



A COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATION SUPPORTING THE LONG-TERM STEWARDSHIP OF CLAREMONT CANYON

## **President's Message: FEMA Grants Withdrawn**

*by L. Tim Wallace*

YOU HAVE PROBABLY HEARD BY NOW that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has withdrawn \$3.5 million in wildfire hazard mitigation grants previously awarded to the University of California and the City of Oakland. As a result, both agencies will be postponing much needed vegetation management programs in their parks and open spaces throughout the Oakland Hills, including in Claremont Canyon. The decision was made on September 16 as part of a settlement between FEMA and the plaintiffs who had challenged FEMA's Environmental Impact Statement. FEMA's \$2.3 million grant to the East Bay Regional Park District is still set to move forward. As we go to press with this newsletter, we plan to post more on this topic on our website, so please check back soon at [claremontcanyon.org](http://claremontcanyon.org).

The withdrawal of funds occurs just as we are about to observe the 25th Anniversary of the Oakland Tunnel Fire, a fire that ravaged our hill-area homes and wildlands in late October of 1991. Those of us who lived through that fire will never forget it, nor the lesson learned that we reside in a potentially dangerous wildland-urban interface, just like many other high risk communities throughout California and the West.

To commemorate the 25th Anniversary, we've partnered with the Berkeley Path Wanderers Association to view areas in Claremont Canyon that burned in 1991 and to discuss what has been done to address fire safety and plan for the future.

We know that we need to safeguard our homes with appropriate building materials and landscaping. Equally important, we must continue to encourage our public parkland managers to make the right decisions in reducing fuel build-up, maintaining fire trails, and setting out strategic staging areas for firefighters. Jerry Kent will be taking on these issues on October 30 at our Annual Meeting and will discuss what went wrong with the FEMA process and why the Oakland/Berkeley Hills are likely to burn again.

In the meantime, please look inside this newsletter for a list of October commemorative events and other events throughout the year. If you are not already a Claremont Canyon Conservancy member, please consider joining. Essentially all of our activities are funded by membership dues. Already a member? Fall is the time to renew your membership. Please mail in your contributions, or you can donate online through our newly updated website: [claremontcanyon.org](http://claremontcanyon.org). Hope to see you in the canyon.



*The wildland-urban interface in Claremont Canyon above Garber Park: most of the top of the ridge pictured here was rebuilt after the '91 fire.*

**Firestorm 25 Events—free and open to the public**  
by Marilyn Goldhaber

THROUGHOUT OCTOBER, several community organizations and the City of Oakland are offering special walks and presentations to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the '91 fire. These organizations (see below) were all founded in response to the fire and hold regular events year round.

The Claremont Canyon Conservancy has regular, monthly stewardship activities throughout the 500-acre watershed, as well as occasional nature walks and hikes—including those we coordinate with the Garber Park Stewards. Please see [claremontcanyon.org](http://claremontcanyon.org) or [garberparkstewards.org](http://garberparkstewards.org).

Just outside the canyon, the Oakland Landscape Committee, the North Hills Community Association, and the Oakland Firesafe Council also offer work parties and events to beautify the hills along the Oakland/Berkeley border and make them less vulnerable to fire.

Of special note when remembering the '91 fire, the Oakland Landscape Committee is responsible for creating and maintaining the Firestorm Memorial Garden, the Frank Ogawa Firescape Garden at the North Oakland Sports Field, the Gateway Emergency Prepared-

**Claremont Canyon** is the largest relatively undeveloped canyon on the western slope of the Oakland/Berkeley hills. Most of the canyon's watershed is owned by the East Bay Regional Park District, the University of California, the East Bay Municipal Utility District and the City of Oakland, with about one-fifth in private hands.

**The Claremont Canyon Conservancy** promotes the long-term stewardship of the entire watershed, coordinated among the stakeholders to preserve or restore a healthy native ecosystem, reduce wildfire hazards, and foster education and research.

**Join the Conservancy:**

Founding Sponsor: \$1,000 over 10 years.  
Family Membership: \$50 per year.  
Student or Limited Income: \$25 per year.

