May 2021.