

2017 Spirit of Lake County

Susie Novak

During the recent Clayton Fire that nearly devastated the community of Lower Lake, Susie Novak approached various members of the Lake County Fire Protection District wanting to know how she could assist the responders and her fellow community members. Her focus was to provide a comfort zone which would encompass food, compassion, support and a greeting from what she called “the Ambassador” (her puppy Gelato) who sat and greeted community members at the front door to the Brick Hall. This began on Friday August 19th, the day we lifted the evacuation and implemented a re-population of the community so deeply impacted by the fire.

Battalion Chief Diener and I agreed to allow Susie to utilize the Lake County Volunteer Firefighters Association Brick Hall, which is an icon of the Lower Lake community, it having risen from the ashes nearly a decade ago. It was Susie’s dream to open the comfort zone and provide 3 meals a day as well as snacks throughout the day. She wanted to provide a safe place for community members to be able to get together, process and network with others who were all dealing with similar and often devastating losses.

Susie began with small donations arriving from throughout the area as well as money supplement from her own pocket. She reached out to community members, civic groups as well as coordinated with the Salvation Army and American Red Cross, to ensure that anyone in need of a meal and a safe place had somewhere to go. The first series of meals were simple comfort foods. She expanded from sandwiches and chips to complete meals 3 times a day. The meals were served from 6am to 9pm and included snacks and drinks throughout the entire hours of operation. The comfort zone expanded its menu to include gourmet omelets, French toast, pancakes, sausage, bacon and fresh fruit for breakfast. Lunch menus included hamburgers, hot dogs, meatball sandwiches, turkey melts and BLT’s. Dinner offerings involved 3 and sometimes 4 course meals that included soup, salad, chicken, mashed potatoes and a wide variety of desserts. Susie coordinated with St Helena Hospital in Clearlake, as well as soliciting donations to sustain her commitment to the community.

This began the day after the first fire started, Sunday August 14, 2016 and continued for more than a month. Susie worked throughout this program at least 12-16 hours a day. She managed the entire operation drawing on her past restaurant experience. This experience included owner operator of Susie’s Grill in Lower Lake for approximately 15 years and several years at Rob Roy Golf Club as a

hostess and chef. In addition to doing the majority of meal preparation for 50-100 community members each day, she coordinated a volunteer workforce and a cadre of donations from our communities.

In short, Susie has been a godsend to the hundreds of survivors of the Clayton Fire. Susie is truly a “Star of Lake County”.