**Contact Us:**

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Email: [info@ClaremontCanyon.org](mailto:info@ClaremontCanyon.org)  
Website: [www.ClaremontCanyon.org](http://www.ClaremontCanyon.org)

**The Board of Directors:** L. Tim Wallace, President; Joe Engbeck, Vice President; Jon Kaufman, Vice President; Fred Booker, Treasurer; Marilyn Goldhaber, Secretary; Members-at-Large are: Josh Borokowski, Steve Holtzman, Jerry Kent, Tom Klatt, Bob Strayer and Dick White.

**The Claremont Canyon Conservancy News** is edited by Marilyn Goldhaber and Kay Loughman.

ness Exhibit Center and the new fire resistant demonstration garden. They also developed the Pollinator Garden at the Broadway offramp from Hwy 24. (See [oaklandlandscapecommittee.org](http://oaklandlandscapecommittee.org).)

Other groups active in vegetation management in our area include the various organizations in Hiller Highlands, the Vicente Canyon Hillside Foundation, the Vicente Canyon Neighborhood Association, and the California Native Plant Society.

**Monday, October 3-November 5, *Remembering the Firestorm, 25 Years Later***, featuring Harold Adler's black and white photographs, Berkeley Historical Society, 1931 Center Street, Berkeley. For hours, please see [berkeleyhistoricalsociety.org](http://berkeleyhistoricalsociety.org).

**Wednesday, October 5, 7 pm, *Why the Oakland Hills Will Burn Again*** @ Montclair Presbyterian Church, 5701 Thornhill Drive. Meeting of the North Hills Community Association with guest speaker Jerry Kent. Please see [northhillscommunity.org](http://northhillscommunity.org)

**Sunday, October 9, 11 am, *Commemorative Event and Memorial Plaque Rededication***, at the Rockridge BART Station, hosted by the City of Oakland, Rockridge District Association and BART. For more, please see [oaklandnet.com/residents/oak030313](http://oaklandnet.com/residents/oak030313).

**Sunday, October 16, 9 am, *Firestorm Memorial Walk #1***, in Claremont Canyon, co-sponsored with the Berkeley Path Wanderers. Meet at Signpost 29 in Claremont Canyon 1.5 miles uphill from the intersection of Ashby and Claremont avenues. Bob Strayer, Conservancy board member, and Martin Holden, former Conservancy board president, will take us on a 3.5-mile tour of both sides of Claremont Canyon. This walk will highlight the fire-prevention efforts in the canyon as well as new paths the conservancy has built. We will carpool a short distance from Signpost 29 to park at the Claremont Avenue entrance to Garber Park. We'll then head out on foot to the Stonewall-Panoramic Ridge Trail, some of which is extremely steep and difficult but offers breath-taking views of the canyon and the bay. We will circle down the opposite side of the canyon to see the restored native woodland above Signpost 29 and then return to our cars. For more, please see *Schedule* at [claremontcanyon.org](http://claremontcanyon.org).

**Thursday, October 20, 5 pm, *Remembrance Ceremony of the 1991 Firestorm*** @ Gateway Emergency Preparedness Exhibit Center, Tunnel Road and Caldecott Lane. For more, please see [oaklandfiresafecouncil.org](http://oaklandfiresafecouncil.org).

**Thursday, October 20, 7 pm, *Berkeley Path Wanderers Annual Meeting*** @ Hillside Club, 2286 Cedar Street in

Berkeley. Sue Piper of the Oakland Landscape Committee will talk on key efforts to prevent another firestorm in the Oakland/Berkeley Hills. Also featured at this meeting is an illustrated talk by Tom Dalzell, author of *Quirky Berkeley*. For more details, please see [berkeleypaths.org](http://berkeleypaths.org).

**Saturday, October 22**, 10 am, *Firestorm Memorial Walk #2*, in Claremont Canyon, co-sponsored with the Berkeley Path Wanderers Association. Meet at the foot of the Short Cut, a path at the back of Claremont Hotel parking lot closest to the Tunnel Road entrance. This 3.5-mile walk, led by Sandy Friedland, former BPWA president, and Bill McClung, former Conservancy board vice president, will focus on the efforts of homeowners, neighborhood groups, and public agencies to reduce the chances of another conflagration. Plan for steep stairways, some with uneven footing, dirt paths, and hilly, narrow streets. For more, please see *Schedule* at [claremontcanyon.org](http://claremontcanyon.org).

