

The equestrian community came together and saved horses during the Creek Fire.

by Brooke Goddard

Gail Thackray was jolted awake by a big flash of light Tuesday, December 5. It was her mother, who lives with her in the Los Angeles area's Lake View Terrace, calling from her cell phone from the adjacent house. Their ranch was on fire, and they had to quickly decide what to take with them – photos, records or pets.



Unfortunately for Gail, she had to make a tough call between saving her family and rescuing her pets. She was able to put one of her dogs into the car, but had to leave behind her St. Bernard dog, Ruthie, her show jumping horse, Swag Man, two ponies, and several bunnies.

“There were only seconds to get out, not even one minute,” Gail said. “The fire was moving at the rate of a football field per second. Within a couple of seconds the entire hill was on fire. I screamed for my daughter to run, picked up my mother, and threw one of my dogs into the car. We ran right to the car, getting burned and singed as we ran.”

Gail and her family barely escaped from their home as falling debris and flames made it nearly impossible to find an exit. “It was just engulfed in flames, there's no other way to describe it,” shared Gail. “The whole property was covered in falling embers and trees were crashing down. The electronic gate at the main entrance was already covered in fire.”

“Since we couldn't go out the main driveway, we had to turn around,” Gail said. “We went toward the north exit, and I thought at this point we had a 50-50 chance of surviving.”

As Gail approached the north exit of her property, she gasped as she realized that the electric gate also was ablaze. In a state of fluster and panic, she searched her car for a clicker to open the gate, praying that she had one in this car.

“I was beyond relieved when I found the clicker in my car,” Gail said. “Then, I thought that the gate may not work if the electric wires in the gate had already burned. I took a chance, and pressed the button. I remember so vividly that gate opening up—it was a miracle. There were flames on both sides. I just gunned it through the opening of the gate, pushing on the gas pedal and praying that we would survive.”

Luckily, Gail and her family made it out to safety, barely. “Just one more minute, and we all would have been dead,” she said. “The Creek Fire started just right above our property line. There have been many nearby fires in the past, but nothing ever came this close. In fires before, I have had at least 10 to 15 minutes to get my belongings together.”

This time it was Gail who notified fire authorities about the quick-burning flames. “When we called the fire department they couldn’t get within a one-mile radius of our property,” she said. “The fire was literally moving so fast that our home was surrounded.”

“People keep asking me why I didn’t save all the animals,” Gail said. “They don’t understand how quickly the flames were moving. I had to make tough decisions in those seconds, and I chose to save my family.”



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While Gail first believed she had lost all of her animals, including her beloved horse, a trail of hoof prints led her to hope that her horse escaped the flames.

“I saw the hoof prints going across the property,” Gail recounted. “I remember thinking that he may have jumped over the fence, but he was nowhere to be found at that point.”

Search for Swaggi

This small flicker of hope that her horse may still be alive inspired the equestrian community to rally together through social media outlets to help Gail find Swag Man, affectionately called “Swaggi.”

Gail’s horse trainer, Erika Rickard of Santiago Rickard Stables, wrote a Facebook post that was shared a remarkable 376 times. She wrote:

“Please, if anyone has found a bay Warmblood gelding, about 16.2 hands, has a white star and three small socks, he is out there somewhere...Reaching out for a little help, we have been trying to locate one of our horses, Swaggi, that was on vacation at his owner, Gail’s, home in a pasture up Kagel Canyon close to where the Creek fire started. The fire moved way too fast for us to get there... If anyone has heard of a horse matching the photo below please let us know! Will get more info/photos.”

In a time of chaos and crisis, when so many horses were lost to the tragic Creek Fire, the equine community shared Gail’s hope that perhaps Swag Man was alive. People commented, liked and posted about Gail’s horse. The entire community came together to search for him.

“There was a lot of posting on Facebook,” Gail said. “Everyone was helping and looking for Swag Man at all of the equine evacuation centers. We were just hoping that someone may have picked him up.”

Sure enough, after Gail thought that she had lost everything, she got a phone call on Thursday

saying that Swag Man was alive and safe at the Pierce College Equine Evacuation Facility.

“It was a wonderful small miracle,” Gail said.

The pasture that Swag Man was living in was surrounded by a large wood fence. He must have jumped the high fence and run to safety through falling embers and flames.

“The rescuers told me that they couldn’t get close enough to the property,” Gail said. “My horse came running out on the other side. He must have run a mile through the burning hill to where they picked him up in a trailer and transported him to safety at Pierce College.”

It seems surreal, like a scene out of movie, to imagine a horse surrounded in flames, jumping over a big fence, galloping through fire, being saved by rescuers, and being reunited with its owner.

On Friday, Gail and her 11-year-old daughter, Sydney, went to pick up Swag Man from the evacuation center. “Immediately, when he saw me, he poked his head out and looked at me,” Gail said. “I couldn’t believe it was actually him. He had a little scar on his leg from when he was a baby, and I looked at the scar on this horse in front of me. It was really him.”

The rescuers couldn’t deny the fact that Gail was his rightful owner. “They told me that he recognized me the minute he saw me!” she said. “That was my boy. Although, he had burned his mane and his eyelashes were singed off, he was basically unharmed. It was so incredible that he made it safely through the fire and we are together again.”

As Gail rebuilds her ranch, Swag Man will be living at Eva Lund’s ranch, Special Spirit, in Shadow Hills. For now, Gail and her family are temporarily staying in a hotel as they decide how to take their next steps. The family lost everything except for the clothing on their backs.

Today, just ashes and debris remain of Gail’s sprawling equestrian estate. “The damage was

incredible,” she said. “I had a bridge made of thick steel that just completely melted, and a metal garage filled with tools that is now just a pile of ashes.”

The local community has rallied around Gail, creating a GoFundMe page that has raised nearly \$10,000 so far from over 100 donations. Just like Facebook sharing helped find Swag Man, the power of social media has helped with the Go Fund Me page.

“Now, more than ever I am just so grateful to be alive,” she said. “This coming Saturday is my birthday, and my friends are coming to help clean up the ranch as part of my birthday celebration.”