**Sunday, October 30**, 4 pm, *The Claremont Canyon Conservancy Annual Meeting @* the Claremont Hotel Sonoma Room with keynote speaker Jerry Kent (see back page).

**JERRY KENT**, MORE THAN ANY OTHER INDIVIDUAL, has studied the problem of fires in the hills and has led public discussions since 1991 on what might be done to mitigate fire dangers in an ecologically sound way. Jerry retired from his post in 2003 as Assistant General Manager of Operations for the East Bay Regional Park District but continues to work toward fire safety issues with an emphasis on ecological preservation.

According to Jerry, large fires were common before urban development when the hills were covered by grazed grassland, scattered oaks, and a few sheltered redwoods. Over the last century a dozen or so of these fires were serious, affecting farmers and urban dwellers. The most recent and most notable was the 1991 Oakland Tunnel Fire, which covered 1,600 acres in a day and destroyed more than 3,000 homes and 2,000 automobiles. Twenty-five people lost their lives. After that horrific fire, federal, state, and local reports spun off 186 recommendations for a long list of agencies, and documented reasons why a *Diablo* wind fire in these canyons is near impossible to stop until the strong winds subside. However, many lessons were learned. They pointed to feasible steps that agencies and homeowners should be taking to reduce the risks of future wildfires in the hills.

Unfortunately, the 10-year FEMA process to facilitate wildfire hazard mitigation work in our open spaces and parks has not clarified much for the public. Jerry will try to answer the questions: what work needs to be accomplished, by whom, and at what cost?

Please join us on October 30 for an enlightening presentation.



*Cal student volunteers pose at the redwood bench at Signpost 29 after a day of trail building with Jon Kaufman and Tom Klatt.*

## OTHER EVENTS IN THE CANYON

**Sunday, December 11—The Birds of Claremont Canyon, 8-11 AM**, led by Dave Quady, Audubon Christmas Bird Count Leader, and Kay Loughman, creator of Wildlife in the North Hills ([nhwildlife.net](http://nhwildlife.net)).

*Join us to look for winter birds in Claremont Canyon. Dave and Kay will also lead a special owling adventure in the wee morning hours, followed by a break for breakfast. Join us for one walk or both.*

**Owling (December 11)**, 4:30-6:30 AM. Meet at the trailhead on the north side of Claremont Avenue (Signpost 28), about one-half mile uphill from the Alvarado Road intersection. After a brief owling lesson, we'll listen for owls at a couple of locations in the canyon. We will walk a little, but mostly stand quietly in the dark and listen. Owling is chancy: we hope to hear an owl or two; if we're really lucky we may see one. Rain or high wind cancels.

**Daytime Bird Walk (December 11)**, 8 AM until about 11:00. Meet at the top of the canyon at Four Corners (the Claremont Avenue/Fish Ranch Road/Grizzly Peak Boulevard intersection). We will drive to a couple of locations to sample different habitats in search of resident and migrant birds. We'll bird from roads, and hike on trails as much as conditions permit. Rain or high wind cancels.

*Call Dave at 704-9353 before 9:00 PM on Saturday, December 10 if you're unsure whether the walks will run in light of the next day's weather forecast. Dress warmly and bring binoculars, field guide and flashlight (for owling).*



The movie “Bring Back the Oaks” can be viewed on the Conservancy website: [claremontcanyon.org/wildfire-videos](http://claremontcanyon.org/wildfire-videos).

### Screening of the movie “Bring Back the Oaks”

by Janis Bankoff

ON JUNE 6, AT HILLER HIGHLANDS COUNTRY CLUB, the Conservancy hosted the premier screening of the film “Bring Back the Oaks: Managing vegetation to reduce fire risk in the East Bay Hills.” Inspired by the controversy surrounding the FEMA grants for wildfire hazard mitigation, and in an effort to address public concerns, the making of the film was co-sponsored by the Sierra Club and the Conservancy, with a grant from the Sustainability, Parks, Recycling and Wildlife Legal Defense Fund. The film sought to document the Sierra Club’s recommended “3 R’s” vegetation management protocol: Remove, Restore, Re-establish (see box).

The screening was well-attended by members of the Conservancy and the public, as well as by local dignitaries, including Oakland Fire Chief Teresa Reed, Oakland Fire Marshal Miguel Trujillo, Berkeley City Councilmember Susan Wengraf, and others.

**REMOVE** the most flammable non-native trees in select areas most at risk for fire.

**RESTORE** those areas with more naturally fire resistant native trees and plants.

**RE-ESTABLISH** greater biodiversity of flora and fauna, including endangered species like the Alameda whipsnake.

Following the screening, the Conservancy hosted a panel discussion of experts, including Scott Stephens, University of California professor of Wildland Resource and Fire Ecology and founder of the Stephens Lab at UCB to study wildland fire science, forest policy, and forest management. Other expert panelists were Martin Matarrese, retired Wildfire Prevention Assessment District Supervisor for the City of Oakland and currently involved in vegetation management efforts involving goat grazing; and, Norman La Force, Chair of the Sierra Club’s East Bay Public Lands Committee, a staunch advocate for fire safety and environmental protection. Says La Force, “It’s time for us to be economically smart and environmentally conscious.” Also on the panel were Conservancy board members and dedicated canyon stewards, Jon Kaufman and Bob Strayer.

Moderator Jim Hanson, a member of the Sierra Club and California Native Plant Society, led a lively panel discussion on the topic of intelligent, science-based vegetation management.

A dessert reception of French pastries, cheese and coffee was provided, thanks to the very generous donations from local merchants: Star Grocery on Claremont Avenue, La Farine Boulangerie - Patisserie on College Avenue and Fournée Bakery on Domingo Avenue. Thanks also to Conservancy member Bob Sieben for help in procuring the Hiller Highlands meeting room.

Later that same week, at the invitation of Berkeley City Councilmember Susan Wengraf, “Bring Back the Oaks” was screened at the Wildfire and Climate Change Forum which took place at the Northbrae Community Center in Berkeley, and included fire officials from Berkeley, Moraga/ Orinda and the East Bay Regional Park District, among others. As Councilmember Wengraf reminded the group, “Fire knows no boundaries.” The bringing together of a consortium of local experts in the field of fire safety is a reminder that we work best when we work together.

Shortly thereafter, the film had a third screening by request of the East Bay Regional Park District’s Volunteer Trail Safety Patrol at their monthly meeting. About 50 members of the volunteer patrol attended and gave a warm welcome to Conservancy board member and Garber Park Steward Bob Strayer who led the discussion afterwards on vegetation management. He also updated the group on the status of the wildfire hazard mitigation FEMA grants and on upcoming events commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the 1991 Oakland Tunnel Fire. The Park Dis-

trict's volunteer patrol works with the District police department providing friendly volunteers in uniform on the trails. Their mission is to: "educate, observe, and report."

Following all three screenings, the question "What's next?" was raised and discussed. While some people have questioned the wisdom of the proposed FEMA-funded project for vegetation management in the hills, the consensus opinion of fire science experts is that the removal of the overstory eucalyptus trees and native conversion in Recommended Treatment Areas (RTA's) will greatly reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire in the East Bay Hills.

It is anticipated that hills fuels management will begin soon, at least in Park District lands. The community needs to know what to expect. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of mandatory vegetation management by individual residential property owners, as well as on the importance of parking to maintain adequate street access for emergency vehicles.

### **View from the top of Gwin Canyon**

*by Tamia Marg Anderson*

LIFE ALONG THE RIDGELINE OF THE EAST BAY HILLS is like life on the edge, where inland and coastal climates come together, where the winds blow the hardest from either side. Conditions there are more extreme than in the sloping canyons and lowlands below. When it's hot, it's hotter on the ridge, and when it's cold, it's colder. No wonder that native Americans eschewed living so high on the hill. While we don't have grizzlies and mountain lions to contend with anymore, our East Bay hilltops can still be an inhospitable place to set up camp. Our sturdy houses might allow us to ignore the inclement weather outside, but, when a Diablo wind blows, wildfires may be nipping at our heels.

When my parents built their mid-century retreat in 1953 overlooking the small side canyon called Gwin, it had been just seven years since wildfire in 1946 had cleared this hilltop property. Twenty-four years later, in 1970, wildfire visited our hilltop again. This time, however, the blaze was stopped before it could pass from Gwin Canyon into the mother drainage of Claremont Canyon, and my parents' home was spared. Twenty-one years later, in what many still think of as the recent unpleasantness of '91, the eastern front of the Oakland Firestorm came to a halt in almost the exact same spot. It left a fire-ravaged landscape 360 degrees around both my parents' home and my

own home (recently completed in September of '91). During both fires, a bulldozer traced the nearly identical path from Grizzly Peak Boulevard down to Claremont Avenue.

Those of us who live at the top of Gwin Canyon know the strength of the Diablo winds, which start in September and continue into winter. The only relief from fire danger is a soaking rain. Gusting currents from the east are funneled and focused as they force their way through the topography of the ridge. No wonder that this area is one of the few spots on maps of East Bay fire history to show repeat burns every few decades. All this would lead one to think of patterns. The only sure one is that fires thrive at the breezy higher elevations while the quiet recesses of canyons are the last to burn.

*Continued on the next page.*



*Tamia Marg's home had just been constructed when the '91 fire hit. In the foreground, completely melted to the ground, is the old Airstream she was using as a temporary office. The house, however, withstood the fire. Every seam and joint was tight, the wood siding still slightly moist, allowing no place for an ember to get lodged.*

© 1991 Tamia Marg

*“View from the top” continued from page 5.*

Not every ridge fire turns into a conflagration, however. Many small fires start every year along the ridgelines of Gwin and Claremont Canyons, but, lacking disastrous winds, without much effect (see Tom Klatt’s article to the right).

Overlooks that draw tourists and locals alike prove to be particularly combustible—human love of things that smolder or explode and flashy roadside fuel are never a good combination. In August 1999, a fire started off the “Berkeley Lookout,” a popular pull-out on Grizzly Peak Boulevard just south of Claremont Avenue. More recently, last July, a fire which started right below that lookout proved that fire could still burn easily in a dripping fog through summer-dry vegetation. These events provided good—if *unscheduled*—practice for firefighters, who quickly extinguished the fires.

Even in the most extreme conditions, fires do not happen without ignition. Most ignition in our area is due to humans’ unwitting contribution of a spark to the tinder. Next to my parents’ house, in October 2000, a wind-shorn euc branch broke a 12 kV powerline but did not ignite the native vegetation below, still quite wet from an early rain.

Of course, fires can and do start at lower elevations. For instance, in 1999 a fire started near the bottom of Claremont Canyon and burned through an acre of thick brush and into a grove of eucs behind homes on Stonewall Road. That fire, likely started from a homeless encampment, was snuffed out in a huge response by firefighters lucky not to have to battle the wind that picked up later that week.

“Early detection, rapid response,” whether it applies to the fight against polio, or invasive weeds, or fire, is the key to our not being victim.

## **June 30 fire along Grizzly Peak Boulevard**

*by Tom Klatt*

I LEARNED OF A WILDFIRE late afternoon of Thursday, June 30, 2016 on Grizzly Peak Boulevard in Oakland and responded to the scene. This was at the northwest end of interagency work managing the vegetation on Frowning Ridge overlooking Strawberry Canyon, about two miles to the north of Claremont Canyon. Luckily, the winds were very light and there was an overwhelming initial response from fire agencies.

Interestingly, the fire burned through the East Bay Municipal Utility District’s 4-acre “tower” hillside, across from the University of California’s Signpost 15. The fire was largely confined to surface fuels (eucalyptus detritus) and did not engage the canopy, though it burned to the top of the hill. This same fuels condition exists on EBMUD land overlooking Claremont Canyon.

The EBMUD hillside is the only portion of Frowning Ridge not converted to native floral communities since the Hills Emergency Forum (a consortium of nine East Bay fire fighting agencies) was formed in 1993. The hill has slopes of over 100% (45 degrees) and burned only a few hundred feet from the PG&E high voltage lines feeding UC Berkeley and the Lawrence Berkeley National Lab.

We have limited opportunities to review ignitions in our fuel management project areas, and each fire improves our understanding of the risks and how management actions mitigate or exacerbate the fire behavior. I believe that EBMUD needs to reevaluate their eucalyptus groves along the north Oakland ridge, as this is a strategic fire suppression zone for both Strawberry and Claremont canyons. Seeds from the ridgetop eucalyptus trees on EBMUD land result

in seedlings emerging downslope on land which was already cleared of this dangerous fuel source.



*Tom Klatt reported on the June 30 fire along Grizzly Peak Boulevard on his last day working for UC as an environmental manager before retiring after 35 years of service. Pictured here are the first responders and the smoldering hillside on EBMUD ridgelines.*



*L. to r. in back: Scouts Eddie Valladao, Max Jennings, (Jon Kaufman), Joe Berck, Matthew Goodbar. Closer: David Hood. Front: Mitchell Celaya, Myles Halpern, Davy Williams, and Scout Leader Mike Edenborough. Below, David Hood and Micah Klein install erosion controls. Also participating but not pictured here are scouts Nathan Wellsfry and Quincy Chan and adults Carl Williams and Bosky Fredrick.*



© 2015 Bosky Fredrick

## **Building trails in Claremont Canyon**

*by Jon Kaufman*

THROUGH ITS STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM, the Claremont Canyon Conservancy has been building and maintaining fire trails in upper Claremont Canyon. Working with the landowners, in this case the University of California, our volunteers have improved the fire trail from Signpost 29 to Four Corners and named it the Summit House Trail (after the old inn that once stood at the top of the canyon). We've also built from scratch what we call the Willow Trail, which parallels Claremont Creek for a time then connects with the Summit House Trail further up the canyon.

These trails allow access for firefighters in case of an emergency, enable volunteers and officials to enter and remove invasive, fire-prone vegetation, and, of course, provide opportunities for enjoyment for hikers and dog walkers. In addition to the trails themselves, we have installed trail markers and a redwood bench at Signpost 29 where people can sit and enjoy the vista of native trees and shrubs made possible by the removal of eucalyptus and other fire dangerous trees. Most recently, with Conservancy board member Fred Booker taking the lead, we now have trail maps installed at key locations.

About a year ago, again working with the landowners, we scouted out a new trail that would connect the Willow Trail at a point just below the redwood bench to the East Bay Regional Park District's Gwin Canyon Trail, which starts at the north end of Norfolk Road and currently stops near the border of UC and Park District lands. Such a connector trail was contem-

plated for many years but never completed due to the challenges of the steep hillside terrain.

Now, finally, with the help of student volunteers, work on the connector has begun. Last fall we worked with Cal students on Berkeley Project Day constructing steps. One Cal student who was helping said, while leveling a hump of earth, "Trail building is a lot harder than I thought."

Work continues with the Boy Scouts of Berkeley Troop 6. Last spring we were most fortunate that Eagle Scout David Hood adopted trail building as his project. David and other members of his troop flagged the final path of the trail, removing overgrowth and cutting into the hillside to make a level, navigable path. The scouts also shored up the lower side of the trail to prevent erosion. The trail's path follows the contour of the hillside as much as possible to avoid ups and downs and getting too close to Claremont Creek. Conservancy board members Bob Strayer, Josh Borkowski and Jon Kaufman were on hand to guide the work, along with the scout leaders named in the caption above.

We look forward to the day, hopefully not too far in the future, when it will be possible to hike a complete circle from Signpost 29 up to Four Corners, then along Grizzly Peak Boulevard to Marlborough Terrace and Norfolk Road, and then down the Gwin Canyon Trail all the way back to Signpost 29. Thanks to everyone who has helped to make this trail a reality!



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## THE CLAREMONT CANYON CONSERVANCY

*Dear Friends and Neighbors*

*Please join us on*

**Sunday, October 30, 2016, 4-6 PM**

**The Claremont Hotel**

*Sonoma Room*

### ***25th Anniversary of the 1991 Firestorm***

Reception	4:00 PM
Presentations	4:30 PM
Open Forum	5:30 PM

Keynote Speaker: Jerry Kent, Retired Assistant General Manager of  
Park Operations, East Bay Regional Parks  
“Why the Oakland/Berkeley Hills Will Likely Burn Again”

*Refreshments and wine bar. Invite a friend or neighbor.*

**RSVP:** [info@ClaremontCanyon.org](mailto:info@ClaremontCanyon.org) or call 510-843-2226